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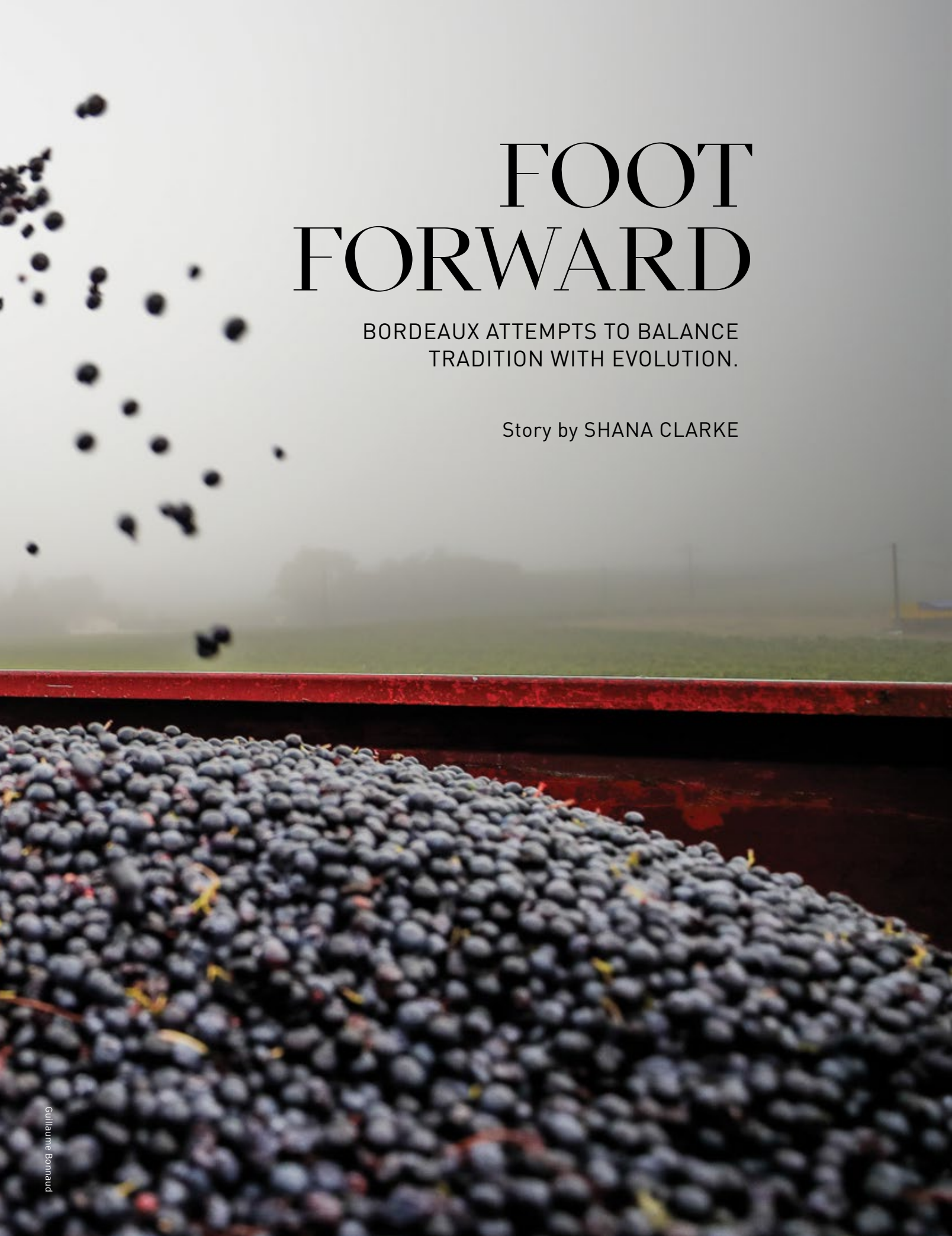
BORDEAUX ATTEMPTS TO BALANCE TRADITION WITH EVOLUTION.

Story by SHANA CLARKE



Guillaume Bonnaud

A rainstorm, quick and urgent, beats down on the roof of the low-ceilinged, nearly windowless winery in the Fronsac appellation of Bordeaux. A small family of barrels sits stacked against one stone wall, and the cement floor bears splotches of both rain and wine. In lieu of a tasting room, or even a table, vigneron Lydia Coudert, dressed in jeans and sneakers, pours wine from bottles lined up on an upturned oak barrel. Coudert is the proprietor, along with her father, at Vignobles Coudert, one of the many small, family-run estates found throughout the region.

