

SINCE 1924



THE VAULT

Octavian Vaults Periodical

MAY 2013

FOR LOVERS OF
FINE WINE

VI

SINCE 1924



OCTAVIAN VAULTS™
THE FINEST WINE CELLARAGE

WELCOME TO THE VAULT, AN OCTAVIAN VAULTS PERIODICAL.

It has been a difficult year or two for the fine wine market, with prices for the first growth clarets falling by a third from their peak in June 2011 to their lowest point in July 2012.

Whilst it looks like we are beginning to turn a corner (see opposite page), we have all come to learn that fine wine is not immune to wider economic influences, despite its low correlation to stock markets. What has become strikingly apparent during this weaker climate is that wine with optimum provenance retains its value better than poorly stored counterparts. Single-owner collections with a traceable storage history and ex-château stock sell at a clear premium.

What inference can we draw from the recent proliferation of 'storage standards'? That there is now general acceptance that perfectly stored fine wines are preferred, sought after, and more valuable? Undoubtedly so. However, due to the difficulty and cost of delivering the Octavian standard, you will see that these other standards such as the HKQAA wine storage scheme are compromised and fall short of the expectations of serious collectors. As Octavian Vaults clients you receive a Certificate of Pristine Storage with every case you remove from Corsham Cellars, which you can use to reassure any buyer of the wine's perfect storage history.

As you know, ensuring the optimal storage environment is, and always will be, fundamental to Octavian's cellarage service. It's the very principle upon which our reputation rests and is the reason why so many of the world's finest wines are entrusted to our care. That's why our new above-ground facility, Colerne Reserve, has been carefully engineered to precisely mirror the conditions at Corsham Cellars. We have been absolutely stringent in replicating the exact conditions naturally found underground – 13°C temperature, 80 per cent humidity, and the absence of vibration and natural light – conditions proven, without doubt, conducive to the fulfilment of fine wines' potential.

With this new, state-of-the-art reserves facility, Octavian has been able to welcome new substantial fine wine trade customers, Bordeaux Index and Liv-ex. And so the importance of Octavian as the physical hub of international fine wine trading continues to grow. For our private clients, this means an increasing supply of fine wine that will remain perfectly stored even though cases may change hands a number of times; plus more potential buyers should you wish to sell your wine.

In this issue of The Vault we are delighted to welcome on board guest columnist Benjamin Lewin MW, whose exploration of biodynamics is as topical as ever at a time when more and more renowned wineries – the likes of Pontet-Canet in Bordeaux and Domaine de la Vougeraie in Burgundy – are embracing biodynamic practices. Benjamin, originally a molecular biologist and now a Master of Wine, attempts to determine whether such practices are "science or voodoo".

We are also excited to feature an excerpt from Neal Martin's groundbreaking first book 'Pomerol'. In his quirky and engrossing style, Neal – wine critic for The Wine Advocate – explores the wines and winemakers of this tiny Bordeaux appellation. Here he introduces us to the hallowed property of Petrus, and its "captain", Jean-Pierre Moueix. If you are intrigued by the extract featured here in The Vault, then we have secured for you an exclusive opportunity to purchase "Pomerol" at the discounted price of £35 + £9.99 P&P (representing £15 off the RRP of £50).

Simply email your name, address and your Octavian account reference to contact@pomerolbook.com. You will then be contacted to arrange payment at the exclusive offer price. We hope you enjoy!

Published by Octavian

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Front cover image courtesy of Domaine de la Vougeraie

MARKET UPDATE

THIS YEAR'S TOP LOTS AT AUCTION

(TOP 10, APRIL 2012 - MARCH 2013)

(1)
DRC assortment vertical '97-01, '04-'06 (96 btls)
Acker Merrall & Condit, Hong Kong - 06-08 DEC
£224,946

