

CLUB ENOLOGIQUE



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Uncorking greatness

CHAMPAGNES OF THE YEAR
Cabernet beyond Bordeaux | California's new cults
Whisky goes into the stratosphere



Cabernet kingdom

Of all the places in the world that now cultivate
Cabernet Sauvignon, none is as revered –
or as grandiose – as the Left Bank of Bordeaux



FEDERICO GARON

In an edition of *Club Oenologique* themed around Cabernet Sauvignon, where else to start other than Bordeaux? Within the pages of this, our Cabernet issue, we focus on plenty of iterations of the grape variety – and the other constituent parts of the famous Bordeaux blend – from around the world, be it California, Chile or Tuscany. And as you'll see over the following pages, Bordeaux actually plays a relatively small part of this package. There is such a thing as being too obvious, after all. But as a scene-setter, it seems only right to turn to the grand estates that serve as the bastions of Cabernet-based wines the world over.

And within Bordeaux, where better to showcase Cabernet than the Left Bank, specifically the Médoc? The photos featured here are taken from the book *Bordeaux 1855: A Guide to the Grands Crus Classés*, published by Flammarion, a celebration of the Médoc's classed growths of 1855, be it their châteaux, vineyards, cellars or gardens. Or indeed, their wines. And because the 1855 classification covers both the Médoc and Sauternes, you'll find one shot from the latter that bucks the Cabernet trend. No prizes for guessing the estate...



Above, from left: the grand, tree-lined approach to the much-photographed first growth Château Margaux, and the marginally more modest entrance to second growth Château Lascombes. While both properties are based in the appellation of Margaux, Lascombes is atypical in having a preponderance of Merlot in its vineyard

Opposite and previous spread: the grounds of Château Giscours, also based in Margaux, are home to a substantial park embellished with water features, sculptures and various rare tree varieties, among them monkey puzzle, giant sequoia and black oak. The Giscours label features a mermaid, with its second wine known as La Sirène de Giscours

B BRAASTAD, CHRISTOPHE JOUNIAUX, FEDERICO GARCIA





C. GOUSSARD, CHÂTEAU DU TERTRE



Above: Gruaud-Larose's uniquely positioned, uninterrupted 82ha (202 acres) form an island in the centre of the St-Julien appellation. The largely homogenous vineyard features hilltops of Günzian gravel that encourage the slow maturation that lends balance to its Cabernet Sauvignon

Opposite: Château du Tertre boasts a high proportion (more than 20%) of Cabernet Franc in its vineyard, and it also employs various different vessels during vinification. These vessels include wooden vats that bring out Margaux's typical silky mouthfeel, and oval, concrete vats designed to replicate the effect of amphorae by keeping the grape deposits suspended in the liquid and lending roundness to the wine

Château du Tertre boasts a high proportion of Cabernet Franc and employs various different vessels during vinification



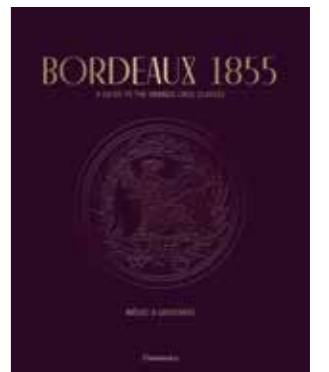
The Château Talbot vineyard covers 110ha (272 acres) in St-Julien on the banks of the Gironde estuary, planted on hilltops of alluvial gravel swept along from the Massif Central by the Dordogne River and from the Pyrenees by the Garonne. The vineyard is dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon, which occupies two thirds of the surface area

CHATEAU TALBOT, DEEPIXSTUDIO



The 1855 classification covers the sweet wines of Sauternes, as well as the red wines of the Médoc, including, of course, Château d'Yquem. The soil here, on the slopes of the Ciron River, is also gravel but over a foundation of clay. The 110ha (272-acre) vineyard spans three hilltops planted with Semillon (80%) and Muscadelle (20%)

Bordeaux 1855: A Guide to the Grands Crus Classés by Conseil des Grands Crus Classés is published by Flammarion (2022).



Richard Woodard takes a look at the seemingly unstoppable price rises in the world of super-premium Scotch

Illustrations by Noma Bar

In 1993, high-street wine retailer Oddbins decided to list an unusual item: a curiously dark-coloured single malt, matured for 29 years in Sherry casks and priced at the then-jaw-dropping sum of £110 a bottle – more than any other whisky on its shelves. Many scoffed. Who in their right mind, they asked, would pay more than £100 for a bottle of whisky?

Oddbins sold out of Black Bowmore within weeks, and in the years since, the 2,000-bottle release has passed into whisky folklore, paving the way for the Islay boom and seeding the notion that whisky might be something more than just a nice drink. Further iterations of Black Bowmore followed. By the time of the fifth release in 2016, the now 50-year-old whisky was priced at £16,000. Today, you can still find first-edition bottles for sale, but instead of £110, they'll set you back £27,500.

The past 30 years have witnessed a transformation of the rare-whisky scene. What was once the province of a few passionately geeky enthusiasts is now a world where the über-rich compete to spend seven-figure sums on the most sought-after bottles. The big auction houses – for whom whisky was an afterthought until a few years ago – now employ spirits specialists and devote entire sales to individual collections or distilleries. Increasingly, brand owners are bypassing the market and going straight to their affluent target customers, selling them ultra-rare bottles and even, through private-client schemes such as Diageo's Casks of Distinction programme, whole casks of mature whisky.

