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Durfort-Vivens' transformation



Gonzague Lurton, seen above on the left with technical director Léopold Valentin, has embraced biodynamics and regenerative viticulture, resulting in wines of greater precision, quality and ageability.

One of the Médoc's success stories of recent years has been the rise in form of Margaux second growth Ch Durfort-Vivens. Having searched for the key to unlock the best in his vineyard, owner Gonzague Lurton has finally seen the quality of his wines blossom with a vineyard-wide conversion to biodynamics. Though other factors have contributed to the wines' evolution, there's no denying that since changing viticultural practices, the wines offer more fruit and flavour – and a more recognisable DNA of freshness, fragrance and

finesse – than ever before.

Lurton inherited the property in 1992 after the retirement of his father, Lucien, and walked into something of a baptism by fire: vintage conditions were catastrophic and means so limited that he ended up selling two-thirds of the harvest in bulk, leaving just a third of the crop for the grand vin. In addition, the property had been run during his father's time with an economy of scale befitting the difficult years of the 1960s and 1970s. Facilities were shared with other châteaux in the family stable, machine-harvesting was prevalent and yields maximised. Clearly, there was much for young Gonzague to ponder.

Initial changes in the latter part of the 1990s included a return to hand-harvesting and working the soil, renovation of the *cuvée* with the addition of supplementary stainless-steel tanks (until 1995 half the wine was still being fermented at Brane-Cantenac) and the creation of a new barrel cellar. At the beginning of the new millennium, the wines had gained in substance, but Lurton was still unsatisfied with the results. 'The quality of fruit just wasn't there and the style was austere, so I knew the viticultural aspect had to change', he reflects.

In 2008, he met Alain Moueix and had an eye-opening moment while tasting a range of biodynamically produced wines at an event at Ch Fonroque in St-Émilion. 'The wines varied considerably in quality and style, but they all had energy and a confirmed tannic line', he explains. Though Lurton still didn't have concrete answers to the issues at Durfort-Vivens, he began experimenting with biodynamic approaches, initially converting 10 ha (25 acres) of vineyard in 2009, then turning the whole vineyard (62 ha, of which 56 (138 acres) are currently in production) over to organic and biodynamic cultivation in 2012. Both organic and biodynamic certification were obtained in 2016. In this he was assisted by his pragmatic technical director, Léopold Valentin, who arrived as an intern in 2008 and took up a full-time position in 2010.

If biodynamic cultivation has improved the nature of the fruit and tannin in Lurton's wines, there have been other points of fine-tuning that have helped elevate their quality and precision. Troubled by the loss of expression in vintages such as 2000 and 2001 as they aged, in 2010 he contacted his cousin Jacques Lurton (now of Vignobles André Lurton, his expertise being in white wines) and asked him to audit and improve the *élevage* at Durfort-Vivens to eradicate the possibilities of oxidation. The process of pumping and moving wine was overhauled and, among other decisions taken, racking was reduced to once after malolactic conversion and once during *élevage* instead of

systematically every three months.

Other changes have come about by way of experimentation. In 2017, Lurton decided to trial the production of wine without the addition of SO₂ with the intent of improving tannin quality. Valentin agreed to the project but advised using amphorae rather than barrels, being wary of oxidation. Italian-made, terracotta amphorae fired at 1,400 °C (2,550 °F) were consequently ordered and the experiment deemed a success. This has led to the regular production (since 2017) of the limited-edition, no-added-sulphites cuvée named La Nature, and a gradual reduction of the level of total SO₂ used in the grand vin to 60 mg/l rather than the typical 80–100 mg/l seen in Bordeaux.

The château's name on one of their amphorae

Experience with amphorae also came to good use when downy mildew hit the 2018 vintage. Such was the devastation and loss, the yield reduced to little more than 7 hl/ha (roughly 0.4 ton/acre), it was decided to vinify and then age the wine in amphora. The experiment was again deemed successful and has resulted in two changes in the winemaking process. Hand-plunging (*pigeage*) in the amphorae has helped gauge a more measured level of extraction in the larger concrete and wooden tanks, while the amphorae are now used for ageing a percentage of both the grand vin and the new *cuvées parcelaires*.

