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Margaux Focus 1: Château Durfort-Vivens

BY NEAL MARTIN | AUGUST 22, 2023

I keep abreast of the toing and froing of most major Bordeaux châteaux. Nevertheless, some estates inadvertently fall off my radar. One of those was Durfort-Vivens. Following a series of perplexing showings in blind tastings, with all the criticism that generates, combined with the estate's eschewal of organized tastings, the Margaux estate became one that I would simply drive past en route to somewhere else. An improvement in quality in recent years urged me to schedule an appointment seeking to learn about proprietor Gonzague Lurton's modus operandi. Then a private dinner a week later shed light upon older vintages. Lurton completed the picture with comprehensive and insightful answers to further questions, and hey presto, I had the article you are reading.



Older vintages tasted in London had perhaps fewer ups than downs

History

Considering Durfort-Vivens is a fully-fledged second growth, its background is full of missing reels. According to early editions of Féret, the Durfort de Duras family owned the estate. When it was acquired by Mon. de Vivens in 1824, he duly appended his name, and the estate was classified a Second Growth in the 1855 Classification, which, lest we forget, makes it one rung higher than Château Palmer to this day. The estate passed to his niece, who married one Mon. Puységur and, in turn, sold it in 1866 to Mon. G. Richier and de la Mare. Given its status, it is strange that the estate became something of a hot potato, passing in quick succession from one family to another. After a short period when it was owned by Mme. F. Beaucourt et Delmée, in 1895, the 48-hectares château was sold to a néapociant, Gabriel Delor.

At this point, I hand it over to Gonzague Lurton, who replied to my questions so comprehensively that I reproduced them almost verbatim as a Q&A.

Neal Martin: Can you just confirm: Lucien Lurton, your father, bought the estate in 1961? What condition was it in? I read that the wine was actually vinified at Brane-Cantenac until 1995.

Gonzague Lurton: Yes, Pierre Ginestet called my father in 1961 as he wanted to recover part of his investment. The Ginestet and the Lurton family knew each other well as my great grandfather, Léonce Récapet, who bought Brane-Cantenac in 1928, was also the main shareholder of Château Margaux at the time. Following his death in 1944, his son François Lurton, my grandfather, accepted an offer from the Ginestet family to exchange his shares in Château Margaux (50%) for Clos Fourtet in Saint-Émilion. My father, who only had one share, didn't want to let it go but was obliged to do so under pressure. Château Durfort-Vivens was acquired by Château Margaux in 1937, and so my family, and in particular my father, knew the property well. From 1937, most probably for economic reasons, the production of Durfort-Vivens was done entirely at Château Margaux. When my father took over Durfort-Vivens in 1961, vinification was transferred to Château Brane-Cantenac.

You have to place yourself in the context of the time when there were very little means. You had to make savings where possible. It is indeed difficult to imagine today that at that time, the owner of Château Margaux needed money and had to resolve to sell Durfort-Vivens. The first thing my father did was to rehabilitate the aging cellar, and in the 1970s, the barrel aging was carried out at Durfort-Vivens. At the same time, he also installed a vat room with twelve 100-hectoliter steel vats, which were still there when I took over in 1992. I vinified part of the 1992, 1993 and 1994 vintages at Durfort-Vivens and the rest at Brane-Cantenac. In 1995, I had a new vat room built and installed stainless steel vats. Once again, I was able to vinify Durfort-Vivens entirely at the château, probably for the first time since 1937.

[Post-script: Lucien Lurton passed away after this article was written in March 2023 with an inning of 98, leaving a huge legacy.]

NM: How did you feel when you were given Durfort-Vivens to run?

GL: I was verv excited as Durfort was the property I wanted. I didn't have any aaricultural or

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winemaking qualifications. I had studied business and was working in a bank when my father decided to stop and hand over the reins. We were ten children, and in 1992, my father divided his properties into ten lots of equivalent worth. He showed them to us and said: "Now make your wishes. Write your three choices on a piece of paper." On the paper I gave him, there was only one choice, Durfort-Vivens. I got my wish. During those first years, we, brothers and sisters, worked together as a collective. Everyone had a different skill set, and we helped each other before gradually becoming independent. I made the most of those first years by taking a training course at the faculty of oenology.