Meanwhile, on the open market, the high-end releases keep on coming. In June, Diageo unveiled the third of its Prima & Ultima series of rare single malts: eight whiskies, including the dream 'ghost' distilleries of Brora and Port Ellen. The 317 sets are priced at £36,500 each, giving them a combined value of more than £11m. This year has also seen the debut of House of Hazelwood, a rolling programme of whisky releases from the private stocks of the Gordon family, owners of Glenfiddich and Balvenie distiller William Grant & Sons. So far, two tranches of eight whiskies each have been put on the market, priced at between £950 and £4,900 a bottle. The total value of the second tranche alone, the Autumn Release, is close to £4.4m (head to p.100 for a review of some of the whiskies).

Impressive numbers indeed. But not quite as eye-watering as the £16m paid by an Asian collector in July for a 1975 cask of cult Islay distillery Ardbeg. Under the terms of the deal with Ardbeg owner Moët Hennessy, the unnamed collector will receive 88 bottles each year for the next five years, giving them a vertical series of whiskies aged for 46, 47, 48, 49 and 50 years by 2026. At an average cost of just over £36,000 a bottle, some observers have suggested that the Ardbeg cask deal isn't necessarily bad value in the current market; others have voiced incredulity. After all, £16m is more than 16 times the auction record for a cask of whisky (set only three months earlier by a 1988 Macallan).

Just how high can whisky prices go?



In such a fast-moving bull market, accurate assessments of true value are elusive. The constantly expanding global audience of drinkers, collectors and investors is navigating an ever more complex marketplace, from traditional specialist retailers to auction houses and, increasingly, direct relationships with the distilleries themselves. They are buying bottles, collections and casks, and their demands are becoming more and more specific: this distillery, that age, personalised labelling, bespoke bottles.

'We're dealing in an area of lifestyle that involves yachts, private jets and big houses abroad,' says Charles Beamish, founder and CEO of Beamish International, a global private-client business that advises people on the buying, selling and verification of rare single-malt whisky, both in bottle and in cask. 'These people want to travel to Scotland to visit their favourite brands, buy product from that brand home [which guarantees provenance and authenticity] and bring it to wherever they live, to enjoy with their friends. That's the kind of people that we're dealing with.'

Beamish works directly with brand owners, overseeing the buying process from origin to execution – in other words, delivering the whisky to the client. The company offers a range of services, but perhaps its most important function is one of fulfilment: helping buyer and brand owner to complete what can be a fiendishly complicated journey. The entire procedure to source rare bottles or casks can take as long as six months, simply because the specifications from customers can be so precise, and the supply side is so finite.

'Some people love peaty whisky, sweet whisky, certain brands, first-fill barrels, cask strength or non-chill filtered,' says Beamish. 'I deal with a lot of wealthy Chinese clients who enjoy higher-strength whisky because they like Moutai [baijiu]. But a US

consumer might like a 42% abv sweet Highland whisky that they can drink on a Thursday night.'

The very existence of a specialist business such as Beamish International is an illustration of how far the high-end whisky market has come – and how fast. For an industry with its roots in making whisky as a by-product of arable farming, it hasn't always been easy for distillers to adjust.

The Macallan has been at the forefront of luxury whisky for decades, but even this pioneer is still getting to grips with the new reality. For 13 years, the distillery offered an en primeur service, allowing about 10 clients a year to acquire their own, newly filled cask of The Macallan single malt, to be bottled after a contractually stipulated minimum maturation period of 12 years. But in 2020, the programme ended. Why?

'It's highly complex,' says Geoff Kirk, The Macallan channel manager for the secondary market, who has also recently set up its private-client management team. 'The bigger challenge that maybe wasn't foreseen from the start of the programme was the fulfilment. It was easy to fill the casks and engage the clients, but bottling and getting the product to the end destination, wherever that happens to be – that is proving to be very challenging.'

There was also a feeling that dealing in full casks – each containing hundreds of litres of whisky – rather detracted from the scarcity message that lies at the heart of the appeal of rare single malt. It is this scarcity – a 'positive' or 'natural' scarcity, as Kirk describes it – that he believes will continue to drive the rare-whisky market to new heights. He explains: 'There are inherent limitations on the supply side, but on the demand side I strongly believe the category has only scratched the surface. The affluent middle class in China continues to

grow, despite the economic challenges, and it will develop in Vietnam. The underlying wealth is pretty phenomenal.' There's also the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Americas. All it takes is for a tiny percentage of wealthy consumers to be turned on to whisky, Kirk argues, and the demand for rare bottlings will continue to expand.

'I just don't see there being any kind of bubble, because the bubble's tiny,' he adds. 'It will have a lot of space to grow from a demand perspective, but it won't have a lot of space to grow from a supply perspective. That's just the basic economics of it.'

Scarcity is partly driven by diminishing availability: as time passes, there's less of a particular whisky around, simply because some of it is consumed. As more and more people buy rare whiskies to collect or invest, rather than to drink, the question is whether this will remain the case. For now, Kirk believes there is a 'nice dynamic' between consumers and collectors: the former are happy to open high-end whisky to drink, and the more this happens, the more inflated the price tag of the remaining bottles. And collectors – even if they have no intention of selling – feel the emotional satisfaction of seeing the value of their purchases grow.

