



## ON THE INSIDE WITH THE OUTSIDER

After hitchhiking from his hometown of Dunkirk to work as a grape picker in Fronsac, Stéphane Derenoncourt worked his way up to become one of Bordeaux's most in-demand consultants. Ella Lister meets a self-taught man of contrasts whose unconventional route into winemaking means he still feels like an outsider, despite consulting to more than 90 clients worldwide

Stéphane Derenoncourt is at once shy and incredibly charming, both modest and self-assured. Full of paradoxes, his life has presented him with challenges, ennui, and the immense good fortune to discover his calling, a métier he might never have stumbled upon were it not for luck and a desire for change.

Born in 1963 in the northern French industrial town of Dunkirk—"not far from you," he says, referring to its proximity to the English Channel—Derenoncourt grew up a good 150 miles (240km) from the nearest vineyard (on French soil, at least). He was more interested in music and girls than in study, and left school at 16 with no baccalaureate. He also left home before time, living briefly in a caravan. He tried an apprenticeship as a mechanic but hated it, and then worked in factories, like his father. "I hated that, too," he declares. "One day I decided to change my life, and I went to pick grapes in Fronsac," Derenoncourt says, recalling "a bohemian life of picking and gardening." It was difficult being uprooted from friends and family, and he was poor, but he quickly felt an affinity with the agriculture: "I loved it."

Three years later, he got a job at Château La Fleur Cailleau, under Paul Barre, whom Derenoncourt describes as a "dynamic boss." He did his first vinification and fell in love. "It taught me what I'd been doing in the vines, and I found the process magical," he remembers, adding, "I decided that was the job for me." In the small Bordeaux appellation of Canon-Fronsac, and with encouragement from Barre, Derenoncourt was able to make an impression right from the start. He knocked on doors in the more traditional appellations to see how they did things and learned quickly.

Then, in 1985, Maryse Barre, Paul's mother, acquired Château Pavie Macquin and had problems with the cellar master so asked Derenoncourt to replace him. "It was in total ruin," says Derenoncourt of the St-Emilion property, which he quickly turned around, earning himself "a little reputation." In 1995, he met the immaculate Count Stephan von Neipperg, who a year later lost his cellar master at Canon-la-Gaffelière, making way for Derenoncourt to begin the next and decisive phase of his career.

The elegant, aristocratic Stephan and the boho, working-class Stéphane came together in the vineyards with a shared vision. In Derenoncourt's first year with von Neipperg, lots of changes took place at Canon-la-Gaffelière, including the introduction of new vats to allow more parcel selection and the substitution of *remontage* (pumping over) by *pigeage* (punching down), which is "gentler and more homogenous," says the consultant. The clay and sand in the vineyards meant that the terroir automatically produced elegant wines, explains Derenoncourt, "but without structure, it's not *jolie*." He noticed the difference straightaway.

In the same year, 1996, in the hunt for more structure, von Neipperg applied to the regulating authority, INAO, for the right to include a chalkier parcel in the Canon-la-Gaffelière blend. This parcel, situated about a mile (1.6km) away as the crow flies, high up on the eastern limestone plateau of St-Emilion, produced naturally powerful wine that would, believed Derenoncourt and von Neipperg, have complemented the elegance of the main wine. However, the requisite permission was not granted, and instead the pair conceived of the tiny production, single-parcel wine La Mondotte. Here, the challenge was the opposite, finding elegance to prevent the wine from being too "hard," as the consultant himself puts it.

Derenoncourt is a self-professed specialist in *argilo-calcaire* (clay-limestone), and while La Mondotte remains a powerful wine, it has achieved an impressive balance in his hands. In 2012, the wine was promoted directly from AOC St-Emilion to premier grand cru classé—skipping the intermediate step—by the very same authorities that had refused its addition to Canon-la-Gaffelière. Von Neipperg clearly viewed this as something of a coup, and while Derenoncourt's reaction is one of studied reserve, he also admitted to being very happy that they had been forced to make La Mondotte as a standalone wine. Château Canon-la-Gaffelière was simultaneously promoted to premier grand cru classé, from the rung below that it had occupied for many years, proving after all that it didn't need the Mondotte grapes to take it to the next level.