(2)
Yquem vertical 1900-2000 (92 btls)
Christie's, Geneva - 13-14 NOV
£156,297

(3)
DRC Romanée-Conti '90 (9 btls)
Sotheby's, Hong Kong - 05 OCT
£140,020

(4)
DRC Romanée-Conti '95 (12 btls)
Christie's, Hong Kong - 23 NOV
£138,305

(5)
DRC Romanée-Conti '88 (12 btls)
Sotheby's, Hong Kong - 31 MAY
£129,843

(6)
Cheval Blanc '47 (12 btls)
Christie's, London - 13-14 DEC
£128,552

(7)
DRC Romanée-Conti '90 (12 btls)
Acker Merrall & Condit, Hong Kong - 25-26 MAY
£120,344

(8)
Mouton '45 (12 btls)
Christie's, Geneva - 14 MAY
£108,928

(9)
DRC Romanée-Conti '90 (1 methuselah)
Zachys, New York - 07-08 MAR
£108,525

(10)
Cheval Blanc '47 (12 btls)
Zachys, Hong Kong - 11-12 JAN
£100,014

All prices include buyer's premium and are converted to £'s using a 12-month average exchange rate.

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MARKET ANALYSIS

THE FINE WINE MARKET HAS UNDERGONE AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF RECESSION. ELLA LISTER CONSIDERS SOME POSITIVE SIGNS.

In last year's issue of The Vault, following three months of tentative price rises, I cautiously called the bottom of the market. In the second quarter of 2012 fine wine experienced a second significant dip, so that in the 13 months to July 2012, the value of Bordeaux first growths had fallen by 33 per cent, as represented by the Liv-ex 50 index (see figure 1).

For the rest of the year, prices flattened out, and in December even started to rise a little, although the first growths still finished the year 10 per cent down on 2011. In the first quarter of 2013, wine prices again began to rise, mirroring the pattern in 2012. This time, however, the uptick comes after a long period of stable prices, and a smoother transition may mean it has more chance of lasting.

· THINKING OUTSIDE THE BORDEAUX BOX ·
The Liv-ex 100 gained 7.3 per cent to the end of March. Largely made up of first growth Bordeaux and designed to represent the fine wine market, the index mirrored the first-growth only Liv-ex 50, as did the broader-based but still Bordeaux-only Liv-ex 500, although this was boosted by the inclusion of lesser châteaux which suffered less acutely than the likes of Lafite and Mouton Rothschild. By March of this year, the Liv-ex 500 was down only 1 per cent year-on-year, compared to 6.4 per cent for the first growths, implying that the second of the double dips did not affect the wider market in the way it harmed the top clarets.

In fact, outside Bordeaux, fine wine seems to have resisted the global economic slump entirely. As first growths plummeted in the summer of 2011, wines from Burgundy and Tuscany bucked the trend, while Champagne prices blithely maintained a steady level. Champagne, Tuscany, and Burgundy have all registered a growth of between 10 and 13 per cent since June 2011, and have outperformed the UK stock market as represented by the FTSE 100 (see figure 1). These regions have proved less volatile than Bordeaux, and not necessarily less lucrative over the long term, with Champagne, for example, registering a compound annual growth rate of 12.5 per cent over nine years – the same as first growth Bordeaux.

While Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC) has seen more ups and downs than Liv-ex's Champagne

and Super Tuscan indices, gaining quickly in the face of Bordeaux's crash and then losing 1 per cent over the year to March, a more generalist Burgundy index would probably show a steadier climb. Burgundy's popularity has continued over the last year, with Asian collectors, in particular, discovering growers other than DRC, for example Mayer, Leflaive and Rouget.

In Hong Kong in March, Christie's dedicated an entire two-day sale to a collection of Burgundy amassed by the region's former Chief Secretary for Administration, Henry Tang. "This single-owner collection sale was comprised of 71 Burgundy producers, many of which were unsung heroes that we wanted to introduce to Asian collectors," said Simon Tam, Christie's Head of Wine in China. The sale was 100 per cent sold, confirming the motivation of local collectors to acquire and discover fine wines from Burgundy.

