



# fine lees

**Training for success**

*Honey Spencer*

**Orange (wine): the colour of change?**

*Henri Lawrance*

**Farming for the future: a look into regenerative farming with Bodegas Bhilar**

*Melanie Hickman*

**Harvest at Château Mouton Rothschild? Completed it, mate**

*Joana Albogas*



Do you like my brain?





the  
unfiltered  
wine  
report



In our frenetic contemporary existence, it is all too easy to lose sight of what truly holds value, even as the alarming concerns of our time consistently remind us of what we might one day lose. In this issue of Fine Lees, we look into the horizon with a balanced perspective – one that is grounded in reality but infused with optimism. It will inspire solutions aimed at creating a brighter future, one that not only addresses pressing issues, but also nurtures the pursuit of hedonistic enjoyment and the elusive balance of life itself.

There are not many writers who are able to write evocatively and knowledgeably on such diverse subjects as wine, motherhood, staff education and socio-economic issues, but these are just a few of the topics that hospitality extraordinaire and wine director at Paskin & Associates, **Honey Spencer** has tackled for us. In this latest instalment of Fine Lees, Honey delves into the initiatives she's launched to attract and retain talent, fostering expertise among sommeliers and keeping them engaged, something she deems essential for a business's long-term success.

**Henri Lawrance** deconstructs the UK's wine consumption patterns, emphasising the growing preference for fresher and lighter styles. Strongly backed by insights, he makes a compelling case for orange wine, suggesting that this hipster-perceived category has the potential to break out in the mainstream and diversify wine preferences in the Isle –

a shift that could only offer a positive journey for both consumers and the wine industry.

At Bibendum, our commitment to sustainability and the world of tomorrow drives us to collaborate with like-minded producers who share our passion and vision for the future. **Melanie Hickman**, co-founder of Bodegas Bhilar, who is dedicated to evolving into a truly biodynamic farm, tells us about her journey in prioritising biodiversity, agroforestry, and reforestation. While their dream of growing grapes at high altitudes remains, their paramount focus is on creating a self-sustaining sanctuary of biodiversity and sustainability, fostering a deep love for the environment in their children and inspiring a positive change in the world.

Lastly, **I will take you on a journey to Sauternes and Pauillac**, to what was an unforgettable experience marked by the generosity of our hosts at Baron Philippe de Rothschild, and our partners at Compagnie Medocaine des Grands Crus. Amid otherworldly meals, the tasting of rare wines, and exceptional vineyard sightings, we also found time to harvest Cabernet Sauvignon destined for Chateau d'Armailhac's 2023 vintage and explore Chateau Mouton Rothschild's private art collection.

**We hope you enjoy the latest musings from our writers and wish you a Merry and successful Christmas!**

*Joana Albogus*



**Joana's** first memory with wine was at a very young age, when she first tasted the sweetness of Madeira during a family trip to the Portuguese archipelago. After graduating with a degree in Economics in Lisbon, and a stint in the Fashion industry in Amsterdam, Joana delved into the world of wine, a passion that had never left her. She has a particular interest in low-intervention, artisanal wines.

# TRAINING FOR SUCCESS

*written by Honey Spencer  
designed by Sophia Martin*



IT STARTED ON THE FIRST DAY  
OF GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL 2016.

OH MY GOD,  
YOU MORONS



GROANED MY SOUTH AFRICAN FRIEND  
ANGELO FROM THE TENT NEXT TO ME.

IT WAS  
6AM



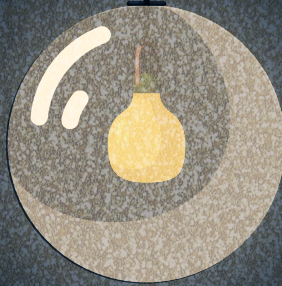
...and the country was waking up to a new reality: **Britain was out of the EU**. While the full effects were predicted not to be realised for up to a decade, the reaction within the world of restaurants was felt swiftly and sorely.

**Many young and talented Europeans no longer felt welcome**, and those who had been planning to travel to join the UK hospitality force instead opted for Berlin, Copenhagen, Barcelona and Marseille as locations to spend their formative professional years in the sector.

Then, as **a curious virus was speeding around Asia** in the February of 2020, the UK government introduced the immigration points system as part of a wider immigration crackdown. The headline: **'Hospitality staff - waiters, chefs, and sommeliers had been deemed 'unskilled labour'** in the eyes of the UK', and those entering the UK for

work would need special visas and minimum salaries in order to qualify. This newly imposed status would also go on to further wound an already fragile perception of hospitality as a career choice for Brits. 'Fantastic', I remember thinking, 'not only are we unable to source talent

from abroad, but now we've put off a whole generation of potential native talent from coming into the field.' **(Today, only 5% of young adults are considering a career in hospitality - [Caterer.com](https://www.caterer.com))**. And then, of course, came Covid, the final death knell in a stunning trifecta imposed on an industry already treading water. As **the last tranches of talent from Europe waved goodbye to the UK and travelled elsewhere in search of a more welcoming and rewarding career**, the UK spluttered through its recovery, slowly, painfully, beleaguered further by rising costs and, by now, a fully blown staffing crisis.



## IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL OF THIS,

I became Wine Director at Paskin, whose venues included high-performing sites such as The Palomar, The Barbary, and 1\* Michelin Evelyn's Table in London's West End.

Hiring senior sommeliers was still within the realm of possibility, but at a junior level, there were few options with the right experience or knowledge.

Anyone who operates within the realm of restaurants knows the importance of passionate and dedicated staff.



'FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE  
WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE,  
AND THE REST CAN BE BUILT'

So, faced with an ever-bleaker recruitment landscape, **I decided it was time for action.** I not only had to **attract talent** to the business, but I had to **train them**, and I had to find a way to **keep them**. The last two, it turned out, dovetailed naturally.