The Vineyard

The 55-hectare vineyard comprises 81.5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14.7% Merlot and 3.7% Cabernet Franc, though the Grand Vin can contain even higher percentages of Cabernet Sauvignon. For example, the 2016 was composed of 94%. This is higher than other Margaux estates.

NM: Can you give me information on viticulture, e.g. rootstock, pruning methods, green harvesting or de-leafing etc.?

GL: Regarding planting, we still mainly follow a classic policy of clonal selection on 101-14 grafted rootstock. Our experience with Riparia shows the difficulty in adapting to drought conditions in our very light clay soil; 3309 is a little more vigorous and works very well. We have just done a trial of 110R in a sandier zone. We are also replacing dead vines of old Cabernet Sauvignon massal selection plots with non-grafted (francs de pied) massal selection vines from the same plot. It's an experiment that we began five years ago. My father told me that phylloxera was not very active in our soil which contains little clay. We have launched a conservatory of old vines, recuperating them from vine growers digging up their old plots, with a view to re-using them in the future. We are involved in a trial of a re-introduction of old grape varieties by planting a few hundred vines of Castets, which could be better adapted to hot climates.

We practice Médoc pruning, paying particular attention to the flow of sap (Simonit & Sirch) with trials of "taille douce" (Bourdarias). In terms of green harvesting/de-leafing, we favor, as much as possible, early management with the thinning of secondary shoots to lighten the load. De-leafing is not systematic. It depends on the plots, their vitality and the characteristics of the vintage. For example, we didn't de-leaf at all in 2022, whereas in 2021, we de-leafed the young plots.

NM: What was the first year that the entire vineyard was biodynamic?

GL: We advanced in stages, but we soon felt that we were going in the right direction, the vines were responding positively, and our grapes were more expressive. After [the initial] 10 hectares in 2009, we rolled it out to 20 hectares in 2010, 30 hectares in 2011 and then 100% in 2012. To keep it simple, I would say that we have entered a cycle that allows for unification in terms of grape maturation. We no longer have the ripening of the fruit first and, a few days later, the ripening of the pips. This disparity explains the two conflicting schools that we knew in Bordeaux from the 1990s and 2000s. The Boissenot school [referring to consultant Eric Boissenot] harvested the freshly matured grapes working with delicacy to avoid bitterness, while the Rolland school waited for perfect polyphenolic maturity but at the price of overripened fruit. The grapes we have been harvesting for a few years now burst with juice and particularly soft pips. Two thousand fourteen is the first vintage where I think it is noticeable.

NM: What sparked the interest in biodynamics? Was it a producer or a particular wine or something you had read about? Were you skeptical at first?

GL: I grew up in Margaux, where we played childhood games in the park, in the streams and in the vines. I witnessed nature changing in the 1970s and 1980s with the disappearance of fish from the streams, beetles from the garden and wild leeks from the vines...My desire was to bring it all back, but I didn't really know how to. I knew about organic agriculture, but the organic wines that I had tasted seemed rustic and didn't correspond to the criteria of a Grand Cru, which in my opinion, should be the height of refinement.

I discussed this with Alain Moueix in 2008, and he told me about Biodynamics which, he explained, not only created a link with the earth like organic agriculture but also an astral influence on the soil and gave the wines the verticality that I was looking for.

He invited me to a Biodivin tasting at Château Fonroque in the spring of 2008, and what I tasted there convinced me that there was something to Biodynamics. Whether the wines were good or not, I found that verticality and that lasting mid-palate, which is, for me, the signature of a great wine.

