

# Philippe Casteja

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France is often spoken of as a two-speed society. On the one hand, there are the '*salariées*' the employees, particularly government, teachers and civil servants, who benefit from a 35 hour week, five weeks holiday, jobs for life, reduced insurance and mortgage costs... and then those who are self-employed, or who work for private enterprises, who seem to fit more into their working lives than the rest of the country put together.

Philippe Casteja falls squarely into this second camp. His day job is as managing director of Borie-Manoux wine merchants, a family *négociant* house since 1882 and one of the last to be family owned and run independently in Bordeaux. But alongside this, at last count, he manages to be owner of eight Bordeaux chateaux both on the Left and Right Bank (including fifth growth Chateau Batailley in Pauillac and premier grand cru classé Chateau Trotte Vielle in Saint Emilion), manager of two more, president of the Conseil de Grands Crus Classés 1855 and president of the French association of wine and spirit exporters (FEVS), taking over from Patrick Ricard, president of the Pernod-Ricard group. Around ten years ago, he was also president of the Bordeaux Wine Council (CIVB).

Despite all of this activity, there is an aura of stillness around Casteja that borders on arrogance. He dresses every inch the English gentleman – checked tweed jacket, handkerchief in top pocket, smartly polished brogues – but his pedigree is Bordeaux aristocracy. Another branch of the family owns the wine merchants Joanne and Chateau Doisy-Vedrines in Sauternes, and the Castejas been involved in wine in the region for several centuries. None of his three children yet work in the family firm, but you get the feeling that, eventually, they will revert to type.

It might be natural reticence that makes him seem reserved, or perhaps it's the result of his work. His role at the FEVS takes him out of Bordeaux, representing the export market for the whole of France in both wines and spirits, and involves lengthy and frequent trips to Brussels. But all of this contact with the EU seems to have left him a little too well versed in diplomacy. No sooner do you draw him into a contentious issue than he corrects himself and offers the counter argument.

Opinions about him are divided. He garners enormous respect, but few people seem to really know him at all – ask among his peers, and you hear the words ‘quiet’, even ‘distant’. He seems intellectual above all else, a sharp and shrewd observer of the scene around him.

The nature of his work gives him a global perspective that is unusual in Bordeaux. ‘This perhaps makes me more optimistic than many people – I’m aware, for examples, of how global wine consumption is growing every year, even while we’re losing drinkers in France, and that gives me hope for the future. But it also makes me more than aware of the problems we face. Currently I’m fighting in the EU for action to help lower the import taxes that India places on wines that can go up to 500%.’

India might well need to take note – in 2005, Casteja was instrumental in the eventual accord between Europe and the US over wine sales; a decision that had been argued about for the previous 20 years. The accord limited the use of names such as Port, Sherry and Champagne in the US that had been seen as semi-generics. While some older producers were still able to use these names, from the point of signing the US undertook to restrict their use in future to wine originating in the EU. Not everyone was pleased, saying that it didn’t go far enough to stop American producers from slapping Champagne on a bottle of Californian sparkling wine, and that worse the accord allowed American companies the right to export wines made in ways that are illegal in the EU, but with a trans-Atlantic wine trade worth over €2 billion a year, it’s a accord that Casteja is proud of, noting at the time that it secured the future exports of European wines.

‘We need to ensure that our wines are reaching the world’s growing markets, and that the quality is right for today’s drinkers. The entry level of wines today is not the same as the entry level of yesterday. We have changed from ‘thirst drinkers’ to ‘pleasure drinkers’ and Bordeaux is well placed to take advantage of this. The new consumer desires are also good news for us – now that we are picking riper we have more fruit and less harsh tannins, but still have lower alcohol due to our climate than the fruit bombs of the new world, meaning that we will always be great food wines.’

We met when both the cru bourgeois and St Emilion classification were in court, being annulled and argued over. Surely this does great harm to Bordeaux’s image abroad? ‘It hasn’t been a speciality of Europe to challenge official decisions. The idea of lawsuits and pursuing complaints through the courts is much more American, but now it seems to have spread to Europe as well. I’m always very sorry when I see things like this that affect the confidence of consumers. It can be very difficult for wine buyers – even in

Bordeaux itself – not knowing what and who to trust.’

‘To date, the changes haven’t affected prices too much, as it’s all too new. But producers are having problems understanding what is allowed and what is forbidden. The Cru Bourgeois classification was the first reworking since 1932, and we will have to wait and see what happens there. But Saint Emilion has worked very well for 50 years, and it would be an enormous shame to see it change. I believe it will carry on despite the challenges.’

‘But I see classification as a specialist problem that only really affects a few elite buyers and drinkers – far more important is the improvement in quality of Bordeaux at all levels, and the success of brands. I believe there will be less small chateaux – brands seem inevitable for the consumer who looks for constant, reliable wine. Offers from other countries are based around brands, and even in Burgundy the négociant houses are basically brands bottling from the different appellations. The word chateaux is certainly glued to Bordeaux, but I believe if you want a wider distribution of high quality Bordeaux, you have to go through the brands. The volumes sold speak for themselves.’

For someone who believes so strongly in brands – and whose own brand, Beau Rivage, is considered one of the most important in the region – it can seem strange to realise that his position as president of the Conseil des Grand Cru Classés 1855 is purely championing the elite chateaux of the region.

‘I really believe that the UGC is of great benefit to Bordeaux, and to France. Alongside haute couture is prêt à porter, and both help each other. The cru classés are a world reference and draw consumers towards French wines.’

‘Almost every advance over the past 50 years that has helped wine all over the world have come from the prestigious growers with the money to investigate. Research into photosynthesis, polyphenols and phenolic ripeness, the work that Emile Peynaud did in oenology and in cellar hygiene – these were all with the classified growers and the information now helps not just the little chateaux in Bordeaux, but winemakers worldwide.’

‘Not all advances are perfect of course – in fact I believe that the idea of over-ripe fruit was a fashion rather than a benefit. People are realising that over ripe is not the answer – ripe but not over ripe. But it was all part of the research. Maybe five years of excess out of a century isn’t so bad. We must remember that Bordeaux is an old area. It’s easy to build a house when you start from scratch, but when you’re remodeling an existing structure, you want modern comforts but they need to be well hidden.’

'This is the challenge for many European growers – to integrate modernism with tradition. We don't want to sell our souls to the devil, and we don't need to fight against each other. I feel assured that many of the great European and New World wines are complementary – I believe that aren't enough great wines in the world, and there is more than enough room for all of us.'

**Philippe Casteja in figures**

Borie Manoux; Employs 54 people, makes 100,000 hectolitres of wine annually, 65% export.

**Owns or manages:**

Chateau Batailley, Pauillac

Chateau Beau Site, St Estephe Cru Bourgeois

Chateau Trotte Vielle, St Emilion 1ere Grand Cru Classé

Chateau Bergat, St Emilion Grand Cru Classé

Chateau Domaine de L'Eglise, Pomerol

Chateau Pignon Lalande, Pomerol

Chateau Lynch Moussas, Pauillac

Chateau Haut Bages Monpelou, Pauillac

Chateau Baret, Pessac Leognan (manages)

Chateau La Croix Ducasse, Pomerol (manages)

Plus brands : Cuvee Borie, Beauroy, Beau Rivage, Port Royal, Chevalier de Lynch.

Berry Bros' Good Ordinary Claret is made by Borie Manoux.