



The Winemakers' Collection

7 Oct 2013 by Jancis Robinson

Philippe Raoux, the owner of Château d'Arsac in Margaux, and his son Pierre Raoux, currently based in Australia, have created the most unusual set of red bordeaux. Every year since 2005 they invite a high-profile winemaker to create a wine from their vineyard. The wine is not known as Château d'Arsac and carries only the most discreet mention of vintage. The idea is that it is the particular winemaker's expression of the fruit delivered that particular year - they have free rein to choose which parcels and the wine takes the appellation Haut-Médoc to give maximum freedom. Each wine is sold as The Winemakers' Collection, Cuvée No X with the name and moody black and white photograph of the winemaker responsible for X given prime prominence.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Cuvée No 1 was made by Michel Rolland. In fact there are arguably few surprises in the list below:

Cuvée No 1 - 2005 made by [Michel Rolland](#), ubiquitous consultant oenologist based on Bordeaux's right bank
 Cuvée No 2 - 2006 made by [Denis Dubourdieu](#), vigneron, academic and consultant oenologist based in the Graves
 Cuvée No 3 - 2007 made by [Andrea Franchetti](#) of Tenuta di Trinoro in southern Tuscany and Passopisciaro in Etna
 Cuvée No 4 - 2008 made by [Stéphane Derenoncourt](#), consultant winemaker based on Bordeaux's right bank
 Cuvée No 5 - 2010 made by [Eric Boissenot](#), consultant oenologist based in the Médoc (the most local of the lot)
 Cuvée No 6 - 2011 made by [Zelma Long](#), winemaker who was long based in California but now makes Vilafonté in South Africa

A very smart wooden case has now been assembled to showcase one bottle of each of these six, as described [here](#) on www.winemakerscollection.com

No Winemakers' Collection wine was made in 2009 when Madame Raoux was very ill. But Cuvée No 7 was made in 2012 by Susana Balbo of Dominio del Plata in Mendoza, Argentina and, when I last corresponded with Philippe Raoux, he was expecting the Zulu winemaker Ntsiki Biyela of Stellegaya Wines and Naked Wines to come and do her best with whatever 2013 delivers. (We expect a second Bordeaux harvest report from Gavin Quinney tomorrow.)

I had tasted a few of these wines in isolation before (as you can see from our [tasting notes database](#)) but this summer I had the chance to look at the first six offerings as a series. I must say that my overwhelming impression was that the hand of man and woman is heavy indeed. Cuvée No 1 conforms pretty closely to the stereotype of superripe, hedonistic Rollandian wine. Dubourdieu's Cuvée No 2 is much fresher - even more Graves-like. Franchetti's Cuvée No 3, arguably made in the lightest year delivered by Bordeaux, is suitably idiosyncratic and full of pleasure while Boissenot's Cuvée No 5 is classic and concentrated for a long life. Zelma's Cuvée No 6 shares some of the ripeness that characterises her wines wherever they are grown, despite the rather unprepossessing 2011 vintage in Bordeaux. I have now tasted the Cuvée No 4 of Stéphane Derenoncourt, a winemaker I much admire, at least three times now and have found it the least to my taste of this particular selection. One of the samples developed quite noticeable TCA in the open bottle and, although all the samples open up in Derenoncourt's trademark sweet, almost burgundian fashion, the oak on the finish still seems a bit dominant to me.

Here's how Philippe Raoux explains the concept:

The global idea of the brand The Winemakers' Collection comes from the thought we had about the word 'terroir'. As you know, the terroir is the blend of the three following elements: the natural conditions, the conditions of production and the human factor. And looking at the viticultural worldwide landscape, we see that the natural conditions are forwarded through the system of appellations generally in Europe, the conditions of production through the system of varieties generally in the New World and nothing about the human factor! So we thought it was the moment to fill this gap and we created The Winemakers' Collection.

Concerning the concept every year we ask a well-known winemaker to come to Arsac. He or she chooses the vines on the Médoc appellation and drives them to the harvest, vinification, ageing and bottling. We remain at the disposal of the winemaker and he/she has in hand all the means he or she wants to produce the wine of his or her dreams.

I think this case of six bottles is unique: I never heard in the history of the viticulture of something equivalent which gives to the amateur the opportunity to taste six different interpretations of a same chateau by six virtuosi of winemaking. The wines become the meeting point of different sensibilities, cultures and techniques. And wine in general takes back its place of a cultural product whereas it is diabolised in some countries such as France...[this was written many weeks before our article about the French government's extraordinary recent proposals to limit communication about wine - see [French government turns on wine](#) - JR] All the more for me it represents a kind of issue in my professional life insofar as it proves wine is above all a cultural product. Now I can die serenely!

