



Here come the
Bordeaux
Amazons



Five Women. Five vineyards. And a common passion for wine. The Bordeaux Amazons are making their own mark in France's iconic Bordeaux region, discovers **Ruma Singh**

They are not particularly large in physical stature, but the Bordeaux Amazons take particular delight in their self-given title because it underlines the sisterhood these five women winemakers from Bordeaux have developed over the last few years. They are Agnès Bousseau (Château de L'Hurbe), Claudine Rozier (Château des Arras), Cécile Thirouin (Château L'Insoumise), Florence Prud'homme (Château Saincrit) and Hélène Fenouillet-Affatato (Château La Gatte).

Despite their different ages and backgrounds, they have a few vital things in common. Firstly, they are female winemakers from the same region in Bordeaux – Cubzaguais, near Côtes de Bourg, 25 minutes north of Bordeaux town, and their vineyards are no more than a few kilometers apart. Secondly, they are all industrious daughters-of-the-soil, very hands-on when it comes to their own vineyards and very proud of the wines they put their names to. And finally, in the very famous, deeply tradition-bound wine region of Bordeaux, they are also symbols of change – women making



Cecile Thirouin

their imprint in the male-dominated world of winemaking. (See facing page for details).

Today the Bordeaux Amazons are on a voyage of discovery to India, a market with great potential for wine. They are curious to find out how India's exotic culture is taking to wine-drinking, and are exploring the possibilities of sending their own wines here. Sipping coffee in Bangalore, the ladies chatter in rapid French. They love Indian food. There have been no upset tummies so far, and they can't wait to do some shopping. Meanwhile, they are more than happy to talk about their wines. So, how did the title Bordeaux Amazons happen? "It happened one evening, over a few drinks," laughs H el ene, the most vocal and fluent of the group.

"Today, a woman in the tradition-bound world of Bordeaux winemaking is not as rare a phenomenon as it once was," she adds. "There are women among the new generation of winemakers. But though women have always been a part of winemaking, particularly out in the vineyards, they have been behind the scenes. Today they are coming forward to play a bigger role." The Amazons are proud of their location in Bordeaux, because, as they say, "Here are all the smaller, individually-owned winemaking properties.



Florence Prud'homme

It's a pretty and quiet place, near the seaside, but not too crowded, so it's a nice getaway from the bigger cities. Yet it is right next to St Emilion, and our children go to school in Bordeaux." Besides making wines, the Amazons also run their Ch ateaux as homestays, so visitors can enjoy a night among the vineyards, a rare treat.

Bordeaux may be famous for its huge properties and iconic wines, but, "it's much harder for us smaller properties," says C ecile. "Few realise how hard it is."

PROFILES OF THE BORDEAUX AMAZONS

Cecile Thirouin – Château L'Insoumise

Bio: Cecile works with her boyfriend in running Château L'Insoumise. "We are both oenologists and like the same styles of wine," she says.

Area: 30 hectares, of which 29 hectares grows red wine varieties: Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec. Sauvignon Blanc was planted one year ago. "White wines are getting more popular in Bordeaux," she says.

Wines: Château L'Insoumise makes their special cuvée (only 20,000 bottles) with a blend of Malbec and Merlot. The premium wine is Prestige, and second, Chais 45 is blended with Malbec.

Château L'Insoumise

360 Chemin de Peyrot

33240 SAINT ANDRE DE CUBZAC

www.chateauinsoumise.com

Hélène Fenouillet-Affatato – Château la Gatte

Bio: Recently divorced, Hélène runs Château La Gatte herself. She worked in the wine trade for 21 years in sales and public relations for major wine companies before buying her own vineyard six years ago. "It's a complete change of lifestyle, a much more natural one," she says.

Area: 13 hectares, growing red and some white grape varieties. La Gatte makes reds, whites and rosés. One hectare grows the unusual Sauvignon Gris, the rest, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon,

Wines: La Gatte makes two reds, one a blend of 80% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon. The second wine is a 100% Merlot, called La Butte. It also makes 8000 bottles of organic wine, Domaine de Montalon.

Château La Gatte

995 Route de Bourg

33240 SAINT ANDRE DE CUBZAC

www.chateaulagatte.com

Florence Prud'homme – Château Saincrit

Bio: Florence worked with the spirit trade for 10 years before deciding to



make a major change and buying her vineyard in 2003. "It was very difficult initially, and I had to start from scratch," she says. Beginning with the French market, Château Saincrit is exported to Japan, USA, Switzerland and Germany.

Area: 17 hectares, of which 70% is Merlot, 15% Cabernet Franc and 15% Cabernet Sauvignon. Some white varieties – Sémillon, Muscadel and Sauvignon Blanc

Wines: Château Saincrit has two red Cuvées: the Silver Cuvée is 100% Merlot, and Villes Vignes, which is 70% Merlot, blended with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc.

