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The Business History of Bordeaux Wine and Luxury. New Trends to Sharpen Competitiveness from the 1970s

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The Gironde vineyard, which makes up the *terroir* of the *bordeaux* appellations, produces “small wines” for everyday consumption, medium-sized wines, “great wines” (*bourgeois* wines or else), and finally *grands crus*. Ever more rigorous quality standards (Gidoïn, 2021; Barrière, 2007) had been applied since the first third of the 20th century (Lucand, 2019; Cardebat, Jiao & Ugaglia, 2019; Cardebat, 2017). The main reason was that the durability of the local production system of *bordeaux* wine depends on the solidity of its reputable capital (Castriota & Delmastro, 2015; Gergaud, Livat, Rickard & Warzynski, 2017). And that latter is articulated around the cohesion of the controlled labels of origin (Célérier & Schirmer, 2015; Giraud-Héraud, Soler & Tanguy, 2002; Hinnewinkel, 2004, 2009).

This article aims to identify how the players in this wine cluster—vine-owners, producers, workforce, oenologists and winemakers, wine brokers, merchants, distributors, communication agencies, œnotourism managers, etc.—struggled to sharpen the brand image of high-end *bordeaux* since the end of the 20th century and sometimes to rebuild “strong brands” (Aaker, 1996), able to bear the reputation of *bordeaux* wines throughout the national circuits of consumption and the globalised paths of luxury products (Donzé, 2021).

A first section will examine the crisis of the historical legacy suffered by the local production system of *grands crus* and consider the issues to which the Bordeaux and Gironde community is confronted to preserve its position and its reputation. A second section will determine how the great wine community undertook to rebuild its economic model by insisting on value creation and redesigning the offer offered to markets. A third section will reconstitute the breakthrough of new owners and managers of *grands crus* able to take in hand the renewal of the vineyard. A fourth section will analyse how the Gironde properties have built a strategy of counterattack and valorisation of their great wines, whilst also assuming the issues of environmental liability requirements in the Gironde vineyard. A fifth section will assess the commercial strategies that have taken shape in order to affirm the symbolic virtues of brands and designations by encouraging their appropriation by buyers and consumers from the upper social strata.

1. Issues

Beforehand, a few issues must be determined as leverage for the analysis of such a recent business history. They tackle with economic (Cardebat, 2017), sociological (Charters, 2006) and sociocultural topics, at the heart of the “market of reputations” (Chauvin, 2010). Although it results from a concrete production process, wine is not a mere object, like a watch, a garment, or a luxury jewel. Its capital is almost immaterial, because it consists of strong doses of cultural references and perceptions of identity and social position, and is boosted by “desire” (Pitte, 2009).

It is an alchemy of luxury, if not some magic conducive to sharing—friends, couples, professional or institutional communities, sometimes according to a few tasting rites or ostentatious ceremonial protocols (Perrot, 1995). A sense of intimacy is outlined in

the collective appreciation of the flavours, the aura of authenticity and singularity of the taste, sharpened by the “wine artists” that are the oenologists, who define the blend of type of grape varieties (*cépages*), and the techniques of maturation of the wines. And this pattern of “belief production” (Bourdieu, 1977) leads to a feeling of a “privilege” (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008) provided by the possession and especially the tasting of a great vintage of bordeaux, erected in an “icon” of consumption (Douglas, 2004).

One might therefore think that the great bordeaux wines follow an easy path thanks to their charismatic legitimacy. But the high-end economy is subject to upheavals that are shaking the competitiveness of bordeaux—a new stage in a history that is constantly confronted with the challenges of commercial competition (Bonin, 2019). As for every luxury product (Planelles, 2022), the durability of the brand image and market share remains fragile, as it is always likely to be challenged by the evolution of fashions or fads, consuming habits, sociability practices, and French or foreign competitors, hence the entry into the field of “contestability”—a management concept that entices to scrutinize the overall environment of the battlefield of wine geoeconomics.

Facing a questionable heritage

The vineyards suffered a depression because of the phylloxera crisis of the late 19th century, from the uprooting of many plants during a market crisis spread from the 1930s to the 1950s, and finally the vagaries suffered by many family dynasties who had to sell estates. From the 1960s to the 1990s, there was an intense movement of reconstruction and development, intensified by the introduction of new techniques for working on vineyards and then wine. The legacy of these decades is particularly heavy for the upscale stakeholders of the *bordeaux* wine cluster: properties belonging to historical families or to capitalists who have diversified their assets or financial enterprises have benefited from large investments.

Châteaux brands and appellations have been constantly “upgraded” and conquered a solid reputation capital. The wine business community has made it a priority to build a “brand image” of *bordeaux*, in France and internationally. A base of prosperity and power has therefore been set up, hence a feeling of superiority compared to many French vineyards (Rhône Valley, Loire Valley) or at least equality, with the rival Burgundy (Pitte, 2005). The 21st century therefore seemed to have to be a “boulevard” to be followed by the great names of *bordeaux*.

But an immaterial crisis has been creeping in for about a quarter of a century. Foreign vineyards (California, Spain, Italy, etc.) came to compete with *bordeaux*, integrated into a process of globalization of the wine economy (Deroudille, 2008; Garcia-Parpet, 2004, 2009; Smith, Costa & De Maillard, 2007). The technical traditions have been challenged by critical oenologists. The perception of the quality of the *grands crus* has been questioned, as if the heritage of the methods of cultivation and vinification should be challenged (Djelic & Quack, 2007), which paved the way to the outline of a “crisis of reputation” (Kokrak, 2013).

