



Olivier Bernard

## THE SHINING KNIGHT, RED AND WHITE, OF GRAVES

**Stephen Brook** describes the people, place and techniques behind one of the world's greatest whites and one of its most underrated reds



This article originally appeared in Issue 7 of *The World of Fine Wine* magazine. The article may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

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Claude Ricard inherited the celebrated Graves estate Domaine de Chevalier in 1948, at the age of 21, abandoning a potential career as a classical pianist in order to take over the reins. But music still pervaded the domaine when Ricard was in charge. On my first visit to Chevalier in the 1980s, the other guests were two flamenco guitarists. There was music – and there was astonishing wine. Over lunch the wines were served blind, a mixture of acclaimed and despised vintages, but there was often little in terms of quality to divide them.

Yet, by this time, Ricard was no longer the owner. In 1983, that perennial French problem of squabbling heirs made the sale of Chevalier inevitable. The purchaser was the Bernard family, better known for the brandy they produced than for wine. Olivier Bernard, at the age of 23, was installed as new co-director of the domaine. Remarkably, Claude Ricard stayed in place, and the two men worked amicably together until Ricard gracefully bowed out in 1988. In the 20-odd years that have passed since Olivier Bernard's arrival, he has enhanced the reputation of Chevalier even further but did nothing to change the wines' character. Chevalier remains Chevalier.

The estate itself is physically unremarkable. Located just northwest of Léognan in the corner of what is today the Pessac-Léognan appellation, the vines stretch in a barely undulating mass from the road to the modest château and less modest winery. And just beyond the buildings, and fringing the vineyards themselves, are the surly pinelands of the Landes, which ripple from here to the wild Atlantic shore. There were vines here from the 1770s, but the estate began to win recognition after the Ricard family bought it in 1865 and expanded the property to 15 hectares. Claude Ricard proved an exemplary steward, installing drainage in 1962 and initiating a policy of selective harvesting normally reserved for sweet wines such as Sauternes.

Today there are some 35ha under vine, of which only five are white. The red vines are planted to 64 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon, 30 per cent Merlot, 3 per cent Cabernet Franc and (making its debut in 2003) 3 per cent Petit Verdot. The white vines are 70 per cent Sauvignon Blanc and 30 per cent Semillon. They are planted to a density of 10,000 vines per hectare, which may be routine in the Médoc but is still very much the exception in the Graves. Domaine de Chevalier is not organic, but close: the soil is ploughed, no herbicides are used and any fertilisers used are organic rather than chemical. The soil is gravelly black sand of up to 1m (3ft) in depth, over a rich subsoil of clay mixed with sandstone. Yields range from 30 to 40 hectolitres per hectare (hl/ha) in an average vintage. The main problem posed by the location is frost: wind machines and smudge-pots are clearly visible in the vineyard. The surrounding woodlands shelter the vines, which is an advantage, but also make them more susceptible to frost.

Despite the seeming homogeneity of the vineyard, there can be astonishing variations in maturation – as much as 15 days even within the same parcel. This is why the white-grape harvest can be spread over three weeks, with teams of harvesters returning to the same parcel up to five times. Defective bunches are removed; only fully ripe bunches are picked. To the best of my knowledge, no other domaine in Bordeaux, other than in Sauternes, practises this degree of selective harvesting for a dry wine. Grapes are picked on flavour and acidity levels, with pickers being exhorted

to bring in only bunches that are fully ripe. Excessive acidity needs to be kept at bay.

'Claude Ricard told me that in 1982 the vineyards were almost devastated by a frost in May,' recalls Olivier Bernard. 'All the affected bunches were removed, and what was eventually harvested was in effect the second crop, which of course lagged far behind in terms of maturation. The quantity harvested – a mere 7hl/ha – seemed ripe but, in fact, was so acidic that the wine was undrinkable for ten years.' Well, not quite. I drank it in 1988, remarking on its high acidity and lack of roundness, but it was still a satisfying glass.

