

HOW BORDEAUX IS SAVING ITS GLOBALLY RENOWNED HERITAGE

BY CAMILLE BERNARD
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In France's Bordeaux wine region, a sea-change is occurring. Faced with an unprecedented crisis worsened by Covid-19 and overproduction, the winegrowers of Bordeaux are navigating through choppy waters. However, financial difficulties and the need for innovation are galvanising both brands and chateaux into action in a bid to reshape the future of the wine market.

A BOTTLING LINE AT YVON MAU FACILITIES IN GIRONDE-SUR-DROPT



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LEFT TO RIGHT, BROTHERS CÉSAR AND CHARLES LARRAQUÉ, CO-FOUNDERS OF CHARLES & CÉSAR

Bordeaux, the historic epicentre of the global wine industry, is going through turbulent times. The recent pandemic has had a considerable impact on the wine market, with restaurant closures both in France and abroad leading to plummeting sales.

Coupled with the closure of the all-important Chinese market and chronic overproduction, this situation has plunged nearly one third of Bordeaux winegrowers into severe financial difficulties. Last July, an aid plan was rolled out so that nearly 10,000 hectares under vine could be ripped up, which gives an accurate indication of the extent of the crisis.

In this challenging environment, shipping companies and individual winegrowers – the pillars of this long-standing wine region – are not idly standing by, but are redoubling their efforts to adapt and reinvent themselves.

Their quest reveals a striking range of strategies, with some of them opting to spread their geographical net further and explore emerging markets that show a thirst for quality wines. Others are focusing on range extensions, introducing innovative bottlings or revamping their winemaking techniques to appeal to a younger, more cosmopolitan audience. The aim is two-fold – this is not just about weathering the current storm, but also laying the foundations for a more resilient and prosperous future for the Bordeaux wine industry.



THE 'BEAUX PARLEURS' BRAND DISTRIBUTED AT A 'BEAUX PARLEURS NIGHT TOUR' IN BORDEAUX

CHARLES & CÉSAR: MORE THAN JUST BREAKING WITH CONVENTIONS

Established in 2020 by brothers Charles and César Larraqué, the Charles & César trading company offers an innovative and enterprising take on the Bordeaux wine arena. Since the outset, Charles and César Larraqué have been convinced of the need to appeal to a younger audience that is all too often ignored. They had an eye for an emerging trend and their company soon carved out a place for itself in the Bordeaux wine market. The elder of the two brothers and co-founder, Charles Larraqué, recounts: "Our aim was to address young consumers, a segment the wine market tends to neglect when it is urgent to find solutions to the lack of renewal of the customer base". Right off the bat, the brothers created Beaux Parleurs, a brand that directly targets young people. And to ensure the brand met with success, the pair implemented a strategy which might seem self-evident but is often underestimated: "We aimed to distribute our product in the right place, the space where young people live like student parties". This is not just a marketing strategy, as Larraqué stresses: "Faced with current competition from beer, we need to acknowledge the importance of pure players for these drinks [Ed. beers] which, twenty years ago, successfully captured the attention of young people. It is therefore essential that the wine industry become a huge magnet for these consumers by making wine fashionable".

Charles & César has undeniably blazed the trail – three years after it was founded, its revenue has reached a very respectable 9 million euros. "Beaux Parleurs has become our biggest brand with sales of 650,000 bottles a year in France", points out Larraqué,



ALL THE VINEYARDS BELONGING TO BORDEAUX VINEAM ARE FARMED ORGANICALLY AND BIODYNAMICALLY

who also stresses the importance of the rosé and white cocktail range. The flavoured wine-based drinks, that take their cue from the mixology space, have also helped get more young people on board and enter the wine segment.

Concurrently with this, Charles & César has a premium wine trading business encapsulated in their Cachemire range, "which illustrates our expertise in winemaking", explains Larraqué, adding: "We work with a cherry-picked selection of properties that are chosen for the quality of their wine and the way they dovetail with our values".

With more than one string to its bow, Charles & César has successfully coped with the challenging situation. "Because of the pandemic, we focused primarily on super/hypermarkets which now account for 90% of our business", recounts Larraqué. The strategy has enabled the brand to remain sustainable and to continue to grow, including overseas where prospects are promising in Belgium and the Ivory Coast.