A market of the “ultra-rich”—the top of wealthy classes—was created by the “trickle-down” of the profits raised by the third industrial revolution. Globalization has given

rise to high-end but large-scale markets in the United States, and also, increasingly, in Asia, particularly in China. Were also strongly involved touristic regions more and more attended by wealthy people eager to enjoy a life favouring festive networking: Mediterranean or Caribbean islands, Côte d'Azur, California, etc., beyond key cities like Paris or New York, rich with *grands chefs'* cellars. Such a mobility of types and locations of life among upper classes ever reshuffles chains of wine distribution and consumption. It is “the end of a consecrated order” (Velasco-Graciet & Schirmer, 2010), and a challenge for the regional competitiveness of the *bordeaux* (Martin, Kitson & Tyler, 2008).

An attempt to mobilise a *SWOT* matrix about *bordeaux* wines

Some boldness leads to establish a *SWOT* matrix to determine the spread of the challenged to which *bordeaux* wines are confronted (Speth, 2014). Such matrix are commonly used by managerial teams to assess upward the threats that undermine the paths to be followed in order to protect the commercial and institutional positions of a company or of a range of products, and therefore to open doors to programs of “transformation” (Rothaermel, 2021).

Table 1. A *SWOT* matrix about *bordeaux* wines: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Habits of asserting “differentiation” material and immaterial processes to enhance brand image - Solid heritage of long-term history, with legendary memories - Excellent knowledge in building differentiation methods in quality, added value, and thus profit margins - Ability of relying on middle and long-term inventories, and thus trust on evolving quality - Fidelity of so many inheritors in wine-business families to assume the reins through transgenerational transmission of vineyards patrimony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Risk of relying too much on path dependancy - Lagging programs of investment in new biological methods of production - Dependence on climatic short-term crisis, with the risk of petty harvests and thus stock - Dependence on sociological discrepancy: Deepening gap between upper classes and middle-classes about wine prices (more than 100-300 € versus 30-60€) -
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taking profit of the reinforcement of new layers of wealthy consumers thanks to enrichment by capitalist growth in new economic sectors or in emerging countries - Seizing the enlarging world of geoeconomics structured by the intensification and the diversification of the demand for wine (and other luxury alcohols, like cognac and champagne) - Inserting into circuits of œnotourism mixing classical and mediatic methods to lure refined or mass visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volatility of overall markets: Covid crisis, tensions on logistics, crisis of high-bourgeoisie in some countries - Fraud in emerging countries like China - Power of booming US (Californian) high-end wines - Cultural changes to be imposed by climatic structural changes - Evolution of modes of sociability less favourable to consumption of high-end wines

Thanks to such a *SWOT* analysis—whatever its simplifying path—, we can be conscious that the launching of this article enhances the blurred environment submitting the stakeholders of the *Bordeaux* wine cluster to an assessment of the ever-fragile prospects of an industry with management concepts and methods.

Despite large inventories of “old” wines, the property values of renowned *châteaux*, and the often-thick flows of treasury pick-up through commercial circuits (Bonin, 2022a), the reputation credit is still ever questioned, the portfolio of talents of owners, managers and winemakers has to move constantly and with “managerial agility” to adapt its *modus operandi* to the sociological and economic evolution of the various outlets within the luxury world and the international wine trade (Spahni, 2000).

2. The struggle about the *grands crus* brand image

Whatever the challenges to be faced, as for the champagne and the cognac (Blancheton & Hlady-Rispal, 2020), the *bordeaux* had to reinvent its position in the luxury market. It was necessary to innovate to revive its competitiveness and ensure its differentiation, by escaping the “commodity trap” which threatens all luxury brands driven by intense commercial growth at the risk of leading to their trivialization. A key issue is the repositioning of the brand image to accompany these sociological changes, to respond to the challenges posed by new societal or socio-mental behaviours.

What was at stake was the commercial strength of the 88 *châteaux* belonging to the segment of *grands crus* (from *premiers crus* to *cinquièmes crus*): 61 red wines and 27 white wines, representing 3 per cent of the *bordeaux* production. They had to renew the “spirit” of the classification of 1855 (Enjalbert, 1987) to fight with competitors (from Burgundy or else).

Differentiating in terms of taste has once again become a key issue, because the consumption or tasting of every vintage must be emblematic of an original personal culture, just like a luxury car, refined leisure, a piece of jewelry. Making a wine is like a “design” because luxury wines express specific taste, creative identity, and even conceptors’ passion (Kapferer, 2014). We can even evoke an “esthetic” of wine consumption (Charters & Pettigrew, 2005). These tasters build their own memory of flavours, far from a simple light effervescence, and an individual but shared narrative of their learning and the practice of refined tastes. An aesthetic of wine might thus take shape: love of beautiful colours, seduction by stylised labels, etc.

As with the overall market of high-game products, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the simple “high-end”, “accessible luxury”, and real luxury. Lifestyle, consumption and friendliness, the price of the chosen bottle, the art of appearance, hedonism (Combris, Lecocq & Visser, 1997): these are all levers for the renewal of specific outlets fed by a high purchasing power. The *bordeaux* wine is then in agreement with the reputed products of luxury on the registers of authenticity and prestige, around the notion of “great wine” (Chatriot, 2017; Barham, 2003).