Could anything upset this 'nice dynamic'? Possibly. As in fine wine, fakes are an ongoing issue, and the perception of whisky trading as some kind of 'get rich quick' scheme in some quarters risks bringing less scrupulous elements into play. In particular, the proliferation of companies and brokers selling casks for investment purposes has the industry worried – so worried that a working group of experts including (among others) Beamish, Kirk and collector and The Whisky Exchange and Elixir Distillers founder Sukhinder Singh is demanding action. Following a round-table discussion in October, the group drew up a range

of proposals, which will form the basis for a Rare Whisky White Paper in 2023. Many of the points relate to the sale of casks to consumers, calling for increased regulation, perhaps through some kind of licensing scheme drawn up under the auspices of the Scotch Whisky Association.

Partly the issue here is related to some companies promising unrealistic returns: quoting growth figures from the historical auction market for rare bottles, and suggesting that these can somehow indicate the future value of a cask.

'I think many of the rogue traders and brokers are dealing with people who have this perception that the whisky market is going to return huge amounts of money to them in the next 10 years,' says Beamish. 'And maybe it will. But what I am particularly professionally upset about is that they're guaranteeing it, which is absolutely ludicrous.'

That's just part of the problem. A whisky cask is essentially an open container (with a bung in it) – easily refilled, topped up or otherwise tampered with. That's assuming the cask exists in the first place – in the past, people have handed over their cash only to find the cask in question was never bought. Even when rogue operators are shut down, it may well be too late to get your money back. But let's suppose that you buy a genuine cask of The Macallan. What can you do with it? Not as much as you might think. 'A lot of the premium paid on mature casks is linked to the original distillery,' says Kirk. 'But what a lot of people do not fundamentally understand is that the cask they have bought cannot be bottled as part of the original brand.'

The spirit may have run off The Macallan stills, but the cask was not chosen by the distillery, nor has it undergone any of the quality checks to which The Macallan's own casks are subject. Bottle it with a Macallan label, and you're infringing the brand's

There are inherent limitations on the supply side, but on the demand side the category has only scratched the surface

– Geoff Kirk, The Macallan

MARC MILLAR, SCHNAPPS, JOHN PAUL



Recent releases such as Glenturret 50-year-old (left, £40,000) and Loch Lomond 46-year-old (above, £4,500) reflect the clamour for limited-edition bottlings



Among recent additions to the premium whisky scene are library releases from House of Hazelwood (left) and 'ghost' distillery Ladyburn, both sourced from the stocks of William Grant & Sons



copyright. 'It absolutely will not and cannot be bottled as The Macallan,' says Kirk. 'We are categorical about that fact. It's not our product once our new-make spirit goes into someone else's cask.'

Safer, perhaps, either to go direct to the brand owner via a scheme like Diageo's Casks of Distinction programme (The Macallan has no plans to operate a similar scheme), or to stick to the primary bottled market, buying a distillery's own prestige releases, or those offered by a high-quality independent bottler such as Gordon & MacPhail.

As the years pass for the high-end whisky market, what began life as the tiniest niche within a niche is becoming ever more diverse. In August this year, The Macallan unveiled The Macallan Horizon – a 'prototype' single malt produced in association with Bentley Motors. The eye-catching horizontal design resembles a concept car as much as a bottle of whisky and – borrowing from the marketing playbook of the luxury motor industry – only a few details about it have yet been revealed. If you want to know more about the whisky inside The Macallan Horizon's futuristic packaging – or how much it will cost – you'll have to wait until at least early 2023. But you can be certain of two things: it won't be available on the high street, and it'll cost a good bit more than £110 a bottle.

Collecting and investing in whisky: Dos and don'ts

- Don't forget that whisky as an investment asset is in its infancy: while short-term gains have been dramatic, longer-term trends are much harder to assess.
- Do your homework: knowledge and experience are vital when prices plateau or decline. Never stop learning, and lean on trusted merchants and auction houses.
- Buy carefully: seek out retailers and auction houses with a proven track record – their expertise is invaluable, and they're a safer bet when it comes to provenance.
- Scarcity is your friend, so closed distilleries, discontinued bottlings and limited editions are a good bet. And buy what you love – after all, you may have to drink it.
- Exercise caution with whisky investment funds and ask lots of questions. Who's behind it? What accreditation and experience do they have?
- What extra charges are involved? For casks, these might relate to storage, insurance, gauging (checking strength and volume) and transportation.
- With casks, factor in bottling costs, including excise duty and VAT – likely to run to several thousand pounds for one cask. Check every detail about your cask: what it is, where it's stored, contractual limitations related to trademarks and bottling, as well as the fine print in the paperwork.
- For cask purchases, read the detailed guide from the Scotch Whisky Association by scanning the QR code below (or check its website). ○



Top Bordeaux blends from outside Bordeaux

The grape varieties that dominate the Gironde also have a long history in other wine regions of the world. Jane Anson looks beyond the borders for a Cabernet reshuffle

If it's not frustrating enough for other wine regions that Bordeaux hogs the limelight every year with its en primeur campaign, they also have to put up with the fact that any time Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot or Malbec is used in a wine, it gets slapped with the label 'Bordeaux blend'.

The moniker may not be going anywhere soon, because Cabernet Sauvignon continues to be the most widely planted red wine grape in the world, with a total of 340,000ha (840,000 acres) under vine, followed by Merlot at 266,000ha (657,000 acres). Both grapes, famously, got their start in this relatively small region in southwest France.

