

Olivier Dauga is no ordinary wine consultant who uses a no-nonsense approach to keep his French clients in touch with today's market. *Jane Anson* spends a day with the former rugby player on his 500km daily commute – and finds out how he is dragging Bordeaux into the 21st century

THE HARD-NOSED PLAYER OF BORDEAUX

After spending a day during the 2008 harvest with Bordeaux wine consultant Olivier Dauga, I can declare unequivocally that he does not have an easy job. For a start, there's the petrol – during harvest, Dauga covers an average of 500km per day, driving around every corner of Bordeaux, from the northern reaches of the Médoc, right down to Entre-Deux-Mers in the south, passing Saint-Emilion and Pomerol on the way. When he finishes in Bordeaux, he heads off to the Languedoc to keep an eye on his clients down there. For this busy six to eight week period, he is working from 7am until 10pm, seven days a week.

Dauga has an Audi GPL hybrid estate on order, but for now he drives a gas-guzzling 4x4. "I don't like quatre-quattes", he says, "they are not me." Despite the mileage, the car isn't equipped with a GPS, as he tells me that he knows every hillock and outcrop of the region (the illusion is somewhat spoiled when he takes a wrong turning just outside of Pauillac, but it is restored in only a few minutes).

Then there's the phone. Dauga (who has a black iPhone with a ringtone that sounds like the opening bars of a cabaret routine) has his handset clamped to his ear throughout much of the day. The first of many calls he receives is from a winemaker worrying about oxidation in the split berries he has brought in. Dauga's answer? "Put an extra gram of sulphur into the vat. This will not affect the taste, but will disinfect the whole area to ensure things are clean and healthy."

Another wonders whether to wait to harvest a few more days. Dauga dissuades him: "If you harvest today, rain water will not have penetrated into the grapes, so there will be no dilution. But if you wait longer and it rains again, there could be a problem. You have more to lose by waiting."

And if that's not enough, there is the nature of the task. Being a wine consultant means not being afraid to tell your clients unpalatable truths, such as that their Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are displaying green pepper aromas when they ought to be all about black fruits. Or that their label, introduced by their beloved grandfather 50 years ago, no longer suits today's wine market.

Dauga's unconventional background may be an advantage, as he is used to convincing sceptics that his opinion is worth listening to. For a start, he hardly looks like a typical Bordeaux consultant. His flowing locks and towering height make it no surprise that he was a semi-professional rugby player before finding his forte in wine. And unlike his more famous colleagues, such as Michel Rolland or Denis Dubourdieu, he is not an oenologist by training.

Dyslexia meant that he left school early, and after a variety of roles, a rugby connection landed him his first wine job, at Sociando-Mallet in the Médoc. He quickly found a natural talent, and rose to be technical director at Sociando, then La Tour Carnet, La Tour de By and Haut Condissas, before starting Le Faiseur de Vin consultancy in 2000. Just recently Dauga has been named Winemaker of the Year 2009 by French restaurant guide Gault Millau, and consults in Morocco, the Ukraine, Australia, Spain, the Luberon, Aix-en-Provence and Bordeaux.

All of this has meant that his stock is rising rapidly – particularly among those who believe that Bordeaux is in need of a fresh approach.

Needing bottle

The idea behind a wine consultant, of course, is to increase the desirability, and therefore sales (and perhaps price), of any given wine. Dauga is keenly aware that a successful wine needs to be about far more than just the product in the bottle. "I think about what a bottle is going to sell for and then make sure my clients can make the best wine possible within those parameters. And →

Profile

that affects what they can invest in their winemaking – if a wine is going to sell for €5, it must be made for only €1-2 per bottle. This means you have to think about the yield per hectare, and the equipment invested in, very carefully. A consultant becomes an economic actor for the chateau, helping it to make money more effectively.”

Having a consultant has become a badge of honour – and some say has been accorded too much importance. Having trouble reaching new markets? Stock sitting in your cellars? Not sure if your labels or tastes are relevant to today’s consumer? A consultant can offer an impartial eye on the problem – and, the critics suggest, allow the winemaker to abdicate responsibility for his wine.

