

# CÔTES DE BORDEAUX, UNITED IN THEIR DESIRE FOR DIVERSIFICATION

BY CAMILLE BERNARD  
PHOTOGRAPHS:  
COURTESY OF THE ESTATES.

---

*The Côtes de Bordeaux group of appellations is a major player both in France and export markets, but it is increasingly under threat from a fragile, volatile economic climate. We decided to sound out some of the area's leading lights and hear their testimonials about a wine market that is struggling to reinvent itself.*

AN ALLIANCE BOURG CO-OPERATIVE GROWER PRUNES HIS VINES





THE VINEYARDS AT  
CHÂTEAU HAUT BEYNAT

Côtes de Bordeaux stems from the merger of five wine areas – Blaye, Cadillac, Castillon, Francs and Sainte-Foy. In the aggregate, it boasts nearly 12,000 hectares under vine which grow on either side of the Gironde estuary, at the confluence of the rivers Garonne and Dordogne.

The group is dynamic and since its inception in 2007, it has made no attempt to hide its determination to create branded wines that can tap into the reputation of Bordeaux, whilst at the same time promoting the specific vineyard sites within this large production area, particularly its hillside vineyards.

These vineyard sites are now grouped together under the same banner and nearly 900 producers leave no stone unturned in their quest to make it successful. From adjusting their range of wines so that they resonate with new consumer profiles to seeking out new markets and developing new distribution channels or even changing their sales models, they have implemented numerous initiatives. Whilst these may differ, all of them share the same unwavering commitment to ensuring the future of the vineyards. As one producer admitted, their aim is to “perform well”. To do this, they know they must emerge from the shadows of the Grands Crus, which have stolen the limelight from their own range of wines offering excellent value for money.

Up until now, this collective force has successfully reached out to audiences both within national boundaries and in export markets where the combined appellations have seen their market share double in just fifteen years, from 11 to 22%.

But in a challenging economic environment, fuelled by a crippling pandemic and now exacerbated by an armed conflict, how is this appellation powerhouse – which holds the honourable rank of fourth largest French AOC by volume of red wines produced – faring? Behind the scenes of the Côtes de Bordeaux, we met some of the appellation’s producers to hear what they had to say.

### ALLIANCE BOURG: PRODUCING FRUITIER WINES BETTER SUITED TO CURRENT CONSUMER TASTES

“Alliance Bourg stems from the merger of the Pugnac, Tauriac and Lansac co-operative wineries in 2007”, explains the company’s technical director, Bastien Queille. “It now groups together around 60 winegrowers farming approximately 500 hectares and producing nearly 20,000 hectolitres of red wine a year”. These sizeable volumes make the co-operative “the leading producer of Côtes de Bourg by volume”, but also a major player in the Blaye Côtes de Bordeaux appellation, where it produces nearly 6,000 hl.

In a challenging economic environment, “we want to enhance our performance by supplying fruitier wines that are better suited to consumer tastes”. The winery is therefore mindful to “produce more appetising wines, with greater palatability”. Queille has noticed that “sales of generic Bordeaux are falling faster than those of AOC Blaye”, and stresses that “we are striving to grow our share of exports to offset the decline”. From a logistics perspective, “we are struggling to secure dry goods supplies but are staying ahead of the curve with inventories, bottling the wines as soon as we receive the bottles and attempting to develop bulk wines to expedite cash flow”. Decisions like these are now managed by Caroline Bru, Alliance Bourg’s managing director who joined the team at the beginning of 2022.

### CHÂTEAU LES BERTRANDS: “THE FARTHER AWAY YOU GO, THE LESS COMPETITION THERE IS”

This family-owned property is located in Reignac, straddling the Blaye Côtes de Bordeaux and Bordeaux appellations. “My father took over the estate in the 1960s”, explains Laurent Dubois. After joining the property in 1993, Dubois chose to develop exports because “I realised that the farther away you go, the less competition there is”.

## BORDEAUX DECRYPTION

MATURING A BATCH OF BLAYE CÔTES DE BORDEAUX AT THE ALLIANCE  
BOURG CO-OPERATIVE WINERY



CHÂTEAU LES BERTRANDS



## BORDEAUX DECRYPTION

Gradually, the share of his export shipments, particularly to China where he marketed nearly 40% of his wines, increased.

In 2020, however, things changed when “the pandemic led to an 80% drop in this share”. This failed to put a dent in his determination to stay ahead of the curve in the international arena, where he had already secured many markets. “We turned to Western Africa where Bordeaux is still popular, as long you sell appealing bottles, made out of heavy glass and sporting attractive labels”.

Dubois is fully aware that “these markets are not looking for high-end wines” and so he orchestrates and segments his entire winemaking process “to create a broad range of wines and therefore price brackets geared to the needs of different consumers”. Although he admits that “the cost of heavy glass has increased and has forced us to squeeze some of our profit margins”, he can continue to pride himself on having maintained a sizeable share of exports, “in the range of 65%” of sales.