These were introduced with the 2019 vintage and replace the second label. With parcels in the communes of Margaux, Cantenac and Soussans, Lurton had noticed that there was a subtle difference in expression according to the terroir. A desire to reveal this and to move away from the standard second label has led to the creation of three *cuvées parcelaires*, one (Les Plantes) effectively a young-vine blend from the three communes, another (Le Plateau) from a parcel in Soussans and the last (Le Hameau) from Cantenac.

The vineyard, indeed, remains the principal focus, Gonzague Lurton being (with wife Claire Villars Lurton, at Chx Haut-Bages-Libéral and Ferrière) among the more active participants in regenerative agriculture in the region. Lessons were learned after 2018, so an equally virulent attack of downy mildew in 2021 was better contained, a more respectable yield of 35 hl/ha (c 2 ton/acre) the result. There has also been a steady but considerable replanting programme over the years with the Cabernet Sauvignon increased to 85% of the vineyard area, the Merlot and Cabernet Franc at respectively 10% and 5%. 'Our soils are mainly sandy gravel with little clay so excellent for Cabernet', says Lurton. This is reflected in the evolving blend for the grand vin, the Cabernet

Sauvignon component moving to 75% from 2008 and to 90% from 2014 (bar the depleted 2018 vintage) with a record 97% in 2021.

According to the winemaking team, key dates in the evolution of Durfort-Vivens in recent years are 2009, 2014 and 2018. 'In 2009 we improved extraction and gained in elegance. 2014 was the year we began to see the positive results of biodynamics and tightened selection for the grand vin, and in 2018 the extraction was further refined and the true DNA of the cru became more obvious', declares Lurton.

As my tasting demonstrated, the decades of innovation and biodynamically driven changes look to have paid off for Lurton and Ch Durfort-Vivens. Replacing austerity with fruit and finesse, since 2014 the wines have offered consistency without sacrificing vintage character.

La Nature and the *cuvées parcelaires*

Ch Durfort-Vivens, La Nature de Durfort-Vivens 2020

Margaux

100% Cabernet Sauvignon. No sulphites added. Aged 6 months in amphora. 4,800 bottles produced. The fourth vintage of this innovative cuvée.

Deep crimson hue. Pure and expressive on the nose, the Cabernet evident from the cassis, floral and graphite notes. Lively and zesty on the palate but with the mellow ripeness of the vintage. Medium weight. Tannins supple and rounded with a faint bite to the finish. Instant pleasure (hence the demand from restaurants). Ageing potential approximative but could surprise. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2022

-

2030

16.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens, Les Plantes 2019 Margaux

88% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 2% Cabernet Franc. Aged 16 months in amphora (80%) and barrel (20%). Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification. Young vines (up to 15 years) from around the estate (one of three cuvées parcelaires which now replace the second label).

Juicy and lifted with the accent on the fruit. Lighter weight and frame, even a touch fluid, but has the sweetness of the vintage. Bright and clean but falls away on the finish. Clearly for earlier consumption. (JL)

13%

Drink

2022

-

2027

15

Ch Durfort-Vivens, Le Plateau 2019 Margaux

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot. Aged 16 months, two-thirds in amphora and one-third in barrel (10% new oak). Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification. From a parcel in Soussans (one of three cuvées parcelaires which now replace the second label).

Dark fruit and chocolate notes with a distinctive edge of mint and anise. Palate sweet and round, the tannins firm on the finish. Lacks a little zest but full and savoury. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2030

16

Ch Durfort-Vivens, Le Hameau 2019 Margaux

53% Cabernet Sauvignon, 47% Merlot. Aged 16 months, two-thirds amphora and one-third in barrel (15% new oak). Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification. From a parcel in Cantenac (one of three cuvées parcelaires which now replace the second label). Deep crimson hue. Bright and lifted with greater density than the other two cuvées parcelaires. Rounded fruit then length and drive. Better definition and more clearly Margaux. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2033

16 ++

Grand vin, 2000 to 2019

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2000 Margaux

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc. Aged 20 months in barrel (40% new oak).