The other big criticism levelled at wine consultants is that they don’t give enough attention to individual clients, that they insist on vast sums of money being spent, and that they are egomaniacs, stamping one particular style on all of their wines, without a care for the terroir or heritage of a wine. And of course there is no licensing or any form of control on consultants other than their performance and their client’s subsequent profile and sales.

Dauga’s way

Dauga is keen to set himself apart. “During the harvest, I will visit each of my clients at least twice a week, and outside of that I will always be available if there is a problem. I don’t want to employ a team of people to do things ‘Dauga-style’, I like to be responsible for my own clients. And most importantly, I like to help them bring out the best in their own wine, not impose my own idea of a perfect wine onto them.”

While there is no Dauga style, there is a Dauga philosophy. “I believe that Bordeaux has been too inflexible in its approach for a long time. Bordeaux is typically not seen as a fun region. The wine is all in the same bottle, with the same label. I want to change all that.”

A typical harvest visit will see Dauga tasting all the tanks, to decide which will make up the first and second wines, and how the acids, sugar, carbonic gas and tannins are developing. Tasting accurately during the vinification process is extremely difficult, as the wine is undergoing so many physical changes, and an expert palate is very useful. “I am checking for faults with the eyes, nose and mouth,” he says.

Throughout the year, a consultant may help choose the barrels, change the rootstocks in the vines, or the pruning methods, design the vinification room, even assess new plots of vines for potential purchase. Aside from the harvest, another busy period comes in February and March, in getting wine samples ready for journalists and potential buyers during the en primeur week.

Dauga’s fees vary widely according to the client, the size of the property, the amount of work needed and the means available. Although unwilling to talk figures, it seems to range from a few hundred to a few thousand euros per month. “One or two people ask me each week to take them on as clients but I almost always say no. It’s not just about the money, but the challenge and the psychological and emotional fit between me and a potential client.”

Here also, there is an important difference between Dauga and other better-known consultants. One of Dauga’s clients, Didier Marcellis at Château Sérilhan in Haut Médoc, told me that a famous consultant (“I won’t name him, but within the top three best-known in Bordeaux”) said that before he would even consider working



for Sérilhan, Marcellis would need to commit to a reverse osmosis machine, a micro-oxygenator and small caskets for picking the harvest. “He then asked, ‘Are you rich? I mean really rich?’ Olivier in contrast adapts his remuneration to his client’s ability. But no matter who you choose, there are hidden costs to a consultant – because under their advice you end up buying more things for the winery and for the vines.”

Oliver Dauga says a successful wine is more than just the product in the bottle

Quality return

For the wine buyer, choosing a wine made with a consultant can offer reassurance about the quality of that wine. “In a difficult year like 2008,” explains Dauga. “You really needed a good consultant because there are so many hard decisions to make. In Bordeaux over the 2008 growing season, we had difficult flowering, then bad fruit set, then rain and the accompanying threat of rot. For a winemaker on his own it was a lot to cope with and a consultant helps make difficult decisions.”

Marcellis adds: “The most useful benefit of having an external consultant is benchmarking. If you are surrounded by your staff and your neighbours, it can be easy to think you are fabulous and make fabulous wine. Olivier can say ‘actually, your wine is a little less good than the one I just tasted this morning’. He has 360° vision.”

Dauga would readily agree with this assessment. “When I started this consultancy, I realised quickly that if you simply make a wine, your business will not succeed. You need a lot of imagination beyond the production, and you have to do a hundred things at the same time. Most winemakers don’t have the time to do all of this, and that is where I come in.”

SOME OF OLIVIER DAUGA’S CLIENTS

- Château Sérilhan (Saint Estèphe)
- Château Civrac (Côtes de Bourg)
- Château Roques Mauriac (Bordeaux Supérieur)
- Château Bellevue Gazin (Premières Côtes de Blaye)

Other powerful critics influencing wine styles in Bordeaux and the world:

- Michel Rolland
- Denis Dubourdieu
- Stéphane Derenoncourt