



## **CHÂTEAU PONTET CANET: A QUEST FOR THE IDEAL WINE**

Forget everything, start anew and erase old habits in order to re-connect with nature, to be born anew ...

For more than 20 years, Alfred Tesseron and his team, led by Jean-Michel Comme, have profoundly transformed both the vineyard and the identity of Château Pontet-Canet.

Leaving behind conventional vinegrowing techniques to embrace organic and biodynamic methods has allowed the terroir to reclaim its origins; the vines seem liberated and the grapes have never been more beautiful. Today, the wines of Pontet-Canet have progressed so much that they are amongst the most prestigious in Bordeaux.

### **HISTORY: THREE FAMILIES IN THREE CENTURIES**

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Médoc was regarded as a peninsula, "a solitary and wild place" as La Boétie put it. Over the course of a few decades, however, it was to come alive and experience a wave of frenzy as aristocrats, magistrates and the bourgeoisie slavishly followed the new fashion, buying land, planting vineyards and building up winegrowing estates. Amongst the winegrowers who shaped the new face of the Médoc was Jean-François de Pontet.

He had made a name for himself at the court in Versailles, where he had held the position of Grand Ecuyer (Master of the Horse) to Louis XV. Upon his return to Guyenne, he became Governor of the Médoc. In 1705, he purchased a few acres of land to the north of the village of Pauillac, which he turned into a vineyard. A few years later, he added several parcels in a place called Canet. As was the custom at the time, he added his own name to that of his land in order to give his estate a recognisable identity. A century later, Château Pontet-Canet was flourishing and became one of the select few to join the famous 1855 classification, which had been ordered by Napoleon III. In 1865, the estate changed hands for the first time and became the property of Herman Cruse, a young Danish trader who had arrived in Bordeaux in 1815 as a wine merchant's clerk.

A businessman, he entered into partnership with a merchant from Altona to create the company Cruse & Hirshfeld. After a rocky start, Herman Cruse built his fortune by trading wine to Prussia, Denmark, Saint Petersburg and Riga. A visionary, the new owner of Pontet-Canet commissioned a Polish engineer, Théophile Skawinski, to create a revolutionary vat-house. He built oak vats which were fed by gravity with the help of a wooden platform on the first floor which could move around on rails. Drawing inspiration from the past, Pontet-Canet recently took up the idea again, just as modern now as it ever was. The Cruse family kept the estate for 110 years, until 1975, when it was acquired by Guy Tesseron, a cognac merchant. Over the course of three centuries, Château Pontet-Canet has known only three owners, three families... A rarity indeed in the Médoc.



## **THE SPIRIT OF PONTET-CANET**

To pass on the history of Château Pontet-Canet and secure its future.... That is the family's avowed ambition. Today, it is Guy Tesseron's descendants who own the estate: his son Alfred and his nieces Mélanie and Philippine, daughters of his brother Gérard. Together, they look in the same direction. Alfred shares his vision of the estate with Mélanie, passing on to her its traditions, his outlook on vinegrowing and his passion for wine. The future looks bright... Mélanie has a university diploma in wine-tasting, as well as a Masters in Vineyard and Winery Management from ENITA, an elite school in Bordeaux. When he started out, Alfred Tesseron spent five years in New York in order to get to know the American market, the largest for Bordeaux wines at the time. Over the course of a single generation, everything has changed. Mélanie chose to live in Hong Kong for two years, giving her enough time to understand the changing tastes of the Chinese, who have become major buyers. Through conferences and tastings, she has become a spokeswoman for Bordeaux wines, and more specifically Pontet-Canet, getting the word out to clients who thirst for knowledge. Back in Pauillac, Mélanie now helps her uncle Alfred to run the estate, easing the transition between generations.

She will of course continue the technical choices made with Jean-Michel Comme. After graduating from ENITA in Bordeaux and completing his studies at the Faculty of Oenology, Jean-Michel Comme worked as an intern with the Moueix group and then at Pine Ridge Winery in the Napa Valley. In 1989, Alfred hired him as vineyard manager, his mission being to overhaul the vineyard. A team formed over the years and Alfred decided to make Jean-Michel responsible for both the vineyard and the winemaking, giving him the title of "régisseur", an old Bordeaux word meaning steward, which is a mark of skill and trust. Having a single person in charge of both aspects has given a real boost to the estate's progress.

A shared state of mind and a particular sensitivity are the key factors which have propelled Château Pontet-Canet to the summit of Bordeaux wines in recent years. They are the expression of the Tesseron family's quiet determination for continuity over the long term.

