



CULTIVATING HARMONY

# CLOS PUY ARNAUD

---

It was the first day of the rest of his life. Until then, he had stayed away from vines and wine.

But when this artist and accomplished musician visited Clos Puy Arnaud in 2000, he was in the thick of it within a quarter of an hour. Self-taught, Thierry Valette was one of the first biodynamists in Bordeaux. What he had read here at first glance, on these limestone soils of the Right Bank, would prove to be even better than he had hoped, raising the potential of the Castillon-Côtes de Bordeaux appellation to new heights.

A meeting with a soloist in search of harmony.

BY LÉA DELPONT PHOTOS OLIVIER ROUX  
TRANSLATION DOUGLAS PIPE









**H**e could have been a dancer, car salesman or saxophone player. Thierry Valette is a winegrower, he drives tractors and makes the bottles sing in Belvès-de-Castillon. The Castillon-Côtes de Bordeaux appellation lives in the shadow of Saint-Émilion. But not his Clos Puy Arnaud, which is taking the spotlight not unlike a soloist, in the firmament of biodynamic certified estates.

It was the 4th Bordeaux wine property to join Biodyvin in 2010. And the 27th member of the association of Olivier Humbrecht, Michel Chapoutier, Anne-Claude Leflaive, Alphonse Mellot or Noël Pinguet. *"The contact with these immense, benevolent and encouraging winegrowers has altered the destiny of Puy Arnaud"*, says the sixty something-year-old with deep blue eyes, a tall, slim man all in arms and legs.

He lives surrounded by books and records, between his piano and his vats. His stage: 15 hectares of fine clay on the asteriated limestone plateau of Saint-Émilion. His backstage: a long, low building with wine-coloured shutters. His music: the freedom of jazz. His troop: Merlot (70%), Cabernet Franc (25%) and Cabernet Sauvignon (5%), all of which are cultivated with a faith in the harmony between man and nature. A confidence that is less pagan but rather turned towards innovation, to *"defend a new vision for Bordeaux of the 21st century"*.

Thierry Valette was dancing with Alwin Nikolais, Carolyn Carlson's mentor, at the Centre chorégraphique national d'Angers when the death of his father in 1979 brought him back to Paris. At the age of 24, the artist found himself managing a Peugeot dealership on the rue de Lyon, at the helm of three garages and 200 employees. This was not his chosen route. He sold the family business in 1982 and moved into a basement on rue de Tolbiac: for seven years he created and ran the "Les Notes Bleues" association, a jazz club-recording studio of which he was *"president and cleaning lady"*.

**The Castillon-Côtes de Bordeaux appellation lives in the shadow of Saint-Émilion. But not his Clos Puy Arnaud, in the firmament of biodynamic certified estates.**

In the inheritance, the saxophonist was promoted to co-manager of Château Pavie in Saint-Émilion, bought by his grandfather during the war - one of the seven properties acquired by Alexandre Valette in the Bordeaux region in the 1940s. The jazzman spent the 1980's surrounded by musicians but regularly sojourned to Pavie for meetings. In 1988, he helped out with the harvest. Perched on a tractor filled with baskets of grapes, he heard "the delicate song of the vine." He felt the blues rising within him, the call of another life.





In 1989, he left Paris, moved to Bordeaux, studied and trained at the professional technical school of La Tour Blanche and at Enita, the educational establishment for agricultural engineers. He made his first wines in Bergerac, then in Corbières, and returned to the region as a vineyard hand in 1993 at Pavie Macquin with Maryse Barre, who was already using biodynamic methods. *"People were worried, they thought we were nailing owls on the doors"*, he smiles. In the vineyards, he pruned vines shoulder to shoulder with a young and versatile cellar master Stéphane Derenoncourt. But the new winemaker didn't feel mature enough yet. Music called him once again. Between 1994 and 2000, he took up his saxophone and recorded two albums.

It was the sale of Château Pavie in 1998 that changed everything. He then acquired the means to buy his own estate. But what can be done

when you have developed a taste for a Saint-Émilion premier grand cru classé? Moving away from the Classified Great Growths seemed to be the most sensible solution. He looked at Madiran, Pacherenc, even Spain... but a phone call from the notary in January 2000 invited him to come and see "a beautiful terroir" on the plateau from which he had tried to extract himself.

