

# It Takes a Village

SAINT-ÉMILION TIMES TWO



PHOTO: LANA BORTOLOTT

*THE TASTING PANEL's East and West Coast editors traveled to Saint-Émilion in search of the Left Bank's most interesting winemakers. Trekking from village to vineyard and from cellar to château, they found wide-ranging philosophies behind the bottle. Lana Bortolot (New York) and Deborah Parker Wong (San Francisco) report from the field.*

When prices for Left Bank Bordeaux and other high-priced regions softened in 2009, it presented an opportunity for Saint-Émilion and its satellite villages to attract new consumers who wanted the prestige of a Bordeaux wine, but not the hefty price tag.

And even though high-end red wine sales appear to have returned to pre-recession levels (global auction sales were up \$175 million in 2010), consumers haven't forgotten what Saint-Émilion delivers—what you might call the new French Paradox: high-quality Bordeaux at affordable prices.

"We show the world that for 20 euros, they can get a fantastic wine," says Jean-François Quenin, President of Saint-Émilion's Wine Council and owner of **Château de Pressac**.

**Jean-François Quenin, owner of Château de Pressac and head of the Saint-Émilion Wine Council.**

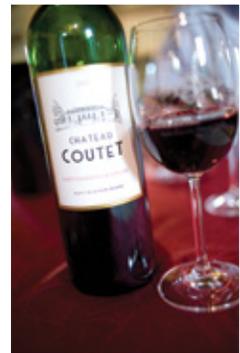
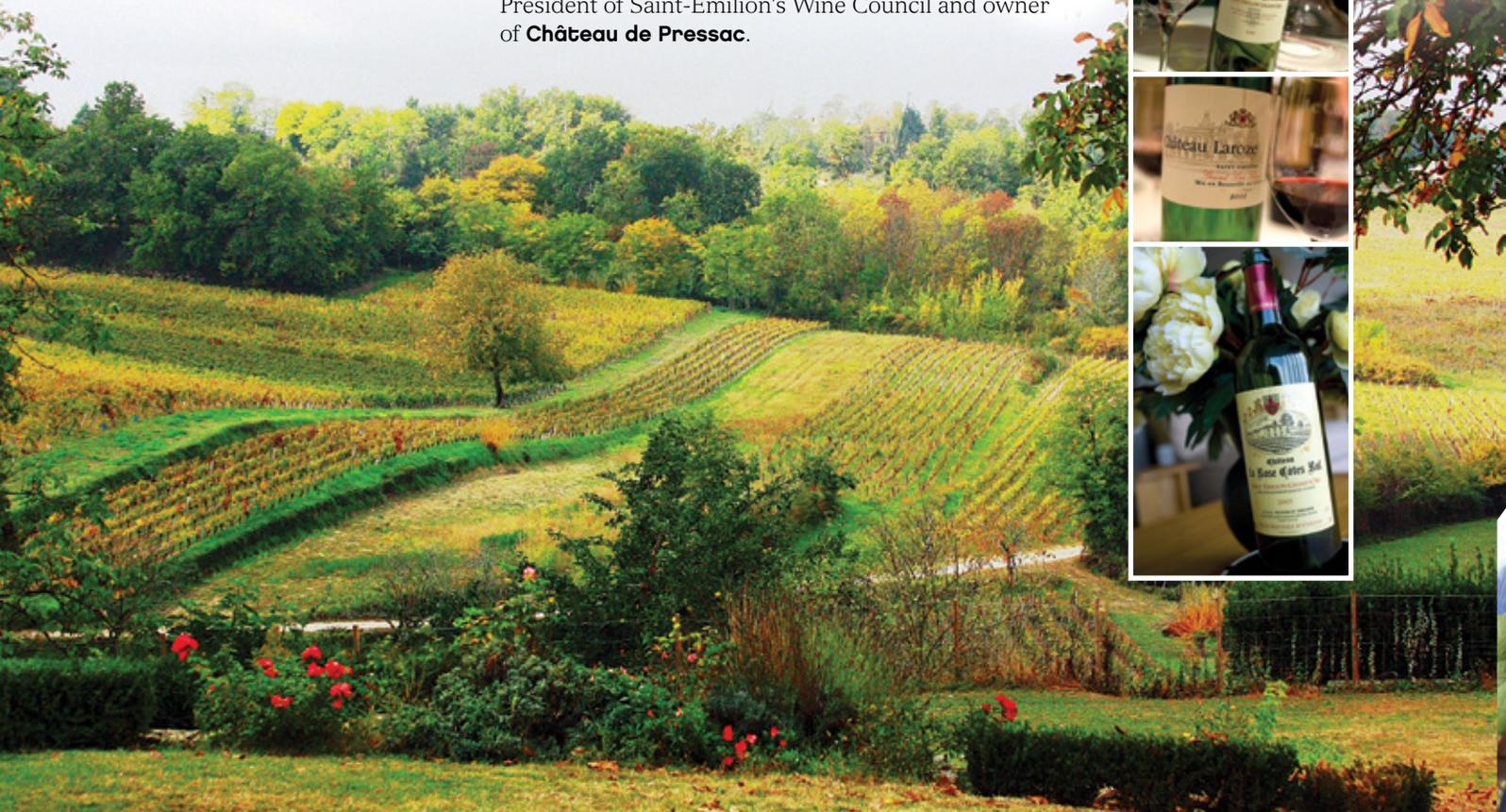


