ROUND-UP AND RESURRECTION: VINEYARDS OF SOUTH-WEST FRANCE (1999)

"It is like death and resurrection." "It is a passion far from passing. I would do it even if I were not paid." "It is like the work of goldsmiths." "As with the woman you choose for life, only time will tell if you have made a mistake."

These are the voices not of preachers and proselytizers, but of French wine-growers speaking of the mysteries of their trade.

I have drunk wine all my life, mostly in an undiscriminating fashion, at best half articulating to myself that this wine is a little thin, that one nice and fulsome. I have never dared judge one better than another, and have sneered at those who did as wine snobs. But all is changed. In the course of a week's meandering between the rivers Dordogne and Garonne I have been vouchsafed a glimpse of mysteries more arcane than I could have imagined.

I started from Bordeaux, partly because for us English it is the wine town and a very visitable place in its own right (take a look at the wine-making section in the Musée d'Aquitaine), and partly because I have French cousins who have spent all their lives there. They live in the suburb of Pessac, near the vineyards of Haut-Brion, one of the most daunting labels in the land (a good vintage would set you back £300 on a restaurant wine list), now incongruously penned behind a high fence in the midst of the suburban sprawl. But it was not the grand vineyards that I wanted to see. Instinct told me that small-scale poking about would be more rewarding than practised commentaries and big reputations.

Accordingly, I made my way to Blaye. It is an engaging little town on the east bank of the Gironde estuary just north of Bordeaux, dominated by one of those huge stone and earthwork fortresses that were the speciality of Louis XIV's great military engineer, Sébastien Vauban. I called at the Syndicat Viticole - the local wine-growers' association - for tip-offs and information and set off across the vine-covered slopes of the Côtes de Blaye, green-gold in the late afternoon sun, in search of the Château des Jonqueyres. It was at least a substantial farm, if not quite what I expected of a *château*.

In the courtyard a weary worker sat by a large steel vat, surrounded by half-crushed grapes and an overpowering smell of must. "They are all in the vines harvesting," said an old lady. "Tomorrow is the same. They won't be here until *l'heure de la débauche*." The hour of debauchery? Bacchanalian orgies after work? She cannot mean that. It must be some rustic expression meaning the opposite of *embaucher*, to engage someone for work. A little girl tried to explain where to find them in the fields. "Oh, you won't find them," said the old lady. "And it will be the same everywhere at harvest-time."

It was getting late. Crestfallen, I decided to go home by the riverside road. At least it would be beautiful. And there I saw the sign for the Château Mondésir-Gazin. I drove on. I drove back. But I could see no *château*. And then it dawned on me that perhaps the sign referred to the utilitarian-looking shed and modest house right beside it. Mr Pasquet, the owner, gave me my first lesson: *château, domaine, clos* - these resonant titles mean nothing at all; you could substitute "vineyard" for each one of them.

His vineyard was on the border of Côtes de Blaye and Côtes de Bourg. "The wines are cousins," he said. The *appellation*, it seems, is often as much a matter of history and politics as anything technical. Your *terroir* - soil,exposure, climate etc - and your grape mix can be the same as your neighbour's, yet the *appellation* can be quite different, and if his is a famous one like St-Émilion he can command a price far higher than yours, even though the wine may be no better.

It is an expensive business making quality wines; the vats, temperature control systems, presses, sorting machines, harvesters represent a huge investment. Even a wooden barrel costs £300. And the object of the exercise, contrary to what you might

expect, is to produce as few, rather than as many, grapes as possible, by pruning heavily, planting densely and letting the grass grow between the rows to impoverish the soil, so that the vine concentrates its essence, which is why you see grapes hanging only from the bottom of the vines. And the more work you do by hand, the higher your labour costs, which is why the big-name wines are so expensive, although more than one competitive young producer said to me: "You know what we say? The big ones harvest by hand only within sight of the road!"

Romantically, I imagined that wine harvested by the fair hands of dark-eyed peasant girls was immeasurably superior. "Not necessarily," said Mr Pasquet. "The machine permits *une intervention rapide*. For example, the merlot grape, which forms the basis of all the Bordeaux wines, is at its ripest for just three days. With a machine you can catch it at its best. By hand you have to start days ahead and inevitably continue for days after it has passed its peak."

My education continued. A friendly tip-off sent me to the Château Gamage, a sunny creeper-covered farm overlooking the flood-plain of the Dordogne, not far from Castillon. "There's a lot to be said for the small producers," said Mr Moulinet, as we sat in the shade of a lime-tree. "They are keen to compete, ambitious for quality, whereas the big names, often company-owned and managed by an employee, are lacking in *âme*, soul."