The name Bordeaux blend itself is unnecessary – Cabernet Sauvignon has been present in Australia, California, South Africa, Argentina and elsewhere since the late 18th and early 19th century, becoming part of the global viticultural landscape not many decades after it had first established itself in Bordeaux as a natural cross between Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc. But it was Prohibition in the USA, in particular, that caused it to then be seen as an 'import' in the mid-20th century.

Of course, if current climate trends continue, it may well be that the Bordeaux blend – which, for so long, has been a shortcut to respectability for emerging regions and a pathway to price rises for new bottlings – becomes a historical anomaly. But for now, the combination of these varieties continues to reign supreme, with many of the greatest wine estates in the world bottling their own versions; Tuscany and Napa are perhaps the two regions that can most legitimately lay claim to standing on the same fine wine pedestal with the style.

I don't claim to be definitive in this listing, since it makes some glaring omissions at the very top end – from Masseto and Sassicaia, to Opus One, Harlan, Abreu and Colgin. Instead, the selection highlights some of the more intriguing current-release Bordeaux blends that showcase the ability of this combination to create long-lasting wines with regional characteristics.

There are many ways to distinguish Bordeaux blends in different locations. I often find levels of Cabernet Sauvignon far higher in these blends than you would ever find in Bordeaux itself, most typically because the grape is able to ripen far more regularly when planted away from the Atlantic seaboard. This means you can find a purity of expression, almost distilled cassis purée, in Australia or Argentina far more typically than in St-Julien or Margaux – and more supple, inviting tannins than from a cool vintage in the Médoc. This is often also why you typically find less of a role for Merlot in the New World, where the Cabernet gets ripe enough that it doesn't need its fruit-filled corrective.

There are a few wines here that are truly linked to Bordeaux – Don Melchor winemaker Enrique Tirado takes samples from Chile to the Médoc for blending with consultant Eric Boissenot. Others work with Bordeaux consultants such as Stéphane Deroncourt and Michel Rolland, while most simply take the varieties and imprint them with their own character, reinventing their voice and trying to prove that, ultimately, the Bordeaux blend should be seen as democratic, not autocratic.



93

Oldenburg Vineyards, Rondekop Rhodium, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2020

Drink 2023–36

Cabernet Franc-dominant in its aromatics and taste profile, this has arrow-straight direction, and bright and vibrant blue- and red-fruit character, with silky tannins. The oak is present but not overpowering, and it would suit being served slightly cool to bring out the freshness. Think ripe Loire rather than Bordeaux in terms of its character. Another impressive wine from Nic van Aarde, from vines located on the iconic Rondekop hill. 46% new oak. 13.5%

£35 (2018) Wine&Something

96

Wynn's Coonawarra Estate, John Riddoch Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra, Australia 2019

Drink 2025–42

Deep plum in colour. Exotic fennel and turmeric spicing, tons of cassis and black cherry; cocoa, eucalyptus, graphite and crushed rock. This is classic John Riddoch, with its powerful but understated tannic frame, building through the palate with a slate edge that slows things down, and an undertow of savoury signature Cabernet Sauvignon character. Balanced and fresh, it feels almost cool climate in its precision. 31% new oak (French oak barrels and hogsheads). 13.5%

£74.50 (in bond) Justerini & Brooks



94

Inglenook, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–36

The depth and power of this wine is striking from the first moment – and even now after two years in bottle, it feels fresh out of the gate, barely revving up its engines. Black cherry, fennel, slate, tobacco, cigar box; give it a few more years in bottle to fully smooth out, then enjoy this luscious example of Napa Cab. Inglenook is owned by Francis Ford Coppola, with Philippe Bascaules director of winemaking. 43% new oak. 14.5%

£61 (in bond) Cru



100

Catena Zapata, Adrianna Vineyard, Mundus Bacillus Terrae Vino de Parcela, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina 2019

Drink 2024–40

This is one of the most exciting of the September releases on Bordeaux's La Place distribution network and one that captures the progress and interest around terroir in Argentina right now. From a vineyard set at 1,500m elevation, on limestone-dominant soils, it immediately sets itself apart with soaring aromatics that give nuance and depth, plus seductively curling peony and raspberry leaf. Powerful and full of character, with chalky tannins, pulses of electricity, and dried herb and fennel studding to the fresh raspberry and red cherry fruits. So good. 14%

£161 (in bond) Lay & Wheeler

97

Clos Apalta, Apalta Valley, Colchagua, Chile 2019

Drink 2023–36

Sculpted and elegant, with one of the highest proportions of Carmenère to date, this shows star-bright blueberry and cassis fruits, raspberry leaf, white pepper, cocoa bean and lemongrass, and a ton of slate-scrape tannins. This is a brilliant wine from a warm and dry vintage, meaning they needed careful plot selection to achieve this result. 90% new oak, then one year in bottle before release. Seventh-generation Charles de Bournet Marnier Lapostolle heads up Clos Apalta today, with Jacques Begarie as technical director and Michel Rolland consulting. 15%