Differentiation between “affordable” wines or commonplace *châteaux* and luxury wines had to resist therefore to luring distinctive signs of quality. A basket of items has been filled by *grands crus*: sure, pricing is the more apparent tool for winemakers (Costanigro, 2007) to promote luxury wines ahead of premium, super premium or ultra-premium (€30-50), to luxury, superluxury or icons (more than 200-300€). But quality is more at stake as “a determination driven by taste, textures and structure” (Mowery, 2019), sensorial process, “farming practices”–insisting

recently on sustainable, organic or biodynamic– are key elements, to which are added scarcity and relatively low amounts of production, the role of “heritage” trade-mark and “prestige” as “a sense of privilege”, and, lastly, the role of “time”, that is no rush in the process and instead a low and long flow of deadlines to reach the upmost reference or concept.

Brands must ensure that they become “trendy” and remain unavoidable in the chic strata, emblematic of the upper social strata and the ultra-rich. Properties and trade-houses need to target foreign buyers, who often absorb two-thirds or three-quarters of the sales of “great wines”. Luxury marketing strategies are readily applicable to these “treasures” enjoyed at the “in-between” dinner tables, along some practices of “ritual consumption” (Bell, 1992, 1997; Rook 1985): comparing tastes, emulating *grands crus*, guessing the name of different wines, shared enjoyment, assessment of differentiation, along some ostentatious or “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1899; Trigg, 2001).

This type of rich consumer of *bordeaux* wants both to be and to appear, as if he wished to join the thiasus (*thiasos*) of Dionysos, and to be impulsed with desire and enjoyment (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). This is because wine is also a component of a specific “culture” (Garrier, 1995) which helps to forge a personality that can “distinguish itself” socially, within the framework of an “economy of singularities” (Karpik, 2010), along schemes of “uniqueness” (Tepper, Bearden & Hunter, 2001), and in this case, the uniqueness of a sipping a glass of a rare and old *grand cru*.

The theme of self-esteem and self-fulfilment needs was once drawn by the “Maslow Theory” when Abraham Maslow (1943, 1970) built a “pyramid of needs” that emphasizes motivation and stimulates the desire to prove one’s ability to access Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Nice, 1984; Moingeon, 1993) characterized “social and cultural attributes”, which would guarantee a position within the high bourgeoisie (Borraz & Dion, 2017). Yet the consumption of a great vintage is what Maslow characterized as a “soft factor”, constitutive of the immaterial capital of the rich in need of recognition and belonging within the upper layers of society.

Sometimes, even with ostentatious consumption, by “snobbism”, or discreet, at receptions or in family, are added the investment to constitute a personal cellar of bottles intended for a lasting maturation, involvement in *bordeaux* promotion institutions. This explains a relative financialization of certain segments of the wine market, when retail investors build up cellars considered as savings assets, hence the soaring prices of luxury *bordeaux* (as well as *bourgognes*) during auctions, as the index reveals *WineDex* (Idealwine) (Di Vittorio & Ginsburgh, 1996; Jones & Storchman, 2001). As in the Stock Exchange or on commodities markets, a kind of high quality “wine price” is defined according to the level of annual harvests.

As solid as it seems, the local wine production system must adapt to the plasticity of society of rich consumers of great wines and to the fluidity of their beliefs in what is a “great” and “good” wine. This often requires the branding of *bordeaux* to be enhanced, thanks to upstream investments and the adaptation of manufacturing, dissemination and promotion processes (Arnould & Dion, 2014). It is therefore necessary, as for champagne and cognac, to stimulate an intense creation of value in

order to guarantee a sufficient differentiation and maintain the level of the reputation of the *bourgognes*, in particular.

At each stage of the production and sales process within the wine ecosystem, various successive initiatives contribute to instilling a final capacity of seduction capable of broadening the base of easy customers and the aspiration to consume great wines, in restaurants, at home or at festive or institutional receptions. Large hotels or palaces have an exceptional cellar for their luxury restaurant and a renowned sommelier chef, such as Éric Beaumard since 1999 at the *Four Seasons Georges V* in Paris. This one has a cellar since 1928, housed in a former quarry, where 50,000 bottles and 2,500 references are housed, including the *bordeaux grands crus*. In the end, the intention is first to capture new market shares and to preserve them in the long term, thanks to a relationship of relative fidelity, able to overcome the ephemeral craze. Then comes the desire to play up the price of the wines, in order to widen the difference with the *grands crus* and the “medium wines”, relying on the difference of reputation (Lecocq & Visser, 2006).

3. Two waves of rebuilding the bordeaux dynasties

Ownership of Bordeaux castles has once again become the sign and symbol of inequalities in renewed societies thanks to the effects of upward promotion brought about by the Third Industrial Revolution and the famous “spillover” of profit shares and high wages. This circulation of money has allowed a deep revival of the luxury *bordeaux* cluster thanks to new dynasties of owners, emerging from the 1950s and then from the 1980s and now consecrated as dominant powers of the wine business community in Gironde. In the context of competition in an economy open to trade and investment and liberal, the structuring of a wine capitalism has proved necessary, with the support of banks and the assistance of financial investors, hence a new configuration of the Gironde economic landscape (Corade, *et alii*, 2010; Corade *et alii*, 2008; Deroudille, 1989).

The resistance of family groups

Family capitalism has been strengthened by often showing itself to be able to ensure the intergenerational transition. And the recent and present managers were able to refresh some kinds of “myths” about the story of their *châteaux*, grown out of the founding narratives transmitted from generation to generation. Like luxury brands (Dior, Chanel, Chaumet, etc.) some *grands crus* are put ahead thanks of “family myths around the places that have been at the heart of their identity and history.

