**Decanter interview**

Christian Moueix

The man whose name has been synonymous with Pétus for more than 40 years has, in fact, not worked at the estate since 2011. But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t been busy. Andrew Jefford meets him to talk about his properties, his obsession with drainage, and handing over the reins.

Who knew? I didn’t. The name Christian Moueix and Pétus seemed indissoluble. He oversaw 40 or more harvests, and claimed to talk to each vine individually. He leased the vineyard out of its famous ‘buttonhole of clay’, entrusting it to Jean-Claude Berrouet for vinification, and then taking it off by the hand to meet the world.

The Pétus page on the website of wine merchant Corney & Barrow, formerly the exclusive UK agent (the agency is now shared with Jerry Ires & Raisd and Justerin & Brooks), is still full of references to Moueix, and his family’s company, Etablissements Jean-Pierre Moueix. Truth, it is stated at one point that ‘Jean-Pierre’s elder son Jean-François now owns Château Pérus’ (long on record for those who troubled to research the matter), but there is no mention of Jean-Francçois’ own negociant company Duclot or its holding company Vidéist. Think Pétrus, think Christian Moueix.

But it’s over; it’s history. Has been for three years. ‘Yes, it’s true,’ he replied, when I asked him if he no longer had anything to do with Pétrus. ‘I managed Pétrus from 1970 to 2010. I remained a consultant to train Olivier Berrouet [Jean-Claude’s son]; but I have had nothing to do with Pétrus since 2011.’

Perhaps there is still an intrigue, an intermingling, an intermingling; perhaps the brothers are major shareholders in each other’s company. Actually, no. ‘Now we are completely separate. That was the purpose. In full agreement between my brother and myself. I knew from the beginning that Pétrus belonged to my brother, before I joined Pétrus. That was clear. I knew that I was going. I was honoured that my father put me in charge of Pétrus, and that my brother left me in charge for so many years. I am still very close to my brother. But it was time for him and his son Jean to be fully in charge.’ Meanwhile Moueix and his own son Édouard...

Well, this is where it gets interesting. Moueix-watchers and Pomerol lovers will have noticed a spate of activity from 54 Quai du Prisonnier, the Ets J-P Moueix headquarters in Libourne, over the past decade. Land has been bought; names have come and gone, mingled like a once-settled landscape of holdings has undergone orgonides and tectonic convulsions. It all begins to make sense when you understand that the good ship Pétrus was steaming off into the sunset, and the two branches of the Moueix family were birthing for an entirely separate future. Ets J-P Moueix needs a flagship for the new century, the post-Pétrus century. Who knows what the future holds?

Star-studded stable

As things are turning out, it might even have three flagships. The most straightforward fit for the Pétrus-shaped hole is Trotanoy. It’s smaller still (7.2 hectares compared to the 11.5ha of Pérus) and half of its parcels lie on clay, giving it a sturdy, triflur style, clearly akin to that of the old master. There is a pedigree of great vintages here (see box p39); recent vineyard work has fine-tuned its performance, and the arrival of a second wine from 2009, too, marked a new seriousness of intent.

Look, though, at what has happened to La Fleur-Pétrus in recent years. Back in 1995, it was...
just 9ha in extent; it has now more than doubled, to 18.7ha (see box p18). La Fleur-Pétrus has also been endowed with a strikingly restored château building and cellars in central Pomerol, where the Moueix family now receives guests in faultless style.

The La Fleur-Pétrus flag fluttering from atop a flagpole which might just be a little taller (though I haven’t measured) than the pole on which one can spy the golden ‘P’ of Pétrus, not far away across the plateau.

La Fleur-Pétrus, though, will be a work in progress for some years: the Château Guillot parcels need some replanting and draining. The original La Fleur-Pétrus parcels, too, give wine of a very different and more graceful, aerial style to Pétrus itself, since they are profoundly gravelly. The two new additions have perhaps deepened its style a little (the 2009 La Fleur-Pétrus, for example, is lavishly textured), yet the ideal is for this to remain very much a wine of the Pomerol gravel.

And then there is the Bélair-Monange story. Even though it lies in St-Emilion, this now-uniitary estate is, at 23.5ha, by some margin the biggest in the Ets J-P Moueix portfolio, and you only have to taste the creamy, chocolatey 2009s and sumptuously upholstered 2010 vintages here to sense just how fine it could eventually prove to be. It represents an elision of Bélair and Magdeleine which, Moueix told me, he had only intended to ask for in preparation for the 2022 St-Emilion classification; he simply alluded to a ‘complementarity’ between the two estates in his submission for the 2012 classification.

The extraordinary fact that the authorities went ahead and granted permission for a major change which Moueix himself wasn’t aware of having asked for was ‘a complete surprise’. At first, a shock. Some people thought that Magdeleine had been demoted, and said it was justified. He smiles. ‘You find out who your friends are on such occasions.’ There will be a second wine in due course at Bélair-Monange, too, and given that Édouard lives there with his wife and children, the bond between the family and the estate will doubtless be intensified. Moueix admits that the light, graceful Magdeleine might have been picked too early in the past. St-Emilion is cooler and later than Pomerol in general, and harvesting the Magdeleine fruit was often the picking team’s last job after the Pomerol properties had all been harvested. Last job — but perhaps still too soon. The new girth of Bélair-Monange means that it can justify a picking team of its own, and since Bélair was acquired (September 2008) picking has been much later than hitherto, hence the striking generosity of style of the 2009 and 2010.