£92.68 Lay & Wheeler

97

Familia Torres, Mas La Plana, Penedès, Spain 2017

Drink 2024–42

Combines structure and power with a savoury edge that speaks of the finesse and ageability of this iconic wine. In my opinion, it is one of the best examples of European Cabernet outside of Bordeaux – less flashy than many Super-Tuscan versions, for sure, but with a quiet power and utterly delicious eucalyptus, sage, cassis and mint, plus that earthy and smoky red pepper edge that you find in the best Médoc wines. Vines planted by Miguel Torres in the 1970s are now expressing their full complexity. 85% new oak. 14.5%

From £43.16 Hedonism Wines, Wine Direct

96

Joseph Phelps Vineyards, Insignia, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–40

The classic Joseph Phelps bottling, released after three years of ageing in barrel and bottle. Espresso, cocoa bean, cassis, earth, crushed rock, leather – this is a wonderful example of what Cabernet Sauvignon can deliver in Napa. The 2019 Insignia is the first vintage to include fruit from the new Phelps vineyard El Venadito, located in the Oak Knoll District, just south of the winery's Yountville Vineyard. Owned by LVMH by the time of release, this was made under the Phelps family, owners for more than five decades. (Founder Joseph Phelps died in 2015.) 14.5%

£192 (in bond) Grand Vin Wine Merchants

95

Peter Michael, Les Pavots, Knights Valley, Sonoma, California 2019

Drink 2024–38

Here is the welcoming spicy embrace of a Sonoma mountain Cabernet, with its shot of freshly cut herbs, rosemary, dill, cracked black pepper, silky tannins and a good kick of acidity through the final moments. If you are worried about California Cabs being too big or unapproachable, this is a glorious place to get to know their potential. It has the gourmet black chocolate and opulence of California but is loaded up with juicy acidity. 100% new oak; with Luc Morlet as consultant, having previously been the winemaker. 14.7%

£195 (2018) Vineyard Cellars

95

Château Marsyas, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon 2009

Drink 2022–36

Cumin, rosemary and dried herbs, with smoky tomato, charcoal flame-grilled pepper, tapenade and blackberry. Still young, even at 13 years old, so give it time to open and then revel in the distinct, character-driven beauty of this Bekaa Valley wine from the Saadé family's property at the foot of Mount Barouk. Good freshness on the finish, excellent texture and grip; this needs a lot of airing but rewards patience. 14%

£24.95 (2015) Corney & Barrow

95

Dalla Valle Vineyards, Maya, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–40

Silky concentrated fruits, shot through with liquorice, slate, graphite, Chinese spice and savoury tannins. The overall structure is supple but powerful – excellent stuff. Mother-and-daughter team Naoko and Maya Dalla Valle farm biodynamically. 14.8%

£464 (in bond) Farr Vintners

94

Almaviva, Puente Alto, Chile 2020

Drink 2023–35

This is full of complexity and pleasure, with an embrace of blueberry and raspberry fruits. Cardamom and turmeric, with lemongrass and sliced dill, giving sculpted, lifted acidities that have been maintained through the heat of 2020, a vintage marking 25 years of this property. An impressive wine with a floral edge. 75% new oak. 15%

£120 (in bond) Berry Bros & Rudd

94

Beaulieu Vineyard, BV, Georges de Latour Private Reserve, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–38

This is an important wine in the history of Napa, seen as the region's first cult Cabernet and longtime home of winemaker André Tchelistcheff. Today it's owned by Treasury Wine Estates, under winemaker Trevor Durling. A balanced and generous vintage, with more volume than over the past few years. Spiced herbs, tobacco, cinnamon, crushed cloves and blackberry fruits – archetypal Napa Cab. 14.5%

£115 (in bond) Ditton Wine & Spirits

95

Daou Family Estates, Soul of a Lion, Paso Robles, California 2019

Drink 2024–40

Inky depths to the damson colour; immediately sets the pace with fresh mint and cassis aromatics and nuanced rosemary, sage, cocoa beans, grilled cedar and crushed rock. This is a rock-star Cabernet that will impress anyone but doesn't knock you out, even with the high alcohols. Plush, smooth, well integrated and broad-shouldered. I keep waiting for it to overpower, but it takes the foot off the pedal at just the right moment. Easy to love. 100% new oak. 15%

£168 (2018) Harrods; £137 (2018, in bond) Honest Grapes

94

Don Melchor, Puente Alto, Chile 2020

Drink 2024–36

Deep plum colour. Raspberry and damson fruits on the attack, given width and depth through the mid-palate by creamy liquorice and cocoa bean. Cedar and vanilla-smoked oak. This is packed with plump fruit, confident and full of character, but it needs to soften further, with a few more years in bottle. Enrique Tirado is synonymous with this Chilean powerhouse, having been its winemaker for more than 20 years and now its CEO. This is a true Bordeaux blend, since each year Tirado takes the fledgling wine samples to Lamarque, a small town in the Médoc where consultant Eric Boissenot has his laboratory, and together they work on the final blend. As of the 2019 vintage, it has been made separately from the rest of the Concha y Toro range in its own winery. 14.5%

£120 Harrods; £81 (in bond) Cru Wine

93

Susana Balbo, Brioso Single Vineyard Agrelo, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza, Argentina 2020

Drink 2024–40

Spice and smoke are high on the agenda here. Plenty of impact; a trace of heat, but it is well balanced by charcoal, grilled red peppers, mandarin peel, liquorice and turmeric. Historically significant also, since Susana Balbo was the first female winemaker in Argentina after graduating from Don Bosco University in Mendoza in 1981. 14.5%