He had been in the wine trade before coming back to the family farm. What did he think of the division between those who had learnt the job at their father's knee and the "chemists," as they used to call them, the post-60s trained oenologists? There was good wine, he said, before oenology, but it was more an accident of climate and weather. Science can't tell you everything, but it can detect deficiencies in necessary minerals. Chance is still an important factor, and experience and hunch. "*Il faut s'imprégner de la propriété*. You have to steep yourself in your land. Different parcels produce different results."

I crossed to Castillon on the north bank of the Dordogne, where in 1453 old John Talbot was killed and his English army defeated in the final battle of the Hundred Years' War. I was looking for the Château d'Aiguilhe on the steep slopes above the town and stopped to ask the driver of a great blue dragon bestriding the shoulder-high vines.

This is a real *château*, the magnificent ruin of a castle built by Edward III, whose moat not long ago yielded an English helmet of the period. Its roofless walls overlook a gracious eighteenth-century farm, that now belongs to a Spanish wine company. But, far from lacking soul, its manager is an articulate and passionate oenologist hell-bent on rivalling St-Émilion, whose church tower is visible on exactly the same kind of ground barely 2km away.

It was his blue harvester I had stopped to ask the way. Like many, he harvests partly by hand, partly by machine. A gang of women were sorting grapes by hand as we spoke. He uses no weed-killer and clarifies his white wine with the traditional white of egg - 80 kilos of it, ordered from an industrial *pâtissier*. Others filter it. He used stainless steel vats; others use fibre glass, cement or even the old wooden ones. Each of these fanatics, I was beginning to understand, had his own prejudices and predilections.

While there is a resurgence of interest in both traditional wines and methods, most try to find a balance between technology and tradition, a policy that was described to me by Xavier de St-Éxupéry with admirable Gallic succinctness - and untranslatability - as "*une lutte raisonnée*": a battle governed by reason. He runs the vineyards of the Château de Tiregand outside Bergerac, whose rambling buildings spread in aristocratic abandon among the trees his family planted when they first came here nearly two centuries ago. The wine they make is Pécharmant, the finest of the Bergerac reds.

Hitherto I had not dared to taste, to *déguster*, in the presence of these experts. But Mr de St-Éxupéry put me at my ease. "It doesn't matter if you don't know the right terms. What counts is the *plaisir de la personne* - what you like. What we look for is another matter. The smell: does it open up when you swill the wine in your glass? Does it leave

a taste in your mouth after you have swallowed it or spat it out - because of course you can't drink all the wine when you are tasting professionally? Is it oily? Does have it have "leg"? Does it have tannins? We need to know all these things, because we have to take decisions about mixing different vats. Is it going to age well and so on?"

At the weekend I joined my cousins at their old family house at Le Fleix. "The bend," it means, from the Latin flexus; for here the river swings hard left beneath the vineyards of Montravel. In our youth we used to get in upstream and let the current sweep us down to the cobbled ramp where in days gone by the barrels full of wine were loaded on to the snub-nosed shallow-draught *gabares* for shipment downstream to Bordeaux and England. *Tonneau* is the French word for barrel, whence tonnage, as a measure of the capacity of ships: how many 900-litre barrels of Bordeaux wine could a ship carry to England?

On Saturday morning we went to Ste-Foy, to the market which every week invests this little *bastide* town with duck breast and goose neck, honey and goat's milk, garlic and calves' brains. We ate our purchases for lunch on Sunday, in the garden, as we used to when my aunt was alive: a whole *foie gras*, accompanied by a sweet golden wine from Monbazillac, from Mr Cros' old-fashioned vineyard, Clos de Fontindoule, followed by Mr Pasquet's excellent Côtes de Blaye to wash the rabbit down.

The English, you always hear, - and they have colonised this region in large numbers - are particularly fond of these sweet Sauternes-like wines. But they seem also to arouse their producers to greater heights of passion than any other wine. Foremost among these artist-alchemists in the Bergerac region, Daniel Hecquet of Montravel described how he waited for his beautiful golden grapes to be attacked, under the influence of autumn mists and damp, by the tiny fungus they call *pourriture noble*, or noble rot. It sucks their juices and shrivels their skins, but out of this dreadful ravaging comes the huge concentration of sugar that makes the wine so heady. "It is," he exclaimed with the fire of inspiration in his eyes, "like a death and a resurrection!"