The Larraqué brothers are appealing to the entire industry to renew its customer base and do more than just think outside the box: "Bordeaux still holds a 40% market share. We are convinced that renewal will come from our region", claims Larraqué.

BORDEAUX VINEAM: DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH QUALITY AND CERTIFICATION

Founded a decade or so ago, Bordeaux Vineam, which is managed by Jean-Baptiste Soula, has undergone a radical transformation. As a producer of organic and biodynamic Bordeaux wines initially focused on bulk sales, the group has made a significant strategic

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BORDEAUX VINEAM HAS CHOSEN TO STAND OUT FOR ITS INTRINSIC QUALITY



CHÂTEAU ROCHER BELLEVUE, OWNED BY BORDEAUX VINEAM IN AOC CASTILLON CÔTES DE BORDEAUX



shift towards bottle-only sales, choosing to stand out not for its image but for the intrinsic quality of its products.

Jean-Baptiste Soula, managing director of Bordeaux Vineam, expounds further: “When I talk about the product, I only talk about the wine. We have sought to become more professional and secure multiple certifications to reach this level of quality”.

This is not just idle marketing talk – the company’s strategy has led to dual certification, both for the products and the system. “In terms of product certification, the group’s six properties in Aquitaine are certified organic and biodynamic. We also produce sulphite-free wines and even wines that are certified organic by Chinese standards, which is extremely rare considering the stringency of the criteria”, explains Soula, adding: “For our system certification, we have introduced ISO 9001 and 14001 standards which guarantee good corporate practice and make us more professional at risk management”.

This strategy has enabled Bordeaux Vineam to stand out in the international marketplace, especially in Asia and the United States where large companies value these certifications greatly. “Exports are a key market for us, particularly Asia and the United States which are interested in our certifications and our sulphite-free wines. In Europe, the situation is different. The estate wines are popular, especially for Sauternes, Médoc and Côtes de Bordeaux”.

Ultimately, Bordeaux Vineam’s vision, which places quality at the core of the company’s strategy, demonstrates that innovation and adaptability are essential for securing shelf stand-out in the competitive world of wine. “Our aim is not just to sell a product but a service”, concludes Jean-Baptiste Soula.

MAISON BOUEY: “TO GENERATE DEMAND, YOU NEED FINE-TUNED MARKETING LEVERS”

Founded over 200 years ago in the Médoc, Maison Bouey exemplifies a story of passion for wine. Its CEO, Jacques Bouey, embodies the sixth generation of this family heritage.



IN EUROPE, BORDEAUX VINEAM ACHIEVES SUCCESS WITH ITS ESTATE WINES



BORDEAUX VINEAM PRODUCES ORGANIC WINES COMPLYING WITH CHINESE STANDARDS



YANN BOUEY, REPRESENTING THE SEVENTH GENERATION AT MAISON BOUEY, MANAGES THE EXPORT DEPARTMENT FOR THE FAMILY-RUN TRADING COMPANY

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“Our adventure in wine began with my grandfather Roger in 1958 and each generation has built upon it”, explains Bouey. The present-day company balances its business between France and export markets.

Maison Bouey is more than just a trading company – one of its defining features is its independently run wineries. This fairly rare occurrence makes it noteworthy, with the wineries managing every aspect from sourcing the wines through to their distribution. “Few negociants have this type of industry activity”, confirms Bouey.

As the owner of 52 hectares in the Médoc, Maison Bouey draws on its own vineyards to define its market strategy: “The land is our cornerstone”, claims Bouey, adding, “We are not only proud of our identity as land owners but also our identity as a family full of life, which I embody but so does my nephew Yann who is in charge of exports”.

Sporting modern labels, the premium wines marketed under the Famille Bouey brand mirror this fusion of tradition and modernity.