£37.80 Hedonism Wines

93

Santa Rita Casa Real, Reserva Especial Cabernet Sauvignon, Alto Maipo, Chile 2019

Drink 2025–38

Joyful Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon from the Alto Jahuel area of the Maipo Valley, this is loaded with sweet black cherry and damson fruits, a thick coating of chocolate and smoked espresso beans – generous and easy to recommend. A trace of heat on the finish, but there is so much going on here that you barely notice. It delivers impressive, well-balanced pleasure, with a well-judged flick of bitter marzipan on the finish. Great stuff from winemaker Sebastián Labbé. 14.5%

£60 (in bond) VinQuinn

94

Bonterra Vineyards, The McNab, Mendocino County, California 2019

Drink 2023–38

I love the smoky red pepper, chestnut and tar barbecue feel of this, with juicy plump raspberry, fig, red cherry and kirsch fruit, all given focus and lift by winemaker Rich Parducci via bitter fennel through the close of play. It's just a shame about the heavy bottle, especially for a biodynamic wine. 15%

£34.85 Vinvm

94

Viñedos Familia Chadwick, Viñedo Chadwick, Puente Alto, Maipo Valley, Chile 2020

Drink 2025–38

The focus of this iconic 15ha estate is firmly on dark fruits and powerful Cabernet Sauvignon character, with its muscular tannic structure and intense red and black fruits wrapped up in bitter chocolate. With slow-build spices, this shows a different side of Chile, and the heat of the vintage comes through not in flavour – the fruit is fresh and supple – but in power and supercharged concentration. I'm always a big fan of this wine, and winemaker Francisco Baettig has done an excellent job of harnessing the potential of the site and its 30-year-old vines. Harvest began on 12 March and was finished by the beginning of April, keeping it relatively low in alcohol, with the winemaking focused on lower temperatures to moderate the natural power and tannic architecture of the vintage. Clear ageing potential. 75% new oak. 13%

£231.67 (in bond) Burnett & Herbert

94

Oldenburg Vineyards, Cabernet Franc, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2019

Drink 2022–32

From a vineyard set at 410m above sea level – one of the highest spots in Stellenbosch – this is packed with blueberry, raspberry, slate, tomato leaf and sage. Stony, focused, crunchy and cheerful, it has energy and juice, and it bangs through the palate. One to gulp. A brilliant-value wine that is easy to drink but full of character and charm. Great stuff from winemaker Nic van Aarde, making use of a newly opened winery for this vintage. 14%

£27 (2018) Wine&Something

94

Viñedos Familia Chadwick, Seña, Aconcagua Valley, Chile 2020

Drink 2025–42

Balanced, intense raspberry, bilberry, balsamic, dill, tar, grilled cedar and sandalwood. Welcoming and confident, with classic Seña swagger; the balance and savoury spice notes arrive if you allow it to sit in the glass. This was a hot and dry vintage, with very little rain over the winter before the season began, and the main challenge throughout the season was water availability. They picked one week earlier than in 2019, and upped the Malbec in the blend to keep

freshness and acidity, and to help with the aromatics. The result is more powerful and opulent than recent vintages, with an emphasis on cocoa bean and then dark mint chocolate on the finish. This is a wine of layers, the tannins a little firm compared to the past two years of the wine, and it could do with a little more air through the mid-palate. But it absolutely delivers on the house style – not easy to maintain in such dry vintages. Biodynamic farming. 13.5%

£105.70 Petersham Cellar

93

Aristea, Cabernet Sauvignon, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2015

Drink 2022–36

Brilliantly balanced, this is truly savoury Cabernet Sauvignon, creamy through the mid-palate but restrained and focused on dried herbs and spices, with sage, eucalyptus and mint alongside the black fruits. The oak is present but well hidden. There's a lot of complexity here, but delivered with a light touch. 2015 was the first vintage of this wine (they are just about to release the 2020), and it has only got better in the years since, but this shows, at seven years old, that it was an exceptional estate from the start. Winemaker Matthew Krone uses 33% new oak and fruit across Stellenbosch, Elgin and Hemel-en-Aarde. 14%

£29.95 Private Cellar

93

Orma, Toscana IGT, Italy 2020

Drink 2024–38

Showcasing the firm, savoury tannins and dried Italian herbs that even Bordeaux blends can deliver from the heart of Bolgheri, this is packed with blackberry, liquorice, sage, fennel and smoked earth. Generous and moreish. Made by the Moretti Cuseri family from 7.5ha of vines located in the same corner of Tuscany as Sassicaia and Ornellaia, with considerably less clay in its soils than other coastal areas of Tuscany, dominated instead by sand and gravel. 15%

£71.67 Millesima

90

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Hands of Time, Napa Valley, California 2018

Drink 2023–36

Creamy espresso, black chocolate, cigar box, cocoa bean, plump damson and black cherry fruit – this is classic Napa, where full fruit ripeness gives supple tannins and drops of silk. It threatens overoaking but just pulls it back. Really needs time in a carafe right now, but once open it has an unfussy charm and provides a window into Stag's Leap. 14.5%

£24.76 Wine Direct

‘Manchester United feels a world away’

Until this year, he was the embattled chief executive of the world’s most famous football club. Now Ed Woodward is more concerned with the terraces of the Douro Valley than Old Trafford. Guy Woodward (no relation) hears his story



For most football fans, Ed Woodward is the man behind the hangdog expression that came to define Manchester United's decline as he watched another defeat unfold from his perch in the directors' box. Chief executive of the world's biggest football club for the best part of a decade, Woodward presided over a turbulent – and, on the pitch, mostly underwhelming – period that saw the team accumulate as many different managers as it did trophies.