Bordeaux is the largest wine-growing region in France, with an outsized reputation to match. Bottles from top châteaux easily command thousands of dollars. Scores and notes from annual *en primeur* tastings—where prices are set for upcoming vintage releases—are followed as breathlessly by collectors as baseball fans during the final inning of a World Series game. Bottles sit aging in collectors' cellars while the ideal "drinking window" is hotly debated. It's not just a region—it's a brand. Yet, this rarefied world of high-end wine is just one component of a massive region consisting of 5,300 winegrowers and 65 appellations. And within this mosaic, generational shifts, coupled with multiple environmental and societal factors, are creating a reckoning of sorts: What is Bordeaux today, and what should it be?

Coudert is a fifth-generation vigneron, but joining the family business wasn't a foregone conclusion. After studying science for three years, engineering for five, and economics and finance for another year, she worked as an engineer in the energy sector for a decade. Her work brought her all over the world—Sweden, Belgium, Houston. But, eventually, the vines called. "I couldn't imagine myself at least not trying to [make wine] one day, [out of] respect for my father, my grandfather," Coudert says.

But she approached the business differently. At first, she observed and absorbed the work done before her. Before long, she saw opportunities to experiment with the winemaking process and found a willing partner in cellar master Julie Macary, who has been with the Coudert family for 18 years. (The two go way back, even attending the same preschool.) Macary wanted to try vinifying wines without sulfur dioxide. Although SO_2 is commonly used as a protectant in the winemaking process, detractors say it mutes fruit and can obscure a wine's character. Coudert was game, and they experimented on 6,000 bottles in 2018. "I really loved the wine. It was very fruity and supple, and for me, it was really in the direction that we should go." The next year, they did the entire harvest's vinification sans sulfur, and they haven't looked back since.

Coudert counts herself fortunate: Her father is open to many of these ideas and gives her a freedom that she says he never had with his father, whom Coudert describes as "very strict." One vintage, they played jazz music in the cellar, working with the theory that vibrations from the sound waves will keep particles in motion and malolactic fermentation will occur faster. Coudert also created a line of wines named after her children, each bottle labeled with a charming illustration that wouldn't be out of place in a picture book. Given the youthful inspirations, it's no surprise that these wines were made to be drunk young. Some may see Coudert and her style of wines as an anomaly in the region, but Coudert says it's all about perception. "I think [people] are just starting to see the changes, even though the changes started a long time ago. I think people now, more and more, see the fun bottle with the label first. And then [when they taste it] they see it's not only the tannic, woody, very concentrated wines that exist."

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Bordeaux contains five official classification systems, each an attempt to define quality by setting parameters on what can be produced, and how. Some classifications may be reviewed annually, such as Crus Bourgeois du Médoc, while the most famous, Grand Cru Classés en 1855, has only been revised once in its 167-year history. But in the past few years, the validity of such order has been called into question. In the Saint-Émilion Grand Cru classification, three out of the four top-ranking estates have pulled out of the 2022 ranking, citing a de-emphasis on terroir, legal battles, and a focus on non-wine criteria such as marketing. Taken in a broader context, it's causing many to question the rankings' real purpose or benefit.

Twenty-nine-year-old Hugues Laborde has only been with Château Haut-Meyreau for five years. But he's already implemented big changes, from the style of wines—moving to a softer, more fruit-forward character—to experimental plantings of grapes, such as Nebbiolo and Petit Manseng. Noting how his peers were turning away from wine in favor of less uniform, lower alcohol beverages, Laborde aims to create styles to draw them in. "For people

Clockwise from top: Guillaume Bonnaud, Lauren Alix for Vignobles Invindia, Guillaume Bonnaud

An amphora used for aging wine at Château Durfort-Vivens.

who don't understand wine, the idea isn't to dismiss them, but to make wine appealing," he says.

One of his first projects was to create a single-varietal Cabernet Franc without sulfites. Because the wine didn't fit into Bordeaux AOC requirements, he opted to label it as Vin de France—essentially, a table wine without any regional designation. Ironically, these declassified wines sold very well, which both pleased and frustrated Laborde. "It was like, I don't understand why this type of product is not considered Bordeaux wine, because it *is* Bordeaux wine."