## **A TRULY PRIVILEGED TERROIR**

Mouton and Lafite to the North... Pontet-Canet's vines are ideally situated within the commune of Pauillac. The vineyard spans 81 hectares, with around a hundred parcels and close to 800.000 vinestocks.

The soul of Pontet-Canet lies in the "Plateau", an outcrop of Garonne Günz gravel (the best in the Médoc) over a bedrock of limestone. This poor and well-drained soil meets all the requirements of the demanding Cabernet Sauvignon grape, which accounts for over 60% of the first wine, the trademark of great Pauillac wines. Some of the parcels on the top of the outcrop were planted in the late 1940s, an age and a situation which make for the best grapes. Of course, some of the vines have died and been replaced over the past 60 years. Planted in the



centre of the outcrop, Cabernet Franc enjoys a particularly favoured situation, guaranteeing wine of exceptional quality. It makes up only 4% of the final blend, but brings noble tannins and a refinement that are quite simply indispensable. Some Merlot vines are planted on the gravelly clay soil around the Plateau.

The other part of the vineyard (14 hectares) is located closer to the Gironde, towards the village of Le Pouyalet. This area has much more limestone: on some parcels the limestone breaks the surface, on others it is clay. These cooler, richer parcels are better suited to Merlot and give a more structured, firmer wine than the parcels on the Plateau. In a recent development for Pontet-Canet, three parcels on the edge of the outcrop were planted with Petit Verdot in 1995. This long-ignored grape variety accounts for only 2% of the vines, but in some years it produces incredible wines, bringing spicy notes. Over time, it has become essential: it is always used in the final blend of the first wine of Pontet-Canet.

Knowledge of the various terroirs of the estate has become more detailed and precise over the last 10 years. This understanding can be acquired by studying the soils, but science provides only part of the answer. At Pontet-Canet, the sensitivity of the soils is judged glass in hand, by tasting the wines. Theory achieves its apotheosis in practice.

## **VINEGROWING: FROM ORGANIC TO BIODYNAMIC AGRICULTURE**

Slowly but surely, since 1990 the vines at Pontet-Canet have experienced a cultural revolution. It came about by breaking free from bad habits born after the Second World War. It meant relinquishing a status quo in which vines had to be bent to the service of man and produce as many grapes as possible.

Approaching things in this way meant letting go of some preconceptions and exploring new paths in order to get as close to nature as possible. It meant remembering that the vine is an unruly creeper, but that at the same time its behaviour is in no way due to chance. With time, one fact became clear: progress in viticulture can come only from observation and experiment: you have to know how to watch the vine in order to feel it.

This development is of course part of the discovery of another world, a different way of seeing. Acquiring a new sensibility requires constant risk-taking, trying things out and finding that they are self-evident. It is never a one-size-fits-all strategy, but rather a matter of following the vines according to the identity of each parcel, taking a long-term view. Choices are the fruit not of intuition, but of a fine analysis of the elements of nature. It is painstaking work. Thanks to Jean-Michel Comme's sensibility, each decision becomes a stepping-stone in the never-ending quest for the ideal Pauillac wine.

- 1994 : Alfred Tesseron's first vintage.

- 1995-1996: The premises of organic agriculture are put in place at Pontet-Canet. The progress is slow, almost unfelt; weeding in the vines was stopped. The effect was small, as ploughing was already practiced.



- 2004: The year of the first biodynamic trial; it took place on the 14 hectares of the Pouyalet vineyard. The wines stood out when they were tasted a few months after the harvest: the Merlots from these “new” plots proved to be tighter and brighter. Alfred urged Jean-Michel to go further. The estate was fully converted to biodynamic agriculture. This decision became a commitment and a challenge, but also the culmination of a 10-year quest. Incidentally, it was also a real upheaval in the Médoc: for the first time ever, a Médoc Classified Growth adopted biodynamic principles.

- 2007: Lack of experience in the face of particularly difficult weather conditions allowed mildew to settle in. Alfred Tesseron made the decision to use chemical treatments. Nature had made its point, giving a cruel reminder that one must be humble at all times. A year later the lesson had been learnt, sparking a spectacular advance in knowledge of the terroirs so that such a thing would not happen again. The vine’s resistance to disease is better known today, the understanding of how different parcels behave has improved. Those factors formed the basis on which subsequent vintages were built. Since 2007, other vintages at least as challenging have been dealt with successfully, always in keeping with biodynamic principles. For Alfred and Jean-Michel, this type of agriculture is neither a cult nor an initiation ritual; it requires sincerity, pragmatism and transparency. Biodynamic agriculture imposes one absolute requirement: it must be understood by all.