## (bordeaux portrait)



Count Stephan von Neipperg, owner of Canon-la-Gaffelière and La Mondotte, who has employed Derenoncourt there as cellar master then consultant since 1996

### On the road again

Despite Derenoncourt's lack of any formal enological training, his talent among the vines and in the winery could not be ignored, and he soon had offers from other châteaux, including La Tour Figeac in '97 and Rol Valentin in '98. "Staying in one place is not for me," he muses, and after speaking with von Neipperg about the rising demand for his advice, the two agreed that he would stay on as a consultant but also be free to consult elsewhere. "It was curiosity and travel and new projects that inspired me," he explains, and so he began consulting more widely in 1999.

"It was a terrible year," recalls Derenoncourt, who couldn't find anyone to work with him because he didn't have any formal qualifications. "I had to train [employees] myself," he says, describing the process as "a kind of school." He also bought his own château that year, Domaine de l'A, so "worked double." It was tiring, he says, and unusual, "but now I am proud to have a good team of 12, where my first employees are my partners." He is at a stage now, 14 years on, where he can delegate a project almost entirely to one of his partners, though he adds that "for very high-level projects, it has to be me." He discovers talent in the form of interns and other young employees on his visits to other châteaux and is not afraid to nab them from his clients.

Dominique Bessineau, of châteaux Côte Montpezat and Haut-Bernat, tells me that day-to-day matters are managed by a dedicated member of Derenoncourt's team but that the man himself is always available for important decisions. Bessineau, originally from Calais, first contacted Derenoncourt

when he was too busy with his primary job (in recycled plastics) to dedicate his full attention to the château, and needed someone he could rely on to take care of the property. He had met Derenoncourt in passing on a few occasions and knew he was a fellow northerner. When he telephoned, he spoke in Ch'ti, their shared Nord-Pas-de-Calais dialect. Derenoncourt answered, simply, "Ouais?" ("Yep?"), and Bessineau explained, "I need your help," to which the consultant replied "I'll be right there." The Calaisien remembers this exchange fondly, saying he had thought the sought-after consultant wouldn't have time to visit in person but, in northern solidarity, had appeared within hours.

Derenoncourt Consultants currently has more than 90 clients—mostly in Bordeaux, where the company is based, and especially in St-Emilion, where it works with two dozen properties, but also across the rest of France (11 clients) and, indeed, the world. Derenoncourt has ten clients outside France, beginning in Spain and Italy from 2003, with the most recent addition to the stable being in India from 2010. An international reputation means that offers are coming in thick and fast. "In ten years, we have turned down at least the same number we've taken on," Derenoncourt tells me.

How does he decide which clients to take on? "It's easy," he says, elaborating succinctly. "Three things: a project that interests me—for example, the terroir; the necessary means to realize the project (funds available); and the feeling with the person." This last factor possibly holds the most sway, and Derenoncourt insists, "I won't work with someone I can't get



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STÉPHANE DERENONCOURT

on with. [...] I have never quit a project because I didn't like the wines but [have] often because I no longer liked the people," he says, adding, "The success can go to their head."

And success they have certainly had. Of the 18 premiers grands crus classés in St-Emilion, no fewer than seven are clients of Derenoncourt: Château Beauséjour Héritiers Duffau-Lagarrosse, Château Canon-la-Gaffelière, Clos Fourtet, Château La Gaffelière, Château Larcis Ducasse, La Mondotte, and Château Pavie Macquin. When I asked him about this at the very beginning of our first meeting, he nonchalantly waived any credit for their ranking, saying merely that "we have been lucky to have been approached by people with beautiful terroir."

### Quiet pride

By the end of our lunch, he was less guarded, admitting to some well-deserved pride: "I say I don't care, but I am proud and satisfied that I've had success with the style [in which] I have approached things." Perhaps our bottle of Nicolas Rossignol's 2007 Clos des Mouches helped break the ice—for Derenoncourt is a Burgundy man at heart and has tried to bring a more Burgundian sensibility to the work he carries out in Bordeaux. The Beune premier cru certainly gave him courage in the face of a less innocuous winged insect, as he calmly and methodically killed no fewer than nine overzealous wasps with his bare hands. Over the course of an hour on the terrace of his newest project, Château Candale, he squashed wasps between his thumb and forefinger or clapped them between his palms in a chivalrous effort to save my *menu fixe*.

Just as he is unfazed by the pail of wasps, Derenoncourt appears equally unaffected by his success, although he does recognize it. With reference to the promotions of Pavie Macquin (in 2006) and La Mondotte and Canon-la-Gaffelière (in 2012), he says, "It's on these châteaux that I've constructed the philosophy of my methods, so yes, I'm quite proud, because it means they can't be that bad after all."