As with all the places he had been studying for two years, he plunged into the IGN map, his finger on the contour lines. What he read between the tight lines made his heart beat faster.

He visited Clos Puy Arnaud under a winter sun, almost blinded by the whiteness of the rock that outcropped between the bare rows. To the north, towards Castillon and even more towards cotes-de-Franc wine AC, the limestone plateau thickens under a layer of clay. But Puy Arnaud, which could be translated into "eagle's nest", is situated on the thin slope, perched above the Dordogne valley to the east of Saint-Émilion. This was on limestone with similar asteria as in the heart of the hill of a thousand châteaux. *"I made my decision within fifteen minutes, trying to hide my excitement. I have had many doubts in my life, but not on that day."*

**This outsider has built his wine style gradually.**

**He began by removing the woodiness from the wines, and went looking for the sap, the life, under the bark.**

The new owner recalls his friend and neighbour from the Domaine de l'A, Stéphane Derenoncourt, who would accompany him for three years. In 2003, he met Anne Calderoni, an oenologist specializing in biodynamic viticulture, who would be his companion until 2016.

*"I was already on the organic path, without certification - twenty years ago, we were not yet under pressure from consumers about labels. But Rudolf Steiner's Course for Farmers seemed rather esoteric to me."* His life and vineyard partner asked him for a dynamiser and a sprayer, nothing more,





Nicolas Legrand,  
cellar master  
and vineyard manager  
assisted by Léa Chiron.









saying, *"I'll take care of everything."* At the time, the estate was only 7 hectares. Since then, Thierry Valette has purchased 27 parcels in twenty-two years. Half of them are woodland. And one parcel with a few truffle oaks. *"The luxury of space"* ... He has *"seen the state of the soil improve and the pH of the grapes decrease"*. Convinced of the benefits of herbal teas and the mysterious preparations of dung and silica buried in cow horns at the solstice, he officialized his conversion to organic and then biodynamic farming. *"Meeting the people from Biodyvin but also the great winegrowers from Renaissance des Appellations, Lalou Bize-Leroy, François Chidaine, André Tissot, has made me feel more comfortable about the powerful Bordeaux hierarchy, which is particularly overwhelming in an appellation such as Castillon, which has missed out on the rankings and recognition. Here, you have to put yourself in a school. Biodynamics is the school of diversity. And, by being atypical, I have also escaped the trap of Bordeaux bashing."*

The outsider has built his wine style gradually. He began by reducing woodiness, shortening the maturation process, and replacing the Bordeaux barrel with a lightly toasted Burgundy cask. He went looking for the sap, the life, under the bark. In the cellar, where a small Buddha has replaced the god Bacchus, the first amphorae appeared in 2018.

**In the cellar, where a small Buddha has replaced the god Bacchus, a quarter of the wine is now matured in Tuscan terracotta amphorae.**

A quarter of the volumes are now matured are now matured in Tuscan terracotta jars. In the vineyard, the 500, the 501 and the Maria Thun compost, the essentials of biodynamics, have done their work. Thierry makes these preparations himself in his "quartier des simples", an old wine cellar that has been transformed into an herbal tearoom. Thanks to the dung horn (the 500) which acts on the soil, the revitalized clay, studded with limestone nuggets, has regained its orange glow. With care and delicate plowing, the soil has regained a lumpy texture, a chocolatey silty-sand crumble that flows between the fingers, leaving a smell of infusion on the hands.

The 501 or silica horn speaks to the plant, supple and vigorous. Even during the summer of 2022 heatwave, the vines deeply rooted in the living soil found the strength to propel their aerial branches towards the sky. Thierry did not hesitate to bend the principles of Rudolf Steiner, who recommends applying the 500 in winter:

*"I put it on all summer at the slightest rain to catch the freshness. It was not the time to spray silica and add heat to heat", he says.*