A first model is that of the Rothschilds, with three branches: that of Domaines Barons de Rothschild, along the fifth generation, since the 1970s (barons David, Édouard, Éric, Robert, Nathaniel et Benjamin de Rothschild), manages *grands crus* (Duhart-Milon in Pauillac, from 1962, Château Rieussec in 1984, Château L’Évangile in 1990) and a group of medium generic wines in France or elsewhere (Chili, Argentina, China). The branch holding the Baron Philippe de Rothschild group heads Mouton Rothschild (90 hectares, since 1853, but premier cru classé since 1973) and the medium brand Mouton Cadet-La Baronnie. The Edmond de Rothschild (then Benjamin) group, Edmond de Rothschild Héritage, is rich with Château Lafite Rothschild (since 1868), Château Clarke (a listrac, since 1973) and 95 ha of

Puisseguin-Saint-Émilion. Less known are the Capdemourlin, of their seventh generation, on their 55,5 ha, of which two saint-émilion.

A second wine-growing community brings together the self-made men who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s: they acquired estates, creating bundles of heirs capable of supporting dynamic businesses, driven by a strong entrepreneurial spirit. This path is embodied by the “Lurton model”, because the Lurton (appeared in 1897) have federated since the 1950s “clusters” of châteaux, appellations, generics, vintages (27 castles on 1,300 hectares), transmitted by the generation of André (1924-2019), Lucien, Simone and Dominique to their 24 children. The only André Lurton vineyards cover 600 hectares, including 270 around Château Bonnet, in Grézillac, in the Entre-deux-Mers, while André Lurton (Neiman, 2019) highlighted the *pessac-léognan* appellation (La Louvière, Couhins-Lurton, Crouzeau, Rochemorin).

The Perromat families (Vignobles M. & J. Perromat, with two sauternes, the graves Beauregard Ducasse, etc.), the Cazes (pauillac, avec Lynch-Bages dès 1934, Château Batailley since 2017; saint-Estèphe, avec Ormes de Pez) (Cazes, 2022), Kressmann (graves) or Tesseron (Lafon-Rochet, Saint-Estèphe in 1960; Pontet-Canet, Pauillac, in 1976) followed the same path, as also for the Domaines Henri Martin, with the successors of Henri Martin à Saint-Julien (Gloria, Beychevelle), among whom his son-in-law Jean-Louis Triaud, then this latter’s son Jean.

The attractiveness of vineyards: *Nouveaux riches* and wine luxury

Dozens of members of the business bourgeoisie revitalized the values that had presided over a form of land endowment of their predecessors of the 19th century (Pereire, Rothschild, Cruse, Guestier, etc.). They had added to their Parisian real estate, art collection and financial assets the possession of a wine estate. However, more than a century and a half later, a similar process was followed: *nouveaux riches* raised within the high bourgeoisie thanks to the success of their entrepreneurial spirit and their capitalist strategy decided to “brand themselves socially”. They, too, acquired properties in Gironde, in ostentatious attributes of their money power. A new layer of wine entrepreneurs has emerged: business leaders have decided to decline their managerial know-how in the wine sector, and to reconvert available capital as part of a professional reconversion. It is a kind of refined capitalism that invests in wine to support its social position “attributes” (Pinçon M. & Pinçon-Charlot M., 1999).

The Mentzelopoulos went from mass distribution (Félix Potin) to Château Margaux. This was also the case for Georges Perse (owner of hypermarkets in 1977-1998), who in 1993 acquired Château Pavie and have five vineyards and 163 ha; or the Cathiards, who abandoned a chain of supermarkets in the Rhône-Alpes region and took over Smith Haut-Lafitte in 1991 (Berdin, 2010; Maric, 2016). The Dassault aeronautics heads have landed in the vineyard: Château Dassault since 1955, followed by Château Lafleur (Saint-Émilion) in 2002 and Faurie de Souchart (a classified saint-émilion *grand cru*) in 2013. In 2019, the Cantenac-Brown margaux (47 hectares) was acquired for 150 million euros by the Le Lous family, which also manages the Urgo medical products group.

In the meanwhile, Girondins capitalists have built up a wine capital. Bernard Magrez abandoned the commonplace trading of alcohols and mass wine in favour of a portfolio of grands crus (about forty estates). The wine merchants Moueix own two dozen estates; the industrial distillers Bernard set up a luxury branch that federates the 390 family shareholders, alongside the sales site Millésima and a trading house, hence a collection of several castles (Domaine Chevalier since 1983, etc.) (Baudouin, 2013). The family managing the fourth French construction company, Fayat, invested in La Dominique (a saint-émilion) in 1969 and Clément Pichon (a haut-médoc) in 1976 (Gasparotto, 2020).

Luxury industry owners have applied their capital of expertise to the wine industry: the Wertheimer brothers (Chanel, Bourjois) with Rauzan-Ségla and Château Canon; Bernard Arnault, the boss of LVMH, a luxury group that invested in Cheval Blanc (taking over in 2009 the 50% acquired by B. Arnault in 1998) and Château Yquem in 1996); François Pinault (of the Kering group) with Château Latour in 1993 (by his family company Artémis).