Maison Bouey also develops innovative concepts such as Colors, in conjunction with Pantone, which enables it to tap into multiple grocery outlets in France and to grow its sales in export markets where it has resonated with consumers in the United States, Japan and Africa. “To generate demand, you need fine-tuned marketing levers. To start with, you need to understand that there is a gap between mature and developing markets. The mature markets – the northern belt of Europe and the French on-trade – is tired of traditional Bordeaux. Demand has therefore shifted and the wine requires a new

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LEFT TO RIGHT, JACQUES, SERGE, YANN AND PATRICK BOUEY, A FAMILY THAT IS FULL OF LIFE



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JACQUES BOUEY IS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT NEW MARKET OPPORTUNITIES



THE PREMISES OF TRADING COMPANY SAVAS ARE HOUSED IN A MAGNIFICENT MANOR HOUSE IN CAUDÉRAN



interpretation. As for the developing markets – places like South Korea, Japan and Africa – they are plunging into modernity at full tilt and we are definitely seeing a resurgence in consumption of the traditional styles of Bordeaux we used to produce ten years ago”.

At the same time, Bouey comments that in France, the biggest Bordeaux wine drinkers are aged between 50 and 70 and they want the reassurance that comes with traditional wines. “Basically, you have to adapt”, concludes Bouey, who is fairly optimistic about new market opportunities that he can see emerging in these troubled times.

SAVAS: THE BORDEAUX WINE REVOLUTION IN AN ERA OF GLOBALISATION

Since it was established in 1975, Savas – a trading company specialising in brand creation – has transitioned from being a local cash & carry to becoming a major player in the international wine market.

“Our story began at the Les Capucins market in Bordeaux”, explains Savas’ marketing manager Antonin Fenniche. The company has since then established a reputation among wholesalers and major retailers with exports now accounting for 90% of its revenue. Its wines are marketed in over twenty countries.

Savas has successfully conquered key international markets, primarily the United States, Asia and the United Kingdom by establishing partnerships with renowned distributors. “Our wines are on the shelves of high-profile retailers like Trader Joe’s, Costco and Whole Foods in the United States and we are also active in French super/hypermarkets”, adds Fenniche.

The company has also developed extensive expertise for on-trade professionals and for marketing Grands Crus, both in France and internationally. Its strategy aims to consolidate its traditional markets whilst exploring new opportunities in Asia and Europe. But one of Savas’ USPs in a competitive marketplace is its expertise in sour-



GÉRALDINE LEFEBVRE-LOPEZ,
THE OWNER OF VIGNOBLES LOPEZ

cing bulk and brokering bottled deals, combined with a complete range of solutions for marketing customisation. “We provide our buyers with an extensive choice of options, from creating artwork to customising packaging, whilst also ensuring excellent value for money”, claims the company’s marketing manager.

Savas is constantly adapting to changing consumer preferences and market trends. Its range encompasses both AOC Bordeaux in various styles and more specific Pauillac, Saint-Émilion Grand Cru and Sauternes labels for instance. “Bordeaux is still the mainstay of our range but we are constantly innovating to meet a variety of needs”. The company also thinks outside the classic formats by introducing bag-in-boxes, cans and alcohol-free wines. As the owner of Château Gromel Bel Air in the Bordeaux Supérieur appellation, Savas, under Cyrille Roche’s management, supervises the entire production process, from the vineyard through to the bottle. “Our dual function as a negotiant and property owner offers a testament to our wholehearted commitment to the Bordeaux wine arena”, concludes Fenniche with unmistakable pride.

VIGNOBLES LOPEZ: COMBINING INNOVATION WITH A RESPECT FOR TRADITION

In a wine region that is often accused of not knowing how to reinvent itself, the track record of Géraldine Lefebvre-Lopez and Vignobles Lopez in fact demonstrates a remarkable ability to adapt faced with a constantly changing marketplace. After taking over the family’s legacy, which began in 1963, Lefebvre-Lopez has established a reputation as a leading light in the revival of the Bordeaux wine scene. Admittedly, she has worked hard, taking over the family-run winery in 2009 after excelling as a student followed by a rewarding career experience in Spain. At the winery, she has converted the vineyards over to organic, developed export sales and refocused on bottled wine sales. “When I took over the reins, our wines were mostly sold in bulk. I chose to rise to the challenge of selling our wines in bottles and the initiative has paid off”, explains

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Lefebvre-Lopez. By 2011, she was already introducing innovations such as customised labels and bespoke liveries for her customers, a strategy that bolstered the presence of her Château Lagrugère and Château de l'Hermitage brands internationally (see issue n°24).