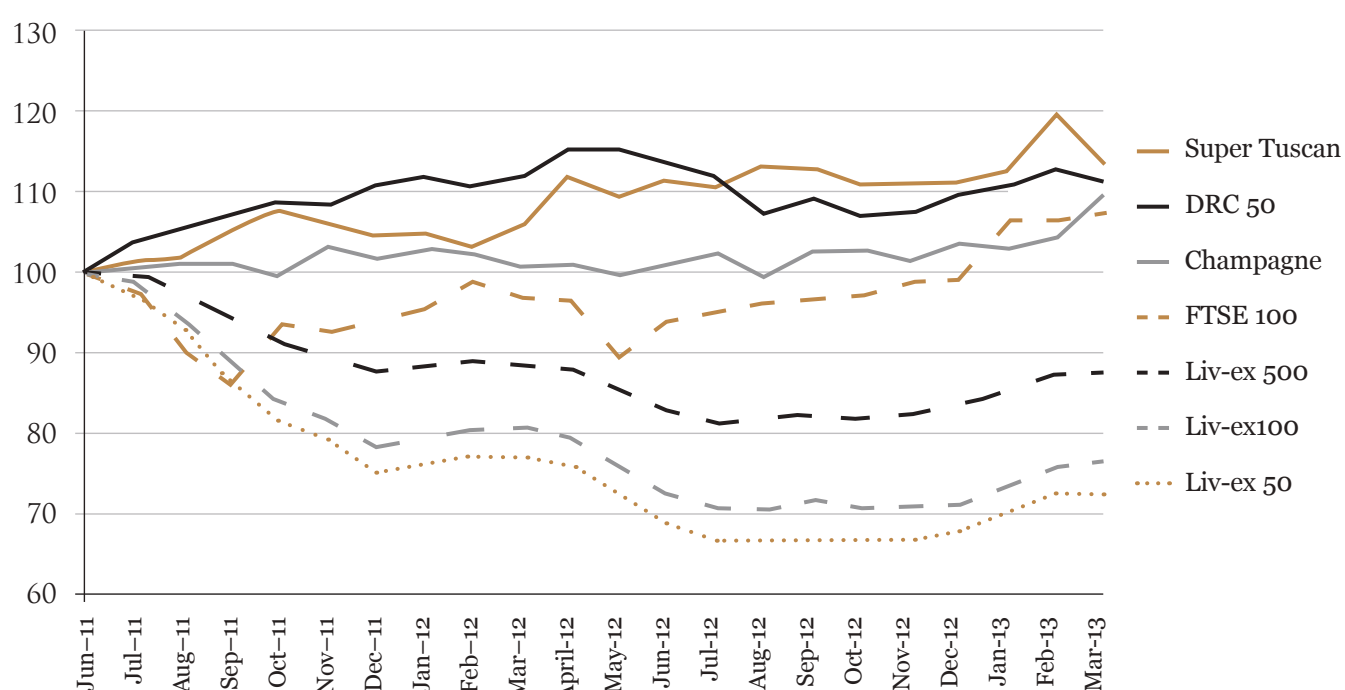
· BORDEAUX FUTURES RULE BORDEAUX'S FUTURE ·

Burgundy accounted for a record 14.5 per cent of trade on the Liv-ex exchange in January, with Champagne and Italy also increasing in demand. Bordeaux's share

fell below 80 per cent for the first time in four years. Nonetheless, Bordeaux still represents the lion's share of fine wine trade worldwide, and its destiny is crucial to the health of the market. While Bordeaux prices picked up in the first quarter, they remained flat through to mid April. This is not unusual as merchants and consumers await the *en primeur* releases with baited breath.

The 2012 vintage is a very good vintage but not a great vintage. The consensus in Bordeaux during the *primeur* tastings was that châteaux need to drop their prices significantly – preferably to the levels at which the 2008s were released – in order to entice buyers back into the market. At the time of writing, Mouton Rothschild was the first of the first growths to release its 2012 vintage, pricing a bottle at €240 ex-négociant, down 33 per cent on 2011, and the cheapest vintage on the market, but double the 2008 release price. Will it be enough to kick-start the fine wine market again or are we facing a triple dip? As Christian Seely of Château Pichon-Longueville Baron told me, "I have a long personal shopping list, which is usually a good sign". Having tasted the 2012s in early April I would have to second that.