As the years go by, the acidity of the grapes increases. The berries possess less alcohol and are more resistant to oxidation. The wines are less sulphured. And so much for the Bistrot cuvée, successively declassified from Côtes de Castillon, to Bordeaux Supérieur and then to Bordeaux. Systematically stigmatized for "*minor defaults*", it has gone down all the rungs of the classification until the Vin de France, where these 3,000 bottles claim their "*Gamay primeur*" spirit. Cabernet Franc (and a third of Merlot) vinified in the Beaujolais style, in semi-carbonic. No wood, just fruit, with a touch of tannic roughness. An early drinking pleasure that can be enjoyed with a camembert at the time of the first strawberries. The other wines in the Castillon appellation, the entry-level Pervenche, the second in command, Les Ormeaux and the Grand Vin are more Bordeaux in spirit and in their predominantly Merlot blend. But they do not want to be forgotten in the cellar. Like an indelible birthmark, they have a youthful tone. "*This is not the result of my own will alone: it is the expression of the place, sunny and joyful*", says its owner.

Good vibes flow through the estate. How else could one explain the survival of a magnificent elm tree, a giant two-hundred-year-old with spidery branches, in front of the door of Puy Arnaud?

This tree, the likes of which are no longer to be

seen, defies its congeners, which have been condemned by disease one after the other. Unfortunately, all the cuttings have failed. It gives its name to the second wine. The 2020 has a subtle rose and peony fragrance. Despite the hot vintage, it is pure and fresh, preserved by a wood-free maturation in amphorae and cement vats. After a few twists of the wrist, the pulp of the fruit rises in the glass and cuddles the taste buds, fading into a minty caress. The Grand Vin 2019 assumes its family pedigree with woody notes, without excess, just enough to round out

**Puy Arnaud, which could be translated into "eagle's nest", sits on similar asteriated limestone in the heart of the hill of a thousand castles.**

the elegant tannins. The power of the black fruit is vibrant and elevated. The Cabernet Franc, so delicate on the limestone, unfolds its floral corolla. Although robust, the Grand Vin winks at you with its gourmandize. "*One could swig it without waiting*", says Thierry Valette.

As the recent plantings come into production - Lilian Bérillon's massal selections, made in situ - the Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon continually increase in the blend. The winemaker believes in this, as well as in the peppery touch of Malbec.











Without forgetting that here, it is called Pressac, *"the name of a Saint-Emilion Grand Cru Classé, proof that there must have been quite a few (Malbecs) in the past"*. He also experimented with Mancin, an ancient local grape variety. According to the Féret Guide of 1874, 20% of it was planted in the Belvès area. In this same work, the magus of Puy Arnaud discovered on the occasion of a re-edition, that his domain, gratified by a very kindly note (*"a most sought-after wine of the region"*), enjoyed the status of premier cru at the end of the 19th century. And that the regions of Castillon and Francs were part of the "Grand Saint-Émilionnais" in the same way as the satellites of the prestigious appellation and of Pomerol. Thierry Valette cannot explain the fall of Castillon throughout the 20th century, ousted from the Crus Bourgeois in the 1930s, then from the classification in 1955.

*"Castillon is a terroir of the future, with important limestone surfaces"*, assures its foremost ambassador, already surrounded by beautiful estates within the Castillon Caractères club, some of which have broken through the glass ceiling.

The future, for him, is also the work of Olivier Salières at the Enerlab laboratory on biophotons. The discovery of these weak emissions of ultraviolet light by all living systems is more than a century old.

In the world's major universities, renowned physicists and doctors have furthered research into 'biophotonics' as a means of communication between cells to exchange information. Enerlab studies biophotons in wine by comparing the effect of different practices - conventional, organic, biodynamic, natural - on the intensity of the vital energy still present in the bottle. Out of 3,000 wines analyzed, often at the request of great châteaux that prefer to remain anonymous, the first 600 are organic, biodynamic or natural. And Puy Arnaud? The Grand Vin is third. In the same way that the Castillonais

**"Being around the people from Biodyvin and the winegrowers from Renaissance des Appellations has made me feel more comfortable about the overwhelming hierarchy of Bordeaux."**

opened up to biodynamics, then to the invisible with *"the internal light of plants"*, it is also interested in bioenergy. Armed with a divining rod, he has "activated" the standing stones in his plots by "linking" them to a large 9-ton menhir pierced by the sun at equinoxes, placed by a geobiologist. Far-fetched esoterism? The winegrower smiles as he embraces the landscape with a big wave of his arm. *"I think we'll soon have scientific explanations for all of this. Through quantum physics."* |