So, what exactly are these methods that make several dozen producers seek out Derenoncourt each year? I ask him to describe a Derenoncourt wine, and he replies that he can describe the approach but not the resulting wine. "A grape will produce different tastes depending on where it grows," he states, continuing, "My passion has always been to explore those differences." In other words, a Derenoncourt wine is one that "expresses the place where it comes from and not the way it was made." Ironically, then, his influence is to minimize—even erase—any perceptible human or

"enological" influence, letting the unique combination of grapes, soil, and microclimate speak for itself.

"The link is terroir," Derenoncourt says of the different wines he helps to make, accepting that "of course the style of vinification is similar." This style is generally light-touch but varying in each place to "adapt to a type of soil." On silty clay, for example, "you must be wary of bitterness," while on sand "you must seek structure," he explains. In extreme cases, Derenoncourt might suggest to a client pulling up a parcel completely where the grape variety is not working on the terroir, then replanting with another.

While he insists that there is no such thing as a "Derenoncourt wine," he cannot deny that there is a "Derenoncourt style." His clients' wines display similar motifs if not the same themes. They are often powerful, rich, and round, but nearly always with a welcome freshness that balances the wines. Jancis Robinson MW has referred to a "tannic drag factor" common in his Bordeaux Right Bank

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wines. Outside Bordeaux, there is undoubtedly room for characterful and even eccentric expressions of terroir and variety, with peppery Syrah from the Rhône (Domaine La Soumade) and meaty Tempranillo from Ribera del Duero (Alonso del Yerro). In the New World, grape varieties find new expression, with Indian Shiraz channeling spiced buffalo (Alpine Wineries' Vindiva Shiraz) and fragrant California Cabernet from Derenoncourt's own joint venture there.

"In France, you have to fight for maturity," while "in California you have to fight for freshness." I ask him if he's tasted wines from the New World that he's liked as much as his favorite French or Italian wines, and his answer is an emphatic no. At a speech in Beirut for a tasting held by his client Château Marsyas, he voiced his initial concerns about making wine somewhere as hot as the Bekaa Valley. "Wine from hot New World countries can lose the idea of vintage as each year it is extracted and sugary," he began. Such wines become brands, he asserted, adding, "To be naughty, I'm going to say they have a Coca-Cola side to them." Of course, he went on to reassure the assembled Lebanese audience that Château Marsyas had avoided this pitfall.

If Derenoncourt is reluctant to describe the recurring motifs of his wines, his business partner at St-Emilion boutique Terres Millésimées is not. Emmanuel Emonot, formerly sommelier at Bernard Loiseau in Burgundy, tells me that he sells wines that represent "the style of Stéphane," explaining that this means "not extracted, not too woody, not overripe," adding, "It's the terroir that comes to the fore."

**The vines come first**

It is unsurprising, given his training among the vines rather than at enology school, that Derenoncourt's primary focus is viticulture. Vinification is not ignored, but the techniques employed are designed to maximize the expression of terroir. For example, one of the first recommendations he often makes to a new client is to invest in smaller fermentation vats to allow greater differentiation between each parcel of vines, permitting each one to develop before embarking on a final *assemblage*. Derenoncourt is also very wary about the unnatural influence that excessive oak can have on a wine, working carefully with artisan coopers to ensure he uses wood that complements the wine in question and doesn't override its fruit or sense of place. "In every property I follow, we will test new coopers on small amounts of wine to allow us to experiment and improve constantly," he says.

Derenoncourt is not a fan of wines that are noticeably oaky. For this reason, he doesn't drink white Bordeaux, going as far as to say that he hates it. The wines "are too sugary and woody and don't express terroir very well," he argues. Neither does he particularly like Sauvignon Blanc, the major component of most Bordeaux whites. (His other pet hate is Tannat.) Instead, you are more likely to find him opening a bottle of Rasteau or Swiss Petite Arvine at home. He has between 7,000 and 8,000 bottles in his cellar and is "mad about wine."

"Another passion is cooking, so it depends what I'm eating," he says. *J'aime bien bien manger et j'aime bien bien boire*, he owns with a grin. This roughly translates as, "I love eating and drinking really, really well," or in other words he is a *bon vivant* (which can be conveyed adequately only in French!). However, the 50-year-old declares with restraint that he won't be drinking that evening: "Only water, because I have to look after my health."

His unobtrusive stance has led Derenoncourt down the path of organic and biodynamic winemaking. From the beginning of his career, he employed organic methods. Barre had been among the first to acquire organic certification for his wine at La Fleur Cailleau, and Pavié Macquin was an early adopter of biodynamics. "I have it in my genes," states Derenoncourt, summing up his simple approach to winemaking thus: "When I'm looking for purity, I look for ways to make the wine as natural as possible."