FIGURE 1: PERFORMANCE OF WINE INDICES SINCE THEIR 2011 PEAK



Source: Liv-ex.com

BIODYNAMICS: SCIENCE OR VOOODOO

BENJAMIN LEWIN MW ASKS WHETHER THERE IS
A RATIONAL EXPLANATION FOR THE QUALITY OF WINES
FROM BIODYNAMIC PRODUCERS



A painting in a Burgundian cabotte testifies to the long-standing belief that the sun, the moon, and the stars all affect the vines

Many of my scientist friends were disgusted that I did not denounce biodynamics in my book *Wine Myths and Reality*. (In the interests of full disclosure, I should state that I was a scientist — in fact, a molecular biologist — in a former life.) My background prejudices me against beliefs that can't be factually verified or treatments whose effects can't be measured; but offset against the fact that many biodynamic treatments seem to be

plucked out of the sky, I have to recognise that some of the best wines on the planet are made by biodynamic producers. Just how far can we rationalise biodynamics, and when does it go over the line into superstition?

One view of biodynamics is that it is, to some degree, a return to traditional values in taking care of the land. "So, what's new? That's the way we always used to do it," Felsina's vineyard manager, a gentleman in his 70s,

said when Giuseppe Mazzocolin told him their vineyards in Chianti were going biodynamic. On the other hand, the biodynamic prescriptions go way beyond any traditions. I challenge biodynamic advocates to provide evidence that in thousands of years of agriculture there is any record of preparations being planted in a cow's horn in the middle of the vineyard at the equinox. (But there are many traditions involving the full moon, of

which more shortly.)

Biodynamics were an invention of Rudolf Steiner. Skeptics of its origins and connection to reality are given to citing quotations from his works such as these: “An island like Great Britain swims in the sea and is held fast by the forces of the stars. In actuality, such islands do not sit directly upon a foundation; they swim and are held fast from outside”; “It is not that the planets move around the Sun, but these three, Mercury, Venus, and the Earth, follow the Sun, and these three, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, precede it.” But the fact that he was a mystic with some strange ideas does not necessarily invalidate the concept of biodynamics.

The overriding principle of biodynamic viticulture is unexceptionable: farming should use only natural products — so, compost is used rather than fertiliser, for example. The difference with organic farming, which also excludes synthetic products, is that biodynamics uses a set of special preparations that convert organic compost into biodynamic compost; to quote Monty Waldin’s book on biodynamic wines, these “bring ‘forces’ or ‘processes’ as well as ‘substances’ to the vineyard, its soil, and the vines. The soil then becomes primed to receive energies streaming down from the cosmos and upward from within the earth itself.” The principles of biodynamics also call for a farm to be self-contained, but you can be recognised as biodynamic whether you purchase your cow manure or keep cows around the vineyards.

One of the key elements of biodynamic practice — and one that has attracted the most ridicule from skeptics — is the use of preparation 500. Basically, this consists of filling a cow horn with manure, burying it in the centre of the vineyard at the autumn equinox, retrieving it at the spring equinox, and converting its contents into a diluted homeopathic spray that is spread over the vineyard. I have tried to calculate just what density of the contents is ultimately spread per square meter of vineyard but have failed to persuade myself that the answer is useful. But anyway, it’s not the manure as such that is at the heart of preparation 500; it’s the astral forces in the cow horn. The rationale for this treatment is best described by Steiner himself: “A cow has horns in order to send the formative astral-etheric forces back into its digestive system [...]. In a horn you have something that can radiate life, and even astrality. [...] By burying the cow horn with the manure in it, we preserve in the horn the etheric and astral force that the horn was accustomed to reflect when it was on the cow. [...] After spending the winter underground, the cow horn contains an immense astral and etheric energy, which you can now use by diluting the contents with ordinary water.”