I was wary of the esoteric aspect of biodynamics. Certain winemakers seemed to have lost their way and produced wines with sensory defects. However, what did interest me was the pure expression of the terroir. I had a doubt about the feasibility of this search for purity in a biodynamic context, but the great Burgundies that had already embarked upon it convinced me that it was possible. So, I began with 10 hectares in 2009 with the help of Alain Moueix. Léopold Valentin, today's technical director, arrived in 2010 with the mission of putting in place biodynamic practices on the property.

NM: You received advice from Alain Moueix and then Corinne Comme (wife of Jean-Michel Comme ex-Pontet-Canet). Did they have similar approaches in terms of viticulture and biodynamics?

GL: Our only advice came from Alain Moueix. I didn't want to deal with a professional advisor but rather a winemaker who knows and has to live with the risks that he takes with his harvest. Alain accepted [my request] to get us started and, along with the late Laurent Nougaro, accompanied us for two years. Then he said: 'You know the basics. Now it's for you to make

them work,' and he left us to fend for ourselves. Léopold Valentin and I met Corinne Comme in 2018 after a disastrous harvest when we lost 90% to mildew. Corinne was working with my sister Bérénice at Château Climens. I don't know her well enough to be able to judge her different approach.

[Post-script: This was written before Bérénice Lurton sold Climens.]



Technical-Director Léopold Valentin (left) and Proprietor Gonzague Lurton (right) at the château.

NM: What changes can you see in the vineyard compared to orthodox viticulture?

GL: There are several things. Nothing is simple. The first thing that delighted my team was witnessing the rapid development in the biodiversity of flora and fauna. The second thing is that we didn't lose any harvest in the first years, and that gave us confidence (The first loss of harvest linked to our agricultural practices was the 2016 harvest - 20%). However, we haven't seen a greater resistance to cryptogamic diseases. It seems that the agroecological component that we are now putting in place was the missing link. Developing living soils with microbial and mycorrhizal biodiversity should allow us to find a satisfactory balance. More and more, I believe that biodynamics is an enhancer of good practice in the vineyard and not a miracle recipe.

NM: When do you decide to pick, and where do you recruit your harvesters?

GL: My technical director, Léopold Valentin, and I taste the grapes every day. We base our decision solely on this. Technological maturity is no longer a problem as it could be when I started at the beginning of the 1990s. We have been working with temporary employment agencies since 2014. This gives us the freedom to either work more quickly with more workers or more slowly, even stopping if necessary.

The Vinification

NM: In one of our conversations, we talked about the vin de presse. How has this changed in recent years? What kind of press do you use? Also, what is the approach towards alcoholic fermentation and maceration? Has this changed as you have altered the viticulture?

GL: Since the 2017 vintage, we have stopped using the pneumatic press and now use vertical JLB presses of different sizes. There is no final pressing. The pressed juices are cleaner, more fatty and less astringent. The pressed wines are gradually funneled into barrels, classified every week by Eric Boissenot and then conserved in jars until blending.

NM: And in terms of alcoholic fermentation and maceration?

GL: I remember 2005, which I regard as the first vintage of the 21st century in the sense of the first vintage in which we found very strong balanced maturity (2003 was different - a heatwave vintage). We found such a richness in polyphenols that we were frightened of losing any, and we extracted a lot in order not to lose any. Since then, these rich vintages have become the norm, and we work them with more finesse.

The accident of 2018 taught us a lot and allowed us to acknowledge the natural richness of our grapes. We lost 90% of the harvest and decided to vinify everything in 750-liter jars. We had to conduct manual punch-downs, and we realized that with very little extraction, we had very rich and balanced wines. In 2019, a very good harvest, we vinified the same plots in vots and jars, trying to obtain this sweet, powerful result. We reduced our pumping over by half to just one pumping over per day of a vat of limited volume. So yes, thanks to our viticulture, the homogenous maturity that we obtained led us to review our vinification methods. The period of maceration, a gentle extraction, hasn't really changed, the wines staying on the skins for around three weeks. Léopold Valentin has a true vinous sensitivity which allows him to adapt and to get the best out of each plot while finding the expression of the fruit as well as delicacy and powerful tannins.