One of the most spectacular manifestations of the success of this agricultural method could be the yields of the vines. Trimming the leaves – cutting the top of the vines in late spring – has been abandoned. At Pontet-Canet, the foliage is shaped in a circle, forming a sort of bridge. The vine finds its natural balance, the bunches are looser, the grapes smaller. The yields have dropped naturally and average around 35 hectolitres per hectare. This approach to the vine has also allowed for a gradual decrease in green harvesting, which has completely disappeared today. Bunch placement is also ideal to allow all the grapes to achieve perfect maturity.

- Three Breton draft horses joined the stables in 2008. What could seem like folklore actually fulfils a precise objective: to avoid crushing the soil. Tractors have become monsters over the last 20 years, the weight placed on their wheels destroying any form of life between the rows of vines. The Château's stables are expanding: four more horses have arrived since.

- In 2010, the wines of Château Pontet-Canet obtained organic certification from Ecocert and biodynamic certification from Biodyvin, for the whole of the vineyard.

## **THE HARVEST: A QUEST FOR MATURITY**

For years, Pauillac wines asserted their forthright character. They were powerful and headstrong, with rough tannins that would take twenty years to soften. Taming Cabernet



Sauvignon's personality and smoothing out the tannins by making them more noble and succulent: those were two of the goals sought by Jean-Michel and his team.

Michel Rolland came to the property in 1999, and his arrival changed the outlook on grape maturity. He brought his experience and an outside view, but also a stimulus in asserting the merits of constant questioning. Going into the vineyards and tasting the grapes has become the key to evaluating maturity. Of course, things changed considerably between 1999 and 2011. With this take on things, one rule remains unchangeable: a wine will always be the reflection of the quality of the grapes' skin. Terroir is expressed in the skin of a perfectly ripe berry. Changing the nature of the tannins means going looking for the fruit.

Seeking precision, caring for details and defining optimum maturity are all part of a balancing act to find the perfect medium between "overripe" and "not ripe enough".

At Pontet-Canet, the refractometers used to measure the quantity of sugar in grapes have been stowed away and laboratory analysis has almost disappeared. In order to track maturity, the Pontet-Canet team roams the vineyard and tastes the grapes. You can taste when a berry is ripe. As Jean-Michel Comme likes to say, "taste is our stock-in-trade."

On the strategic side, parcel harvesting has long been outgrown and replaced by "homogenous terroir" harvesting, a technique which requires dividing the parcels into two or three sub-parts. Each year brings its own truth, there is no unchangeable harvest: everything depends on how the grapes ripen.

In 1999, the traditional picking baskets were replaced by smaller crates, which can hold up to 7.5kg of grapes. The harvest has lost some of its charm, but it ensures that the grapes stay whole. The sorting process is the result of thought and common sense. Since 2003, the grapes have followed a logical course: they are hand-sorted a first time, then destemmed, then hand-sorted a second time on a vibrating table for a final check. This ensures that only perfect grapes are kept.

## **WINEMAKING KEPT TO THE ESSENTIALS**

Wooden and concrete vats... The vat house at Château Pontet-Canet has known and anticipated all the various materials of which vats can be made. In 1996, the decision was made to bring wooden vats back into use; new, smaller vats were purchased – two a year for eight years – in order to revive the tradition. The withdrawal of pumps in 2001 seemed like a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The vats are now fed by gravity, as Théophile Skawinski had intended.

More than a revival of traditions, using oak is part of a quest for quality, as the wood ensures a thermal inertia which is particularly helpful for making red wines with ageing potential. For the 2005 vintage, the Nicole vat house was inaugurated on the day before the harvest started. Its 32 tapered, thick-walled, 80-hectolitre concrete vats offer the same thermal inertia as oak, but are easier to use.



Understanding the grapes, revealing the terroir from which they originate, above all making sure not to violate them: that is how Pontet-Canet has chosen to make its wines. In response to a vinegrowing method which refuses to force the grapes, the winemaking also respects them, as was shown by a return to the use of natural yeast in 1999. Letting things happen as naturally as possible has become the rule.

The vat is filled and fermentation can begin when it sees fit. A threefold decision has been made in controlling the fermentation: heat as little as possible, cool down as little as possible, extract as little as possible. Rack and return and punching down are not used at Château Pontet-Canet, and pumping-over is always done very gently, in order to maintain a very low level of extraction: skins of good quality give themselves willingly. After vinification, the wine is left to its own devices, macerating for three to five weeks until it is run off.

To go with this gentle method, Pontet-Canet deliberately decided not to use automatic temperature control systems, which could result in a standardisation of work. Each vat is monitored very closely and temperatures are measured by hand, which encourages a closer relationship with the wine which is coming into being.

Stripping down to keep only what is essential: that is the philosophy which the estate has chosen to follow in making its wine. It seems to be the key to the success of Pontet-Canet wines.