Such exacting procedures in the vineyard are very labour-intensive and, inevitably, costly. In 1991, a difficult year, the pickers spent 1,100 hours per hectare harvesting grapes.

Chevalier is far better equipped now than it was in Ricard's day. Bernard built a superb circular winery lined with stainless-steel tanks. When the grapes, red or white, arrive at the winery, they are sorted on a *tapis de triage*, and since 1999 the reds have been sorted a second time after destemming. There is no skin contact for the white grapes, which are pressed directly. Bernard likes their fermentation to start at around 18°C (64.4°F), so he chills the newly filled barrels in a cold chamber. There can be as many as 120 barrels, each of which is handled individually. Thus, if chaptalisation is required, each barrel is assessed and treated separately. Fermentation begins slowly with natural yeasts, and there is no malolactic fermentation. In the 1980s the wine would have spent only around five weeks on the lees, but today it remains in contact with the lees with *bâtonnage* for around 12 months. The risk of this procedure is that the wine can become too plump and broad, but the naturally high acidity of the Chevalier white means that, in practice, that is rarely a problem. And when the risk is high, as in 2003, the wine is taken off the lees much earlier.

White Chevalier remains in oak for around 18 months, far longer than most other white Bordeaux. But Olivier Bernard and his technical director Thomas Stonestreet are keen to avoid any overt oakiness in the wine. The purpose of this long oak-ageing is to give the wines weight, structure and texture, not woody flavours. The barrels are only lightly toasted, and the proportion of new oak does not exceed 30 per cent (although in the early 1990s the proportion was a bit higher). The barrels are often soaked in hot water before leaving the cooperage so as to get rid of any bitterness residing in the staves.

For some years, Chevalier has employed two distinguished consultants: Professor Denis Dubourdieu of Bordeaux University, and Stéphane Derenoncourt, who earned his spurs at Canon-la-Gaffelière and La Mondotte. Dubourdieu no doubt surveys and maintains the classical purity of the white wine, but Derenoncourt has encouraged non-Bordelais practices such as *pigeage* for the red wine. Walkways above the steel tanks facilitate manual punching down, which, Bernard is convinced, breaks up and moistens the floating cap more evenly than any other method. Another feature of the red wine, since 1996, is that the must is mechanically concentrated to reduce the volume by between 3 and 10 per cent. This concentration is done with extreme care, since any negative characteristics in the must, such as vegetal aromas, will be concentrated, too. Because of the expansion of the vineyard in 1989, and the replanting of various parcels, the average age of the red vines is only around 20 years. This paucity





The estate is located just northwest of Léognan, where the consistency and purity of the wines reflects the primacy of the terroir

of very old vines justifies the use of concentration to increase the grip and structure of the wine and can increase the potential alcohol of some parcels of Cabernet Sauvignon from around 11.5% to 12%. There is no pumping of the must into the tanks. The fermentation is quite prolonged, at up to around 32°C (89.6°F) in temperature. After pressing, the wine is aged around 18 months in roughly 50 per cent new oak, with about 30 per cent of the malolactic fermentation taking place in new barrels. There is usually a light fining and filtration before bottling.

Less than half the production finds its way into the *grand vin*, the rest being released under the second label of L'Esprit de Chevalier. This, too, is explained by the relative youth of the vineyards. Any wine that seems in any way dilute or stringy or vegetal is swiftly declassified – which is not to say that L'Esprit rightly exhibits those characters!

Comparing reds and whites

If the white wine is widely acclaimed as one of the great dry white wines of the world, the red is often underrated. The high proportion of Cabernet, the marginal and youthful vineyards that require ruthless attention to ensure the grapes ripen fully, mean that red Chevalier is rarely a big, powerful wine. In its youth it is delicate and fine, sometimes austere, yet it somehow takes on weight and flesh as it ages. When I tasted, blind, a half-bottle of deeply coloured red at the château, I placed it in the 1970s. It was 1955. Any notion that red Chevalier is a light or insubstantial wine is without foundation.