Château Saincrit

555, Chemin du Peuy

33240 Saint André de Cubzac

www.chateau-saincrit.com

Claudine Rozier – Château des Arras

Bio: Says Claudine, "I was born in Belgium, lived in Paris, and married a man from Bordeaux. My husband died in 1993, and I hired a winemaker to make the wines, as I had a small child. From 2000, I began making my own wines." She sells mostly to negociants, keeping a small amount to make her own style of wine. She handles it all herself: the vineyard, winemaking, the commercial aspect and the marketing. "My daughter is studying winemaking in her final year. I hope she returns to our Château and takes over," she says.

Area: Château des Arras is an old property, 27 hectares in all, growing 60% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon.

Wines: Château des Arras makes three wines – Cuvée Traditionale, made in

stainless steel vats; Cuvée Prestige, which is aged nine months in French barrels; and a Bordeaux rosé, made from Cabernet Franc.

Château des Arras

BP 18, 33240 SAINT GERVAIS

www.chateaudesarras.fr

Agnès Bousseau – Château de L'Hurbe

Bio: Normandy-born Agnès married Marc Bousseau and has been making wine since 1979. She is the 3rd generation in her family in the winemaking business. The family has owned the Château since 1921. Her son is also studying winemaking. She handles sales, finances, part of the vineyard work and wine tourism, offering rooms for people to stay in her Château. With the largest Château, Agnès sells her award-winning wines mostly within France but also exports to the UK.

Area: 27 hectares, of which 25 hectares are for red varieties – Malbec, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Wines: Château de L'Hurbe has 10 hectares under the appellation AOC Côtes de Bourg, while 17 hectares comes under the appellations AOC Bordeaux or Bordeaux Supérieur. A part of the Merlot crop is put aside to make 6000 bottles of Clairet, while two hectares are devoted to white wine grapes: AOC Bordeaux Blanc sec, AOC Crémant de Bordeaux (sparkling) from Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon.

Château de L'Hurbe

27 Route de L'Hurbe

33240 ST LAURENT D'ARCE

www.chateaudelhurbe.com

We all chose this life because of our love for wine, but every year is a new challenge. You have to reinvent and change constantly as new techniques emerge in winemaking

Adds H el ene, “We all chose this life because of our love for wine, but every year is a new challenge. You have to reinvent and change constantly as new techniques emerge in winemaking. But it all helps to keep you focused with the end goal in sight. It’s uplifting to see the results of your hard work.”

With Bordeaux still regarded as one of the last bastions of traditional winemaking, how much has evolved since their advent into the wine world?

“Compared to the New World, yes, Bordeaux is still traditional, but now there’s a better consciousness of the outside world,” says Claudine, “We are aware that many countries produce good wines now, and at present we are re-focusing on our vineyards. In fact, today winemakers are expected to step out of the cellar into the vineyard and be more a part of the entire process.”

Adds H el ene, “Without good grapes one can’t make good wine.” Interestingly, besides the domination of Merlot among the grapes they grow, there is a rise in popularity of Malbec as well. But the class of Bordeaux wine remains unchanged, they insist, and there will be no selling-out to the newly popular style of ‘pour-and-drink’ wines. “There are often very high alcohol levels in such wines and they are too heavy, too flabby. Drinking such wine is like eating jam without bread!”

Do the Bordeaux Amazons have any personal preferences among the New World wines? “I like the whites,” says Florence. “The reds don’t usually keep. In the US, for instance, there is little vintage effect on wines. The wines taste the same every year.” The women are not pessimistic about a wider acceptance of the more complex, made-for-food wines that Bordeaux is famous for. “We all have our own shares of the market. Our wine is made to be drunk with food, whereas many New World wines find it harder to find perfect pairings because of their high alcohol content. You can’t have a very strongly flavoured dish with wine, there must be balance.”

Still, they accept the fact that Old World classics have lost some ground to the crowd-pleasing New World



favourites. “In fact, in neighbouring Belgium, 80 per cent of the wines sold are from the New World. It’s the same in the UK,” admits H el ene. “Their advantage started with good marketing and attractive pricing. And perhaps the consumer profile has been changing, too. There has always been a view that French wines are expensive and difficult or complex to drink. It’s only now that wine drinkers are discovering that not all Bordeaux wines are expensive. That is the only disadvantage of having the Bordeaux tag. Of course, there is no denying that there are advantages too, because the Bordeaux name is so well-known around the world.”

The Amazons’ wines range from five to eight euros per bottle in France, while in the US, which is their biggest export market, they cost \$14 to \$24, inclusive of taxes.

The Amazons all loved their Indian food experiences and were intrigued by the different cuisines they tasted. How do they foresee their wines standing up to spicy Indian food? “Our wines will stand up well to Indian food, as they have balanced alcohol levels and no residual sugar,” says Cecile.

“We love spicy food,” beams Claudine. Biryani, different styles of *daal*, *rotis*, *bhindi* (okra), tandoori chicken, fish and prawns are what they have tried and enjoyed. Some of their ros es will go very well indeed with Indian food, and so will their Malbecs, they said.

India is waiting for the wines of the Bordeaux Amazons! ♦