# WE STARTED TO RUN WSET PROGRAMS AT OUR HEAD OFFICE



The uptake and impact took me by surprise. The teams started to flourish, and weekly **wine sales swelled**

**by up to 20%** some weeks. I walked into The Barbary one evening to find a junior sous chef waxing lyrical to a guest about the merits of fermentation in stainless steel vs amphora. I was as stunned as the guest sat across from her. Weekly wine trainings became more interactive rather than the lecture-style sessions I'd grown accustomed to in my earlier career. **Employees who had completed the course surged brazenly with newfound confidence,** as did their enthusiasm for selling off-piste and more premium wines. Around the same time, I set up a weekly initiative called 'Maverick Studies' within my team of sommeliers. Each week, we select a region or concept (Piedmont or Sake for example) and conduct a deep dive into it, each sommelier

and offered them up to anyone who wanted to grow their knowledge in wine.

having their own area to research and present. Elements included the history of the region/subject, related terroirs, varieties, the 'first mover' producers, and the contemporaries, a vintage run down, and the future considering realities such as migration and climate change. Now orchestrated by a junior sommelier, these sessions provide a communal depth of knowledge rarely rehearsed outside of WSET classrooms. I suspect **these sessions have also played a small but vital role in retaining the sommeliers within the group.** Wine tastings are frequent, and each member of both front and back of house are encouraged to try the wines as much as

they need to in order to sell them in the best way; the sommelier team also engage in twice-weekly blind tastings. **Wines are offered at a 70% staff discount to the whole company to encourage everyone to buy and enjoy wine from the six venues in their own time,** another factor which has allowed us to develop more enhanced wine programs in key venues such as The Palomar over the last year. Supplier relationships are paramount to any business's success, and ours support with samples for staff training and extra bottles to be used as staff incentives and rewards. Trips to vineyards and wine fairs are also used as staff incentives and work as brilliant tools to build employee relationships and a deeper understanding of the world of wine and their place within it.







Of course, none of this is as straightforward as I'm making it out to be. The realities of running a hospitality business with its unique pressures: schedule conflicts, sickness cover, overlapping services, staggered start times, stock-takes and management meetings make conducting training more like an exercise in using a crowbar than the tranquil and nourishing segment of a week than it might be in any another type of business. But in my experience, training is worth fighting for. The positive impacts of well-trained staff on retention, morale, and overall company culture are not to be underestimated. **Investing in staff training is a key factor in enhancing employee skills and overall productivity and, in the long term, plays a part in the overall growth and success of a business.** And in light of the most recent chapter in the history of the sector, we need all the help we can get.

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**Honey's** rise within the world of wine has been an energetic, dynamic, and progressive journey. She has travelled across the globe and executed wine lists at renowned venues such as Sager and Wilde in London, Den Vandrette in Copenhagen, 10 William Street in Sydney and Noma in Mexico. Honey is currently wine director for PASKIN and Associates, curating the wine programmes for all restaurants including The Palomar, The Barbary, and 1\* Michelin restaurant, Evelyn's Table. She also works as a consultant on a few projects. She is a fierce advocate for sustainability within the industry, and is listed in *The Drinks Business '50 Most Powerful Sommeliers in London'* and *CODE's '100 Most Influential Women in Hospitality'* (2022).



ORA

NOGE  
(wine)

THE COLOUR  
OF CHANGE?

written by HENRI LAWRENCE  
designed by SILVIA RUGA

‘ENGLAND IN EFFECT IS INSULAR, SHE IS MARITIME, SHE IS LINKED THROUGH HER EXCHANGES, HER MARKETS, HER SUPPLY LINES TO THE MOST DIVERSE AND OFTEN THE MOST DISTANT COUNTRIES... SHE HAS IN ALL HER DOINGS VERY MARKED AND VERY ORIGINAL HABITS AND TRADITIONS.’

*Charles De Gaulle, 14 January 1963*

This quote accompanied De Gaulle’s veto on the UK’s application to join the then-EEC. Do not worry, we will not be discussing UK-EU relations.... but the accuracy of this statement rings true today. THE UK IMPORTS UP TO 80% OF ITS FOOD AND INGREDIENTS AND 98.6% OF ITS WINE – *Business Insider, Vinex*. That last figure comes as no surprise, but when we look at other net wine importing countries in Europe, such as Poland, you will find that the vast majority comes from the same continent. Even Germany is a net importer – one of the largest in the world, in fact – and turns to Italy, Spain and France to top up its own supply - *Statista*.

The UK, on the other hand, imports significantly from Australia, Chile, New Zealand, USA, and South Africa, alongside the largest European exporters.

This has made it a global wine hub where you can find any vinous wonder you’re looking for, however niche – say, a South African white Cinsault, a Macedonian Vranac or an entire tasting dedicated to Ukrainian wine. Even discounters offer Swiss Pinot Noir, Corsican rosé and Argentinian Bonarda. I’m sure most of us agree that the UK, even without a winemaking tradition, is a great place to be as a lover of wine.

Perhaps then, with this embarrassment of varietals and origins that we so enjoy, we’d expect the UK to consume a diverse array of wine styles. But looking across various sources, it seems that this isn’t the case. A 2019 YouGov survey asked drinkers if they drink certain styles of wine. It found that 41% of Britons enjoy a ‘crisp white (Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Grigio)’, while 38% reach for a ‘full bodied red (Malbec or Shiraz)’ and 34% for Prosecco. 1 in 4 would opt for a Pinot Noir or Champagne. Down in 7<sup>th</sup> place, at 17%, we find an oaky white such as Chardonnay.

When we look specifically at favourite grapes, Pinot Grigio leads, followed by Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Rosé\*. A shy Pinot Noir makes an appearance, and other reds include Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Malbec and Rioja\* (Tempranillo) - *The Herald*. The preponderance of crisp whites and rich reds is quite striking – it seems that UK tastes have settled on archetypal styles i.e. whites that are ‘least like reds’ and vice versa.

\*Not represented varietally in the survey.



# GRAPE



# EXPECTATIONS

When we think that the ‘ANYTHING BUT CHARDONNAY’ movement took off way back in the 90s, it seems that the crisp, ‘no oak’ expectation may be quite sticky, especially considering Chablis-style Chardonnay’s moderate resurgence. Just as certain roles typecast actors – Connery and Bond, Radcliffe and Harry Potter – the country may have settled on particular stylistic expectations for white and red wines that leave other styles behind.

## WHAT ABOUT SEASONALITY?

Surely consumers are reaching for bigger whites and reds at Winter, chillable reds in Spring and Autumn and rosé over Summer? I’m sure we’d like for this to be the case, but it seems consumer preference reigns all year round. If you were to guess how much rosé sales spike in Summer versus the rest of the year, what would you guess? 20%? 10%? Not so - across On and Off trade, rosé nudges up around 3% then and dips the same in winter – *Bibendum / PROOF*. Reds show the inverse – including Pinot Noir and Gamay - and white wine is relatively flat all year round. Only sparkling shows a significant jump around the festive season.