The white remains astonishing. It has twice been my privilege to participate in vertical tastings of this wine: first in London in 1988, and more recently at the château, where 26 vintages were tasted blind by the technical staff and a few invited journalists. Just one elderly wine was unsatisfactory: the somewhat oxidised 1981. The other 25 were at the very least good, and most of them were exceptional, even from tricky vintages. Nor was there any rupture or stylistic change in the 1980s, when the château was changing hands. In their youth, the vines can be racy and citric, but it's after 15 or 20 years that white Chevalier really comes into

its own. The minerality remains, but the aromas evolve. There are stone-fruit aromas, a toastiness and smokiness that aren't oak-derived, sometimes a nuttiness, a complete absence of hollowness on the palate, a harmonious balance between fruit and the ever-present acidity, and an extraordinary length of flavour. Although the degree of human intervention is considerable – think of those harvesters patrolling the same rows over and over again! – there is never any sense that these wines have been manipulated. Their purity and stylistic consistency are abundant proof that, here at least, it is the terroir that is speaking.

At lunch after the tasting, Olivier Bernard, as hospitable a host as his predecessor, rather baffled his mostly Bordelais guests by serving, blind, two 1985 Bâtard-Montrachets with the first course. Then four red glasses appeared. There was a flurry of guesswork, including the correct supposition that they were all 1985 Bordeaux. Names of first growths flew through the air (mostly the wrong ones, it turned out). Three of the wines were Latour, Mouton, and Margaux. The fourth was Chevalier. Only one person had chosen what turned out to be Chevalier as his favourite of the four, but no matter. The red Chevalier did not pale in comparison with its august cousins from the Médoc, even if it couldn't quite match them in terms of finesse and poise. If the red has rivals, and more successful ones, the white Chevalier has peers, perhaps, but no evident superiors among the white wines of Bordeaux – or, one is seriously tempted to suggest, France.

TASTING NOTES

After each vintage I have added the year in which I last tasted the wine.

Whites

**2003** (2005) Opulent peachy nose, but atypical Chevalier. Likewise, the broad, lush palate, yet it's not slack or lacking in minerality. **16**  
**2002** (2005) Discreet nose, citric, pears. Very fresh, tight, ripe acidity with a mineral edge, terrific concentration and balance; great potential. Classic. **18**