PHOTO: LANA BORTOLOTT



**Fall color in Montagne.**

PHOTO: DEBORAH PARKER WONG

## Mavericks Welcome Here

Nimbleness is one thing that's helped Saint-Émilion. Says Jean Pierre Dubreuil, a fourth-generation winemaker at **Château de la Grenière** in Lussac, "Saint-Émilion is a laboratory. We like progress and new technology. Tradition is important, but it's not the most important."

That spirit, spurred by the garagistes, put Saint-Émilion on the map. The movement is largely credited to Murielle Andraud and Jean-Luc Thunevin, who today, still champion the appellation, and mentor other young winemakers like Marie-Bénédicte Lefèvre at **Château Sansonnet** who want to do it their way. Their signature **Valandraud** wine is no longer the young pup it was in the early '90s, but the couple has refreshed the line with other labels, most notably Jean Luc's "Bad Boy." And Murielle, the head winemaker for all, recently countered with her own "Bad Girl," a crémant made from Entre-Deux-Mers grapes.

Another kind of Saint-Émilion maverick is Xavier David Beaulieu of **Château Coutet**, a multi-generational winery whose quirkiness is reflected in its long history and its current stewardship. If Beaulieu lived in Brooklyn or Portland, Oregon, he'd be an artisanal cult hero. Here, he's somewhat of an enigma.

His triangular-shaped plot of 14 hectares (35 acres) is surrounded by Premier or Grand Cru Classé estates—Angélus, Beauséjour, Grand Mayne. Yet Coutet, which lost its own Grand Cru Classé in 1985, is an anomaly among the *grandes dames*. Its terroir is enviably rich, but above ground, the soil is lumpy and many of the vines are in tatters. Beaulieu may perplex his neighbors, but they also admire his non-conformity.

"He has one of the most exciting terroirs in the world," says Quenin. "If he worked the vines properly, he can sell the wine for 100 euros a bottle, but he just doesn't think about that. He is very unique."

The state of the estate is intentional. Little has changed here since the 19th century: The land was plowed by horse until 15 years ago, when the winery was wired for electricity.

The entire plot is biodynamic by nature and here, rare flora and fauna exist because of the extreme protected territory. And the wines? Wild, savory, earthy and rich.

"It's not a choice; it's how we have always done it," says Beaulieu. "With my brother, my job is to bring Coutet back to its place."

**The non-conformist:**  
**Xavier David Beaulieu of Château Coutet.**

PHOTO: LANA BORTIOLLO



PHOTO: LANA BORTIOLLO

**Marie-Bénédicte Lefèvre from Château Sansonnet. Against the advice of everyone, she changed careers to buy a declassified winery and is working to restore its name.**

## Old Guard Welcomes the New World Order

More of Saint-Émilion's enterprising spirit can be found even in the storied estates. Increasingly, the old guard is hiring young guns armed with new ideas and social media tactics. So, while they're not making new wines, they are making new inroads.