It is the detailed, meticulous work of hand and eye required to make the *liquoreux* and *moelleux* wines, as they are called, which seems to excite the imagination. Cello-playing Jacques Blais, one of the stars of the Monbazillac vineyards which surround the gorgeous Renaissance Château de Monbazillac south of Bergerac, goes through his vines six times to make sure he picks every bunch at exactly the right moment. Geneviève Lescaut, watching her husband trimming their 50-year-old Semillon vines in the morning sun, described it graphically as the "work of goldsmiths - *un travail d'orfèvres*."

Their few acres at the Château du Petit-Malromé are in the hilly Côtes de Duras country just north of the town of Duras. To the west, the country stretches hilly and green with vineyards practically all the way to Bordeaux. This is the Entre-Deux-Mers, with countless vineyards producing Entre-Deux-Mers whites and Bordeaux Supérieur reds, which can be tasted, among other places, at France's biggest *cave coopérative* in Rauzan, which also boasts a formidable castle.
The jewel of the area is St-Macaire. Hot and sleepy within its butter-coloured walls, it seems to have been forgotten by the rest of the world. The banks of the Garonne lie just below it, a green and shady place to sleep off a picnic. And behind it lies some of the prettiest wine-making country I saw, where Toulouse-Lautrec is buried, in the village of Verdelais.

At the Château Génisson I watched a delicious Premières Côtes de Bordeaux being made with few of the aids of modern technology. As we sat sipping on the terrace at the end of the day, while the chestnut-trees, prematurely brown, bombed us with shiny new conkers, the pickers, young men and women, chased each other, not entirely without malice, with buckets of water. Mademoiselle Arrivet, whose family have made wine here for ten generations, looked on with amusement and affection. "In the old days," she said, "this horseplay invariably ended with one of the girls up-ended in the grapes." She recalled that it was not many years since workers received part of their wages in wine. There was about the place an engaging aura of less hasty times.

From here I headed south along the Garonne to Agen and the vineyards of the Fronton and Brulhois. For wine-bibbers, the *caves coopératives* at Fronton and at Donzac in the Brulhois are a real discovery; they give the lie to the old caveat about cooperatives being places where farmers dump their grapes and someone else makes the wine, as does the cooperative in Buzet, *Les Vignerons de Buzet*, the main producer of Côtes de Buzet.

My last port of call was the vineyards of Cahors, one of the most distinctive appellations of the south-west. Black in colour and heady in flavour, it was - as *caorskoye vino* - the preferred Communion wine of the Russian Orthodox church; I have seen it on sale in the supermarkets of Odessa. The vines begin at Puy-l'Évèque in the valley of the Lot, but the prettiest stretch lies upstream where the river coils like a basking snake between ever steeper valley sides towards the county-town of Cahors, with its famous fortified bridge.

It was outside Cahors, on the edge of the stony plateau to the south, that I met the most original of all the wine-growing personalities I came across: Madame Biesbrouck of the Domaine des Savarines. "*Elle bichonne ses vignes*," I was told. "She cuddles and pampers her vines and brings them up *en biodynamie*" - which, I assumed, meant organically.

When finally I found the farm, Mme Biesbrouck was in the process of doing what they call *remonter le vin*, which means pumping wine from the bottom of the fermentation vat and spraying it over the thick crust of skins and pips that forms on the top - the *marc*, which eventually has to be handed over to the state as a tax. She made me wipe my feet and close the door behind me to prevent any draught from affecting the wine. She invited me to climb the ladder and put my head over the top of the vat. "Not too far, mind," she said. I did so and was immediately struck by what felt like a blow that stopped my breath. It was a lethal concentration of carbon dioxide. "That's how peasants have killed their wives for centuries," she said. "If you get in the vat to clean too soon after emptying it, you can die." She is married now, but when she worked alone, she used to wear a diver's helmet with a pipe gripped between her teeth.

This practice, and the parasol she rigged up on the tractor, were but minor eccentricities in the eyes of her neighbours, when she started out twenty-odd years ago. Much worse: she was a woman and had not even been born to this work. Her parents were shopkeepers and she herself a riding instructor trained at the French army cavalry school. The farm was in ruins, had no water or electricity and she was alone, which attracted the attentions of some local Lotharios, whom more than once she had to see off with a shotgun. But the ultimate proof of her craziness was her refusal to use any chemicals - "I would rather die than put Round-Up on my vines" - and her insistence on regulating her activities according to the conjunctions of the planets.

But the last laugh has been hers. Her wine is served in Tokyo's smartest restaurants and she is promoted by her erstwhile detractors as a spokesman for the wines of Cahors. "You must follow your impulse in life," she said. "*Il faut suivre son essor*."

I asked, did she mind visitors just showing up as I had done. "I'd rather they phoned first," she said. "But, no, we are here for that. That's how we sell our wines." And that I found was the attitude of everyone I spoke to.