



OLIVIER DAUGA
consultant en vins

Château Civrac
Château Civrac 2007
COTES DE BOURG, BORDEAUX, FRANCE



An Englishman abroad

We may dream about owning a vineyard, but Englishman Mark Hellyar has turned the dream into reality, and the wines from his Bordeaux château are creating a storm across London

It is, perhaps, everyone's fantasy: to remove oneself from the hurry and scurry of the rat race and do something ridiculously romantic like buying a vineyard. How many of us haven't kicked back with a Friday night gin after a particularly rough week and idly wondered how the bank manager would react if we told him we were selling up to buy 10 hectares of gnarly old vines in the middle of nowhere?

Of course, there'll be no money in it, and of course it will be hard work, but you can just imagine the satisfaction of being able to plonk a bottle of something on the table when your friends come round for dinner and know that it's been entirely grown, vinified and aged on your very own estate. Now *that* is validation of one's existence...

So, much credit must go to Cornishman Mark Hellyar. After years of working in the slightly less romantic world of medical electronics, he sold his share in the company that he founded and headed off to France in search of that very dream.

It's often said that the only way to make a small fortune in the wine world is to start with a large one, and certainly Hellyar is under no illusions that the 'effort' to 'reward' ratio is heavily skewed in favour of the former. 'Passion is a cliché,' he says. 'But I think you have to have it...' Which is a tactful way of saying 'I ain't doing this for the money, fellah.'

Having said that, it does help if you (a) buy the property shortly before one of the best Bordeaux vintages for decades, and (b) have a particularly talented French winemaker on board to help you with the technical stuff.

Olivier Dauga, an ex-rugby international who looks like a bear in expensive rimless glasses, is one of the best things to come out of the Bordeaux wine scene in decades, and Hellyar affectionately says he

'couldn't work without the big French ponce'.

Talkative, passionate and opinionated, without being dogmatic, Dauga knows how to make wines that are ripe and modern, but that are also indisputably Bordelais in style, with an inherent freshness. These are not wines that are out to make a statement or impress American critics; they are wines that are ridiculously (you might say 'dangerously') easy to drink.

The true test of Dauga's worth (and Hellyar's decision of where to buy) is that Château Civrac is able to make really good wines whatever the vintage: 2005, for instance (the year Hellyar bought the place), has been rightly lauded as a terrific year. But conditions were so exceptional that it was the kind of year where it was almost impossible not to make a great wine.

Arguably more impressive is the fact that the 2007 is similarly a terrific bottle. In a cooler, wetter year, some clarets turned out as wan and charmless as Gollum; the Château Civrac, by contrast, is light, perfumed, elegant and utterly, utterly drinkable. Simply perfect served with a plate of steak frites...

'I'm passionate about food and wine matching,' says Hellyar, and to do that you need to have freshness and tannin. At the same time, you don't want to have to wait five years to drink it.'

This is the advantage of the less fashionable areas of Bordeaux, like the Côtes de Bourg, where Civrac is based. It's not an appellation that has made wines that need 20 years in a cellar prior to opening. And now the science of grape growing and winemaking has moved on to ensure riper grapes and better vinification, it all means excellent wines, with a definite sense of place at remarkably reasonable prices. The kind of wines, in fact, that France thought it had forgotten how to make. No wonder that this

son of Padstow is still loving every minute of it.

'I'm very lucky to do what I'm doing,' says Hellyar. 'It's a lot of hard work, and you don't do it to make money, but it's really rewarding. There's something quite magical...'

Perhaps time to have that conversation with the bank manager after all...

WHAT IT TASTES LIKE

Perfumed, lively plum and redcurrant fruits, with an attractive underlying minerality. Its mid-weight palate is exceptionally food-friendly, with ripe tannins and a leavening freshness.

WHERE TO TRY CHATEAU CIVRAC

High Street: £13; Bibendum; The Sampler, Islington, www.civrac.com (mark@civrac.com)

Restaurants: Angelus, Le Gavroche, Le Pont de la Tour, Northbank, Rex Whistler at Tate Britain



FROM THE EXPERT

NICOLAS CLERC

Wine manager, Le Pont de la Tour

'Some of the best wines from the Côtes de Bourg are for long ageing, but Civrac isn't like that. It's a ripe, modern wine with good fruit, but still with that classic Bordeaux freshness and grip. It is, if you like, a new generation of Bordeaux.'

'People think you can't have red wine and fish, but in Bordeaux, there's a long tradition of it. You wouldn't try it with plaice – it would be too delicate – but it's good with meatier fish like monkfish or red mullet. My recommendation for Civrac at our restaurant would be with the red mullet, cooked with aubergine caviar and a black-olive jus – those darker flavours need a red wine, and the Civrac is perfect.'

'At home, Bordeaux and lamb is a classic match, but why not try it with a meatier fish in a rich autumnal sauce? If that's too much for you, then it's great with steak frites as well.'