# JUST AS CERTAIN ROLES TYPECAST ACTORS — CONNERY AND BOND, RADCLIFFE AND HARRY POTTER — THE COUNTRY MAY HAVE SETTLED ON PARTICULAR STYLISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR WHITE AND RED WINES THAT LEAVE OTHER STYLES BEHIND

We see then somewhat of a paradox. The range of wine available is wider in the UK than it has ever been and includes almost all the key European styles that form the rump of continental shelves. Despite this, consumers tend to reach for a handful of key styles all year round.

Maybe this is just down to the democratisation of wine? When wine was the preserve of the upper classes before the 1960s and wine education was narrow but deep, privileged consumers made do with the few regions they had access to – Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne, and Port. But within these few regions they bought a range of red and white styles as well as sparkling, dessert and fortified.

It would make sense to expect an increase in the diversity of consumption as consumer exposure to different styles and potentially, wine knowledge, have increased over time. Perhaps, with wine following in the footsteps of beer – a delicious, affordable, yet more brand than terroir-led beverage – PRICE, VARIETAL AND BRAND HAVE

BECOME THE KEY DRIVERS TO GUIDE THE AFFORDABLE, RELIABLE DRINKING EXPERIENCE THAT CONSUMERS DEMAND.

The UK is also distinct amongst its wine producing neighbours. Looking across the channel, France includes zippy Riesling and Chablis next to Gewurztraminer within its favourites – *L'Observatoire E. Leclerc*. Hopping over the border again we observe a longstanding obsession for Lambrusco's red bubbles while plump Primitivo climbs the top 10, below food friendly Sangiovese and Montepulciano – *IRI/Vitality*.

Although preferred styles in these countries would indicate a greater diversity of consumption, even from a narrower available range, the UK is not as insular as first mentioned. Studies have found an increasing convergence in the mix of alcoholic drinks consumed across both traditional beer and wine markets. Key trends in wine have a more global reach and affect both majority wine producing and wine importing countries.

# TURNING HEADS, SHIFTING APPETITES



Looking at the UK and France again, we can observe AMONGST YOUNGER CONSUMERS A SHIFT TO FRESHER, LIGHTER AND LOWER

ALCOHOL STYLES. This change has affected red wine sales above all, while continuing a longer running abandonment of sweet styles.

What lies behind this trend? Several things. The most well publicised driver is a burgeoning health consciousness that eschews the higher alcohol reds associated with previous generations. Consumers are also drinking less often, and this is leading to a gradual premiumisation of the category.

Another trend, observed by our insights team, suggests that the higher cost of living has shifted Britons to prioritise food-free or food-light wine occasions. When consumers aren't reaching for the increasingly popular beer and cocktails, they are looking once more for fresh wines – sparkling, white and rosé.

It would be amiss not to mention rosé when looking at contemporary UK wine tastes and how to angle orange wine. A more niche, summer-only, female-leaning drink just 10 years ago, rosé has seen continuous growth since and exploded during COVID. Now a firm perennial favourite, the Provence style has seen various producers dial down traditional extraction levels to fit customer expectations. Again, this explosive popularity has been mirrored over the channel.

Light, red fruited, lower in alcohol and perfect with or without food, it's easy to understand its success given the key trends that we've discussed. Looking into our love of all things pink, our research team found that 25% of respondents liked rosé for its refreshing/crisp nature, 24% for its taste and 23% for its lightness. When investigating how the style spread, we found that 64% of consumers discovered new brands through supermarkets and 41% through recommendations by friends and family. Over a third of customers referenced colour as a decisive factor in drawing them to the style – *Bibendum / PROOF*.

FOR AN ANECDOTAL CONTRIBUTION, I REMEMBER LOOKING AT SEARCH DATA DURING A ROLE IN WINE ECOMMERCE AND ALL YEAR ROUND, 'ROSÉ' CAME TOP - ABOVE ALL OTHER REGIONS AND VARIETALS - THIS COLOUR-LED STYLE SEEMS TO ACT AS A MUCH-LOVED LEVELLER OF WINE KNOWLEDGE.

A distinctively coloured, conversation piece wine that is refreshing, versatile, mid to low alcohol and prioritises style over varietal and appellation. That all sounds quite convincing when looking at UK tastes and the stellar success of rosé.

Speaking to consumers about the style, we found that OVER HALF OF THEM HAD NEVER HEARD OF ORANGE WINE AND 83% OF THEM WOULD BE INTERESTED IN TRYING THE STYLE. The majority of those who had tried orange wine would try it again. Looking at these figures alongside the shift to perennial rosé consumption, we can see an untapped demand for new, vibrant wine styles – *Bibendum / PROOF*.

Standing out on a supermarket shelf is one thing but outside of its natural, hip wine bar environment, orange and the customer may need a tad of matchmaking in the On Trade – but herein lies the opportunity. Without delving too much into the natural wine world, its ability to turn the category on its head with a craft beer-ified, visual-led, appellation-light approach has certainly resonated with those who might feel excluded from a complex category.

Faced with so much choice, we've seen that customers fall back on old favourites but orange (!) has the ability to similarly grab the imagination and reset the customer conversation, much like rosé and the natural wine movement.

A customer might want to start with a glass, or they may add in a few varied dishes as an accompaniment. They'll likely want something dry and refreshing. In this case, pointing them to a lighter extraction orange wine is an easy way to change things up, to touch on winemaking and technique in a new context and to reintroduce gentle tannins into the equation. Rather than the customer sitting at the poles 'crisp white' or 'full red,' we might be able to resituate them in the middle of the playing field. After that, adjacent styles – a textured white, a crunchy red or a deep rosé – are just a step away. That adds up to an enhanced customer experience, a potential nudge to turnover, and a win for the diverse world of wine.

Customers, above all younger generations - those least engaged by wine - increasingly seek out authentic experiences and brands. They are drawn to casual dining, to diverse and fusion cuisines and to spice-laced dishes. The continued rise of food halls around the country exemplifies these changes. A group of friends can meet, make their own personal choice of cuisine then sit around the same, casual table. Here too orange wine can have a particular impact. Attracting people away from beer and cocktails with an unusual, Aperol ballpark aesthetic, it can then pair effortlessly, suiting a range of palates and cuisines thanks to its serving temperature, aromatics, and structure.

## SO, WHAT ABOUT ORANGE WINE?



# LET'S TALK BUSINESS

In terms of listing, carrying a core, more approachable style as an orange entry point is wise. *Gérard Bertrand's* ORANGE GOLD is just the ticket. An organic, elegant, Chardonnay-led blend of seven varieties, this is an orange at its easiest. Typical dried apricot, orange peel, spice, floral and tea notes abound but gentle extraction results in a rich texture and just a tickle of tannin. From there, a more textural number like *Caruso e Minini's* Sicilian 'ARANCINO' offers up added nutty overtones and a little more tannic structure. Either way, having at least an entry point wine offers an opportunity for a customer to dip a toe into the category and to enhance their wine drinking experience. When it comes to pairings and offering more of an orange journey than of course, the more the merrier, and special listings would work a treat.