Evolved brick-brown colour. Tertiary notes of leaf and tobacco with a leafy freshness. Marked acidity on the palate. Still some sweetness but the fruit is muted and fading. Smooth tannins if a touch green. Falls away on the finish. Nose better than the palate but unlikely to improve further. (JL)

12.5%

Drink

2008

-

2023

15.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2001 Margaux

71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (40% new oak).

Evolved colour. Muddy and less distinct on the nose than the 2000. Some sweetness to the palate but little fruit expression. Tannins green and edgy but the acidity does provide a bit of length on the finish. Unlikely to improve further. (JL)

12.5%

Drink

2008

-

2022

15

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2002 Margaux

80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (40% new oak). Reduced yield of 25 hl/ha due to poor fruit set (particularly in the Merlot).

Garnet with brick at the rim. Marked by the Cabernet. Graphite, pepper and chocolate notes with a certain lift and freshness. Structured and upright but finishes with dry, powdery tannins. Still some substance. A pleasant surprise given the reputation of the vintage. (JL)

12.5%

Drink

2010

-

2024

15.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2003 Margaux

61% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc. Aged 14 months in barrel (45% new oak).

Brick hue. Soft, round and supple but with little energy or charm. Some sweetness but little fruit and marked acidity on the palate. Hard and short on the finish. Dull and uneven. Probably suffered from the heat and drought. Beaten before it started? (JL)

12.5%

Drink

2009

-

2020

14.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2004 Margaux

59% Cabernet Sauvignon, 36% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (45% new oak). 57 hl/ha (largest harvest Gonzague Lurton has produced).

Garnet with a touch of brick at the rim. Briary fruit on the nose with a hint of black pepper. Light- to medium-bodied but fresh and persistent. Lacks density on the mid palate but long and harmonious. Probably at its most joyous stage. (JL)

12.5%

Drink

2011

-

2026

16

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2005 Margaux

67% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc. Aged 22 months in barrel (45% new oak).

Deep garnet hue with a touch of brick at the rim. Rich and dense with a solar ripeness. Sweet and full on the palate, the tannins big and bold. Powerful in style, the extraction perhaps pushed a little. More Pauillac than Margaux. Misses some finesse but still has

plenty of reserve. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2015

-

2030

16.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2006 Margaux

70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot. Aged 18 months in barrel (43% new oak).

Garnet hue with a touch of brick at the rim. Roasted and earthy on the nose with a hint of mint. Lift on the palate, the fruit present but tannins marked and slightly bitter on the finish. Strict and austere but still there, even if the finesse is missing. Ever so slightly wayward. (JL)

13%

Drink

2014

-

2026

16

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2007 Margaux

77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (45% new oak).

Garnet hue. Leafy, tobacco notes on the nose. Light to medium weight. Some sweetness but little complexity. Tannins drying on the finish. Lacks definition. Luncheon claret at best. (JL)

13%

Drink

2013

-

2023

15

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2008 Margaux

75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (45% new oak).

Garnet hue with a translucent rim. Mint and pepper notes. Lots of freshness, if on the leafy, green side. Some sweetness to the palate, the flavour blackcurrant bud. Tannins slightly dry on the finish. Phenolic ripeness questionable but the green acidity does lend freshness. (JL)

13%

Drink

2016

-

2025

15.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2009 Margaux

73% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (50% new oak).

Relatively youthful ruby-garnet hue. Aromatically pleasant with a bouquet of blackcurrant and blueberry. Ripe with some sweetness and added density on the mid palate. Tannins supple and round. Length on the finish and, at last, some Margaux typicality and elegance. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2016

-

2032

16.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2010 Margaux

74% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (50% new oak).