IT’S FAIRLY OBVIOUS WHAT SORT OF EFFECT IS LIKELY TO BE ACHIEVED BY MOVING FROM CONVENTIONAL FARMING—WITH FULL-BLOWN USE OF SYNTHETIC PESTICIDES, HERBICIDES, AND FERTILISERS—TO ORGANIC VITICULTURE. IT’S MUCH MORE OF A QUESTION WHAT FURTHER ADVANTAGE IS GAINED BY GOING BIODYNAMIC

While I am prepared to believe that biodynamic treatments may improve the quality of plant life, and I don’t entirely exclude the possibility that homeopathic effects might exist, it is asking altogether too much to believe in astral forces that can be measured by no known technique of physics or chemistry and that, indeed, appear to defy the laws of physics. I’m not even going to ask whether the concentration of astral forces in the horn over the winter defies the second law of thermodynamics.

Aside from preparation 500, preparations are made from horn silica, yarrow, chamomile, stinging

nettle, oak bark, dandelion, and valerian. Most of these are cited as being important for providing particular trace elements, though without any actual scientific support. I particularly liked this description (again from Monty Waldin): “Liquid manure was made from yarrow plants growing on land where soils tests had shown a deficiency of potassium and a total absence of selenium. Analysis showed that the liquid manure nevertheless contained measurable amounts of these materials.” The second law of thermodynamics be damned — now we are creating elements! It is so far beyond credulous as to cast doubt on the whole enterprise.

It’s fairly obvious what sort of effect is likely to be achieved by moving from conventional farming — with full-blown use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilisers — to organic viticulture. It’s much more of a question what further advantage is gained by going biodynamic. But surely it should be possible to determine whether there are, in fact, any differences in the soil. Whether dilution of the various treatments to homeopathic levels is likely to have any real effects is somewhat doubtful scientifically but by no means impossible. Unfortunately, the mystical leanings of biodynamic producers have tended to discourage scientists from taking on much serious investigation. One study to compare organic and biodynamic vineyards managed identically over a six-month period with a Merlot vineyard in California produced “no consistent significant differences between the biodynamically treated and untreated plots for any of the physical, chemical, or biological parameters tested.” A more recent study with wheat suggested that the plants grew more vigorously when treated with biodynamic, as opposed to organic, compost, but the effects were sporadic. A study at Geisenheim to compare conventional, organic, and biodynamic viticulture showed a clear difference moving away from conventional viticulture, with a 10–20 per cent drop in yield, but the only difference between organic and biodynamic plots was an increase in the number of earthworms in the biodynamic area. More power to the earthworms, but it remains to be seen whether this is a consistent effect or coincidence.

It’s a fairly common route for wine producers first to go organic and then biodynamic, but most of the producers I’ve asked about when they noticed the greatest effects say that it’s after they went biodynamic. I suspect, however, that this is a matter of timing, most likely a delay before the full effects of the organic conversion manifest themselves. So, at present there is no evidence, except for the anecdotal observations of the producers themselves, to support the assertion that there is any benefit from advancing from organic to biodynamic viticulture.

· FALLING OFF THE EDGE OF THE FLAT EARTH ·

The mystical aspects of biodynamics show most strongly in the association of particular treatments with phases of the moon or even with astrological alignments (though it is not considered essential to apply all the preparations on the recommended lunar cycle in order to be regarded as biodynamic). A review of superstitions associated with the lunar cycle would make a fascinating article in itself, but (remembering that folklore often has a basis in real effects) at least here it should be possible to achieve some rational insight into any possible basis for the effects. It’s an old superstition that plants should not be pruned by the full moon because the sap runs too freely, the rationale presumably being that the moon is exerting the same effects here that it does upon the tide. But this is susceptible to measurement of whether there is any difference in the turgor pressure during the lunar cycle. Similarly, racking in the cellar is supposed to be done by the descending moon, when the sediment is at its most compact; more than one Burgundian producer explained to me that the sediment takes much longer to settle if you rack during the ascending moon. The same argument applies to racking or bottling during thunderstorms. I was excited recently when a producer told me he had been

measuring turbidity during the lunar cycle, because at last it seemed there might be some data on lunar effects — but it turned out to be the cycle following racking and showed a more or less steady decline during the month. I have tried but have been unable to find a way to calculate whether changes in atmospheric pressure might, in theory, produce measurable effects; I am doubtful but concede the possibility (though I draw the line about the extension of the argument to cutting fingernails or hair).