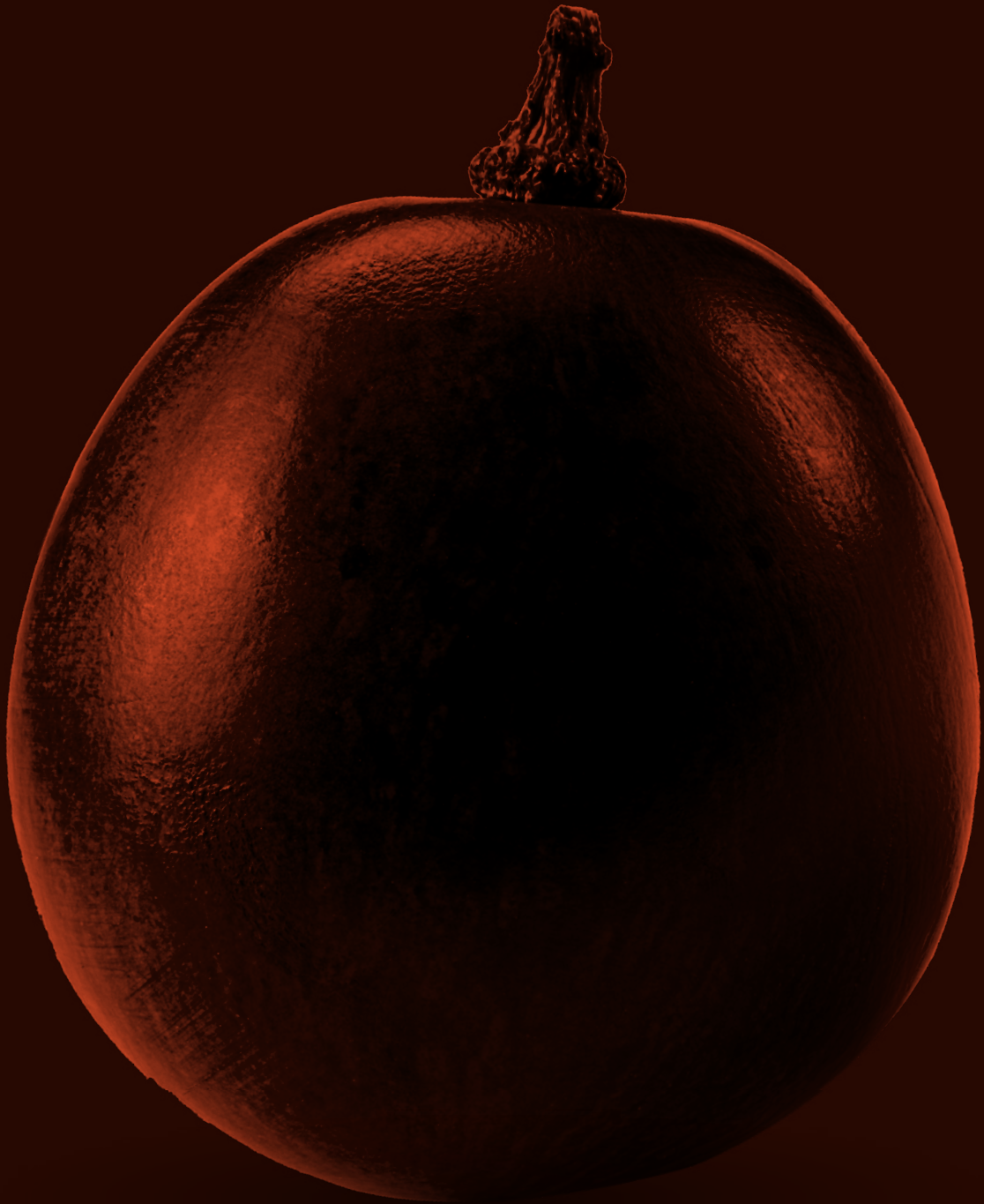
INTRODUCING AN ORANGE LISTING IS ALSO A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW SOME BREAD-AND-BUTTER MARKETING. Be sure to include highlights on your list that give customers a nudge to the style. With such a nascent category, including a line on how orange wines are made could be a helpful way to open the conversation. When it comes to that conversation – be prepared – orange wine cheat sheets are an excellent option, and this is a great excuse to top up staff training on winemaking methods. Again, a nudge is key – with the right listings, orange can be a fun, low risk way to introduce something new to customers.

## ORANGE WINE CAN ALSO WORK AS A HOOK.

A 100% orange paired dinner still stands out in the On Trade, and this offers a great opportunity to explore the category, its incredible versatility and to revitalise the wine category for both connoisseurs and amateurs.

All in all, research shows that orange is waiting to seize rosé's momentum and break out in the mainstream. This may well chip at the dominance of the UK's go-to styles and open up our palates to less archetypal styles. Whether this results in a nation of chilled Cinsault swiggers, Viognier enthusiasts and Navarra Rosado hounds remains to be seen... but this can only be a positive journey for customers and the industry alike.





**Henri** has always thought about tomorrow's dinner tonight. From this longstanding obsession with food and French regional dishes, a deep love of wine swiftly followed. After securing WSET qualifications, a jump from the corporate world was inevitable. Bringing experience of customer strategy and digital marketing, a debut role in wine ecommerce made perfect sense. He then arrived at Bibendum as a Customer Marketing Manager, where he works to drive sales in the On and Off trade by communicating the joy of wine.



# FARMING FOR THE FUTURE:

A LOOK INTO  
REGENERATIVE  
FARMING WITH  
BODEGAS BHILAR

*written by Melanie Hickman  
design by Romain Bénard*

## **JULY IS SET TO BECOME THE HOTTEST MONTH ON EARTH SINCE SCIENTISTS BEGAN KEEPING RECORDS.**

The Mediterranean Sea has also hit a record high, reaching 28.4 degrees Celsius. These statistics will continue to grow every year, alongside my two young children. They will bear the burden of my generation's excesses, prompting my family to take a hard look at how we live, our relationship with the land, and to reconsider our goals for their future and the legacy we leave behind. Though we have

been farming biodynamically since our estate's inception, with each new day we strive to become a truly "biodynamic farm" and explore how we can grow better grapes while fostering resilience in the land that will one day be passed on to the next generation.