At the fairy-tale-like **Château de La Rivière**, Marketing Manager Thierry Disclyn is using weekly YouTube videos to promote the winery. At **Château Gaby**, Pierre Rebaud uses youwine.tv, Facebook and Twitter to chat not only about the winery, but also Canon Fronsac, one of Saint Emilion's satellite appellations. Both men say the new media give them opportunities to capture a lifestyle beyond the borders of the estates.

Such a holistic view is typical of the area, says Guy Meslin at **Château Laroze**, because winemakers here truly have the "It takes a village" mindset. Meslin and his neighbor, Pierre Mirande at the similarly named **Château La Rose Côtes Rol**, are part of an effort to promote the appellation while also protecting its down-home character.

"Families who are wine-passionate are here because they want to become involved in the local life," Meslin said. "Other [regions] are institutions; people restore houses but don't live there. They lose something terms of village life."

To help show visitors that slice of life, more châteaux are embracing oenotourisme (wine tourism), a term that has only recently come into vogue. At **Château Haut Sarpe**, one of seven Libourne-area estates owned by the Joseph



**Pierre Dufourq (left) and Rodolphe Desbois at Château Haut Sarpe.**

Janoueix négociant family, they're testing consumer-friendly programs such as "B-Winemaker," a hands-on blending workshop. Developed by young winemakers Rodolphe Desbois and Pierre Dufourq, the two-and-a-half-hour program includes a tour and guests depart with a wine they have blended and bottled. "We're breaking away from a rigid system of distribution with programs that cater to wine enthusiasts and support direct-to-consumer sales," says Dufourq.

Engaging consumers is particularly important for producers like **Château St. Georges**, a dramatic hilltop estate in Montagne that was redesigned in the 18th century by Victor Louis, architect of Bordeaux's Grand Théâtre. St. George sells up to 80 percent of its production directly to domestic consumers with the remainder to direct-import retailers in the U.S. and Northern Europe. Director Pascal Apearé is adding a cooking school and related programs that will be marketed to the estate's 40,000 clients.

### Quality Is a Priority

Large or small, via négociant or sold direct, Right Bank producers continue to make quality a priority. With the purchase and renovation of **Château Belair-Monmage** in 2008, Ets Jean-Pierre Moueix's holdings now stand at 11 estates concentrated in northern Pomerol and the southeastern corner of Saint-Émilion. A 2010 barrel sample showed complex, spicy tannins and more concentrated black fruit than in previous vintages.

At **Château Tailhaus**, a pristine 11-hectare Pomerol estate in the Moueix portfolio, soft-spoken proprietor Luc Nebout's wines have undergone a shift in style to reflect more concentration and with that, gained even more complexity. Nebout notes, "Evolution [in the bottle] is very evident; when the wines turn the



**Château Valandraud winemaker Murielle Andraud is credited, with her husband Jean-Luc Thunevin, for the garagiste movement in Saint-Émilion.**

corner to spice, they are demonstrating the terroir."

"There may be a broader range of wine styles being made, but there is still no better place in the world for Merlot," confirms winegrower Françoise Lannoye whose **Lannoye Estates** in Puisseguin produces wines

that emphasize the freshness and complexity (marked by black fruit and brown spices) that are hallmarks of the cool-climate region.

While in nearby Lussac, winemaker Laurie Bartok crafts rich, contemporary wines using whole-berry fermentation at 20-hectare (49-acre) **Château Soleil**. It's not likely that Bartok's "dialed-up" Merlot-dominant blends will be mistaken for New World wines; they're driven by the same flavors but with more density and richness. Styles shift again at neighboring **Château La Claymore**, whose popular on-premise wines span three AOPs—Lussac, Montagne and Bordeaux Superior—and show their leaner dark fruit, minerality and baking spices to great advantage.

It may take a while for Saint-Émilion and its satellites to promote their quality messaging, but winemakers here are making missed opportunities of the past an object lesson for the future.

Meslin, from Château Laroze, said that while the Médoc was prepared to handle the globalization of wine, Saint-Émilion was less so because of its small size. But, he says, by banding together, they won't miss that chance again.

"Tomorrow, Saint-Émilion will change," Meslin said. "I don't know if it will be for the better, but we will adapt." ■■

*For Deborah Parker Wong's tasting notes on selected wines from Saint-Émilion, visit [www.tastingpanelmag.com](http://www.tastingpanelmag.com).*