And as someone who considers himself a Bordeaux vigneron first and foremost, Laborde says it's aggravating that these wines can get devalued, but big companies that produce large volumes of wines that "have no identity," as he puts it, get to keep the Bordeaux moniker. Laborde says he thinks other producers are failing themselves—and failing the region. "We don't ask ourselves the right question," he says. "The right question is, 'What [does] the market want to discover?' That is the big problem in Bordeaux."

The conversation about attracting new drinkers also extends beyond what's happening in the vineyard. Marie-Pierre Lallez, who runs Vignobles Raguenot with her sister and husband, began canning their wines during the early days of Covid, hoping a new format could help boost sales. Canned wine, although increasingly popular in the U.S., was—and still is—a novelty in tradition-bound Bordeaux. It took a while to find cans with the appropriate lining, as well as someone who could do the actual canning (their quest ultimately ended with a company in the south of France).

Naming the brand French Can Can, they brought their red, white, and rosé to market with surprising success. "It's a new way of selling," Lallez says. "Young people are drinking wine, but not in a formal way that we used to drink wine. We know wine in cans is part of the future." She says it was important to sell the wine under the Bordeaux appellation. "Many consumers see Bordeaux as a bit of a has-been; maybe it is a bit boring or old-fashioned," says Lallez. With cans, they hope to promote something innovative for the region. And noting it's the same premium wine that goes into the can as into the bottle, Lallez thinks it can help shift perceptions.

This past June, just days before what was supposed to be the triumphant, post-pandemic return of Bordeaux Fête le Vin—an annual wine celebration in the city—hail decimated a large swath of vineyards throughout the region. Just two months later, multiple wildfires threatened the region during a heat wave so severe that some producers were granted permission to irrigate their vines, a practice typically not allowed under the region's classifications. It's devastation like this—attributable to climate change—that's been motivating many in Bordeaux to convert to sustainable, organic, and biodynamic farming.

In fact, 75 percent of vineyard acres carry some sort of sustainable certification, a high number due in part to the variety of certifications available in France. The most widely recognized are AB (organic); Demeter or Biodyvin (biodynamic); and HVE or Terre Vitis (sustainable). As of 2020, wineries could use "Vin Mèthode Nature" to indicate low-intervention practices. There's also a bee-friendly certification, a designation that acknowledges business practices that reduce environmental impacts, and one exclusively for cooperative cellars.

For Gonzague Lurton of Durfort-Vivens, a highly ranked "Second Growth" château in Margaux, climate change served as the catalyst for completely rethinking his wine style. His vineyards have been fully biodynamic since 2012 and were certified in 2016, and Lurton finds the fruit more expressive than with conventional farming. But biodynamic certifications have certain thresholds for sulfur use, and as an estate whose wines required a long aging time, a certain amount of sulfur was needed to protect them during maturation. In addition, oak barrels, the most common aging vessel in Bordeaux, require sulfur for cleaning. The desire to eliminate sulfur seemed unattainable.

In 2017, Lurton consulted with his technical director Léopold Valentin, who came back with a solution whose traditions date even further back than Bordeaux's: terracotta pots. Known also as amphora, or *qvevri*, these vessels have been used for thousands of years in places like Georgia, and have been coming back into fashion, especially with low-intervention winemakers. At first, Lurton was skeptical. He was worried about too much micro-oxygenation with the material, which would accelerate the aging process. But the bespoke pots, from a company in Italy, were fired to specification based on desired porousness.

The winery started by aging one plot of Cabernet Sauvignon as an experiment. Lurton, who also oversees a property in California, wasn't in Bordeaux for the first six months of the experiment. When he returned, they opened the jars for the first time. "The result was astonishing for us; it was more than what we expected," he says, smiling at the memory. "The style of the wine was so different. It had the aromas of grapes. I never heard anybody say that the wine has a taste of grapes; the taste of other fruit, yes, but not grapes. And in the mouth, we could not even feel the expression of tannins. They were so smooth, so

Onewineproduction/Château Durfort-Vivens

melted. It was incredible." He knew he wanted to take this experiment further, and he ordered more pots for the next vintage.