Amphorae at Durfort-Vivens

NM: Can you tell me about the introduction of amphorae? What vintage was it first used? What kind of vessels are they (size, the temperature of clay baking etc.)? How much of the Grand Vin is matured in amphora, and how do they meliorate the wine? Which cooperages do you use for the French oak barrels, and how much racking do you do?

GL: Initially, it wasn't to obtain certification but to develop our practices. Biodynamics has become such a fashion that all wine producers have started to ask for it. As we were doing it fully, we decided that to be credible, we had to prove it, so we asked for Demeter certification. Biodynamics is a process that leads us to reconsider all the input materials brought to the vine and the cellar. In the cellar, this concerns sulfur with a maximum total of 70mg/l. For an aging of 18 months, this requires some reflection.

The 'unified' maturity of our grapes led us to think that we needed less oxygen than we had used before. The first approach was to reduce the supply of oxygen during all movements of the wine. The second was to lower the number of rackings that we thought necessary. This diminished supply of oxygen logically translated into less SO2.

In 2017, I set Léopold Valentin a challenge by asking him if we were capable, on a trial basis with a small volume, to carry out long aging, 18 months without SO2. He immediately replied 'why not' but didn't feel at ease doing it with barrels. He came back a few days later with the idea of Tava terracotta amphora, which has the advantage, compared to traditional terracotta, of being baked at a very high temperature of up to 1400°C and of being not too oxidative or completely inert.

The first trial being very conclusive, I decided to order 50, and finally, after three years, we now have 180. Ever since, we have been using the amphora (technically 'jars' because amphorae have two handles) for the aging of all our wines. The first wine is up to 30% (plus 70% new barrels), and the single-plot wines are between 30 and 70%.

The amphorae have, in fact, taken the place of used barrels, which use a lot of SO2 for their maintenance. We, therefore, use more new barrels than previously with respect to our first wine.

This rational management of SO2 is one of the keys to the current success of our wines. We still keep our wines with doses of free SO2 of around 25mg/L, but the management of oxygen supply now allows us to bottle long-aged wines with total sulfur of 50 to 55mg/L. This reduction in unnecessary doses of sulfur gives us wines that have a much richer aromatic expression leaving much more room for floral notes and also much greedier tannins without the dryness. Concerning our barrel policy, we use four cooperages in equal parts: Taransaud, Sylvain, Demptos and Seguin-Moreau. They are medium and medium-long-toast barrels. Following on from the blending, which takes place quite early, generally in February, only one racking is done during the aging.

NM: You recently made some special cuvées from particular parcels. What is the reasoning for this? Is there a danger that it could detract from the Grand Vin?

GL: It has been a few years now. Since 2015, we had this idea of presenting single-plot wines in place of a second blended wine. We know from experience that we have plots with different characteristics that we blend into our first wine. It is even more interesting that 'technologically' the soils are very similar: sand to clayey gravel from the Quaternary period with a varying clay percentage between 5% and 15%. These differences in style show that a terroir's own character is not defined by its granulometric composition.

The 'role' of the second wine is to give access to the first wine, and I thought that by highlighting the characteristics of the terroir, this would give even greater access to the first wine. However, over the last ten years, the percentage of first wine has gone from 65% to 35%. It's the policy of all the Second Growths or their equivalents, and I have resolved to bring Durfort-Vivens back to this court. Magnificent plots that used to go into the first wine found themselves put to one side, and I didn't see any interest in creating a second and a third wine.

During visits to wineries in California, where we lived for three years between 2014 and 2017, I realized that they knew how to showcase single vineyards using quite similar labels. This served as a basis for the project that we launched in 2019. There are three different wines. Les Plantes is from young vines that can come from any of Durfort-Vivens' plots. Young vines have a shallower root and produce wines with vigorous fruit but a lighter tannic structure. Le Plateau is from vines situated in Soussans and mainly around the Marin plateau, hence its name. The signature of this wine is its volume in the mouth. Le Hameau is from vines situated in Cantenac and Margaux, mainly around the hamlet of Cure-Bourse, which gives rise to its name. Le Hameau demonstrates tannic tension with a lot of length. We noticed that year after year, each of the "parcelles" had its own particular style that we found again and again, whatever the blending. It's an example of the strength of the terroir.

