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## Article Archive Neal Martin

### Mother's Kisses: Château Doisy-Daëne

Sauternes is a strange place, beautiful and serene and yet somehow dislocated from the rest of Bordeaux. Driving down from Pauillac to Barsac is a long drive and the blood pressure can rise on the gridlocked ring road, which during rush hour becomes the city's crown of thorns. But once you begin journeying south down the poplar-lined N113, you leave your troubles behind, worries seem to evaporate and perhaps it is psychosomatic, but the landscape becomes tintured with a golden glow.

Here is one of the greatest and I would insist, most under-rated wine regions of the world. With the exception of *Le Roi Yquem*, Sauternes is not as adept or inclined to promote itself as the Left Bank. Its mellifluous creations remain stubbornly unfashionable, almost passé when termed as a "pudding wine". Consequently in an age when the elite Cru Classé have presided, and in some cases, fuelled meteoric price inflation, Sauternes and Barsac's values remain relatively constant. Given that they are much more difficult to create than dry red wines, especially in terms of its knife-edge viticulture, then they should be considered obscenely well-priced.

Today I am visiting three Barsac estates: Château Doisy-Daëne, Château Doisy-Védrières and Château Climens. It seems obvious that the first two should appear consecutively, if only to juxtapose two estates separated at childhood in the early 19th century. At time of writing the Climens article is finished, but since I will re-taste a swathe of vintages at the château in April, I will wait until later to publish that article.



Against expectations I arrive at Château Doisy-Daëne five minutes early and alas its proprietor *Denis Dubourdieu* is not there. It gives me time to look around the vineyard, inspect the dew-covered vines glistening in the morning sunlight. *Denis*, or should I say *Professeur Denis* arrives five minutes later, I presume driving from his home at Château Reynon in Cadillac. An erudite, revered man who has done so much to promulgate the virtues of both dry and sweet white wine in France, I find him very down-to-earth and affable (though it must be said: the airs and graces that abound in the Left Bank would unsightly here in Sauternes.) Standing in his casual brown leather jacket surrounded by his vines, one can forget that he is head of the oenology department at Bordeaux University.

First, I ask him just to outline his estate:

*"My grandfather bought Doisy-Daëne in 1924 when it was just five hectares," he begins. "My father purchased part of Doisy Dubroca in the early sixties, which was more than 5 or 6-hectares and recently in 2003 we bought a very small estate of around three-hectares, which is very well situated just between Château Climens and Château Coutet. This was really part of a first growth so now we have 18-hectares in total."*

This being the second week of September, I ask about the impending harvest as we had just passed his son *Jean-Jacques* out in the vineyard practicing a last-minute prune of the vines. *"The harvest will commence at the end of this week. We have a small team of pickers, just five or six persons, never more than ten."*

We move on to the vinification.

*"We use one-third barrels for Doisy-Daëne and one-fifth for Château Cantegril. I like the Russian oak, which was used in the 19th century before the French started cutting down their own forests. My grandfather used to by 50-60% of his oak from there. The ageing in cask is short; it was short even during the time of my grandfather. Just one year followed by six or seven months in stainless-steel casks without oxidation. I prefer the non-oxidized style of Sauternes. The Hungarian sweet wines are oxidized, it is their style, but for me, Sauternes is without oxidation so that we can develop a bouquet through reduction over time that protects the fruit. They are two different aspects of aroma. I prefer one style but many other people prefer the other oxidized style."*

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*"The residual sugar is never more than 120gms/L. All my life I have resisted against the friendly advice of my 'friend writers' to make Sauternes with higher sugar levels. There are only special occasions you can do that. It is my personal taste."*

Of course, Denis is the doyen of dry white wines, in particular the oft-traduced Sauvignon Blanc. I ask him how that came about?

*"My father started to produce a dry wine in 1950. He was obliged to a 'yellow' harvest and when the bunches were too close and he picked some of the bunches before noble rot arrived. Those went to make the first dry white wines."*

At the other extreme is his rare L'Extravagance de Doisy-Daëne, one of the most coveted wines of the region.

*"The first L'Extravagance was produced in 1990 and then the next was in 1996. Since 2001 we have produced it every year. I made it because in the first half of the 19th century, the amount of Sauvignon Blanc in Sauternes was higher than in the 20th century. This is because the Sauvignon Blanc was "delicate" to grow and was sensitive to flower set and oidium. People decided to grow Sémillon as it was easier. I wanted to produce pure Sauvignon Blanc Sauternes and so to avoid the grey rot we only had four or five bunches per vine, therefore we made a severe yellow harvest. In 1990 it was easy to ripen: when we pressed the grapes the development of sugar was 30 degrees potential which was crazy. I was interested in finding the best conditions to ferment that and at that time I was involved in the selection of yeasts. Only a small number of yeasts can complete the alcoholic fermentation at that level. 1996 was the first year that I could do the same and this time I only used 50% Sauvignon Blanc. I reduced the sugar level as I felt it was too high with the 1990 and thereafter we continue at this level. It is a unique Sauternes wine; it is something special that we like to do."*