Digging deep

Let’s, though, return to Pomerol. Another aspect of the frenzy of the last 10 years has been subterranean: Moueix has turned mole. Anyone who studies the evolution of Bordeaux’s terroirs over the past 400 years will know that drainage is critical to unleashing their potential — and anyone who has toured Pomerol after a rainy spell will know that drainage here is often inadequate, not least because of the profusion of small estates and parcels (Pomerol reminds me of a giant allotment).

‘The plateau of Pomerol,’ says Moueix, ‘is just that — a plateau. Which means that it is flat. How do you drain something that is flat? It is not easy. And the only way to do it — which we did not have 20 years ago — is to have wells about 6m deep and to create drainage with a slope of at least 2% leading to those wells. Then you have to pump the water to a place where there is natural drainage. For that you have to bring electricity to the wells, and have submerged pumps in the wells.’

Over the past decade, the Moueix family has installed seven of these deep wells in the plateau, with the water eventually draining down to the little Barbanne river via streams like the one which lies in the fold of land between La Fleur-Pétrus and Le Gay. ‘Most of the time we needed to run either the electricity or the drainage exit through somebody else’s property, so we have been signing many complicated agreements for this. And we say “if you would like to send your drainage into our well, you are welcome” — but honestly, without wishing to be too pretentious, it has been quite a positive thing for the whole appellation.’

Indeed. In great vintages, of course, the wells will be inept, since Pomerol needs every drop of water it can hold (retained water in sub-gravel clays was a key reason why Pauillac and St-Éstèphe outperformed the purer gravels of Margaux and Pomerol in the fierce heat of 2003). In less-than-perfect years, though, this network of new wells has the potential to raise quality for the Moueix properties and its plateau neighbours considerably. It’s also won Moueix an unconventional term of endearment from his wife Cherise: ‘I call him “Mr Drainage”. He is always ringing me up from all over the world and asking me to look out of a window to tell me how a drain is working.’

Other hallmarks of the Moueix approach in the vineyards include deep inter-row ploughing, carried out four to six times a year, and fastidious crop-thinning over the summer to eliminate all the late clusters. ‘People used to see that I harvested earlier, and criticise me for that, saying that Christian Moueix didn’t want to take risks. But the reason was that we were ripper earlier than the others, because we had eliminated all the late clusters.’

‘The day of picking is incredibly important,’ adds Édouard. ‘At Hosanna, for example, if we pick it a day early, it’s green. If we pick it a day later, it’s prune. I exaggerate, but only a bit. We walk every parcel, every day. We subdivide parcels with red and white ribbon. And we unroll between 7km —’

Above: ploughing the vineyards at Château Magdeleine in St-Emilion, which has been reunited with Château Bélair Monange
Left: Christian Moueix cleans out one of the many drainage exits he has created throughout his Pomerol properties
Trotanoy through the years

Ch Trotanoy 2010 (90/100) £200* Trufley already, with veuves and terroir. Scents of tobacco, earth and leather. Smooth and soft. A joy! Drink 2015-2040 Alc 14.5%

Ch Trotanoy 2009 (95/95) £200 Black fruit is a hallmark of fresher years at Trotanoy, and the ripet years sing out with almost the same profile, but a bit wilder. Great Pomerol can be a mix of almost fourscore and sleek beauty, and this is not a bad example: it looks that perfectly. Drink 2015-2045 Alc 14.5%

Ch Trotanoy 2008 (85/88) £133 A more dry, open-boned style that’s even richer. Glassy and ripe, polished yet complex and refined, too, with the right profile which is the land’s birthright. Drink 2016-2028 Alc 14%

Ch Trotanoy 2007 (89) £145 A mushroom note to begin with, then the classic Pomerol tobacco and fruit after some time in the glass. Both red and black fruits in evidence here, and cool energy, held in reserve: flaviory, chunky tannins come from the fruit in the mouth. Drink 2018-2040 Alc 15.5%

Ch Trotanoy 2006 (88/88) £105/135 Fine & Rare

A bubbling vig of cream here, with the complexity coming from the notes of dried wild mushroom and wild flowers, too. The central palate is long, rich, sweet and graceful, drying just a little towards the finish. Drink 2015-2023 Alc 15.5%

Ch Trotanoy 2005 (88/89) £790/850 Fine & Rare

Still deep red, intense, with a complete and disarmingly lovely nose in which fresh, floral scents are still apparent, its baguette-like, slow-dropping, tobacco-coating finish still has a fresh fruit core, too, gently reined in chocolate and tobacco leaf complexities. Grand, venerable Pomerol. Drink 2015-2020 Alc 15.5%

*Unless otherwise indicated, all prices are per bottle. In France, a single bottle purchase from Corney & Barrow, correct as of December 2014.