

Château Clinet

Marathon man



Facts & figures

Vineyard

11.27 hectares

Merlot: 85%

Cabernet Franc: 5%

Cabernet Sauvignon: 10%

Wines

First: Château Clinet

Second: Fleur de Clinet

Grid reference: p.37, 5D

The sports master steps out into the school playground, gulps a lungful of Siberian air and wets a finger to check the gale is gusting from the north.

His slash of military moustache twitches with satisfaction and, turning on his heel, he marches into the maelstrom of the boys' changing room, boys he has avowed to turn into men.

“Today, gentlemen, you are cordially invited to a long-distance run around the woods,” he bellows. “Get changed into your kit within two minutes or face detention until the end of time.”

Cue a chorus of groans and frenzied rifling through kitbags for recycled fake letters excusing little poppet from any form of physical activity. An hour later and the woods are alive with the sound of hyperventilating 13-year-olds staggering through the quagmire, barely recognisable under a film of mud, including myself. Each breath is more painful than the last. My muscles are melting. I'm thankful that, on such an Arctic day, the vultures cannot pick my bones until my body thaws next spring. The only pupils having fun are those who are preternaturally fit. They sprint ahead of the pack so that they can pit stop for a quick cigarette before taking a perilous shortcut across the ninth tee.

The trouble with running is that it is essentially “distilled boredom”. Expending so much effort running from “A-to-A” seems rather pointless. I feel no urgency to join Lycra-clad joggers religiously eating 10K of pavement three times a week. However, one man who *does* enjoy running is sitting opposite me at a pizzeria in St-Germain de Puch, south of Libourne. Trust me: this guy is one Speedy Gonzales, clocking a super-human time of two hours 39 minutes for his last marathon. I mean, that is Olympian, isn't it?

“I have only ever run three marathons,” says Ronan Laborde matter-of-factly. That is three more than I will ever run. I feel exhausted just *thinking* about it. I am more focused on the delicious pizza that is presently compensating for the lethargic service.

“As for my record time? That was in Paris,” he continues, cool as a cucumber. “I came 14th in the Médoc marathon this year, but that's unofficial. Something about the length not being exact.”

Pah... could they get nothing right in 1855?

“But don't you get... bored?” I ask, mopping a little grease from my mouth.

“No. I listen to music.”

“When did you run your first?”

“I did my first marathon in 2001. I just wanted to see if I could do it. Then in 2005 I had an operation and they said I would not be able to run for a while. For one month I could not walk, but I ended up running one just two months later. That was three hours 27 minutes.”

I almost choke on my Sloppy Giuseppe. Is that humanly possible? I eye Ronan suspiciously as he devours his Pepperoni Hot and takes a slug of beer. Should he not be nibbling a stick of celery? I wonder how often he trains?

“About five times a week. That's around 80-90km.”

“Can you still drink wine when you're training?”

“Yeah. I just stop three days before the race.”

Oh... I despise this man. He was one of those guys I remember at school, sauntering to a win without cheating, the dude that snubbed out his fag on a tree stump before rounding the final bend and cruising to victory. I examine his physique. He does not own the willowy, featherweight, titanium frame or the gaunt features or even the loneliness of a long-distance runner. Yet I wager he could run the 15km back to Pomerol faster than I could drive. One year after we had that discussion, Ronan achieved even more impressive scores, including third in the Médoc Marathon.

He is “Monsieur Marathon”.

History

Pomerol is home to a family of crus bearing the name Clinet: Châteaux l'Eglise-Clinet and Feytit-Clinet (*see* p.204, p.246) being the most famous examples. The name appears on the de Belleyme map of 1785 among the cluster of symbolic vines around the *ancienne église*, adducing the presence of viticulture from the 1770s when the land was being recorded. With regard to the etymology of the name, Garde's *L'Histoire de Pomerol* notes that “Clin ou Clinet” was a fashionable name during the 16th and 17th centuries, though it doesn't cite an individual.

Ronan Laborde propounds a theory that the name originates from the “Clinet de Molas” family. He uncovered a document issued in 1763, a *Register d'Acte de Domesticité*, that refers to Pierre Clinet, *seigneur de Molas*, who possessed several *métayages* in Bordeaux. Unfortunately, the document doesn't state exactly where Pierre leased out farmland, but it is likely to have been Libourne. Like Pierre's father, Bertrand, the family's profession was to mint currency for the king, a noble occupation that implies they occupied the top strata of society. Given that the *hôtel des monnaies* (or mint) was in Libourne, a town that maintained fidelity to the royal household, they may well have lived there and appropriated their name to agricultural land that they owned in the commune of Pomerol.