Deep crimson colour. Dark fruit and mint notes with a hint of anise or fennel (similar to that found in Le Plateau 2019). Succulent fruit on the mid palate with integrated tannins. Long, persistent finish. Definitely more precision and balance. Plenty of life and tension. (JL)

14%

Drink

2018

-

2035

17

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2011 Margaux

75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (45% new oak). Only 24 hl/ha owing to hail. Early harvest (9-23 September) due to the onset of botrytis.

Garnet hue. Leafy and herbal on the nose. Some sweetness to the palate but with a green acidity running alongside. Tannins dry and hard on the finish with even a touch of bitterness. Phenolic maturity apparently compromised. (JL)

13%

Drink

2018

-

2024

15

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2012 Margaux

79% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Merlot, 2% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (50% new oak). 31.5 hl/ha. Start of organic and biodynamic conversion.

Garnet hue. Leafy note on the nose. Round but fresh on the palate, the acidity present. Not quite fully ripe but fruit present, tannins fine and more precision than 2011. Clean finish. (JL)

13%

Drink

2018

-

2025

15.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2013 Margaux

82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Merlot, 1% Cabernet Franc. Aged 18 months in barrel (50% new oak).

Garnet hue. More of a red-berry spectrum with redcurrant and strawberry notes. Palate soft and supple with a brush of acidity and light tannic frame. Almost burgundian in style. Slightly dry finish. No great complexity but gentle and harmonious. (JL)

13%

Drink

2018

-

2025

15.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2014 Margaux

90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot. Aged 18 months in barrel (50% new oak).

Garnet hue. Fragrant and floral on the nose. Smooth and again floral on the palate, the tannins finely honed, the freshness apparent. Plenty of length and drive. Still not the density of a top year but *digeste*, balanced and with added finesse. Clearly a step up. (JL)

13.5%

Drink
2022
-
2035
16.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2015 Margaux

90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot. Aged 18 months in barrel (60% new oak).
Garnet hue. Ripe and round, the generosity signalling a solar year. Gourmand fruit on the palate. Plush and full but fresh at the same time. Bigger volume with firm, forceful tannins. Powerful but contained. Large but balanced. Considerable potential for ageing.
(JL)

13.5%
Drink
2023
-
2040
17.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2016 Margaux

94% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Merlot. Aged 18 months in barrel (60% new oak). Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification.
Dark crimson hue. Beautifully fragrant with dark-fruit (blueberry) and floral notes. Long and linear with very fine tannins. Lots of drive and persistence. Complex and sincere. Poised and elegant. Everything at perfect pitch. (JL)

13.5%
Drink
2025
-
2045
18

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2017 Margaux

91% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Merlot. Aged 18 months in barrel (60% new oak). Low yield of 17 hl/ha due to frost. Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification.

Light ruby-garnet hue. Pure and aromatic with red-fruit and floral notes. Palate light- to medium-bodied but lively and pure. Lacks the density of a top year but lovely fruit and freshness. Filigree tannins so smooth and gentle. For more-immediate pleasure. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2023

-

2032

16.5

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2018 Margaux

70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 23% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc. Vinified in amphora then aged 18 months in new oak barrel (70%) and amphora (30%). Downy mildew reduced the yield to only 7 hl/ha. Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification.

Dark crimson hue. Rich but lifted with lovely purity of fruit. Round, suave and gourmand on the palate but, again, pure, long and fresh. Impressive concentration. Loads of energy and drive. Peacock's-tail finish. Promises well. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2026

-

2045

17.5 +

Ch Durfort-Vivens 2019 Margaux

90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot. Aged 18 months in barrel (60% new oak) and amphora (one-third). Organic and biodynamic (Demeter) certification.

Bright crimson hue. Lively and lifted with expressive dark-fruit notes. Pure and suave but fresh. Acidity a little more present but tannins very fine. Long, clean and well constructed. Along the lines of 2016 but a notch below. (JL)

13.5%

Drink

2027

-

2042

17 +