## **ONE UNDENIABLE FACT IS THAT BIODIVERSITY STRENGTHENS ECOSYSTEMS.**

With this in mind, we have been planting perennials among our vineyards since 2015, and more recently, we have incorporated agroforestry by planting 76 tree saplings in the last winter alone.

However, for my conscience, this wasn't enough. Five years ago, we purchased a high-altitude wheat field on the mountaintop of Kripan, in Rioja Alavesa, bordering the forest. My initial idea was to plant an experimental vineyard at 900m, hoping that my children would have an advantage against climate change. But upon reflecting on my principles, I realized that converting one monoculture to another wasn't the right approach to help them. To combat climate change, they will not need more vines; they need healthy soils, insects, birds, fresh air, and clean water.

## MY IDEALISTIC SIDE LED ME TO CONSIDER REFORESTATION

—an investment with a noble return, albeit not a financial one. I had to adjust my course from less radical to more regenerative, honing in on my convictions and converting them into sustainable actions. The challenge was to establish a farm with healthy soils, rich biodiversity, food for pollinators, trees for water capture, all while following my biodynamic training of self-contained farming that would also serve as a source of income.

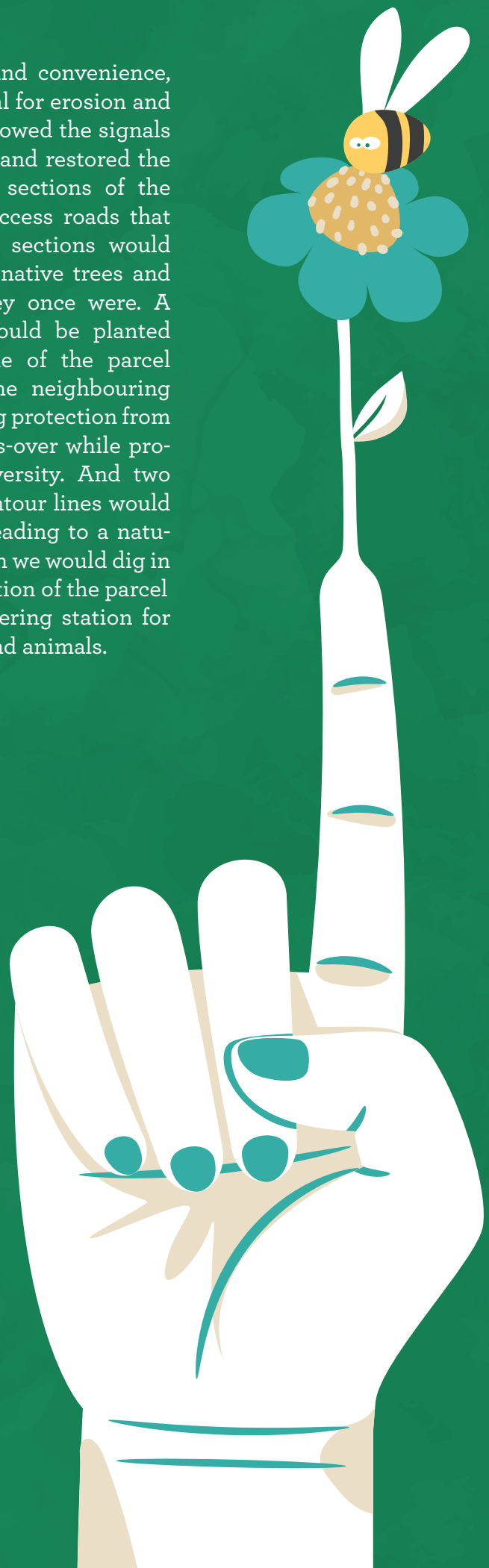
## IT WAS QUITE A TASK, AND I WAS READY FOR THE CHALLENGE.

I hired a professional to analyse the parcel's topography, natural water flow, and contours, only to discover that my most beneficial tool was someone deeply connected to the earth—Alfred, a member of our team since 2014. Combining the aerial photography of the parcel dating back to the 1940s, careful observation, data, Alfred's practical knowledge, and the regional expertise of my husband David, we designed a plan to bring my dreams to life. Rather than sticking to one monoculture,

## WE LOOKED TO THE PAST FOR GUIDANCE ON HOW TO MOVE FORWARD.

Historic photos revealed hedges of thick native forest on the steep gradients, contrary to what I found—a wide-open parcel farmed along the slope for max-

imum profit and convenience, yet detrimental for erosion and runoff. We followed the signals from the past and restored the four separate sections of the parcel. Four access roads that separated the sections would be lined with native trees and bushes as they once were. A hedge row would be planted along the side of the parcel exposed to the neighbouring field, providing protection from chemical cross-over while promoting biodiversity. And two of the four contour lines would have swales leading to a natural pond, which we would dig in the lowest section of the parcel—a future watering station for native birds and animals.



## THE NEXT QUESTION WAS WHAT TO PLANT.

Anyone who knows me or has visited our winery will be aware of my passion for bees. Serving as a barometer, their health reflects the earth's ecosystem, and it is vital that we listen. Instead of buying mass amounts of bees and forcing them onto my land, I chose to entice them. Which is why the uppermost portion of the parcel was planted with lavender. With the help of a noble team of plow horses,

### WE PLANTED 5000 PLANTS BY HAND AND HOOF!

Lavender is a native herb that can be found scattered throughout the mountain, along with thyme and rosemary, which I also planted on a much smaller scale. Should the bees accept my invitation and move into the wooden houses I set out for them, I will harvest honey in the good years, offering a small return over time. When the lavender is in bloom, guests will be invited to a unique high-altitude wine tasting and lavender harvest adventure with breathtaking views at almost 3,000 feet elevation

### —SOMETHING QUITE UNIQUE FOR OUR REGION.

Reviewing images from the past, we discovered that the mid-section of the parcel once contained



the highest number of forested hedgerows, making it a perfect location for reforestation. Fortunately, the native trees in our area are holm oaks, which are great partners for truffles. Thus, we have filled the middle of the parcel with 200 holm oaks inoculated with truffles. Whether or not truffles will grow is un-

certain, but it is a gamble I am happy to take as there is no real downside. Even if truffles don't thrive, it will mean I reforested a section of the parcel, which is a win in itself. However, if biodynamically farmed truffles do grow in 10 to 15 years' time, it would be a lucrative reward.