On our third meeting, the consultant is clutching a book titled *Le Livre Noir de l'Agriculture* ("The Black Book of Agriculture"), its subtitle translating as "How we are killing our farmers, our health, and the environment." He is clearly opposed to the use of chemicals and prefers

a more sustainable agriculture, though he doesn't impose organics or biodynamics on his clients. "Becoming organic is a lot of work," he acknowledges, adding, "They have to want to." He will always, however, propose more natural methods, such as composting, working the soil, and *enherbement*—that is, planting grasses and cereals, which are not necessarily organic, between the vines in winter.

He is quick to dispel my fantasy about his role, saying, "It's not some kind of cool job where I wake up with an idea." Instead, his success is founded on a "rigorous approach, hard work, the sum of details," he says, concluding that what he does is "peasant work, an everyday job," by which he means not simply that it is an ordinary job but that it is one where *every day* really counts.

He refers to his international "notoriety"—from Europe, to Japan, via the Middle East—and recounts endless business trips. At our second meeting, in Paris, he had just spent a week in Hong Kong and from there went to Tuscany via Chablis, where he tasted 140 samples. After a few days at home, he stopped in Paris en route to Brussels. He estimates that he now spends about half the year traveling.

Nonetheless, he does not think of himself as a "flying winemaker," saying pointedly that he prefers to have just one client per country outside France, except Italy and Spain, where he has two because they are within easy reach. He thinks his style is very different from that of other consultants, even those he

respects. He likes the classic style of Jean-Claude Berrouet, citing Trotanoy and La Fleur-Pétrus. He is circumspect with regard to Michel Rolland, saying, "Rolland does things I like and things I don't."

Bringing up the topic of Stéphane Derenoncourt in wine circles seems to invite contrasts with Michel Rolland. Touraine grower Jacky Blot describes two camps of consultant winemaker: those who seek elegance and those who seek *démonstration* (showiness). He puts Derenoncourt firmly in the first. In other words, he is someone who can make a wine from a hot vintage taste like one from a cooler vintage, "where others might do the opposite," says Blot. Derenoncourt is even capable of shocking himself with this ability. When the sommelier at a Paris restaurant served him a glass of 2003 Canon-la-Gaffelière, he thought it must be a 2001 or 2002. It is hard to find someone who doesn't admire Derenoncourt, and yet he describes himself, or at least others' view of him, as a *vilain petit canard* (the French equivalent of the Ugly Duckling, with a touch of the rebellious black sheep).

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Château Canon-la-Gaffelière, promoted to St-Emilion premier grand cru classé in 2012 and one of the seven properties in that top tier for which Derenoncourt consults

**Integrating with the Bordelais**

Derenoncourt arrived in Bordeaux an outsider and has never fully integrated into the relatively corporate world of cru classé winemakers in the region. "The Bordelais are not very accepting of people not from Bordeaux," he says, though he is perhaps also guilty of not accepting the Bordelais or their ways. "I'm discreet: You don't see me out at Bordeaux dinners," he states. During the primeur tastings, Derenoncourt held his own version of a Bordeaux dinner for his clients and team members. It consisted of an outdoor party (in an unseasonably cold April), with a live Latin band and rare entrecôte, bone marrow, and fries served up on to plastic plates by his wife, with all his employees mucking in and letting their hair down in equal measure. It was an unfussy antidote to the more formal occasions that otherwise fill up the Bordeaux calendar.

Blot explains Derenoncourt's apparent unpopularity in the region as a result of his having "shaken up Bordeaux traditions." Derenoncourt says there are lots of people in Bordeaux who don't like him. "The French don't like those who have success," he reasons. But it was even worse before he made it, with people openly insulting him. An established enologist once told him he was "unworthy" of making wine, because he didn't have a degree. Recently this one-time detractor came up to him again but this time with a veiled metaphor to share: that nobody can be a great composer who can't read music, except in very rare cases, where the person has exceptional raw talent. "I took this as a compliment," says Derenoncourt, with a satisfied smile.

Derenoncourt accepts that his reception is not all negative. He is popular among the *négociants*, he says, because his wines sell well and with his producers, too. Wine, he says, "must be easily consumable in its youth, because today's consumers drink wine young; they don't necessarily have cellars." I ask whether this is more important than the wine aging well, but he is adamant that the two are not mutually exclusive. Approachability in youth "must not prevent more erudite consumers being able to appreciate the wine when it's older," he insists. "In the past," he explains, "wines were more vegetal and needed longer to develop, whereas now riper grapes with supple tannins can be powerful young without being aggressive." He cites "concentration" and "superior phenolic levels [of ripeness]" as factors helping wine to charm when young, while surviving gracefully into old age.

