

SPIRITO di VINO

Culture and Quality for a Luxury Wine-Style

Asia

LOUIS XIII

The Film you will never see

SPAIN

Success in the Toro region

GOURMETS

The secrets of Japanese sushi

FRANCE

At school in the vineyard

HONG KONG

Enjoying wine in the air

Marathon Tasting

EIGHT DAYS IN TUSCANY, HUNDREDS OF SAMPLES, AND FIVE LOCATIONS FROM FLORENCE TO MONTALCINO AND MONTEPULCIANO

The consultant of nature

by *Alessandra Piubello*

Stéphane Derenoncourt is a consultant to some 90 wineries. Based in Bordeaux, he has not seen a journalist in the vineyard for years...

Satori (in Zen Buddhism, this is the experience of awakening in a spiritual sense), walking among the vineyards in the ancient Burdigala. Step after step, treading soils of clay, limestone, sand and gravel. Plot after plot, from morning to night tasting Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. Day after day, from Fronsac to Médoc, from Saint-Émilion to Entre-deux-Mers, from Pessac-Léognan to Castillon-la-Bataille and beyond. Marching through rain, wind and sun. Kilometre after kilometre. It is the harvest, the key moment of the Dionysian kalokagathia. Sensei, the most unconventional terroirist of the Bordeaux bling bling: Stéphane Derenoncourt. I have met him other times, through his wines, too. His respect for the fruit, his expressive delicacy: unique sensitivity and intensity. Quid pluris. A look that reads your mind and a rather brusque manner conceal pure authenticity, the unusual ability to be both near and distant at once. A consultant to 90 wineries around the world, his heart beats in Bordeaux. Sure thing, I'll be back in September. You confide that you have not met a journalist in the vineyards for many years, neither French nor any other nationality. Nobody on the hunt, hiding behind a glass, is it possible? How can you write about wine and abuse the word terroir if you don't know the vineyards? Tant pis, spirit of wine fluttering in the Bordeaux green-brown-red, boots on, and ready to discover the Derenoncourt universe. You tell me a few, succinct words on tasting the grape to comprehend structure and maturity. I observe the vine you have selected to nibble the Merlot from. I taste, concentrating on the sensations of the pulp. I try to keep up with you; you know exactly where to go in this endless, luxuriant sea. I touch the soil, so that you describe it for me, the only pause between one grape and the next. I listen to you with your meticulous rigour as you reel off to the latest château owner the names of every single plot (you know them like the back of your hand), and the respective days to start harvesting, or when you will drop by for a final check before harvest. To you, everything is clear, you've been applying this system for more than thirty years. Every nuance of the grape is revealed to your expert palate: the precise perception of its development, and the intuition of the exact time to harvest it. You use no analyses other than your senses. To tell the truth, I searched in vain for your analysis laboratory, I

On these pages, Stéphane Derenoncourt, considered the most unconventional oenologist in Bordeaux, amid the vines: he knows all the plots of the various châteaux that he advises in a role he has performed expertly since he was 36, which has brought him beyond French and European borders to Spain, Italy, Syria, the United States, Tunisia, Lebanon, Austria and India.



The start in Saint-Émilion; now he and his team are worldwide

opened door after door in Fillol, that magical spot with a sentinel sui generis that you chose as your headquarters, far from the clamour of the Bordeaux world. Every consultant boasts a lab with all the latest gear, at the service of his clients. And they earn well out of them. You don't; you prefer to remain apart. Strange and unique man that you are: for all the digging I have done, I have never unearthed contradictions, inconsistencies, shortcuts or falsehood.

A professional of great calibre, accustomed to observing, thinking knowledgeably and building projects, and given to speaking his mind frankly with the force to shatter status quos. Isabelle Saporta knew well when she penned her Bordeaux exposé, *Vino Business*, that you would have taken the responsibility to tell the truth. Few times in my life have I met someone with your moral uprightness, concealed by your innate modesty, mixed with your rebel laugh, with that easygoing gaze in your sad eyes, and your sometimes-cutting irony. Here we must recognise the man, even before the wine. You, Ch'ti (as they call the inhabitants of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, often abbreviated as North) arrived from Dunkirk at 18 years of age, bringing the sea, the wind, and solitude as a companion to the Fronsac vineyards for the harvest. You had no money, little education and no strings to pull. Meeting Paul Barre (Château La Grave, La Fleur Cailleau): your

first job, discovering biodynamics, and your insights with François Bouchet. Always in the vineyard, your alma mater, the mystical source you never abandoned, Bergson's élan vital. Your surprising talent is spotted, you are maître de chai.

Then, you began in Saint-Émilion, (today, with 25 clients in the district, it is a robust nucleus) with Pavie-Macquin (first with Maryse Barre, then with Nicolas Thienpont), and later with Canon-La-Gaffelière, La Mondotte, and Clos de l'Oratoire (Stephan de Neipperg). The voice in

your wine, ever different, always respecting the land as an assistant to nature, called out to others. You became a consultant at 36. You broadened your horizons, starting with Spain, then Italy, Syria, the United States, Lebanon, Turkey, Austria, and India. Socratic as you are, you formed a team, which now has 15 members. And you continued to look beyond. In 2010 your first collaborators, Julien Lavenu, Simon Blanchard and Frédéric Massie, were made partners in Derenoncourt consultants (Christine, your wife, forever at your side). I have never seen a team so compact, skilled, passionate, and ready to help each other at any moment. You can be enlightened on the road to Bordeaux: the Derenoncourt philosophy is a natural, conceptual and design opus of immense value, present in the glass. Good, healthy grapes perpetuated by good, healthy knowledge: miracles can still happen. 🍷



Here above, Stéphane Derenoncourt with his wife Christine, who has always been at his side in his 'assistant to the earth' activities. Top of page, his first collaborators, from left, Frédéric Massie, Julien Lavenu and Simon Blanchard, who became partners in Derenoncourt Assistant and started a team that now counts some 15 members (www.derenoncourtconsultants.com).