For Manchester United fans, Woodward was the source of deep frustration, anger and, at times, vitriol. At the height of the unrest, Woodward's home was attacked by supporters spouting death threats. He stepped down earlier this year, after the fallout from the botched launch of a European Super League. (For the record, Woodward claims he was opposed to the concept but was using it as leverage to renegotiate the terms of the existing Champions League.)

The Woodward I meet is a world away from the popular image of the ruthless but world-weary former JP Morgan banker who prioritised United's commercial success over performance on the pitch. 'Timing's everything,' he says cheerily, by way of explanation. 'Right now, I'm just disconnecting my brain and getting back on solid ground.'

Part of that ground is in the Douro Valley, where, four years ago, he and his wife Isabelle bought a winery. And it is when talking about this that he morphs from hard-nosed financial dealmaker into a somewhat wide-eyed ingenu, his boyish enthusiasm suggesting he still can't quite believe his luck.

Woodward's slow-burning interest in wine dates back to an initiative instigated by his father to mark his graduation in 1993. 'My dad worked for Ford his whole life. He was a beer man, but as he progressed in the company he was given gifts, taken for lunch, and came to like wine. He wanted me to understand wine too.' Woodward senior funded his son's purchase of a mixed case and told him that if he took the label off each bottle he drank and

kept a scrapbook, he would 'reload'. 'I was a useless 21-year-old, but I did it. Not very well, but well enough that it led to more.'

Woodward stumbled into an accountancy career on the recommendation of his now brother-in-law and off the back of the 'milk round' corporate days that he attended 'for the free booze'. He had met Isabelle at university in Bristol, and when they moved to London in the late '90s, they enrolled on courses with the Wine & Spirit Education Trust in a bid to refine their palates. 'I didn't have any money back then,' he says, 'but it sent me on a journey of discovery, and that's important.'

That journey – and its trajectory – changed in 1999, when he went into merchant banking. The bank he joined, Robert Fleming, was taken over by JP Morgan, and Woodward rose up the ranks. He recalls a vinous epiphany drinking an Olivier Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet at his boss's house: 'I'd never had a wine like it.' Then there was a tasting hosted by Deutsche Bank at the Royal Academy, featuring the 1982 vintage of all five first growths. 'I was blown away.' The couple started holidaying in wine regions – South Africa, Australia, California. He set up a wine club with two friends, each putting in £50 a month to buy en primeur. The first vintage they bought was Bordeaux 2005 ('We got lucky') – the club is still going today ('We've got more red Bordeaux and white Burgundy than we should have').

That same year, Woodward was advising the US-based Glazer family on their takeover of Manchester United. After the Glazers accrued a majority shareholding in the club, they recruited Woodward to oversee its commercial operations, securing lucrative global sponsorships and doubling revenue. With his own income also bolstered, he and Isabelle started considering their own deal. 'We'd chat over bottles of wine, and once we were on the third bottle, we'd talk about owning a vineyard – with about as much clarity as three bottles of wine permit.'

Woodward went to school in Essex with the winemaker Matt Gant, whose older brother is a lifelong friend. 'His parents drove me to school,' he says. Woodward kept abreast of Gant's career as he made his name in Australia, first at mainstream Barossa brand St Hallett and then at his own more offbeat venture, First



ALEXANDRA VANOTTI

Drop. (Today he runs Gant & Co in Margaret River with his wife Claudia.) 'Our first idea was to buy a place in Australia and have Matt run it,' says Woodward. 'We actually got quite far down the road with a place in Barossa, but we pulled out the day before the auction because I finally realised I was buying it for lifestyle reasons, not business reasons. And why buy a place as a lifestyle choice if you can't visit it? That's how muddy our thinking was.'

As Gant's star continued to rise, he started spending his winters doing a vintage in Portugal, where he came across a young Douro winemaker named João Pires – 'the best young winemaker I met on all my travels'. The pair hit it off, kept in touch and started sharing knowledge, Pires in the Douro, Gant in the Barossa. Gant was struck by the potential of the winery at which Pires worked, and made a mental note that it might just interest Woodward. Quinta da Pedro Alta had been owned by the same family for five generations, but illness and failed investments meant it had started to drift; it had all but stopped bottling its own wine, instead selling bulk wine to Brazil and selling most of the rest of its grapes.

In 2016, Gant invited Woodward to the Douro with Gant's brother, a jaunt Woodward treated 'like a lads' trip – a pint of Guinness at the airport before the flight, that sort of thing'. He remembers Gant telling him the winery was for sale and how much it would cost, and thinking it was 'way out of my league. I wasn't in the position to commit,' he says. 'We'd bought a house near Manchester, the kids came in 2015 and I was fully into United. I still had so much to do – I was thinking I had multiple years left there.'

It was United's first season under Portuguese manager José Mourinho, and the pressure was on. 'The forces around United are incomparable to anything,' says Woodward. 'It's easy to be CEO of a FTSE 100 company, but Manchester United was the most public private company around. It's in the news every day. It's full-on, 24/7, and then the games at the weekends. The longest holiday we took during my time there was five days.'

