

Deserving heroes



Beyond Bordeaux's familiar list of big-name producers, there is a cast of supporting players who go about their business with little fuss, consistently turning out excellent wines at good prices. Steven Spurrier shines a light on just a few of his favourites

THE TITLE I originally had in mind for this piece was 'Unsung heroes', which meant that the estates selected for inclusion should be little known, punching above their weight within their appellations, and heroic for doing so in obscurity.

There are many such wines, but finally I decided to choose châteaux with a long history that have produced consistent quality through thick and thin, often via many changes of ownership, and which today totally deserve the plaudits that their wines receive.

The wines of the six estates profiled here represent unquestionably good value for money,

but such is the level of financial investment needed to make the best of even the worst vintages, they cannot be cheap; although compared to some of their higher flying neighbours, they are not expensive.

When I owned a wine shop in Paris, I peddled the phrase *rapport prix-plaisir* or value-for-pleasure, which suits these wines perfectly. When calling in samples for tasting, I requested just the 2010, a great vintage that these fine châteaux express so admirably. But since their attention to detail and selection is currently at such a high level, each vintage is worthy of interest. >



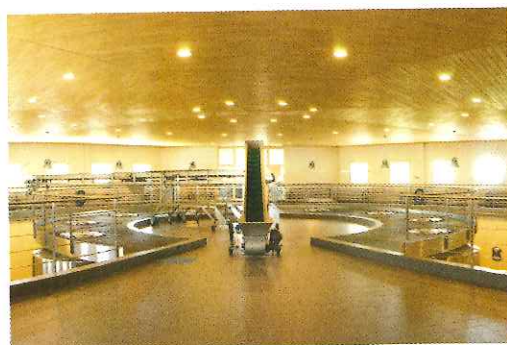
Partly underground, the cellars at Château de la Dauphine in Fronsac hold 600 barrels, of which one quarter are renewed each year

Château de La Dauphine, Fronsac

Not only was La Dauphine an obvious Deserving Hero, but I would give this description to the appellations Fronsac and Canon-Fronsac almost in their entirety. Following a reputation that equalled if not surpassed that of St-Emilion and Pomerol by the 18th century – confirmed by the grandeur of many châteaux – yet fell away after phylloxera, these appellations continue to produce some of the most robustly elegant and best value-for-pleasure wines on the Right Bank.

Yet La Dauphine has a class all its own: archives date the estate back to 1670. In 1709 it was sold to Jean Olivier, a financial advisor to Louis XIV, and remained in the family through three centuries. A classical (though smaller than Laroque) château was finished in 1750 to welcome Princess Maria Josepha of Saxony, wife of Louis, Dauphin of France – hence the name. By the 1960s the property was in the capable hands of the De Brem family, who also owned Canon de Brem in Canon-Fronsac, regularly producing the best wines in both appellations. In 1985, François-Régis Marcetteau du Brem, the last descendant of the Olivier family, sold La Dauphine to Christian Moueix of Ets J-P Moueix.

Despite the Moueix viticulture and



Above: Guillaume Halley has run La Dauphine since 2004; inside the new gravity-fed vinification cellar



Above: Château de la Dauphine was built between 1744 and 1750 by Jean-Baptiste de Richon, then a lawyer to the Paris parliament

vinification know-how, Fronsac was a losing proposition and the château was sold again in 2000 to Jean Halley, co-founder of the Promodès Group, who took on board the vendor's concern about the future of the appellation. The southerly exposed vineyard covers 40ha of vines averaging over 30 years in the form of an amphitheatre with a 60m height differential, the soils on the plateau being limestone, in the middle limestone with clay, and at the bottom clay-silty sand.

The whole property is now farmed organically with technical choices tailored to each individual plot; in the new circular vinification cellar there are 26 concrete and 16 stainless steel gravity-fed tanks of just 50hl (hectolitres), allowing each parcel to be vinified separately; the double-insulated underground cellar houses 600 barrels, renewed 25% per year. The estate's oenologist was Denis Dubourdieu, who was succeeded in 2011 by Michel Rolland. >

'La Dauphine has a class all its own'



Château de La Dauphine, Fronsac 2010 18 (93)

90% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc.
6,300 vines/ha

Lovely deep red with carmine rim. Very fine, robustly fruity nose with elegance and class to the fore, impressive ripeness in a restrained style, retaining florality and red fruits, still powerful and young with admirable structure, depth and everything in place for an assured future. **Drink** 2016-30 **Alc** 14.5%