**2001** (2005) Smoky, herbal nose. Good attack, spicy, sumptuous, but mineral, highly concentrated and very long. **18**  
**2000** (2005) Fresh nose, pears. Lean, zesty, oaky, white pepper; seems to have retreated into a shell. **16**  
**1999** (2005) Floral nose, lanolin. Clean, lively, upfront; less complex and mineral than expected. **16**  
**1998** (2005) Rich, toasty, apricot nose. Fresh and zesty and surprisingly forward; lacks some density but very enjoyable. **16**  
**1997** (2000) Rounded, spicy, quite complex, with good acidity and length. **16**  
**1996** (2005) Waxy nose, apricot purée. Forceful, very concentrated, exuberant, lively and mineral. Good length. **17**  
**1995** (2005) Toasty, stony, nutty aromas. Austere, powerful, very concentrated and youthful. **18**  
**1994** (2005) Stylish nose, apricots and pears. Fine attack, tight and quite oaky, exemplary finesse if not overtly fruity. Very good length. **18**  
**1993** (2000) Spicy, elegant nose. Broad, creamy, nutty, with a vigorous finish. **16**  
**1992** (2005) Inexpressive, waxy nose. Spicy, tight and youthful; fine acidity but lacks some flesh. **17**  
**1991** (2005) Powerful, toasty, white-peach nose. Fresh and lively, toasty, yet lacks some excitement. **16**  
**1990** (2005) Rich, peachy, nutty nose. Fresh, luminous, elegant, very mineral; classic and long. **17.5**  
**1989** (2005) Ripe stone fruits and almonds nose. Robust, mineral, powerful; has weight and depth. **18**  
**1988** (2005) Apricot-purée nose, oaky. Rich, forceful, concentrated, yet fleshy and long. **17**  
**1987** (2005) Reserved nose. Full-bodied and lush, supple and succulent, with good length. **16.5**  
**1986** (2005) Waxy, spicy nose, apricots and pears. Lean, stylish and concentrated, with a long oaky finish. Yet slightly neutral. **17**  
**1985** (2005) Discreet, tangy, toasty nose. Medium-bodied, but fresh and persistent, with fine extract and a mineral finish. **17**  
**1984** (2005) Exquisite aromatic nose. Good attack, quite oaky, harmonious acidity, grapefruity; excellent balance and very long. **18**  
**1983** (2005) Youthful lemony nose. Tight, oaky acidity gives freshness and a long citric finish. Still youthful. **17**  
**1982** (2005) Brioche nose, very elegant. Not that rich but elegant and assertive, if a touch lean. **17.5**  
**1979** (2005) Waxy apricot and gingerbread nose, a touch of honey. Rich, supple, discreet; lacks some weight and power but well balanced and fresh. Good length. **16.5**  
**1978** (2005) Powerful, toasty nose, classic, lightly honeyed. Very concentrated, pungent, spicy, vibrant; tremendous vigour. **17.5**  
**1975** (2005) Spicy nose, apricot, apples. Rather lean, lacks fruit; finishes flat and hard. **14.5**  
**1970** (2005) Rich waxy nose, dried apricot. Fairly rich but has angular acidity, losing some fruit and complexity. **15.5**  
**1941** (1996) Elegant, honeyed nose. Rich, rather dried out and austere but full of extract, even honeyed; still has some life and length. **17**

Reds

**2003** (2005) Dense, oaky nose. Supple, lush, quite tannic, hefty fruit; well balanced despite modest acidity and length. **16.5**  
**2002** (2005) Sweet if muted nose. Rich, juicy, supple, concentrated, with fine acidity and length. **17.5**  
**2001** (2005) Rich, oaky, powerful nose, blackcurrant. Lush, succulent, concentrated and delicious; stylish and balanced. **17.5**  
**2000** (2005) Fleshy, smoky aromas. On the palate the spiciness and fine acidity brighten the supple texture; forward, but taut and long. **17.5**  
**1998** (2005) Discreetly oaky nose. Sumptuous and suave, concentrated with welcome spiciness and a long savoury finish. **16.5**  
**1995** (2000) Very elegant, red-fruits nose. Medium-bodied but finely balanced, with delicious fruit and supple tannins. **16.5**  
**1990** (1998) Rich, oaky nose. Soft and silky. Perhaps lacks some grip and depth – yet persistent. **16.5**  
**1989** (2005) Rich nose, tobacco and cloves. Tight, concentrated, smoky, spicy, yet discreet and stylish, with exceptional length. **17.5**  
**1985** (2005) Ripe, opulent nose, a bit meaty. Intense, even peppery; good acidity, yet lacks some finesse. **16.5**  
**1983** (2003) Delicate raspberry and blackcurrant nose. Lean, redcurranty. Quite high acidity gives freshness, but mature. **16**  
**1979** (2003) Firm, somewhat earthy Graves nose. Rich, but elegant and graceful, with fine tannins and good length. **16**  
**1978** (2000) Light but sweet and graceful nose. Medium-bodied. Somewhat ethereal now but still has some vigour and length. **16**  
**1970** (2000) Sweet, cedary nose. Rich, even robust, concentrated and elegant, holding up very well. **17**  
**1955** (2005) Tobacco-scented nose. Concentrated, opulent. Still retains fine acidity; savoury finish. Still alive and kicking. **17.5** ■

