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Château Coutet Photo by Lana Bortolot

A Walk on the Wilder Side

At St-Émilion's Château Coutet, the past still dictates the present

By Lana Bortolot

Not every estate in upscale St-Émilion is neat and programmed, its vineyards pruned and groomed in the same precise manner as those of its neighbors.

Consider Château Coutet, a multi-generational winery whose quirkiness is reflected in its long history and its current stewardship. It's on the beaten path—surrounded by the grandest estates—but definitely off the radar.

Xavier David Beaulieu, 51, and his younger brother, Alain, are the current iteration of the 400-year-old estate. Theirs is one of two local families who can trace their ancestry to the Middle Ages. Mayoral ownership weaves through its history, beginning with Thomas d'Augereau, nearby Libourne's mayor in 1600, and the estate has always been transmitted through marriage since the late 17th Century.

When I ask which generation he represents, Beaulieu laughs, shrugs and guesses, "20th?"

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Xavier David Beaulieu

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Vice president of the local historical society, Beaulieu is the family historian as well as the winemaker, and, as such, is nearly as obsessed with dates as he is with grapes. He likes to pore over the farm records from his great-grandfather's time, noting everything from yields to the number of posts planted in the vineyard. He has tracked the wine's export to the grandest tables in Europe—from Tsar Nicholas II to the Grand Khedive of Egypt. In the first classification of 1954, the estate was listed as Grand Cru Classé.

Many of these accolades are on display in the tasting room, a modest space despite the château having a certain architectural provenance: it is the work of Pierre Alexandre Poitevin, a church architect who studied with Victor Louis, the designer of The Grand Theater in Bordeaux. Here, bottles occupy almost a secondary place among historic photographs, facsimiles and artifacts. And, indeed, pouring wine for a tasting in late October seemed to be an afterthought for Beaulieu, who was keen to talk about a variety of natural topics ranging from genealogy to geology and flora and fauna.

And with good reason: his triangular plot sits among St-Émilion's most prestigious properties, Premier or Grand Cru Classé estates—Angelus, Beauséjour, Grand Mayne, all on the limestone and clay-mixed côtes and pieds de côtes. Ausone, Canon and Clos Fourtet—all on the limestone plateau—are within 500 meters.

"He has one of the most exciting terroirs in the world," says Jean-François Quenin, St-Émilion's wine council president and owner of Château de Pressac. "In his wines, the terroir is speaking."

Beaulieu certainly knows what he has. "I like to say the best terroir of Angelus is below our worst," he says, but he considers it with a child-like joy. Taking me through the vineyards, he's frequently distracted by the activity around him—migrating birds and butterflies, buzzing insects, a nearby wedding party. His almost 14-hectare (32 acres) plot has been farmed biodynamically from the get-go and attracts rare birds and insects who come for the even rarer flora—wild gladiola and Roman tulips—that have thrived here for centuries.



Château Coutet

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Château Coutet in pictures

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"The secret of the organic way is not the vines, but what's around the vines," he says. "We need the predators." He squints at the sky again, pointing to butterflies taking delicate dips into his air rights, then is momentarily distracted by the sounds of the post-wedding party. "The day after the wedding is even better, everyone is relaxed and drinking," he says with a snort, which along with a short laugh and a clap, is a frequent punctuation in his conversation.

But, back to those vines. Little has changed here since the 19th century. Until 15 years ago, the land was ploughed by horse and the winery was not wired for electricity. While the estate happily escapes the pretension of a Grand Cru Classé, it also lacks the prestige.

Coutet lost its classification in 1985, a demotion, says Beaulieu, caused by a lack of marketing on their part. But he says, "With my brother, my job is to bring Coutet back to its place."

It's hard to see how they will achieve that, judging from the state of the estate, which has the character of a frowzy wild child. And while the terroir is enviably rich, above ground the soil is lumpy, and many of the vines are in tatters, crazily strung along the wires. Though Coutet is clearly not the looker of

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Cellar inspection

Cabernet Sauvignon and Pressac/Malbec.

Beaulieu may perplex his neighbors, but they also admire his non-conformity.

the same ilk as its neighbors, it's fascinating and charming in a way no well-manicured mansion could achieve.

Beaulieu waves dismissively at the skimpy vines, his clear disregard for their state articulated by the gesture, and moves on the more-favored subject of topography. His land encompasses a slope 35 meters in height, over which the vines are evenly distributed. Like his ancestors, Beaulieu tracks each segment, noting things like yields and susceptibility to disease. He says his terroir dates back to Roman times, and he aims to maintain its original state as much as possible.

"The landscape is a living scenery. We know we have good years and bad years and we manage all that. A lot of people forget that viticulture is agriculture and it's the relationship with the earth and the sky."

We trek up and down the vineyard's edge with Beaulieu occasionally stooping to pry a stone or sift the soil through his fingers.

"The difference in the terroir is very important; it's like a big family with different children." He pauses and waves over the straggly vines. "I manage it like an orchestra." He plants 60 percent Merlot, 30 percent Cabernet Franc and 5 percent of each

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Beaulieu among the wild and straggly vines

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"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," says wine council head Quenin, when we meet for dinner before my visit to Coutet. "But they don't think about the wine—it's just the family estate to them." Quenin's own property, Château de Pressac, is a meticulously restored 14th Century fortified manor house.

"It's not a choice; it's how we have always done it," says Beaulieu.

If you were to guess what Coutet's wines taste like, based on the looks of the place, you'd have a sensory onomatopoeia: wild, savory, earthy and rich. To Beaulieu, the wines taste otherwise. "In the 2010 en primeur, *Wine Spectator* said the wines taste like flowers and it was so surprising to me because this is what we say about our wines—they are the flower of the vineyard."

And this is his preference. Beaulieu worries that consumers' changing tastes will mean creating a more monolithic wine, with blacker, riper fruit—"exactly like our neighbors. It is not interesting to make the same—we have to put the personality in front, we're too small [to compete]."

He cites a 1971 bottle as the best example of what he feels Coutet is about.

"I left it open without a cork for four days and forgot about it. When I tasted it, it was fantastic! It was very present—I could not believe it!"

This example of Beaulieu's absentmindedness ended happily and with delicious results, but also provided unwitting insight into the haphazard beauty of the estate. 🍷