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Going beyond Steiner, the biodynamic calendar was not proposed directly in his writings but was developed afterward by his followers. The phases of the moon are only part of the division into root, leaf, flower, or fruit days, which depend on astrological signs and are supposed to govern which agricultural activities (planting or harvesting, for example) are appropriate. This is pretty hard to accept, but beyond that comes the argument that the biodynamic calendar determines how a wine tastes. What possible rationale could there be for this? Nevertheless, there are supermarket buyers — who are surely among the most hardheaded in the wine trade — who believe it makes a difference. (In parentheses, one might ask how this relates to the drinking patterns of their consumers. After all, what’s the point in making your commercial decisions on the best tasting days if the people who buy the wine may then drink it on the worst tasting days?) I am sorry, but here I really think we have fallen off the edge of the flat earth.

So, here is my basic problem. The more I investigate biodynamics, the clearer it becomes that it has no rational basis. It is not rooted in a return to the land by recovering lost old values; it’s actually a newfangled invention. The mystical associations really are a farrago of nonsense. Why do I care? Well, there are some brilliant wines made by biodynamic producers. Can they all be fooling themselves that it was going biodynamic that really made the difference? I have struggled for a way to find a balanced view that respects what these producers have achieved but without accepting what I see as a profoundly irrational and anti-scientific worldview.

It’s important to establish whether or not biodynamic viticulture has better effects than organic viticulture for two reasons. First, general acceptance of the validity of biodynamics without examination of its principles leads to increased superstition and disconnection from reality. Second, if effects of biodynamic treatments could be demonstrated and explained on a rational basis, they would no doubt be more easily and widely employed, which would be a valuable service to the community. If there is an answer, it must be that some of the preparations do, in fact, have beneficial effects, unlikely though that may seem for such dilute solutions. Personally, I am inclined to the view that it is the enormous care and attention that the producers devote to their vineyards that is responsible for their success, and that they would have exactly the same success if all of the biodynamic preparations were replaced with distilled water. But I’d like to see this tested directly all the same: take a vineyard, divide it into two, and treat one half with all the biodynamic preparations and the other half with distilled water — then see if there is any difference. But you can understand why, so far, I have failed to persuade any producer to spend time doing this.

- PETRUS - FIGUREHEAD ON THE PROW

OPENING TO CHAPTER ON PETRUS, PAGE 356 OF "POMEROL"

BY NEAL MARTIN

Under the blank enamel sky a chugging Citroën 15 gambols with childlike glee around potholes and puddles. Two gentlemen occupy the front seats, both wrapped in thick woollen herringbone overcoats and paisley scarves, voices raised over the rambunctious engine; their words vaporising as they meet frozen air. The driver is the taller of the two, large in frame with jowly cheeks and heavy eyelids, his waxed black hair flecked with grey and his large hands tucked in his warm camel-skin gloves. His two sons, wrapped in matching duffel coats and navy woollen scarves are perched on the back seat, peering out of the frosted window at the snow-draped vines as if Mother Nature had decorated the landscape with icing sugar.

Pomerol is recovering from a severe cold snap. The first fortnight in February had been relatively warm, but the wind had turned on its heel and a viscous tongue of Siberian air had pushed the mercury as low as -24°C (-11.2°F). The snow had drifted two or three feet deep in places and rendered some lanes impassable. And yet it is not unprecedented and local vignerons take solace in the fact that their vines were dormant and that the talons of this pernicious freeze has sunk its claws into the land before their sensitive buds could be burnt.

"Can we stop here?" requests the passenger by the name of Maurice Malpel, an agronomist visiting from Toulouse. "I would like to take a quick look at the vines. I promise I will not be too long."

"They are the same as last year," quips the father of the two boys at the wheel. If truth be told, he would prefer to remain inside the car and continue their discussion on a promising artist that had recently caught his eye.