But then, disaster struck. The 2018 vintage was almost completely wiped out due to disease pressure, save for about 10 percent of the crop. With nothing to lose, they decided to vinify whatever they had in terracotta. His technical director was reluctant; how would these vessels—not built for vinification—work when it came to some of the most important initial steps in the wine-making process? With some MacGyvering of the pots, they succeeded, and to this day the clay vessels are used for both vinification and aging.

Lurton's cellar has grown to 160 terracotta vessels, which he believes to be the largest amphora cellar in the world. Standing next to the handcrafted army of pots, some of which are almost as tall as him, Lurton points to individual features of each. Moving the lids is the most perilous part of the process, he says, giving one an affectionate pat. They can't be replaced because they were each designed for a specific pot. If one breaks … And yet, the pots are still more economical than oak. They never need to be replaced and use much less water for cleaning. As for sulfur? "One cuvée is produced without any sulfur added," he confirms. "All the other wines are produced with 50 percent less total sulfur than before."

However, overlooking this sea of ochre and amber, it's hard to forget that Durfort-Vivens is a Second Growth estate—one with a reputation dating back to the 1855 classification. Aren't there certain style expectations? How much is a wine like this allowed to change? "Terracotta helped the wine find its place," Lurton explains. He looks back on his wines and finds the older vintages too austere when young. Now, there are more complex fruit aromas, the wines are more approachable at a younger age, and they can be enjoyed earlier. "We are not trying to make a big wine. It's just a big expression of a wine."

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In 2021, waves spread throughout the wine world when the Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur Association approved the use of six new grape varieties in Bordeaux AOC and Bordeaux Supérieur AOC blends. Currently, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot dominate red grape plantings, while Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Muscadelle are the most commonly planted white grapes. The new varieties now allowed include four red (among them the Portuguese grape Touriga Nacional, and Marselan, a cross between Cab Sauv and Grenache Noir) and two white varieties (Alvarinho, also from Portugal, and Liliorila, a cross between Chardonnay and Baroque). The grapes are more resilient in the face of extreme heat, disease pressure, and other effects brought on by climate change. But the intention is not to change the wines in any dramatic way, and until more is known, only 5 percent of a vineyard can be planted with these varieties, and a cuvée can only contain 10 percent.

Marc Milhade of Château Boutisse Saint-Émilion Grand Cru, as well as Château Recougne Bordeaux AOC, is one of the winemakers experimenting with these grapes. The vines are still too young to be viable, but he's also taking another look at grapes that have always existed in the region but fell out of fashion over the years as another possible salvation. Carménère, a grape that thrived before phylloxera mostly wiped it out in the late 1800s, is one of particular interest. As a variety with low acidity and one that can be tough to age, it never rebounded in the way others did. But with its elegant spice character and ability to produce a lower-alcohol wine, Milhade and others think it's due for a revival, and could be another tool in the response to climate change.

In 2000, Milhade's father started a Carménère nursery at Recougne using old vines found throughout Saint-Émilion. After identifying the best clones, he submitted them to the official grapevine catalog, making them available to all winemakers. In 2007, Milhade started planting some at Boutisse for use in the estate's Merlot-dominant Saint-Émilion Grand Cru wines. A warming climate means very ripe grapes, which means more alcohol. Merlot, especially, doesn't take to these hot temperatures, but Milhade finds Carménère works as a tempering component in a cuvée. "A blend is a lot of details, and Carménère is just one of the details," he says.

Under the Recougne label, Milhade makes a single-varietal Carménère—only about 8,000 bottles at the moment, but it's selling well. "It gives something new to the Bordeaux region," he says. Whether alone or in a blend, "What I like about Carménère is it's not bringing a very deep color or strong concentration," he says. "It's a little bit lighter. And today we see globally that the people are looking for wines which are not too deep like they were in the [Robert] Parker period."

Something old becoming something new: Like Carménère, this is the challenge facing Bordeaux. "The heart of the production of Bordeaux has to go on, has to continue, but we have to propose a new vision of Bordeaux with new wines," says Milhade. "That's what I did, changing the grape varieties [for example]. But it's hard, because traditionalists don't want to change anything. So it's always a fight. But the new generation, they are trying to push in order to have the right to produce new things and to offer wines that consumers are expecting. It takes time." ■

Courtesy Xavier Milhade Wines