

Aiming for world winning Malbec

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MY goal is very simple, Philippe Lejeune says. “I want Chambert to become the ‘Romanée-Conti’ of Malbec!”

Burgundy’s Domaine de la Romanée-Conti makes the most expensive and sought-after red wine in the world. Philippe is well aware that some people might think his dream arrogant or silly, but I think that he’s on the verge of achieving something very special indeed at his superb estate in Cahors.

Cahors is Malbec territory. About 150 years ago it had around 58,000 hectares of the dark-skinned grape that was the main ingredient in the region’s famous “black wine”. And then phylloxera arrived. The American aphid munched its deadly course through Europe’s vineyards. Cahors was devastated. Attempts to revive its vineyards were made in the 1940s and 1950s, but by 1971 there were still only 440 hectares of vines. Since those dark days, Cahors has continued to recover, although the 3,700 hectares of Malbec grown there today seems small in comparison with the 24,000 hectares that thrive in Argentina, where French settlers took cuttings in the 19th Century. The Chambert estate, unusually large by Cahors standards, spreads out around an imposing turreted château.

It was in ruins when a family of wine merchants bought it in 1973, lovingly restored it and replanted its abandoned vineyards, high on the harsh but beautiful limestone causse, 300 metres above sea-level.

There was one great and largely unforeseen advantage of the phylloxera disaster at Château Chambert. According to Philippe: “So many vineyards that had remained in production had been spoiled by chemicals (weed-killers and fertilisers).

“We skipped the crazy days of the 1950s and 1960s and were able to be organic from day one (although they have never sought official certification). It’s very rare to find somewhere like this. It’s quite a challenge for such a big vineyard to be organic (there are 60 hectares of vines – and organic viticulture is labour-intensive), but nature helps us. At this altitude there’s always a breeze which is great for keeping down humidity.”

Diseases like mildew and rot are therefore rare. “It’s a great site!”

The relatively high altitude also enables the grapes to ripen more slowly than those in the valley and to develop more flavour. “Global warming means that everything happens a week or two earlier than it did in the past, but we still harvest around the second week of October – two weeks later than estates on the plain.

You need Malbec to be very ripe, otherwise you discover just what tannin is like.”

There’s no doubt in my mind that Chambert has a very special vineyard, with a superb climate and near perfect soil conditions. Philippe bought Chambert last year and is determined to take the wine to an even higher level of quality. The quality of the fruit at Chambert is superb, but the winemaking has then to do it justice. “The winery is not the sexiest place,” Philippe admits, “but we’re trying hard here to make wine as carefully as possible. We don’t hurry and the main goal of aging wine in our 800 barrels is to enhance the quality of the wine.”

As Philippe has no technical background in wine, he relies on the excellent skills of Vincent Neuville and has also brought in Stéphane Derenoncourt, one of the world’s most talented and imaginative wine consultants. Although most people in the know believe that Malbec is capable of very good things, I’m not convinced that it’s really a proven Premier League grape variety. However, the samples of the 2007 vintage that I tasted with Philippe are the most convincing evidence yet that it might achieve greatness.

Stéphane Derenoncourt does not agree with a recent trend in Cahors to make very oaky wines. One year in barrel is enough. His new formula is working so well that it recently convinced leading British importers Liberty Wines to add Chambert to their portfolio. This means that Chambert is now poised to feature on a lot of swish restaurant lists in our region.

We can look forward to some superb red wines, with silky tannins and gorgeously spicy, black cherry, brambly and damson fruit – the characteristic of the 2007 samples as well as of the team’s exciting re-blending of the 2004 wine.

“I want us to make elegant, balanced wines, says Philippe.