Another crucial factor we have come to consider is closing the loop on our farm. As the climate changes, our agricultural systems break down, and prices skyrocket. Finding fodder for our horses becomes increasingly difficult. In our desperation to find food for them, we must consider what type of farming we are supporting and which kind of nutrients we are providing for our hardworking plow horses. With this in mind, we have dedicated a quarter of the land to their food supply. Alfred thoughtfully presented options that encapsulated my vision of biodiversity and aesthetics, and from the list I chose Sainfoin, a legume with beautiful pinkish-red flowers, to complement the adjacent lavender, packed with nectar and pollen—another temptation for honeybees. When time came to sow the seeds,

### **I WITNESSED A LOST ART; IN PERFECT SILENCE,**

Alfred executed the ancient skill of hand sowing seeds by pulling a handful from a satchel and dispersing them in an outward motion in almost exact distance and rhythm every few steps. Simply observing the gentle repetitive motion felt meditative in nature.





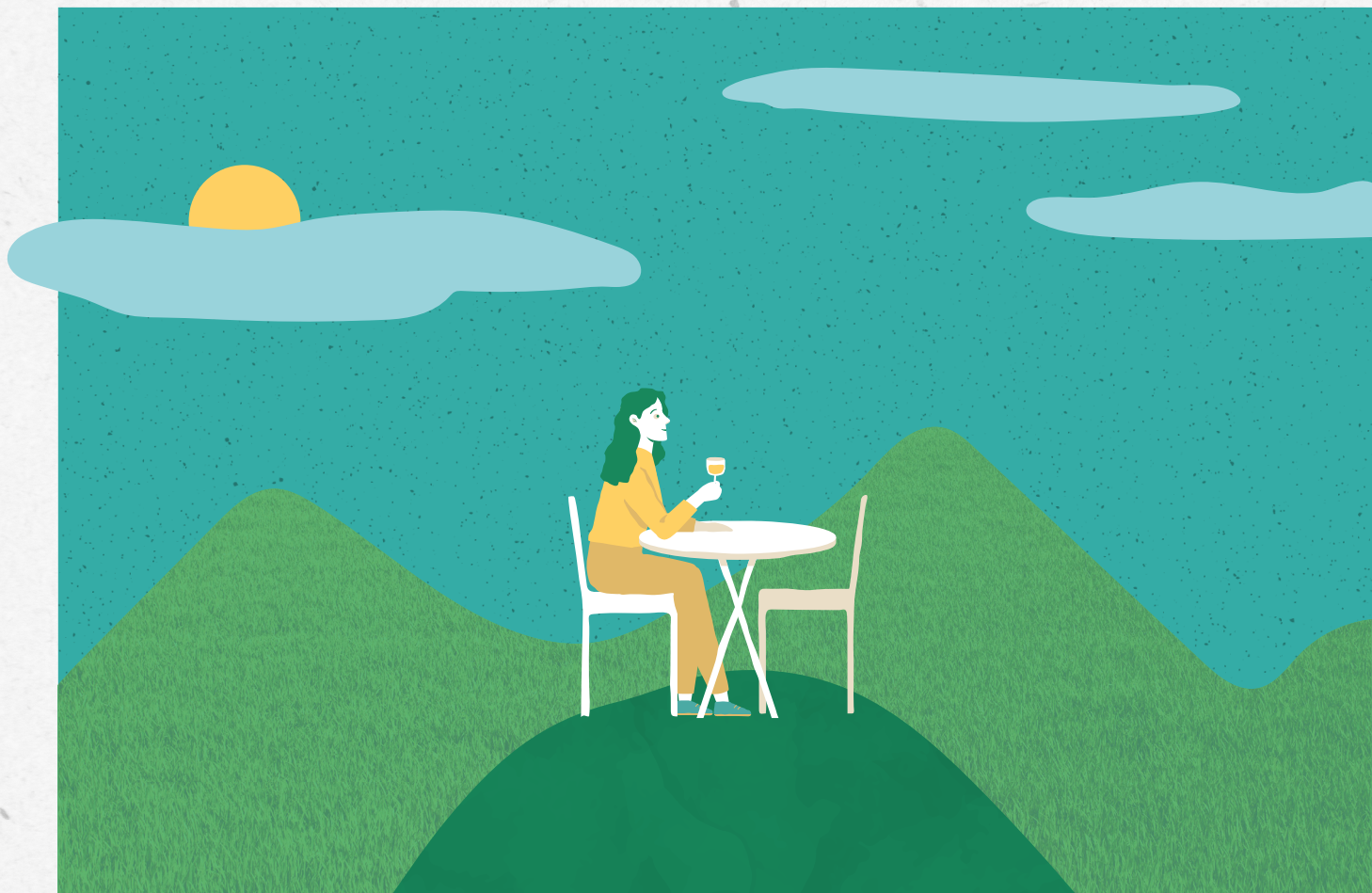
## FINALLY, THE CULTIVAR THAT HOLDS A SPECIAL PLACE IN OUR HEARTS—THE VINE.

I couldn't let go of the initial idea that led us to acquire the parcel five years ago—planting a vineyard at this altitude. The DOCA Rioja stretches 100 km from a Mediterranean climate in the east to Atlantic in the West. Speaking in terms of altitude, along the slopes of the Sierra Cantabria is a different animal than the peaks of altitude found in Rioja Oriental. Even Logroño, a short 20-minute drive down the hill from our village, reveals temperature increases from 2 to 5 degrees centigrade on average, and this parcel is located in the highest altitude village in Alavesa, Kripan. That's to say, the gamble in this regenerative parcel could prove to be growing grapes at this altitude, but unfortunately, with the changing climate, I doubt it.

### **THIS WILL BE THE LAST STEP IN OUR VENTURE.**

The agricultural crisis we face is more than a mere environmental concern; it is deeply intertwined with a spiritual crisis arising from our disconnect with nature. With a commitment to biodynamic practices, we are transforming our farm into a regenerative sanctuary of biodiversity and sustainability. Through our approach of cultivating healthy soils, diverse ecosystems, and a legacy of responsible stewardship, we aim to instill in our children a profound appreciation for the natural world, inspiring a genuine bond with the earth that will guide them in their relationship with nature throughout their lives. Though we still hope to succeed with the vineyard at this altitude, our primary focus lies in working towards a more self-sustaining system, while nurturing a sense of wonder, respect, and love for the environment in our children. And that, they take these lessons and expand on them as steppingstones to improve and guide them in their own endeavors.