Asset management institutions have diversified their finance and real estate portfolios by supplementing them with vineyards, which provide them with stability and profitability. Insurance companies symbolize this part of wine capitalism. Thus, the French leader Axa built in 1987 Axa Millésimes, rich of Château Pichon Baron (pauillac 2nd vintage classified 1855, the ex-Pichon-Longueville), Château Pibran (pauillac), Château Suduiraut (sauternes 1st cru classé) and Château Petit-Village (pomerol). AG2R-La Mondiale followed with three grands crus classified saint-Émilion: Château Larmande in 1990, Château Grand-Faurie La Rose in 2005, Château Soutard in 2006, and Château Cadet-Piola in 2009.

Discreet but pervasive individual investors

In a much less visible way, hundreds of *grands bourgeois* consider the investment in wine goods as a “promising investment”, in the same way as a property by the sea, like around the *Bassin d’Arcachon*, in Gironde itself. The vineyard seems an attractive heritage investment. The objective is threefold: to establish a social position, to gain access each year to wine boxes from their property, and finally to consider for the future of significant gains, since the price of the hectare has not ceased to increase since the beginning of the century.

Specialized real estate agencies are therefore intermediaries in this market, such as Barnes Vineyard Investment, of the Barnes International group of high-end real estate agencies; and, moreover, a member of the Lurton family, Arnaud Lurton, is one managing partner, in sign of the osmosis between the various branches of the Gironde wine business. Brilliant and seducing catalogues intend therefore to lure investors towards a “hobby vineyard”, for instance, as advertised, an “outstanding chartreuse, dedicated to wine passion” (for €3,3 million), a “*cru bourgeois*, coveted terroir”, as “a solid base to build a gold nugget” in the Médoc (with 14 hectares, for €2 million), or a “vast property, leader of its appellation” in the Graves (for €10 million).¹

4. The challenges to granted positions

¹ *Barnes Catalogue*, April 2021.

As in any productive sector, the durability of positions on the “Bordeaux place” and moreover all along the circuits of wine promotion and reputation-building has been severely challenged. As already told, renowned châteaux and trademarks are more and more submitted to a harsh “contestability”, which impulses reactivity, either to boost the credit of reputation and to answer recent “civilisational” demands about the quality of luxury and high-end wines.

Rejuvenating reputed vineyards

Investing decidedly to rejuvenate the basis of high-end vineyards became a decisive strategy from the 1990s, as numerous actors told to the specialised press or to investigators. The author of this article himself got testimonies from an array of owners and managers in 2020-2021 : several Cruse families at Château Taillan, Château Laujac and Château d’Issan; Sophie Schyler (Château Kirwan), Hervé Kressmann (Latour Martillac), Guy Petrus-Lignac (Château Guadet, at Saint-Émilion), Dominique Fedieu (Cussac-Fort-Médoc), Christophe-Luc Robin (Lalande-Pomerol) or Joël François, even if the data of these interviews are scattered throughout the following analysis.

A deep revitalisation of the *grands crus* issued from the 1855 classification was steadily achieved (Markham, 1998) by numerous landowners in parallel. Many areas have invested heavily in wine processing methods in the name of improved quality and improved consistency, after years of glaring disparities (lack of investment, poor monitoring, etc.). The brand positioning of brilliant *châteaux* was at stake, order to assume the transmission of the “sacralisation” of their heritage (Borraz & Dion, 2015), mixing identity, history, and high quality requirements.

Waves of investment have made it possible to upgrade domains such as Château Pavie (Figaro, 2018) or Château Lascombes since 2000: there, “Dominique Befve took Lascombes in hand, rebuilt and restored the vineyard, modernized the winery and cellars, introduced oxolines and cold prefermentation macerations. As a result, Margaux’s second *grand cru classé*, which had fallen into disrespect, regained its place” (Les Échos, 2015). “From the purchase of Malartic-Lagravière by Belgian businessman Alfred Bonnie in 1997, great works were undertaken. In the vineyard, it is necessary to pull out old vine-stock or mix old and new ones, to restore the soils, to adopt more respectful methods of cultivation; one had to build a grape vat (*cuvier*) using gravity and identified crops by parcels, and cellars for 1,400 barrels” (Brasseur, 2017).

In terms of final quality, renowned oenologists—like Michel and Dany Rolland (Brunisset, 2012), Denis Dubourdieu or Jean-Claude Berrouet—were required. The promotion of the oenologist’s role has been decisive in the reconstruction of reputable capital. The role of the *Institut de la vigne & du vin* (at Villenave-d’Ornon) became essential for the formation of new oenologists (Chevet, Hinnewinkel & Velasco-Graciet, 2015) and in the supply of engineering services.

This high-quality race explains why those in charge ensured the cohesion of their appellation here and there. Thus, the classification specific to the Saint-Emilion, established in 1956, was revised in 1996 and then in 2012 (Candau, Roudié & Ruffé,

1991). Moreover, a decisive step was the creation of the *Pessac-Léognan* appellation in 1976 by Jean Kressmann and André Lurton, around high-end *châteaux*: this allowed to expand the geography of great wines and the commercial offer.

The challenge of sustainability for the *bordeaux* luxury wines

A “glass ceiling” was nevertheless likely to stop the repositioning of high-end wines from Gironde. Indeed, whatever their level of wealth and their independence from critical currents of opinion, the rich social strata must also consider environmental constraints. If the stake of luxury *châteaux* is to practice “the look” in wine consumption, they had not to be confuse their appearance by delivering wines from vineyards that use a lot of phytosanitary products and pesticides. They must affirm the growing desire to respect “good practices” unless to be accused of participating in the overexploitation of the vineyard. In any case, global warming is encouraging many oenologists to plan a new range of grape varieties. Moreover, all luxury products face this challenge of the perception of their “moral value” by all potential buyers (Kunz *et alii*, 2020), including in the US and Chinese markets (Adegbite *et alii*, 2020).