"Hold on. I'll pull over here at La Fleur-Pétrus."

The brakes squeal as the Citroën reluctantly skids to a halt and startling silence momentarily floods the car. The father leans around towards his sons and with a single raised finger, orders them to sit quietly ignoring the wails of protest. They have a burning desire to escape the confines of the vehicle, stretch their skinny white legs and run between the rows. Just like the vines, they need to expend their pent-up energy that has accumulated through the winter.

Maurice crouches down on his haunches, extracts a small silver scalpel from his breast pocket and makes an incision into the trunk as deftly as a surgeon cutting open his favourite patient. Meanwhile the father winds down the window and lights a Gauloises, exhales a plume of smoke and surveys the languid rise of the land. In the distance he espies the figure of Marie Robin attired in her black apron, scattering corn for her chickens that



cluck around her ankles. Above, on the skeletal branches of a dying elm is perched a solitary crow, envious and ravenous, desperate for his own food after the long harsh winter.

The father conjectures on the forthcoming season and wonders what it will bestow since he has heard idle chatter that 1956 will be an abundant crop like 1955, perchance a "vintage of the century" like 1945. Who knows what tomorrow may bring.

After a couple of minutes Maurice stands up to

PETRUS WAS THE CATALYST FOR CHANGE
AND A STANDARD BEARER FOR POMEROL.
IT'S A WINE WHOSE AMBITION
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CONFINES OF ITS APPELLATION

attention as if a sergeant major has hollered his name. He rolls a cutting between his fingers and scratches his head, a vexed expression on his face. Leaning down towards the driver's window, he stutters as he grapples for the right words. In the end, he comes straight to the point.

"This vine is dead. I am certain."

Maurice is taken aback by the father's incredulous guffaw, the kind reserved for jokes in bad taste, of which this is a prime example. He takes another long drag on his cigarette before speaking in his inimitable low timbre that seems to resonate through the air around him.

"That is impossible, Maurice. I know you are an expert but..."

"It is dead," he interjects. "I am certain. And if this vine is dead, then look around you and fear the worst my friend."

The father's face suddenly becomes stoic and pensive, as if unexpectedly eclipsed by the moon. He looks across the land as far as the eye can see and wonders whether he is looking at a vineyard or a graveyard. Maurice gets back into the passenger seat and irrationally feels like a harbinger of doom, culpable for the fate that has befallen everything within sight. Part of him wishes he had kept his thoughts to himself. What if he is wrong? What a fool he feels. He places a consoling hand on his friend's shoulder.

"You'll know what to do. You always do."

Without a single word, the father turns the ignition and the noise of the engine banishes the silence. For the remaining journey he is laconic and distant, lost in a deep train of thought....

If Pomerol is a galleon crashing through the waves then Petrus is the figurehead carved on its prow. There, on the gallery with one hand on the wheel and an eye to the telescope, stands its "captain" Jean-Pierre Moueix, charting a course towards fame and recognition. Petrus was the catalyst for change and a standard bearer for Pomerol. It's a wine whose ambition and destiny lay far beyond the confines of its appellation, a growth that sought the acclaim previously exclusive to the aristocratic First Growths. Yet achievements would have been impossible if the wine had been anything less than profound and it took two individuals with the vision, tenacity and fortitude to convince the rest of the world that Petrus was a wine like no other. One was Jean-Pierre Moueix and the other, Mme Edmond Loubat.

Nowadays Petrus is one of the most coveted and expensive wines in the world, the Holy Grail for aficionados, an enigma beyond the financial means and wildest dreams of many. But where did it come from? What was Petrus before fame beckoned? Where does the future lie?

In order to find out, I spent time with its long-time ambassador Christian Moueix at his offices in Libourne and at his home on the banks of the Dordogne. I met his reclusive elder brother Jean-François, de facto the proprietor of Petrus. I met the self-effacing magician Jean-Claude Berrouet, whose vinous midwifery over five decades has given birth to more legendary Pomerols than anyone past or present, and I talked to his son and heir, Olivier Berrouet. I sought to disentangle fact from mystery and apocryphal stories from truth. Perhaps I could fill in missing pieces of the jigsaw? Perhaps I could discover more about this unique wine, because the truth of the matter is there is no Pomerol like Petrus.