Yet despite the intensity of the day job, Woodward couldn't stop thinking about Pedra Alta. He started to draw up plans to structure things differently, bringing in other investors. As it turned out, the sale was a protracted process in which other bidders came and went. By the time his bid was finally accepted in the summer of 2018 (for a fee negotiated down closer to that

of a Championship defender than a Premier League striker), he had more money to play with and a clear five-year plan to break even.

So, what was it that appealed? The boyish grin returns. 'Matt calls the Douro the Grand Canyon of wine regions. Did you know it represents 65% of the world's mountainous wine regions? I remember first seeing the view from the highest point of the vineyard, at 550m, down to the river at 230m, and thinking how we could have a tasting deck there. I'm getting tingles just thinking about it.'

Again, the business element was a secondary consideration. 'You don't buy a vineyard unless you've got an interest in wine. We certainly didn't buy it to make money.' Mostly, though, he says, he was drawn by the people – 'hard-working, humble; people you can work with and you want to work with'. Woodward was struck by how Pires, whose father was the hairdresser in the local village of Pinhão, could walk into any bar in the village and be greeted with 'How are you, João?' 'You get that feeling of community there. I don't have that in London.'

In his banking career, Woodward embraced the 12-hour days and the team environment and work ethic that went with it. 'It'd get to 9pm when someone would say, "Let's have a sharpener downstairs and then come back to our desks and get this finished." And everyone came, including the PAs, because they were part of a team. That's what I'm enjoying now.'

'I've only been able to turn my focus to it this year, and I'm still wet behind the ears. But I'm loving learning.' Phase one, he says, was about stabilising – 'to keep the banks happy, reassure staff, and get everyone bought into the five-year plan'. Investments were made in a temperature-controlled cellar, grafting and replanting in the vineyard and more vats to allow for vinification of more precise parcels.

Next came a rebrand, led by Woodward's wife Isabelle and featuring the three original granite markers (*feitorias*) on the property from the demarcation of the Port region in 1761.

In between times, Pires was honing his low-intervention, sustainable winemaking approach, with remote input from Gant as consultant. 'João and I both knew this was an amazing site that just needed a fresh start, fresh energy and fresh capital to realise its potential,' says Gant. 'The Douro is hugely undervalued as a region. I love its diversity.'



Ed and Isabelle Woodward (below and opening spread) bought Quinta da Pedra Alta in 2016, drawn by the beauty of the site and the enthusiasm of winemaker João Pires and consultant Matt Gant (above and left)

'You don't buy a vineyard unless you've got an interest in wine. We certainly didn't buy it to make money'

ALEXANDRA VANOTTI; RICARDO BERNARDO





RICARDO BERNARDO

The core team at Quinta da Pedra Alta (above, from left): winemaker João Pires, winemaking consultant Matt Gant, owners Isabelle and Ed Woodard, and commercial director Andy Brown



‘These are people you can work with and want to work with. Hard-working, humble... I was so impressed by how collaborative they are’

Among the varieties planted across the 35ha site are Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca, Rabigato, Gouveio, Viosinho and Sousão. The variety in altitude allows for a range from aromatic whites to full-bodied reds, though Pires says renewed focus has allowed him to harness the acidity and freshness that he feels will come to define the house style.

Most strikingly, in just four years the range has grown from four to an almost unwieldy ten different wines. At the core of the range are two whites and two reds spanning a host of textures and fruit-versus-acidity balance, with the imposing, taut yet rounded reserva red ‘the long pole in the tent’, as Woodward says. The three Ports – a ten-year-old Tawny, an occasional vintage Port and a zippy white Port (unapologetically aimed at the cocktail market) – are sacrosanct, as a nod to the brand’s heritage. (While Pedro Alta was demarcated as a vineyard in 1761, it was 1998 before it made non-fortified wine.)

Like Pires, Woodward is keen to dial down the Douro power but brings a dose of realism. ‘Straight out of bottle I found our reds fruity, yes, but quite big and tannic. But we’re not [Château] Latour – we’re not going to hold on to them until they’re ready.’ Lockdown allowed for experimentation, and Clarete – a lighter, brighter red co-fermented with white grapes, intended to be served cool, and sold by The Wine Society – is, says Woodward, a way of addressing the trend to drink reds earlier. He is clear,

though, that he is not telling Pires or Gant how to make the wines. ‘I’m just the dumb money.’

Woodward recognises it’s never going to be a full-time role for him (he’d like to get back into sport) – but he and Isabelle have seven-year-old twins, and in the longer term he wants his children to be involved. ‘I want them to understand the value of hard work. You look at the workers there, not earning much but picking grapes in 35°C heat on terraced schist. It’s amazingly hard work. It’s a different level of grounding. Then there’s a product to sell, across multiple countries, with duty, tax, logistics, marketing, social media... It teaches you lots of different skills, all within one small business.’

For now, he is enjoying the ride, splitting his time between London and the Douro. ‘The last time I went was during the vintage, and a few winemakers got together for a barbecue. They were sharing stories of the harvest and how business was going, and they kept running off to get this wine or that wine to taste and discuss. And there was a bunch of 18-year-old interns sitting at the end of table, not taking selfies for Instagram but talking, listening, learning. And chain smoking.’

‘I was so impressed by how collaborative they all are. I’m going out there again next week, and I can’t wait to see them and have a beer with the team.’ It’s a team that, unlike Manchester United, seems to manage itself. ○