Initiatives to improve cropping methods are no longer limited to “green-committed” winemakers. Indeed, many reputable properties have moved towards new uses oriented towards the challenge of durability, a component of sustainability, to balance mere short-term hedonism or superficiality of ostentation. It can be helpful to enhance brand differentiation indeed and embark on the march towards more “natural” wines makes it possible to evolve the codes of the world of luxury.

5. Enhancing wine luxury retail circuits

As with all the luxury ranges, the construction of a culture of differentiation has also focused on the retail channels of wine. The tactical art is to reconcile mass marketing and luxury brand image (Nueno & Quelch, 1998).

Advice guides for buyers and consumers play an important role, such as the *Hachette Wine Guide* and the *Guide rouge Michelin* (Karpik, 2000) or regular files in daily newspapers (*Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Les Échos*) and specialized magazines aimed at affluent consumers. Media “gurus” (Ali, Lecocq & Visser, 2008) mobilised information and assessments to educate high-end consumers about *grands crus* and *crus bourgeois*. The American wine expert Robert Parker became the media’s favourite because of his assessments in *The Wine Advocate* between 1978 and 2012, which were aimed at the new rich North Americans and then Asians.

Specialised commercial platforms

Along a subtle marketing strategy (Yeung & Thach, 2019), the retail circuits have been adapted to the selection and promotion of *grands crus*, whether in specialized shops (such as that of Bernard Magrez in Paris) or in flashy corners within the “department stores” of Paris (such as the *Galleries Lafayette*) or other cities. The presentation of wines has been inserted within in-store narrative that complements the portfolio of meanings luxury brands to support their high-end positioning (Dion

& Arnould, 2011; Debenedetti, 2021), as “sacred places of luxury” (Dion, 2014, 2), in the wake of patented luxury objets (Cui, Chan, Joy, Sherry, Wang, 2014).

Sometimes even, the design of the commercial platform is conceived according to the criteria of luxury distribution, where artistic engineering creates some charismatic “glamour” and “magic” (Dion & Arnould, 2011), almost hedonistic (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Even the retail chain Nicolas, owned by the powerful wine group Castel, altogether in Bordeaux and in Switzerland, has arranged a fine presentation of the great wines in a few dedicated corners.

Such retail instruments are suitable both to encourage the discovery of new wines and to maintain fidelity to an appellation rich in authenticity (Beverland, 2005, 2006) and the heritage of an original culture (Dion & Borraz, 2015), often considered “unique” (Karpik & Scott, 2010). Wine also contributes to the construction of refined business practices: “Luxury brands have adopted ‘abundant rarity’ strategies (Karpik, (2012), characterized by feelings of exclusivity and by artificial rarity tactics [... with] the creation of memorable retail experiences, to personalized services, and to attaching symbolic capital and prestige to the brand name itself through communication, social influence, social networks, celebrities, brand ambassadors.”²

This high-end sales strategy is implemented in Gironde itself. The tourist attraction of Bordeaux explains the proliferation of shops in the heart of the city centre: their department stores are carefully presented, sometimes in sheltered cabinets. Since 2016, the *Cité mondiale du vin*, built as a beacon of the glory of *bordeaux*, also provides a shop rich with ranges of *grands crus*, and panels or videos that highlight reputed vineyards.

The boom of high-end œnotourism

As in the whole of luxury and in imitation of champagne practices, an institutional and promotional communication strategy has been deployed from the 1980-90s. “Events” of communication are organized with celebrities from various segments of reputed life (the yearly *Fête de la Fleur*, concerts, tastings, hosting of stars, etc.). The dynamism of the *Commanderie du Bontemps de Médoc & des Graves, Sauternes & Barsac* contributed to this movement of notoriety. For its part, the *Jurade de Saint-Émilion*, bearer of the notoriety of the appellations, organizes the *Fête de Printemps* in June and the *Ban des vendanges* in September.

The bordeaux wine system had to consider the wine tourism revolution, while ensuring that the sectors of over-tourism and over-consumption were differentiated from the sectors of tourism centred around “selected” clientele and the “uniqueness” concept. Fine marketing methods must be mobilized (Decrop, 2010; Briot & De Lassus, 2014). This movement has affected the *châteaux* themselves, insisting on their websites and all along the path of visit of the *chais* (cellars) on history, local tradition, cultural roots, heritage of expertise, at the service of some kind of “cognitive proximity” embedded in clusters of rural and vineyards excellence. Heritage (Hudson, 2013) and storytelling (Mora & Livat, 2013) asserted itself as a powerful leverage to convince potential buyers and *châteaux* followers. Culture and

² Kapferer, 2016, p. 121.

luxury are converging to design a cultural approach of wine and stimulate “intelligence” as a lever of attractiveness beyond mere “taste culture” (Gasparotto, 2021).