NM: It can be argued that Durfort-Vivens does not have the same high profile as other Margaux estates. For example, I could not find an official website. Is that something that bothers you, or is it not important?

GL: It's true that the property isn't really high profile. That's probably due to its owners over the last 60 years. It probably matches the style of the property. It isn't exuberant. There is a lot of Cabernet-Sauvignon that traditionally gives it an austere approach in its early years before revealing itself later. The viticultural approach, along with the evolution we have brought about in the aging process, are changing the game. The wines are now very expressive in their early years and keep much longer, for example, their floral aromas.

For my part, I am very wary of communication and have always preferred to say things after having done and considered them. This isn't the Bordeaux tradition, and that puts us rather quickly into the low-profile category. For the last three years, my wife, Claire [Villars-Lurton] and I have been working hard on making our communication more professional, whether it be towards professionals or the public.

[In this respect, Lurton details recent recruitments and states that their Internet site is being revised, ditto their social media profile.]

The Wines

As mentioned previously, these notes combine three or four sources. Let's examine the oldest first. When I mentioned that I was planning to crack open a 1979 Durfort-Vivens, Lurton was actually a little dismissive and remarked that the 1978 was better. As it transpired, the 1979 put in a sterling performance, maybe a little ragged around the edges, but it had retained freshness alongside its rustic veneer. An exemplary 1982 Durfort-Vivens shaded this, opened on Christmas day with modest expectations.

It is exquisite. Old school claret in the best sense of the word, not fruit-forward or precocious by any means, but it reveals a haunting balance and complexity. Interestingly, we were accompanied by a couple who like their vino but are no oenophiles. They could not get their head around the 1982 and contentedly polished off an inferior Pomerol. I guess it is a wine that seasoned palates might appreciate. But wines stand as a testament to Lucien Lurton. The 1983 Durfort-Vivens, tasted from double magnum, is almost as good as the previous vintage, quite beguiling on the tobacco-scented nose, armed with exquisite transparency on the palate. Wonderfull

The following tasting notes come from a private dinner at Portland restaurant in London. It was organized with fellow Bordeaux lovers all intrigued by the Margaux estate and eager to find out more. The tasting was vintage-focused on the Noughties, with one representative from the Nineties and just a couple representing the more recent biodynamic era. I'll not mince my words because it was a disillusioning tasting that vindicated my own past criticisms. Too many vintages, at least in that era, had shortcomings of some kind, whether it was a lack of tension or complexity or a sense of a wine-seeking identity. As we concluded the dinner, I was moved to defend the estate as the last decade is far superior compared to the wines tasted that night. The oldest wine in that dinner, the 1996 Durfort-Vivens, put in a commendable showing, even if it is now fully mature, perhaps a little leafy in style, but with focus and decent substance. Based on these bottles, matters go awry in the Noughties. A "solid" 2005 Durfort-Vivens augured well, but the 2006 and 2008 showed poorly in the context of those growing seasons, and as such, they should be approached with caution. The 2010 Durfort-Vivens augurs that change was afoot and tasted completely different to preceding vintages, bestowed with greater fruit and purity, lovely balance and vigor, a sapidity that encouraged another sip. Perhaps it is no coincidence that it is contemporaneous with the piecemeal conversion of the vines to biodynamic viticulture and the appointment of Léopold Valentin? Yet I still get the sense that Lurton and Valentin were working things out, and you cannot simply change a vineyard overnight. More consistency comes in 2014 with one big caveat...