"I don't care what people think; it's just important to know where I am with myself," he says, adding frankly, "It's part of my personality, but it has probably helped, since it makes me a bit interesting." Instead of the suit and tie of a typical Bordelais, his signature look is casual: jeans and well-worn leather sandals. However, Derenoncourt's reputation as a bohemian is not really warranted, and he puts it down to the fact that he hitchhiked to Bordeaux with long hair and a guitar. "I'm not bohemian in my head," he says, describing himself instead as "structured and serious."

He still loves music, but his tastes extend to classical, as well as to blues, punk, funk, and rock 'n' roll—genres that he says "never go out of fashion." He likes both Bach and Beethoven, while Vivaldi annoys him. His real musical

Photography © Vignobles Comtes von Neipperg

**DERENONCOURT IN ACTION: CHÂTEAU MARSYAS AND DOMAINE BARGYLUS**

The Saadé brothers—Sandro and Karim (pictured below)—sought out Stéphane Derenoncourt in 2005. Sandro Saadé heard about this “rising star” from a contact in Bordeaux, where he was on a reconnaissance mission having just embarked on an ambitious vineyard project in Syria. Derenoncourt couldn’t resist the singular opportunity and went to Domaine Bargylus to see the terroir for himself, which was enough to convince him to take on the project. The Saadé family, of both Syrian and Lebanese heritage, were also looking for a promising site in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, which they soon found, and where Derenoncourt consulted from day one. “We don’t like overly woody wines, we don’t like stereotypical wines, and we want wines with character and lots of minerality,” declares Sandro Saadé. “I don’t think Stéphane would have worked with us if we hadn’t felt this way.”

According to the wine critic and eponymous author of *Michael Karam’s Lebanese Wines*, “The Saadé brothers clearly wanted to make quality wine, and they brought in one of the best, and most traveled, consultants to make it happen.” Karam adds that “Stéphane not only understands the palate of the modern consumer, he also possesses what I believe is a rare instinct for terroir,” saying, “What he has done in Syria is stunning.” It is true that the wines from Bargylus are wonderful. Both the red and white in 2008, for example, have an emphatically Old World aura and are expertly made. The white is particularly lovely in its creamy, silky precision. The wines have continued to be released despite the civil war that has prevented the brothers or their team from visiting the domaine for the past two vintages. “It’s the first time in our lives that we’ve made a wine without seeing the vines—at a distance,” says Derenoncourt.

He still visits Château Marsyas about six times a year, despite the Bekaa Valley being very close to the border with Syria (“Damas’ is just behind that mountain,” points out Sandro Saadé from the car window). The war-torn capital city Damascus is close enough that the Saadé brothers have put on hold their plans for a new state-of-the-art winery building at Marsyas. The

uncertainty in the region is too great. In March this year, just three weeks after our visit, Assad’s regime fired rockets across the border into Bekaa as a reprisal against the Lebanese government for not preventing “armed terrorist groups from using the borders as a crossing point.”

Nonetheless, the architectural plans are all drawn up and are displayed along one wall of the existing vat room until they can be realized. “Stéphane was very closely involved in designing [the layout],” says Sandro Saadé, explaining the three levels that will facilitate a gravity system whereby the grapes enter the winery on the ground floor, are fermented in the vats on the floor below, and end up in the barrel room below that, therefore avoiding any need to pump the wine. This fits comfortably with Derenoncourt’s low-intervention approach.

Involved at Marsyas from the very beginning, Derenoncourt had carte blanche to institute his recommended approach. Pointing at the densely planted rows, he says, “You won’t see vines that neat and precise anywhere else in the Bekaa.” While elsewhere in the valley the simpler Cordon Royat training system is more common, Marsyas uses the Guyot system, which “allows the sap to flow,” he explains. The vines are trained between 20 and 26 inches (50–65cm) from the ground for optimum maturity, with the grapes soaking up heat reflected from the gravel. Yields are low, with Marsyas producing less wine from 5,000 vines per hectare than most local wineries do from 2,000 or 3,000 vines per hectare.