On the spot, some *châteaux* have sometimes set up “interpretive courses” (*parcours d’interprétation*) where communication agencies mix the topics of history, patrimonial heritage, and the economics of *grands crus*, and spaces for conferences or seminars, to mix cultural intelligence and the understanding of wine processes. The history of the vineyard estates and wine houses that unite many is also mobilized to highlight the convincing durability of efforts in the vineyard and in the cellars. A symbolic example might be the support provided by a dedicated office, *Bordeaux Excellence*: “The Cordier Mestrezat experience offers a privileged audience a real journey through time and space through the myth of a city, its wines, and its castles. Like a bridge between a past that still lives in the place and a future that takes shape in gold letters over a unique oeno-emotional journey, *L’Expérience* slowly reveals its treasures to us until culminating in a majestic setting: the *Cordier Vintaged Collection Box*. It is the fruit of a perfect alchemy between the greatest craftsmen of Bordeaux and the magic of the terroir, imagined by Cordier Mestrezat Grands Crus with the sole aim of satisfying, on the one hand the amateur and the collector of great wines, on the other hand the château.”³

Several high-end properties mix wine art and artistic culture. Mouton Rothschild set up a Wine and Art Museum containing objects associated to wine (since 1962); and since 1945 artists personalize there the wine label for each vintage, with thus a whole collection. Punctually, art exhibitions are showed in a few *châteaux*, to increase their attractiveness. A few ones are even equipped with luxurious hotels, like Cos d’Estournel, which uses for that the historic house of Château Pomys, or Cordeillan-Bages in Pauillac. “Lynch-Bages is first and foremost the winery of the Cazes family, which has been welcoming visitors from all over the world for more than thirty years on the famous *terroir* of Pauillac. Lynch-Bages & Cie are extraordinary experiences for wine lovers, of course, but not only. It is the Château Cordeillan-Bages, a 17th century chartreuse house housing a 4**** hotel with 28 rooms, branded with the *Relais & Châteaux* label, and a gourmet restaurant, member of the *Grandes Tables du Monde*. It is still the place of the picturesque village of Bages, with the Café Lavinal, a friendly bistro where the world of winemakers and owners likes to meet, pretty shops, reception rooms and the Wine School which offers tasting classes.”⁴

An ardent process took shape when the owners of prestigious *châteaux* decided to rehabilitate and extend the architectural equipments, mainly to modernise and extend the *chais* buildings. Well-known architects have been mobilised (Bidalon & Muteaud, 2016): “For visitors, often foreigners, who are often not very knowledgeable, it is necessary to impress, to make dream. These properties have gone into the realm of luxury. Much like in perfume, the container must match the content”.⁵ The owners especially wished to create a harmony between their institutional and promotional communication, and the concrete brand image of their *châteaux* through investments in contemporary architecture (Coustet, 1988).

³ [Tourisme viticole Bordeaux - Agence oenotourisme de luxe (bordeauxexcellence.com)]

⁴ [Village - Destination Bages | Famille JM CAZES].

⁵ Luc Arsène-Henry, in Niedercorn, 2016.

This is the case at Château Lafite since 1988: “Built under the direction of the Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill, the new breeding cellar is underground and circular, and its vault is supported by sixteen columns that give the whole a majestic and airy style. Its construction required two years of work and the displacement of 10,000 m³ of land. It is used for the aging of second-year wines and can accommodate 2,200 barrels. This winery was the first in the world to innovate by offering a circular storage of barrels.”⁶ A prestigious competition animates some *châteaux*: the cellars of La Dominique, in Saint-Émilion, designed by Jean Nouvel, with a block made with long plates in red stainless steel and dressed in huge windows, echo the building designed by Christian de Portzamparc at Cheval Blanc in 2011, with a huge cellar with a wave-shaped curved roof.

Architects Jean-Michel Wilmotte at Cos d'Estournel and Pédesclaux, Mario Botta at Faugères, Norman Foster at Château Margaux, and Philippe Starck at Carmes Haut-Brion embody this desire for both prestige and efficiency, with good results in terms of brand image. Under the aegis of the architectural firm A3A (Guy-Y. Troprès & Caroline Marly, from Bordeaux), the Schylers at Château Kirwan (Margaux), in 2016, carried out the restructuring and construction of the cellars, a cuvier and visitor reception areas, with, in addition, a stainless-steel sculpture in South facade realized by Kinga and Anatoly Stolnikoff, *Le Cep de Noé*. As for Château Figeac, it chooses in 2018 to equip itself with underground cellars and work and tasting buildings (also with A3A).

A coherence is cemented, therefore, on the very sites of the properties, where the development of wine techniques, wines, historical and human heritage are now intertwined in a form of “emotional luxury” and of excellence, as is shown by an agency specialist in luxury œnotourism. *The Cordier Mestrezat Experience*—from the name of a big wine trade house—offers a privileged public a true journey through time and space through the myth of a city, its wines, and its châteaux. “Like a bridge between a past that still inhabits the place and a future that emerges in golden letters over a unique œno-emotional journey, *L'Expérience* slowly reveals its treasures until culminating in a majestic setting: the ‘Cordier Vintage Collection Box’. It is the result of a perfect alchemy between the greatest craftsmen of Bordeaux and the magic of the terroir, imagined by *Cordier Mestrezat Grands Crus* with the sole aim of satisfying, on the one hand, the amateur and the collector of great wines, on the other hand the *château*.”

And this company also joined the community of benefactors of the *Cité mondiale du vin*, mainly financed through private funds.⁷ These “immaterial” processes of course end by being complemented by “liquid” ones: “Building on unique expertise in range personalisation and innovation, we are committed to offering our customers a selection of exceptional, tailor-made products, from rare bottles to numbered collections.”⁸

6. Conclusion: A renewed competitiveness for Bordeaux luxury wines?

⁶ [<http://www.lafite.com/fr/lesprit-lafite/lhistoire/>].