Recent vintages have been superior to every preceding vintage, except the 2016 Durfort-Vivens. Hailing from such a consistently impressive vintage that burgeons with benchmark wines, it is perplexing that this Margaux has never appealed to me. Its shortcomings were reinforced when juxtaposed directly against the superior 2015 and 2017 Durfort-Vivens at the château, both exhibiting more fruit intensity and cohesion, certainly more finesse towards the finish Perhaps something was missed during this period? Maybe the percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon (94%) is higher than optimal? Now Gonzague and Claire Villars-Lurton have moved back to Bordeaux permanently, I speculate that maybe this partly underlines the success of 2018, 2019 and 2020 Durfort-Vivens, all occupying a higher level than vintages a decade earlier. They demonstrate that this château can handle warmer growing seasons in its stride, while the curveball thrown in 2021 implies that it can also cope with a challenging, cooler season without recourse to chemical treatments to ward off rot.



Bottles tasted at the château with Gonzague Lurton. Recent vintages have demonstrated great

The approaches employed at Durfort-Vivens are not unique to Bordeaux. Nowadays, many estates apply biodynamics, certified or not, and use clay amphora to mature their wine. What distinguishes Durfort-Vivens is the zeal in which these concepts have been embraced, not unlike like-minded estates such as Pontet-Canet or Les Carmes Haut-Brion. At the same time, and as the saying goes, in vino veritas. Examining the wines up until the last seven or eight years, I sense an estate seeking its identity. Transient history in the mid-20th century precluded Durfort-Vivens from establishing a kind of rhythm and its name entrenched within cognoscenti's minds. Doubtless, some misconstrued it as an off-shoot of Château Margaux. Later, under the Lurton family and during Gonzague Lurton's formative years, the wine wasn't vinified at the château, fomenting a feeling of dislocation that is akin to homelessness, a wine without a home, without a base that serves as a fulcrum for activity. When that was finally addressed, it took years to implement improvements in the vineyard and see those translate into bottle. Furthermore, for Gonzague Lurton, learning the art of making wine and familiarizing with the vineyard takes practice. These explain why it is only within the last dozen or so years that Durfort-Vivens has realized what it wants to be.

Nevertheless, Lurton practices viticulture that pushes wine to the edge: eschewing protective sprays, abiding by Rudolph Steiner's tenets, the introduction of clay amphorae that facilitates less usage of sulfur but, in my opinion, still molds the wine differently from traditional barriques. I'm a bit agnostic when it comes to these innovations and never prejudge a wine, good or bad, based solely on viticultural technique. I appreciate that Lurton is striving to use his vernacular, "verticality" in his wine through increasing percentages of Cabernet Sauvignon, though occasionally, I feel that this comes at the expense of phenolic ripeness. It's a noble and achievable aim, one that the late Paul Pontallier often propounded at Château Margaux (though Philippe Bascaules is less dogmatic.) Sometimes it renders Durfort-Vivens just too austere, and it can be detrimental.

The separation of cuvées à la Burgundy is an intriguing and novel concept in Bordeaux. Unequivocally, it is an intellectual exercise, though as a believer that a crucial factor in Bordeaux's strength resides in the art of blending and creating wines that are more than a sum of their parts. Only time will tell if such separation is advantageous. Bordeaux does not have the fractured geology or dramatic topography of either the Côte d'Or or the Mosel.

As for the owner himself, I find Gonzague Lurton a fascinating winemaker. He is headstrong in terms of beliefs to perhaps the point of obstinacy. Lurton is not one for half-measures, something he shares with his wife since one easily sees common approaches between Haut-Bages-Libéral and Durfort-Vivens. Lurton is perhaps less comfortable in the limelight, happiest in one-on-one settings discussing wines. Forging your own path like Lurton has done takes courage, but that does not mean there are potential missteps. We're human, after all. Durfort-Vivens makes for a compelling Margaux estate that warrants both criticism and praise, certainly more of the latter in the last four or five years. Durfort-Vivens has become a Left Bank sui generis, less high profile than, say Pontet-Canet and yet equally individualistic, which is no bad thing. Long may Lurton continue down that path.

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