Despite their greatest efforts, the Lopez family's resilience has been seriously put to the test by climate change since 2017. "We have had to cope with challenging vintages, with crop losses of up to 50%", laments Lefebvre-Lopez.

Although seriously affected, she and her husband Olivier – who joined her at the family-run winery in 2020 – have refused to give up and have launched new initiatives aimed at diversifying their range and appealing to an even broader audience. "We have introduced single varietals, including 100% Sémillon and 100% Petit Verdot labels to set ourselves apart from classic Bordeaux".

Meanwhile, the winegrower's ability to promote her wines has also borne fruit on the international stage: "The gold medals awarded to Château Lagrugère and Château de l'Hermitage bolstered our positions in demanding markets such as China", she explains, whilst also pointing out that after coming to a total standstill for six months, exports are off to a lukewarm start.

CÉRALDINE LEFEBVRE-LOPEZ AND HER HUSBAND OLIVIER LEFEBVRE



The Lopez family has also refocused its efforts on the French market, choosing as primary targets direct-to-consumer sales and the on-trade.

Lefebvre-Lopez's objective is now clear: "We aim to increase the share of direct-to-consumer sales, which already account for 25% of our business, and develop our range of wine tourism solutions".

YVON MAU: REINVENTING TRADITION BY ADAPTING TO YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Founded in 1897, trading company Yvon Mau is a pillar of the Bordeaux wine industry. "Four successive generations of the Mau family have run the company, each one adding its own contribution", explains

Frédérique Lenoir, marketing and communications director at Freixenet Gratien, the French subsidiary of international group Henkell Freixenet.

When Yvon Mau was bought by Freixenet at the turn of the 2000s, then Freixenet merged with Henkell in 2019, the company became Freixenet Gratien. The change marked a new era for Yvon Mau, although its production facilities in Gironde-sur-Dropt remained the same, thereby safeguarding its traditional expertise.

In the face of market challenges, adds Lenoir, "we conducted a complete revamp of the Yvecourt brand, established over 45 years ago, after realising that most of our customers were over 60". Yvon Mau thus decided to radically reposition the brand, whilst also staying true to its roots. The strapline "ever popular" was chosen to illustrate the transition, combining modernity and heritage. Wines under the Yvecourt brand, renowned for their consistent flavours and quality, were re-launched with a contemporary design that also featured a nod to the history of Yvon Mau. Alongside this, the Premium brand, distributed in France and export markets, now targets thirty-somethings keen to enjoy "off-beat, accessible Bordeaux".

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THE WINERY AT YVON MAU



LE-SITE-D-EXPLOITATION-D-YVON-MAU-A-GIRONDE-SUR-DROPT



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THE EXPERTISE OF YVON MAU REMAINS UNCHANGED

Whilst these two brands have, to date, generated fairly positive results in their respective markets, the trading side of the business is faced with more challenging issues to overcome. Lenoir explains: “Our business in this segment bears no relationship with the Yvecourt and Premius brands where the target is more buyers ‘with their heads down’, meaning consumers where the style of the label is fairly irrelevant and the quality in the glass is what matters”. Despite the downward trend in sales of Bordeaux wines, Lenoir remains optimistic: “Initial feedback following the Yvecourt brand revamp is encouraging, even though we won’t get proper confirmation until the start of 2024. Export markets are also showing promising signs, particularly the American market”. Lenoir concludes by saying that “Bordeaux is still an incredible brand name, equivalent to Champagne in terms of prestige. But what we now need to work on is the Grands Crus image which is not the same as that of winegrowers who get their hands dirty and deserve to see their work recognised just as much”.

BORDEAUX IS STARTING TO BOUNCE BACK

Despite an unprecedented crisis, Bordeaux continues to offer an element of surprise, move forward and generate appeal, confirming its unrivalled place on the global wine stage. Faced with present-day challenges, Bordeaux winegrowers and negociants show a remarkable ability to reinvent themselves.

The variety of strategies implemented, ranging from creating brands targeting a younger audience to exploring new international markets, illustrates the vitality and resilience of Bordeaux and proves that despite the economic and climate challenges, its potential for innovation and quality is still impressive. So no, we certainly haven’t heard the last of Bordeaux!