



Global wine lovers make own Bordeaux blends with top expert

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By Suzanne Mustacich

Saint Emilion, France (AFP)

Not even airspace paralyzed by volcanic ash could keep Do-It-Yourself wine enthusiasts from across the world from their first Bordeaux cru and a chance to blend with the palate behind the world's most famous wines.

Fifty-five intrepid DIY winemakers from 10 countries and three continents made their way to Chateau Teyssier in Saint Emilion where Crushpad, the San Francisco-based micro winery, set up its first overseas operation a year ago.

This was the first sip of their foray into Bordeaux winemaking, which they have been overseeing from their day-jobs around the globe.

They seem to be quite pleased with the 2009 vintage, the only thing they have to complain about is a little volcano, reported Stephen Bolger, president of Crushpad France.

But while a handful of clients remained stranded in airports, others made superhuman efforts to get here, he added.

The big draw was a chance to make the final blend with Eric Boissenot, Crushpad's consultant.

As wine insiders know, Boissenot is the consultant and master blender for A-list wines, including Lafite-Rothschild, Mouton-Rothschild, Margaux, Latour, Pichon, Palmer, and nearly every other Medoc wine of fame. The DIY winemakers were here because they have paid 6,750-13,500 euros a barrel to Crushpad for the opportunity to produce their own barrel of wine from plots of land and grape variety they have chosen and make their own blend.

They are personally involved as far as they wish, down to picking their grapes, or managing every detail from a distance using a computer programme.

And they are passionate about what they are trying to achieve. Some give the finished product to friends; some enter prestigious competitions and may win prizes; some sell their wine; and other just drink it. The average cost per bottle between 22.50 and 45 euros.

Rebel operation

Landing Boissenot was nothing short of a coup for Bolger.

"These people are dreaming of becoming winemakers, they want to evolve their wine experience with winemaking," said Bolger. "For them it's a real pleasure to work with someone who is mythical in winemaking."

Boissenot's expertise, honed after 20 years of tasting the results of minute changes in how a vine is handled or a grape is transformed into wine, makes him invaluable to First Growths, who need an objective perspective -- and a boon to a start-up operation like Crushpad France.

"We needed someone with an in-depth knowledge of the terroir and the people working the vineyards to help us find the plots with the quality level we wanted to bring to our clients," said Bolger.

But what would attract the consultant, whose bread and butter are bastions of elegance and classicism, to a rebel operation where Medoc Cabernet Sauvignon's are freely blended with Saint Emilion Merlot, a combination sure to raise eyebrows amongst the Bordelais?

"At first I was a little perplexed when they contacted me," Boissenot admitted.

"It's an American concept that isn't easily imported to France, but what interested me was the blending -- what I love is blending."

The opportunity to blend wines made from plots not only in different appellations, but on different sides of the river that divides the region geographically, historically, and in terms of wine, stylistically, proved a seductive opportunity.

Another big draw was the chance to take the art of blending directly to the consumer.

"Today, what really interested me was to meet these people who have thought of their blend in intellectual terms but now they are going to really discover it."

Emotion linked with wine

In Teyssier's vat room, the vintners began uncorking the "base blends" already assembled by Boissenot and Neil Whyte, Teyssier's winemaker.

"This is the first time we've met our wine," said Richard Perris, a London lawyer, of the rebel cru made from four different appellations. The first tastings had Perris and his fellow vintner, Adrian Chopin, a London banker, revising their initial plan of dispensing with 300 bottles of wine.

"Initially we thought we would sell it at cost to our friends but now I'm not sure, it's too good for them," said Chopin, only half-jokingly.

"We need to tweak the base blend," said Perris, ready to get to work. "We're eager to talk to Boissenot about that."

As they waited their turn to blend, everyone circulated to taste each other's wine, intrigued to see how different decisions in winemaking produced entirely different results.

"They are going see why wine is like this or that," said Boissenot, standing at a table with the tools of his trade, a beaker and a spittoon. "We will blend together. It's very interesting to work with consumers rather than estate owners."

Blending is an art form and Boissenot has his own style which eschews exaggeration and over-extraction.

"I look for complexity and elegance," said Boissenot. After tasting all of the samples of wine, an image forms in his mind. "From there I know where I want to go, what I want to obtain."

So far the blending had exceeded expectations.

"We blended the white wine this morning and it was very exciting," said Rudo Autner, a financial consultant from Slovakia, who is producing four barrels.

"I would never expect that the blending could be so emotional, but that is what happened for me this morning."

Alison Deighton, London-based property developer with a hotel in Italy, also found the experience surprisingly emotional.

"We had a 'moment' this morning while blending our white wine," said Deighton. "We decided on more steel and less barrel, it created the most fabulous white wine."

Everyone agreed the experience was worth travel hassles.

"I come from a country with a long wine history but I have never had this kind of experience of emotion linked with wine," admitted Autner, who has bought a chateau in Slovakia and plans to make high-quality wine in his own country.

"It's funny that I had to travel across Europe to find my emotions vis-a-vis the vine."

- AFP