Ch d'Arsac, The Winemakers' Collection Cuvée No 1 Michel Rolland 2005 Haut-Médoc 16 Drink 2014-2022

Ubiquitous Michel Rolland was the obvious choice for the first in this series of famous winemakers given the job of making a wine from Ch d'Arsac's grapes. Dark glowing crimson with a bright red rim. Very sweet, almost tarry nose. Quite obvious alcohol on the nose. Sweet, very thick palate entry. I feel as though this wine may call for a knife and fork rather than a glass! Lots of tannin still in evidence (a characteristic of the vintage). This tightens up on the finish which is quite dry and with just a suggestion of the heat of alcohol. This still seems quite youthful and unknit to a British palate. Desperately needs food. I know Michel would disagree, and would hate to read this (though he probably won't), but I can see a relationship with some of his southern hemisphere wines here. 13.5%

Ch d'Arsac, The Winemakers' Collection Cuvée No 2 Denis Dubourdieu 2006 Haut-Médoc 16.5 Drink 2010-2018

Denis Dubourdieu is another of Bordeaux's high-profile wine consultants, even if he has spread his wings geographically more markedly after this wine was made rather than before. His own base is in Graves and Sauternes. Less intense crimson than the No 1 from Michel Rolland. Just mid crimson with some evolution at the rim. Very attractively aromatic, in rather the same way that fine red Graves is - oddly enough! (Perhaps I ought to have been made to taste these wines blind...) Racy and lifted. Rather flattering - not in a sweet, sweet way but in a vivacious, mouthwatering way. Some transparency. Dry finish. Not luscious but very appetising. My style of wine. But not a very long-distance runner. There is some tannin there but no great density of flesh. Impressive persistence though. 13%

Ch d'Arsac, The Winemakers' Collection Cuvée No 3 Andrea Franchetti 2007 Haut-Médoc 16.5 Drink 2010-2015

In theory anyway the proprietor of Tenuta di Trinoro in southern Tuscany and Passopisciaro in Etna drew the short straw in terms of vintages. We're told on the back label that he favours late picking and the use of small fermentation vessels. Quite an evolved mid ruby and real evidence of development on the nose even though it is not especially intense. Gentle, subtle nose with hints of warm hazelnuts. Definitely ready but in the undertow on the palate there is real excitement and vigour. It's a pleasure to taste a wine in which all the youthful elements have knit together. Most impressive finish. Good freshness but no excess acidity. A delightful wine that seems very 'happy in its own skin'. Great evidence that quality and intensity do not necessarily go hand in hand. 13%

Ch d'Arsac, The Winemakers' Collection Cuvée No 4 Stéphane Derenoncourt 2008 Haut-Médoc 16+ Drink 2014-2022

Another very high-profile Bordeaux-based by international wine consultant. Mid bright crimson. Very flattering and somehow sweet and perfumed - is this an oak thing? Opulent with a hint of candied violets and smoked meat. Lots of sweetness on the palate. Then still some (attractive) greenness and real energy. This does seem very Derenoncourt - and shows great drive. Still a little youthful and unsettled but it offers lots of pleasure. Tannins and a bit of oak on the finish. Work in progress. Maybe just a bit too much winemaking and a bit too little vineyard? But presumably it will all settle down. 13%

Ch d'Arsac, The Winemakers' Collection Cuvée No 5 Eric Boissenot 2010 Haut-Médoc 17 Drink 2013-2025

Very dark, lustrous crimson. Meaty and really interesting, vital nose. Great balance and both intensity and restraint if that is possible. Absolutely lovely texture. I'm sure this will age well and will gain complexity but it's already drinkable and approachable thanks to, presumably, extremely clever massage and treatment of the fruit. Of all the six wines, this seems the closest to stereotypical top-quality Médoc. Haunting and beautifully balanced. Glorious. Is this because 2010 was such a great vintage or because Boissenot is so talented? Or both? 13.5%

Ch d'Arsac, The Winemakers' Collection Cuvée No 6 Zelma Long 2011 Haut-Médoc 16+ Drink 2013-2025

Another vintage short straw for the first female winemaker given her way with Ch d'Arsac grapes. Although she started off in California at Robert Mondavi and Simi, she is now most closely associated with Vilafonté in South Africa. Deep crimson. Very rich and only slightly prune. Presumably this was picked relatively late? Everything is there. It's much riper and more luscious than many Bordeaux 2011s initially although the acidity sticks out a bit at the moment. Lots of pleasure in this rather un-bordeaux wine. 13.5%