“From April to September or October, there is no rain,” states Derenoncourt. For the first five years, and every other year thereafter, cereals have been planted between the vines to break up the earth and allow the roots to seek water farther from the surface. The winery, which also makes its own compost and eschews chemicals, is organic though not certified as such. Marsyas is not biodynamic, although the winemaker, Sebastien Khoury, employs both organic and biodynamic methods at his own Domaine de Baal, so the pedigree is firmly installed.



Photography by Ella Luster

When the time comes to pick the grapes, there are three stages of selection. The first is in the vineyard, with harvest always taking place in the morning, before the Lebanese sun is at its fiercest. The second is in the winery on a conveyor belt, which then delivers the grapes gently into the vats so as not to break the skin. There is no pre-fermentation maceration, which Derenoncourt dismisses as being akin to “cold cooking”). The grapes are punched down during fermentation, which takes place inside the grapes, forcing the flesh to break free of the skins. It is this process that Derenoncourt describes as the “third *tri* [selection],” because any underripe grapes don’t ferment. The thermoregulated fermentation and maceration last for around 18 days for the red and less for the white.

“Everything comes quickly in the hot climate,” observes Derenoncourt of making wine in Lebanon. The whole vinification process is thus short and gentle—“to preserve the freshness of fruit and avoid excesses of alcohol and extraction.” The red wine spends between 12 and 16 months in barrique depending on the vintage, with about one quarter aged in tank, again to retain freshness. The white wine sees no oak at all, and while the plans for the new building incorporate a space that would allow the white to be aged in barriques in future, the consultant is not keen for that to happen.

The Marsyas whites—from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc—are at once rich and fresh, with good acidity, though less refined than Bargylus, with the Sauvignon dominating on the palate if not in the blend. The reds are sweet and ripe yet fresh and sensual. Karam refers to them as “brazenly international in style” but says, “They are nonetheless very well made, with a pleasing mineral freshness (both on the nose and the front palate), bold fruit, and well-integrated tannins.” He concludes that, in Lebanon, with Derenoncourt’s help, “Château Marsyas has set new standards.”



passion is Tom Waits; his favorite song, “Blue Valentine.” “I can’t live without Tom Waits,” he declares. Another staple on his iPhone is “I Hope that I Don’t Fall in Love with You,” which includes the words, “I can see that you are lonesome just like me.” And Derenoncourt admits to being a solitary person.

“I’ve had three wives,” he says, though the French *femme* means at once “wife” and “woman,” and for Derenoncourt there’s no need to differentiate. He has two children with his first wife (second *femme*), and two more with Christine, his wife of 12 years, whom he met when she was an intern and who now runs their own property, Domaine de l’A. They have a cat called Satanás and a dog called Berlioz (though not because of any particular proclivity for the composer).

**Feet still on the ground**

Every now and then, Derenoncourt seems suddenly surprised at the realization of his success, but it doesn’t seem to have gone to his head. He quite sanguinely imagines being thrown back to the simple poverty of his early 20s, still eating and drinking well (“maybe beer”) and getting by. “I don’t care about money; it doesn’t interest me,” he avows. He is just as happy interacting with the winery employees as with his clients—their bosses. He actively encourages the involvement of those lower down the hierarchy, insisting that they join in key tastings and have a chance to express their views: It’s all part of the “human adventure” at the heart of what he does.

Derenoncourt may cultivate his bohemian image, but he doesn’t neglect the business side, even if he does his best to downplay it. His expanding empire includes the shop in St-Emilion that opened in April 2011 (“It’s not really primarily a commercial venture—not really the thing for Russians and Asians who want the big labels”) and an annual en primeur tasting beneath the chandeliers of Paris’s Georges V hotel (“It’s the only place where I can fit 300 people”). This year was the tenth anniversary; to celebrate, Derenoncourt wore a suit but didn’t stretch to a tie. His speech at the dinner afterward was succinct (“like a mini skirt: short enough not to be boring, and long enough to cover the subject”). Apart from that joke, it consisted primarily of thanking his team effusively (if Derenoncourt can ever really be described as effusive), which drew applause from the banqueting room lasting almost as long as the speech itself.

He has also put his name to Les Parcelles, a range of affordable wines representing different Bordeaux appellations, in partnership with négociant Maison Bouey. “I’ve never had any objectives, just done what takes my fancy.” He doesn’t know what’s next for the business and has no plans for new wineries in his own name. “I’m not somebody who calculates—it depends what comes up,” he says. The only certainty is his dedication to the expression of terroir. Oh, and he still has the guitar, but now it goes in the trunk of his rather grown-up Audi A7, his ever-sandaled feet firmly on the accelerator. ■