⁷ [Mestrezat, Patron "Builder" of La Cité du Vin | Mestrezat.com].

⁸ [Unique and Exclusive Creations | Mestrezat.com].

The history of the wine trade makes it possible to link the high-end positioning of the great *bordeaux* wines and their power of attraction on aristocratic, bourgeois or institutional markets, as shown about the wines produced by the Cruse family or purchased by the powerful Cruse trade house (Bonin, 2022b). The strength of recognized designations of superior quality by foreign brokers, traders or wholesale dealers has stimulated exports (Becuwe & Blancheton, 2021) and spurred competitiveness within a world-wide wine economy (Garcia-Parpet, 2001).

It is difficult to assess whether the convergence of commercial struggles has enabled the great *bordeaux* wines to effectively fight the competition on an international level (Robinson, 2015). The evolution of the consumption habits of ultra-rich Chinese—about tens of thousands—has obviously created and then powerfully expanded markets, as for all French luxury products (Chuang, 2021; Leff, 2021). The increase of flagship wineries in China, the intensity of digital channels mobilized for wine promotion thanks to influencers, and the stays of many Chinese in Paris and Bordeaux—before the pause imposed by the Covid crisis—are all factors of this progression. The China area (with Hong Kong) had become the first outlet for *grands crus*, with one third of exports (Pétric, 2022), whilst the *grands crus* succeeded in 2019 to reach in value the half of the whole exports of *bordeaux* (Cougard, 2020).

In any case, at the heart of the society of a globalized 21st century, the local production system of *bordeaux* wine have succeeded in adapting, within the framework of a demanding, continuous, and shared strategy—except to lose ground for properties showing inertia (Hogdson, 2008) or procrastination. Beyond exceptions, the economic model of the *grands crus* has joined that of luxury consumer brands, thanks to an interaction of concepts, designs, commercial tactics, institutional communication method (Atwal, Heine & Phan, 2016). Such a subtle balance between wine and its perception has been reached thanks to the parallel immaterial and material investment of wine growers—as has been the case about champagne, about the role of “place” (identity and terroir and tourism), marketing the “myth” (image and competitive advantage) and the management of the industry (Charters, 2013).

Wine and luxury became therefore once again—after the troubled 1930s-1960s years—an emblematic couple. High-end brand names won their struggle to preserve their overall reputations within the “bordeaux wine civilisation” (Schirmer, 2020). Such a turnover might be evidenced by the growth of the *Caudalie* branch of beauty and care products based on grapes by the Cathiard family in Smith Haut Lafitte, one of the great wines of the *Pessac-Léognan* appellation. The capital of reputation is there shared between wine growing, œnotourism (with a guesthouse and communication courses), and subproducts marketing.

A final issue will turn around the building of a “sub-cluster” within the overall Bordeaux wine cluster (Bélis-Bergouignan, 2011), itself part of the French wine cluster (Porter, 2013), both affronting challenges from high-end European or Californian wineries as clusters braced themselves against competition (Porter, 1998). An affective system has been more and more focused on the high-end and luxury segments of Gironde wines: costly cellars, cabinets of architects, agencies of advice to winemakers about œnotourisme, offers of expensive guest services,

specialised boutiques and restaurants, taste-events, even exhibitions in Bordeaux and in the châteaux, conciergeries and transportation, etc. This subcluster articulates around a grand-bourgeois attractiveness, a profitable chain of value, and expectable returns on assets and investment.

A kind of clubbish way of wine life took shape therefore as a new stage of the business history of *bordeaux*, from the 1980s-90s, along the concept of “*biens clubs*” or clubbish goods (Calvet, 2005), with there a socially restrained art of clubbing. It is being cemented by conventions based on processes of mutual recognition in the art of tasting and consuming luxury wines through a complementary sign of “distinction” and with the integration of Bordeaux wines into the history of French luxury business as a key sector of the competitiveness of France within globalization.

SUMMARY

This article aims to identify how the actors of the bordeaux wine production system have managed to sharpen the brand image of high-end bordeaux since the turn of the 21st century. The stakes were both economic and sociological because the capital of reputation was contested. But the great wine community has set out to rebuild its business model by insisting on value creation and redesigning the supply offered to markets. The properties have built a strategy of counterattack and valuation of their great wines. Commercial strategies have taken shape to affirm the symbolic virtues of brands and designations by encouraging their appropriation by buyers and consumers from the upper social strata.

RESUME

Cet article vise à identifier comment les acteurs du système de production du vin de bordeaux ont réussi à affûter l'image de marque du bordeaux haut de gamme depuis le tournant du XXI^e siècle. Les enjeux étaient à la fois économiques et sociologiques car le capital de réputation était contesté. Mais la grande communauté viticole a entrepris de reconstruire son modèle d'affaires en insistant sur la création de valeur et la refonte de l'offre offerte aux marchés. Les propriétés ont construit une stratégie de contre-attaque et de valorisation de leurs grands vins. Des stratégies commerciales innovantes ont pris forme pour affirmer les vertus symboliques des marques et des désignations en encourageant leur appropriation par les acheteurs et les consommateurs des couches sociales supérieures.

KEY-WORDS

Bordeaux, *grands crus*, sociocultural identity, luxury, singularity, high-end wines, œnotourism, reputation.

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