**AND PERHAPS EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY,  
WE HOPE OTHERS WILL DO THE SAME,  
COLLABORATING FOR A BETTER FUTURE.**



**Melanie Hickman** is a North American native and vine grower, who moved to Spain in 2012. She and her enologist husband, David Sampedro own Bodegas Bhilar, a biodynamic winery located in the village of Elvillar, Rioja Alavesa. Together they manage 17ha of estate vineyards certified organic and biodynamic (in conversion to Demeter) farmed exclusively by plough-horses. Always striving to surpass their beliefs, their winery and home are powered by solar panels and a windmill, and not connected to the electric grid. From inception, they have maintained a vision of the future that set them apart from the rest of the region: advocating for regenerative farming and motivated by wanting to express the characteristics of their village's limestone soils, whilst leading a continuous search for old vines in high-altitude locations. Together they continue to invest in small, old parcels with a focus on thoughtful farming, to ensure biodiversity and healthy soils for the future.



# Harvest at Chateau Mouton Rothschild? Completed it, mate.

Well... Sort of!

WRITTEN BY JOANA ALBOGAS  
DESIGNED BY CHI YAN LI

**A 2:30am wakeup call. The alarm goes off, and likely one of the very few times I didn't hit snooze.** Instead, I got up in a jump. What would typically sound tortuous, felt effortless in the early hours of that Monday morning. Perhaps because I couldn't sleep for most of the four or so hours I had been lying in bed, rolling from one side to the other, only to roll over again. Covers up. Covers down.

And up again. *Damn, I'm going to look tired.* As someone who doesn't typically go on wine trips, this was a big one to be joining. **Bibendum and a handful of our best customers had been invited to harvest at Chateau Mouton-Rothschild, and to visit a few other Chateaux part of the Baron Philippe de Rothschild portfolio. Imposter syndrome mode: activated.**

However, when an opportunity like this comes up, one doesn't question. One doesn't even blink. One jumps at the opportunity and sends their passport details as soon as they're asked to do so. A sleepless night felt like a small price to pay. **And rightly so – it was the best two days someone working in wine could ever dream of.** And yes, I do know you're likely to be rolling your eyes - but bear with me.



Gatwick Airport doesn't seem to distinguish day from night, dusk from dawn, nor anything in between. And while everything else felt awake in the early hours of the morning there's a certain unease about meeting those, you'll spend the next 36 hours with for the first time at 4am, chaotically huddled together over a small table at a certain crowded sandwich shop franchise. A few familiar faces, from tasting events or the odd Instagram post. A clumsy hello wave, polite introductions, and a couple of *you look fresh!* remarks later, we were ready to board.

**WOW. These are the sommeliers and wine buyers of some of the top restaurants and hotels of London. And we're going to Bordeaux. Bordeaux!**

That's the funny thing about getting so enthralled in the wine industry. **In a blink, you get pulled into it, and you start perceiving sommeliers, winemakers, and restaurateurs as celebrities.**

Talents and names that others, *outsiders*, are oblivious to. Ones that leave anyone else with blank faces while you euphorically recount a moment, a story that's completely irrelevant and unexciting – **perhaps about concrete eggs, or lees ageing, or a specific yeast strain.**

**That is, unless you work in wine. Geology has never been sexier.**

By the time we landed, sleepiness had given way to palpable enthusiasm. Defiant to the weather forecast, the renown temperamental Bordeaux was sunny and just warm enough. We arrived at our first stop, **the charming Chateau Coutet. Picturesque, welcoming, understatedly elegant. Perfectly French in all its simplicity yet impeccable upkeep.** We were greeted by the welcoming smile and the contagious ease of Aline Baly. She owns and manages the estate alongside her father and uncle, Dominique, and Philippe Baly, with technical and commercial assistance from Baron Philippe de Rothschild, who have exclusive distribution rights.





**Recognised as one of the finest wines in its appellation, Chateau Coutet was ranked a first growth in 1855, the highest echelon in the Bordeaux hierarchy. It stands as one of the oldest estates in the Sauternes region and, on par with its remarkable architectural heritage, it has an exceptional terroir.**

We walked through the vineyards, following our host, and avidly drinking each and every one of her words. **You know it's serious when everyone's notepads are out, pens furiously scribbling pages.** Where we stood, we could see past the 13th-century tower where Chateau d'Yquem sits. Nearby were other famous names like **Climens, Rieussec and Suduiraut.** This might not come as a surprise for many, but as someone who had never been in Bordeaux, seeing so many chateaux and vineyards in such proximity was nothing short of mesmerising. **No matter where you were, you rubbed shoulders with an iconic chateau and were a mere step away from yet another one of the world's greatest terroirs.**

In her very own casual and hands-on way, Aline picked some botrytised Sémillon berries, and we all tasted the noblest of rots. Delightfully, deliciously, incredibly sweet.

**The name "Coutet" comes from the Gascon word for "couteau," meaning "knife," in reference to the wine's fresh, vibrant acidity and unique crispness.**

And the acidity was very much present on those shrivelled grapes. **When young, Chateau Coutet has aromas of white flowers, citrus, honey, and vanilla. Noble rot comes through with age, revealing a deep, delicate bouquet with hints of spice and candied fruit.** After a winery tour, and a walkaround in what, rumour has it, is **the longest cellar in Bordeaux,** an outstanding lunch followed. Paired with three sweet wines, and one Bordeaux Blanc, it was clear that the style is a perfect food companion from the first course to last.

**Did you know it was the British who decided sweet wines were dessert ones? Something local vigneronns inwardly disapprove of.**

The Bordelais will have it with herb-roasted poultry, but the brisk, palate-cleansing acidity present in these wines enables them to combine perfectly with pretty much every course of a meal. Foie gras, Asian cuisine, lobster, oysters, and other shellfish dishes are among the endless combinations – **bearing in mind that a savoury pairing will highlight the wine, while creating a beautiful balance on your tongue.**

The morning and afternoon flew by, and as we took the scenic route to Pauillac, I was once again struck by the grandeur yet apparent accessibility to so many chateaux in so few square kilometres. **Vineyards were everywhere, but they seemed small, restrained, and immaculately tended to, next to the beautiful buildings that majestically stood atop them.**



**The evening was surreal. We were royally welcomed to Chateau Clerc Milon, an 1855 Classified Growth bordering two classified First Growths – Cos d’Estournel and Smith Haut Lafitte.**

**A straight-lined building, evoking modernity was furnished with a cutting-edge winery, dressed in technicolour lights.** The dining room, however, reminisced a ballroom and we were suddenly transported to a timeless era, one of elegance and prestige. Perfectly matching the wines, we would have later that evening. We were treated to a superb meal, generously hosted by Camille Sereys de Rothschild, granddaughter of the Baron Philippe de Rothschild, who acquired Chateau Clerc Milon in 1970.