## **THE BARREL HALL: LESS NEW OAK**

The return to nature and simplicity continues in the barrel hall. At Pontet-Canet, the ultimate goal of ageing is transparency: trying never to hide what the vines have produced. In keeping with this philosophy, oak must have less of an impact on the wines, with one unavoidable consequence: the proportion of new oak has consistently diminished. From one harvest to the next, the vintage effect plays its part by showcasing how the synergies of wine and oak are in constant evolution. The wines are matured for 14 to 16 months depending on their nature. Here again, the decision is made through tasting.

Today, only 50% of the barrels are new oak, a percentage deemed high enough to ensure that the wines mature as they should. It could decrease even further in years to come. In 2012, a hundred *dolia* arrived... Different shapes and sizes were tried out for a few years, until Jean-Michel came up with the perfect shape in which to mature 35% of the first wine. He commissioned a local company to make the *dolia*, the Château keeping ownership of the design and the mould. They have wide shoulders and a narrow bottom in order to limit the contact between the lees and the wine. In order to produce a wine truer to its terroir, each *dolium* contains gravelstones from the best Cabernet outcrops and limestone from the best Merlot terroirs. Their clay gives the amphorae their ochre tint, highly unusual for a Médoc barrel hall, which preserves the link between vineyard and barrel hall, thus respecting the overall philosophy in practice throughout the whole estate.



## **THE WINES: PURITY, FINESSE AND SENSUALITY**

The return to nature over the last 15 years has been accompanied by constant risk-taking, a development underpinned by real faith and deep passion. A complete rethink of how to grow vines and make wine, it has profoundly changed the profile of Château Pontet-Canet wines. More than an evolution, it is a new style of Pauillac wine which is revealed from one vintage to the next. What strikes you immediately is the energy which these wines display: the expression of tension and intensity, they are bright and brilliant, as though liberated of any constraint. Their internal balance combines contained power, uncommon precision of fruit and undeniable class. They seduce by their full-bodied fruit, the finesse of their mouthfeel and their natural elegance. Refusing to be arrogant, they deliver a natural emotion which enhances their seductive charm.

### **Château Pontet Canet 2013**

This 2013 has to be approached in a spirit of complete innocence. Light in colour, it has a delicate, floral and refined nose, more reminiscent of a great Pinot Noir than of a Pauillac wine. Superbly complex, with an uncommon range of aromas and flavours, it is smooth and lingers very long on the palate. This wine will go far.

### **Château Pontet Canet 2012**

Once again, the château transcends the vintage and delivers a 2012 of remarkable purity and energy. Its definition and brilliance are absolutely fantastic, with a brightness of fruit and finesse of tannin which take it to the summit. Another landmark. Pontet-Canet matured almost a third of the 2012 harvest in amphorae.

### **Château Pontet Canet 2011**

This wine is at the pinnacle of the vintage, one of the finest wines made. Energetic and with fabulous substance, it offers supreme balance, with a magical hue and a taffeta touch. Fruit, tannins and acidity all meld with sumptuous harmony. Another masterpiece.

### **Château Pontet Canet 2010**

The whole world has acclaimed the success of the vintage. Pontet-Canet is at the summit and some already hail it as a legendary wine. It is the first 100% organic and biodynamic certified vintage. The wine seems almost black, a deep and intense purple. The ripe and generous nose combines very pure notes of blackcurrant, violet, rose and liquorice. Wonderful internal harmony creates a symphonic red which associates shimmering substance, exquisite freshness,



noble tannins and radiant fruit. The wine is gracious and fine, leaving a lasting memory of fulfilled pleasure.

#### Château Pontet-Canet 2009

The nose combines blackcurrant and blackberry against a cedarwood backdrop. The palate reveals a wine of serene concentration, succulent fruit and tannins as elegant as they are consistent. What stands out is the balance, the structure of perfect harmony and the sheer pleasure on the palate. The never-ending finish calls to mind innate elegance.

#### Château Pontet-Canet 2008

Particularly intense colour heralds the quality of the vintage. This impression is confirmed by a ripe nose on black and red fruit aromas, a slight hint of oak and a few floral notes. The new style is showcased in a wine which professes vibrant character, remarkable amplitude and delicious tannins.

#### Château Pontet-Canet 2007

This is the first vintage in which biodynamic echoes are to be found. Everything finds its place: the nose shows aromas of black and red fruit, vanilla, mineral notes and liquorice. From a full and generous attack, the palate reveal finesse, intimate harmony, balance and smooth tannins. A delicious and sensual red reminiscent of haute couture. The finish lasts for delicious ages and brings a feeling of fulfilment.

#### *Thanks*

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