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Chris Kissack, thewinedoctor.com



If the excerpt from 'Pomerol', Neal Martin's debut book has whet your appetite, why not purchase the full version, and enjoy a 25% reduction on the RRP*, courtesy of The Vault?

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CELLAR MASTERS

CRAIG CHARD, WAREHOUSE SUPERVISOR

"It's always a good conversation-opener when you tell people that you've been underground for the past eight years," says Craig Chard, warehouse supervisor, and one of the 'moles' making up Octavian's 34-strong, sub-terrain cellars team. "You could say I'm allergic to sunlight," he laughs, particularly since his previous job was night shift picker at another Octavian facility at nearby RAF Kemble.

Today, while his working environment may be totally devoid of natural light – an intrinsic element of the flawless storage conditions required for laying down the finest wines in the world – Craig's passion and enthusiasm for his work shines through when he talks about it. He clearly loves what he does. "I want to be there," he says, doing what he describes as a "varied role in which two days are never the same, covering everything from ordering cleaning supplies to stocktaking, and goods-in to distribution."

Keen to highlight that he is 'just one cog in the wheel' of a finely-tuned and cohesive team, Craig is emphatic about the importance of maintaining 'Swiss watch' precision in in-house processes for optimum efficiency and customer service. "It's essential that everything keeps moving," he explains. "Much of my role focuses on maintaining the smooth running of the warehouse. We all have a part to play at the right time, but more than anything, we're driven by ensuring that customers' wines are stored perfectly, and they're ready whenever they are needed upstairs."

Service is fundamental to the Octavian reputation and it's something that Craig takes personal pride in ensuring. So much so that he will readily extend his 6am to 3pm shift to as much as twelve hours when needs must. "It's like caring for a baby, you can't just leave it. Say a customer needs wine for a particular function or our London hotel and restaurant customers have a particular deadline, it's up to us to make it happen. We have a reputation for being the best in the world and we want to keep it," he says.

One of the greatest changes Craig has witnessed in his role over the years – and indeed, what he cites as the most challenging aspect – has been the introduction of handheld terminals, which are now used for all picking. "I was PC literate before, but I've had to evolve with the technology, which has at times been hard, especially when you're using

bespoke technology that's new to you and you're 100 feet below ground, with just a laptop and a phone to rely on!" he adds. However, technology has undoubtedly revolutionised the team's work.

"There's picking consistency, any problems are immediately highlighted, efficiencies have been improved and mistakes eliminated. When the IT works well, everyone's happy," Craig says.

"THE OLD GRAFFITI AND
DRAWINGS CAPTIVATE
EVERYONE WHO SEES THEM."



And Craig is never happier than when he's conducting cellar tours, which may be to existing and prospective customers and even special interest groups. "I love this place. It's the most unique place in the world. Seeing customers' faces light up when they come down here – they're like kids in a sweet shop," he enthuses.

"Visitors are always fascinated by the history of the cellars and their former usage. The MOD left behind a few smooth walls, but much of the exposed rock, complete with cut marks can be still seen today, together with old graffiti and drawings that captivate everyone who sees them," (see back cover).

Craig's favourite character is a man with a flat cap and pipe. "It just makes you stop and think about how people passed their time here in those days. What do the German inscriptions mean? And who were 'Dave and Doris', whose pairing has been immortalised on these walls? It's incredible – you can't help but be affected by the atmosphere here."

The unique Corsham environment has rubbed off on Craig in other ways too. Despite being an ardent West Country Bitter drinker, he has, over the past eight years, been collecting 'Marilyn Merlot' bottles from the Napa Valley, California. "The bottles look lovely and just appealed to me," says Craig, adding, "if I can be a collector, anyone can be – and where better to wrap them up and store them away safely than here at Corsham?"





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