Here, we tasted Chateau Mouton Rothschild 2006, a wine that, according to Neil Martin, **"put winemaker Philippe Dhalluin on the map, in the sense that unlike the 2005 born in a great vintage, this 2006 had to transcend it"** (Wine Advocate, January 2017). We had the privilege of tasting its 1996 counterpart, deep garnet in color and awarded a staggering 97+ points by Lisa Perrotti-Brown, as she describes the full-bodied palate as **"richly fruited, opulent and oh-so seductive, with bags of youthful black fruit and lovely finely grained tannins, finishing with fantastic freshness and length,"** (Wine Advocate, October 2019). We were also graced with an unctuous Chateau Coutet 1995, that could still age for decades, a juicy Chateau d’Armailhac 2015, and an elegant Domaine de Baronarques 2021.



Our evening ended, and soon came the morning. Again, and against all predictions, the harvest morning was sunny and wonderful. *We were lucky with the weather*, we kept being told. It was meant to be. Everyone was in high spirits. We were each gifted matching polos, and matching caps, and a pair of secateurs in a leather purse, embossed with Baron Philippe de Rothschild's recognisable logo.

**We were in wine heaven, surrounded by south-facing gnarly, old vines and healthy, tight bunches of Cabernet Sauvignon.**

The sun shined, and a soft breeze whizzed between the leaves and tendrils. Wherever we turned we'd see a very French, beautifully rustic building in the distance. But my goodness, harvest is a back breaking job. Especially in Bordeaux, where vines are lower. At least compared to the ones in England.

**I hate getting my hands dirty, but I loved how purple they got.**

*If I leave here with all 10 fingers, I'll deem this day a success.* We had fun. Everyone was happy, light, smiling. And we each took our role as harvest crew very seriously. After all, it's not everyday one harvests grapes for Chateau d'Armailhac's 2023 vintage. I could tell how useless we

looked as the vineyard manager looked at us as one does when they first teach their grandmother how to use an iPhone.

**The estate's rich history dates to the d'Armailhacq family in 1660.** Three centuries later, it was acquired by Baron Philippe de Rothschild in 1933, passed to his daughter Philippine de Rothschild, and is now owned by her children, Camille and Philippe Sereys de Rothschild and Julien de Beaumarchais de Rothschild. They carry on the family's tradition of excellence and innovation in winemaking.

Chateau d'Armailhac produces a refined Pauillac wine, characterised by its timeless elegance and robust, well-structured tannins, regardless of the vintage.

**After all, it's not every day one harvests grapes for Chateau d'Armailhac's 2023 vintage.**



**Wine is an agricultural product. A testament to earth's bounty and vintners' undivided devotion.**



**And in case you're wondering why the title of this article doesn't coincide with the actual harvest...**

Well, we were meant to pick at Chateau Mouton Rothschild, but Mother Nature is unpredictable. We learnt that morning that we would head over to the grounds of Chateau d'Armailhac instead.

For someone who sits behind a desk writing and thinking about wine all day every day, and for my travel companions, who select, pour, and enjoy wine in the finest, most cosmopolitan of settings, **this was a good, rare reminder that wine is an agricultural product. A testament to earth's bounty and vintners' undivided devotion.**

During a joyful harvest lunch, where we shared thick layers of ham, soft and airy bread that was crunchy on the outside, and other traditional harvest delicacies, **we had the exceptional treat of tasting the vin de lies of Chateau Mouton Rothschild 1982.** Alongside none other than Camille and Philippe Sereys de Rothschild and Julien de Beaumarchais de Rothschild, joined by Ariane Khaida, the group's Managing Director.

*Screams in wine geek.* Full-bodied and expansive, it boasted a fruity character enveloped in velvety mature tannins, and a long-lasting finish. William G. Kelley has described the 1982 vintage as **"lavish, even flamboyant, and at the same time seriously structured and quintessentially Mouton, it encapsulates the greatness of the vintage,"** (Wine Advocate, December 2022).

Our day culminated in a visit to the legendary Chateau Mouton Rothschild.

**Nothing beats the smell of freshly pressed grapes. It's sweet and intense and fresh, all at once.**

It's warm, alive, and comforting. It fills your lungs, and you can taste the sunshine trapped in squeezed berries.

We toured the imponent winery, perfectly organised. 70 metres long, where the gravity-fed room is built on two levels linked by elegant metal pillars, combining wood and steel. In true Mouton fashion, 44 huge oak vats carry the chateau's winemaking tradition. They're each of different sizes and correspond to the different parcels of the estate which are vinified separately. This allows the team to optimise both the selection during harvest and the blending of the wine.

Now, if you're anything like me, wine is one of many passions. I love art, despite not being particularly knowledgeable about it. I find an odd, almost instant gratification by staring at art, no matter which form it takes. **Chateau Mouton Rothschild has become known for its unique labels – which were not always well received.**

Following an initial avant-garde collaboration with poster artist Jean Carlu in 1924, Baron Philippe patiently waited until 1945 to firmly establish a tradition that would subsequently define the iconic visual identity of Chateau Mouton Rothschild.

**Throughout the years, Chateau Mouton Rothschild has brought together renowned artists of their time, such as Miró, Chagall, Picasso, Dalí, Jeff Koons, and even King Charles III, among many others.** And we got to see all the original pieces. Except for the one by the British monarch, which is safely kept within the walls of Buckingham Palace.

**When creating these pieces, artists enjoy complete creative freedom,** with themes like the vine, the joy of drinking, and the ram, the emblem of Chateau Mouton Rothschild, serving as abundant sources of inspiration.

There is no other way of putting it: we were spoilt with many memorable moments, many more than could fit in one essay. But ultimately, it was the extraordinary generosity with which we were hosted that truly elevated this experience to remarkable heights. A heartfelt thank you to the entire team at Baron Philippe de Rothschild, and our partners at Compagnie Médocaine, for this unforgettable Bordeaux encounter.

Illustrations created by Niki de Saint Phalle for Chateau Mouton-Rothschild in 1997



Joana's first memory with wine was at a very young age, when she first tasted the sweetness of Madeira during a family trip to the Portuguese archipelago. After graduating with a degree in Economics in Lisbon, and a stint in the Fashion industry in Amsterdam, Joana delved into the world of wine, a passion that had never left her. She has a particular interest in low-intervention, artisanal wines.



*Do you like my brain?*



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