THE THREE GENERATIONS OF THE DUBOIS FAMILY IN THE BARREL CELLAR  
AT CHÂTEAU LES BERTRANDS



## BORDEAUX DECRYPTION

### CHÂTEAU HAUT-GRELOT: “YOU HAVE TO EVOLVE, CHANGE AND ADAPT”

At Château Haut-Grelot, Julien Bonneau is the fourth-generation incumbent at the helm of the property where “my father Joël developed vineyards”. It was also his father who, in the 1980s, developed direct-to-consumer sales in France followed by exports”. The young winegrower is now building on his father’s work, mindful that “you mustn’t put all your eggs in the same basket and need to diversify markets”.

He admits that the pandemic did not facilitate exports, especially as the Chinese market had already suffered a downturn since the turn of the 2000s and had “fallen out of love with Bordeaux”. But he says that it did “significantly promote sales to private customers”.

Getting sales back on track, however, is challenging, as it is for everyone. To stand out from the crowd, he is convinced that he must “make different wines that match my customers’ needs better”. IGP Atlantique affords him greater freedom than the appellations, although the majority of his wines are labelled Blaye. He markets 14 different labels across the three colours, “and even an orange wine”.

“You have to evolve, change and adapt”, admits Julien who feels that in this climate, “the identity of my estate is stronger than the appellation”. He is therefore focusing on “diversifying, not just my products but also their distribution channels”.

### CHÂTEAU HAUT BEYNAT: “ENERGISING DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER SALES”

Set in the vineyards of AOC Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux, “the property has been in my family since 1840”, recounts Florence Cardoso, who took over the reins of the estate with her husband Paul in 1996, “to do a job involving passion and to meet people”. But with the turn of the century, “we had to produce high volumes to generate economies

JULIEN BONNEAU, TAKING UP THE TORCH AT THE FAMILY-RUN HAUT-GRELOT



CHÂTEAU HAUT-GRELOT



THE VINEYARDS AT CHÂTEAU HAUT-GRELOT



CHÂTEAU HAUT BEYNAT, A FAMILY-RUN PROPERTY IN THE HANDS OF THE CARDOSO FAMILY



## BORDEAUX DECRYPTION

THE VINEYARDS AT CHÂTEAU HAUT BEYNAT



GUILLAUME RAYMOND, THE OWNER OF CHÂTEAU BOIS DES GRAVES



of scale and the techniques to achieve this made us slaves to the treadmill of our land, and we lost all sense of purpose". In 2013, hail destroyed all of the estate's fruit. Whilst the couple teetered on the brink of throwing in the towel, they met "some amazing people" who, each in their own way, gave them a helping hand. Florence never takes without giving back and she therefore became involved in the Solidarité Paysans mutual help for farmers association, becoming its chair before launching the SOS Vignerons Sinistrés association for disaster-stricken winegrowers. The couple got back in the saddle, but had "no intention of carrying on in the same way. So we reduced the size of our vineyard to 7 hectares".

In 2021, I stumbled across a call for projects called 'Slow Tourism Wave II' and I applied". Cardoso was confident that this was the right way to "make my property meaningful again by welcoming people and creating a circular economy". It proved to be a beneficial way of "energising direct-to-consumer sales and generating customer loyalty".

### CHÂTEAU BOIS DES GRAVES: "THE AOC MODEL HAS RUN OUT OF STEAM"

In Saint-Ciers de Canesse, Château Bois des Graves produces wines under the Côtes de Bourg, Blaye Côtes de Bordeaux and Bordeaux appellations.

In 2017, Guillaume Raymond took over this family-run company, "whose vineyard extended over 28 hectares". As the clay-silt soils "produce wines that no longer match what consumers are looking for", he bought "14 hectares more on red gravel soils, which yield more aromatic, finer wines".

At the time, 98% of the wines were sold in bulk. "Starting in 2018, sales plummeted and the price had dropped so much that we could no longer cover our production overheads". Although he is committed to "keeping the family heritage going", he admits that "it is becoming very challenging to adapt from one year to the next without knowing where we are heading". Having reached the conclusion that "we are nearing the limits of a system that



THE VINEYARDS AT  
CHÂTEAU BOIS DES GRAVES

does not take into consideration the constraints faced by winegrowers”, he decided to join the Tutiac co-operative winery in 2022. Here, he appreciates the “conversations with member growers” and the fact that “our production is segmented based on the needs voted in advance”, offering “better visibility over the long term”. He sells “between 1,500 and 2,000 hectolitres” of Blaye appellation wines a year.

## SUMMING UP

Over a fifteen-year period, the extensive Côtes de Bordeaux group of appellations has successfully positioned itself as a major player on the Bordeaux wine scene, forging an incredible reputation both nationally and internationally. When put to the test of a volatile marketplace, however, collective strength is only relevant if producers adapt to multiple constraints that go beyond purely economic market pressures. After leveraging the potential of their vineyard sites, producers are fully aware that the issue now is to rise above the identity of these appellations, which can be divisive. Hence, all of the producers we met clearly voiced their determination to diversify, not only their product ranges, but also their markets and distribution channels.

In a bid to thrive, some of them have even completely upended their business model, with the conviction that the future will be brighter for those whose individual identity is stronger than the image conveyed by a wine region or appellation. Whatever the choice, all of them are determined to fully grasp the opportunities for economic recovery that await them.