

Terre de Vins

[BORDEAUX TASTING] “Great ambitions for Château Phélan Ségur”



Above: Véronique Dausse and Philippe Van de Vyvere.

After a year as the contented owner of Château Phélan Ségur, Philippe Van de Vyvere gives his first impressions. The head of port logistics group Sea-Invest, operating in Belgium, France and Africa, Philippe Van de Vyvere is living his wine dream as he enters his 65th year. Terre de Vins managed to find out more from this very discreet man.

After barely a year at the helm of Château Phélan Ségur, what are your first impressions? The discovery of this estate has been a real journey. When I visited the property for the first time in May 2017, the weather was magnificent, the vines were bright green and spring was in the air. There was an incredible vibe. The proximity of the Gironde affected me, because my job has always kept me “in contact” with water. There was an immediate attraction for the place, the wines and respect for the work done by the Gardinier family and the teams!

Since the acquisition in January 2018, I have been here very often. Each visit is an opportunity for me to discover my vineyard (it's amazing to be able to say "my" vineyard) but I recognise the need for humility, to know that this terroir does not belong to me, I am at its service! The property's 70 hectares are spread over four broad plots that I am gradually discovering: magnificent gravel in Anguileys adjoining Calon to the West, the Houissant plateau to the South, Fontpetite which overlooks the Gironde bordering on the Montrose vineyard. I'm getting to know the cellar and vineyard teams more personally and, as a lover of the great wines of Bordeaux, I am blown away by their know-how and wisdom.

In January, I discovered a vineyard in the middle of pruning, under a cloudy sky. I was impressed by the harshness of the landscape but also by the beauty of the gravel plots. The Enclos plot at the center of the Château dates from 1951! I was amazed by the pruning work and I noted the vital importance of the quality of the cut with the secateurs, and hence the value of the work of our vineyard teams.

I heard for the first time the quality of silence in the cellar. I have enjoyed the privilege of living these "firsts"! I like to walk in the shadows of the cellars and observe this traditional method - to which we still hold - of racking from barrel to barrel without using a pump ("soutirage à l'esquive").

What are the main goals for this Saint-Estèphe?

I clearly have great ambitions for Château Phélan Ségur and I will take the time to understand the property. But I have already given a simple road map to Veronique [Dausse], for the vineyard, my absolute priority! While carrying out a quite thorough audit of our vineyard, we have already speeded up the renewal of our vines. Some of our plots are still planted at rather low density: they will be a priority with our plan to bring them up to 10 000 vines / ha; we're making a pond at the bottom of the park in front of the Château that will allow us to channel water from the drainage basin, which had the annoying habit of stagnating at the bottom of adjoining plots. I am confident about our viticultural practices, that allow us to manage our property in a sensible and reasoned way. We were among the first to use "sexual confusion" in 1998, we work our soils, we are careful not to compact them, we cover with grasses that allow the soils to breathe. We regulate our inputs with a decision-support tool that monitors vigor using geolocation. We have moved from "multi" plot viticulture to intra-plot, and the precision of the work is spectacular. This is explained by the complexity of the sub-soil in Saint-Estèphe.

I have no particular intention to go organic. We work with reason and common sense. I want to take care of our property's ecosystem, which includes 40 hectares of woods and meadows. I already have a plan to plant almost a hectare of trees in our park as well as hedges, and I am going to reintroduce cattle to the meadow.

As for the winemaking, the outline for a new vat room and cellar is under way. The goal is to be able to express the vineyard work in the vat room! We must absolutely equip ourselves with smaller vats, to be even more precise in our winemaking! Even if it is undeniable that recent vintages show more purity, precision, ripeness. This project motivates me because I can fully contribute to it thanks to my background in "industry" (it's not a rude word!). I absolutely want us to continue working within the Château. This is something unique to Phélan! The Château is part of the cellars! Indeed, I immediately started renovation of the reception areas in the Château with my Belgian architect friend Axel Vervoordt. Axel has come to "breathe" this place with its distinctive Palladian architecture. I am sensitive to the history of the buildings and so I decided to rename one of our dining rooms "The Irish Room". While respecting the soul of the Château, I want to bring a touch of warmth and modernity. Our guests and friends should feel comfortable while enjoying a moment out of time around a fine meal prepared by our in-house chef. Phélan Ségur has always been a "welcoming home" and I hope that the "Phélan Spirit" will be perpetuated.

Your first vintage, 2018, is an exceptional one. How is it showing at Phélan Ségur?

The particularly rainy spring of 2018 made me aware of the pressure on the vineyard teams and some difficult truths. We couldn't get into the vineyard for fear of compacting the land, we had to work to get rid of weeds, we had to protect the vineyards against mildew... What intensity! And this summer, so hot, with the fear of storms and hail...

I could go on like this... I know that I'll need many vintages to understand everything but my commitment is strong (maybe even stronger than I had imagined): there is something magnetic about this property. We are deeply attached to it.

Also, I have no desire to change the style of Château Phélan Ségur wines. I love their balance, their finesse, their precision, the quality of their tannins. The power comes from the terroir, it doesn't need to be stirred up. Our wines are not exuberant: I appreciate this measured character that is often synonymous with refinement. They age with such grace. I tasted a 1955 vintage, blind, which was magnificent and seemed much younger!

The first vintage that will bear my name and that of my son Pierre will be the 2017, blended after the purchase. But my first real vintage is the 2018. What a privilege! I followed the harvest daily but unfortunately at a distance this year. Even if I am not familiar with tasting such young wines, I can say that they seem incredibly good. The Merlots are fat, fleshy, powerful! The Cabernets Sauvignons are distinguished with great freshness, despite their ripeness: in short, it will be an extraordinary vintage, with exceptional fruit, great complexity, a fine balance and remarkable smoothness.