*"The first challenge was the fermentation and the second was to keep the freshness in such a rich wine. The key to maintaining the freshness is that the botrytis must arrive early, when the grape is fruity and able to react. Sauternes is not a concentration of botrytis, it is a reaction between a fruit and a fungus, the fruit reacting to the fungus and producing an enormous amount of aroma and flavour, it is a defence mechanism for the grape. If the grape is green or over-ripe then it cannot react. Secondly, the reaction must be fast, one week and no more. The sugar content before the noble rot must be high, about 14-15 potential, so you need a very small crop and good soil to do that. That sugar level can double in a few days, so you can have all the freshness with a huge amount of sugar. But you must pick berry by berry, so that it takes one hour to fill a basket of berries. It is not really a commercial wine."*

One of the little known facts about Doisy-Daëne is that they once produced an equivalent of an Eiswein. When I enquired about this, Denis has a look of surprise on his face, as if nobody had asked him about it since the late 1970s.

*"Yes, we made an Eiswein in 1978. We covered the vine with plastic sheets and we picked the grapes on the 23rd December when the grapes were frozen. It is not Sauternes...it is another thing."*

I ask Denis the simple question: what makes a great Barsac wine?

*"Botrytis is not a truffle. We are not interested in the taste of this fungus, we are interested in the taste given by the fruit when mixed with botrytis. Botrytis itself is a bad taste. Barsac is not Sauternes, even if I put Sauternes on the label. Great Barsac is the purity...the perfect purity, the freshness, the acidity, complexity of the aroma first and the afterwards the alcohol that is caressing on the palate. By that I mean like a child, when your mother kisses you. Then the ability of ageing, which is impossible if a wine has been oxidized either in the grape, the cask or the bottle. It is a fight against oxidation, which is fundamental to allow the reductive bouquet."*

*"What is fascinating is that the fruit is corrupted by a fungus, but in the end the wine has much more intense taste of fruit than any other on the Earth. It is 'delicate' (sic) to produce in the vineyard but not so difficult to vinify. When I blend, some parts are very rich but if they are not perfectly pure, then I exclude them from the blend. I learnt that from my father. Do not worry about the richness: focus upon the purity. If you have that, then you can have the richness. Complexity is also very important. The problem in our life is ennui...we lead boring lives. Boring life is a boring taste and boring taste is when wines are always the same. If everyone wants to do the same thing, then the wine becomes boring."*

Our brief appointment is over all too quickly. Denis invites me to return one day to Arcachon on the coast where his retired father lives and he promises to open a bottle of that Eiswein. We briefly discuss New Zealand's Sauvignon Blancs, many of which he admires although he advises against residual sugar levels exceeding four or five grams. But he certainly sees great potential for that country in the future. Surely the lure for him to make Sauvignon down there is too great for him to resist (but maybe a long commute from Cadillac?)

Now to its sister: Doisy-Védrines...

## **Tasting Notes**

### **2006 Château Cantegril 89**

A light golden colour. The nose has gone intensity with good level of honeyed botrytized fruit. There is just a hint of marzipan in the background. Good definition. The palate is medium-bodied, good acidity, good level of botrytis, nice viscous texture, perhaps just lacking a little tension on the finish, but a good 2006.

### **2006 Château Doisy-Daëne 93**

The 2006 Doisy Daëne is a little closed on the nose: honey, butterscotch, tinned pineapple and a touch of apricot. Perhaps it is me, but the wine is a little 'sleepy'. The palate is viscous, lovely

acidity and vibrancy, very harmonious honeyed middle with a focused, long honeyed finish. Very primal of course, but the balance bodes so well for its future. Excellent. Drink 2011-2025. Tasted September 2008.

**2007 Château Cantegril 90**

This still has a very leesy nose, but underneath there are scents of pineapple, cooking apple and a touch of honey. The palate is medium-bodied, well balanced, good acidity, nice focus though lacking the weight and complexity of Doisy-Daëne. Edgy, slightly spicy finish. Very fine. Tasted September 2008.

**2006 L'Extravagant de Doisy-Daëne 97**

This has a wonderful nose, lively and vivacious, great definition with honey, apricot and a touch of white flowers. There is a sense of transparency with this bouquet. The palate is full-bodied, quite unctuous, good acidity, thick honeyed fruit but beautifully balanced and fresh. Clementine, apricot and a touch of orange peel on the finish. Very long and seductive, the kind of wine you do not want to spit out. Superb. Drink 2011-2040. Tasted September 2008.

**2007 L'Extravagant de Doisy-Daëne (97-98)**

Due for bottling not until January 2009. The nose is very focused with good definition, light honeyed fruit, mango, white peach, touches of limestone, fine sense of *mineralité*. The palate is medium-bodied, good acidity and very concentrated with pure honeyed fruit laced with a touch of apricot. Builds beautifully towards the finish, with a lingering honeyed and marmalade tinged aftertaste. Outstanding. Tasted September 2008.

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