Antoine Arnaud was a *négociant* and owned vines in the *lieu-dit* of Petrus during the 1770s. He also owned “domaine de Clinet”. He married Jeanne Sarein and they had one daughter, born in Néac in 1811 and baptised her Catherine Henriette Arnaud. In 1831 she married Elie Désiré Constant, thereby uniting the two families. Elie was born in 1802 to Bernard Constant and Marie Dubois and it must have been a noisy household as Elie had 10 siblings. With so many mouths to feed, it was fortunate that the Constants were a wealthy family of *négociants*. Elie also seemed to have a penchant

Previous page: Who is that handsome devil? Why, it's Ronan Laborde of Château Clinet.

10-hectare (ha) vineyard was planted with 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, the remainder devoted to Merlot and Malbec. *Féret* lists the numerous medals awarded at various competitions from 1879 until 1910 and these were proudly emblazoned on a rare bottle of Clinet 1940 that I tasted at the château with Ronan some 69 years later.

While Pomerol produced more than its fair share of legendary wines from the likes of Petrus, Vieux Château Certan and L'Évangile (see p.354, p.448, p.230) after World War II, the wines of Clinet were deemed inferior and tasted rather "hard", according to our sages such as David Peppercorn MW. My singular experience of this period, a bottle of Château Clinet 1952, attested his observation. Clinet was not spared the 1956 frosts and vines had to be partly replanted. Thereafter, the estate stagnated for a number of years.

Ronan unearthed a wonderful illustration in Henry Guillier's *Les Grands Vins de la Gironde*, with turn-of-the-century photographs of Château Clinet. The winery lies in the shadow of the l'Église St-Jean, there is a blurred image of an ox stationary between the vines, and assumedly a suited Mon. Lucquot standing in the centre. Another photograph illustrates the barrel cellar: all earthen floors, large wooden beams and mould on the brick walls.

Georges Audy was bequeathed Clinet from his mother, Germaine, who had married into the Audy family. He had to divide his time between the property and his négociant business – it is perhaps the latter that got the lion's share of his attention. The crops were harvested by machine (by rote) and the Cabernet Sauvignon was prone to underripeness. He passed the property to his son-in-law, Jean-Michel Arcaute, in the mid-1970s, and Jean-Michel set about improving the wine by reducing the percentage of both Cabernets in favour of Merlot, as well as introducing hand-harvesting, manual selection, a longer *cuvaison* and a higher proportion of new oak. In 1985 he enlisted the services of Michel Rolland, who was already familiar with the vineyard, since Clinet had been one his first clients at the Chevrier Laboratory in 1973 (see p.84). Jean-Michel's hard work and perseverance paid off when both his 1989 and 1990 received rapturous acclaim from critics, most notably Robert Parker. Clinet was back on the map.

But in 1991, the property was sold to the insurance company GAN, and just eight years later it passed into the hands of Jean-Louis Laborde. Laborde was a successful businessman specialising in agriculture, tourism and waste management. His family lived in Paris, where he maintained a large wine cellar, mainly Bordeaux with Tokaji and Sauternes. At his wedding reception his lucky guests were served the delightful Château Clinet 1988. But Jean-Louis' interests extended beyond simply drinking wine, since he was a sleeping partner in Château Pajzos in Tokaji. He was close friends with Jean-Michel Arcaute, who had tipped him off that GAN was intending to sell its properties, and on acquiring Clinet, Jean-Michel continued as winemaker.

I only met Jean-Michel on one occasion in London, where I found him disarmingly generous with his time. Little was I, or anyone, to know that in 2001 he jumped into a cold sea, never to resurface. It was a great loss to his family and to Pomerol.

Jean-Louis's son, Ronan, was born on 1 January 1980. At around 13 years of age his interest in wine began to burgeon, particularly after reading *Larousse des Vins*.

"I wasn't sure what to choose – wine or sport," Ronan recalls, taking another bite of his calorific pizza. "I was at boarding school and then one day my father called and said, 'Would you be interested in running Château Clinet? If yes, I can help you buy it.'"

"I thought it would be a fabulous job working with all that wine and so I started in October 2003 as general manager. I didn't realise how hard the work would be."

Vineyard

The vines of Château Clinet are located on the central plateau and presently cover 11.27ha, comprising around 85% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc, with an average vine age of 47 years.

I ask Ronan about his vineyard husbandry as he glugs his beer and mops up the olive oil with his crust.

"I wanted to increase the planting density and we have managed to do that, increasing from 6,700-7,200 vines/ha. I would have liked 10,000, but then the rows would have been too narrow to use the tractor. We are training the vine so that the fruit is just 35-40cm from the ground to absorb heat, but I also want to raise the canopy to force the sap higher and stress the vine.

"My policy is that low yields are not mandatory to make excellent wine and over the last decade we average around 38hl/ha. In 2003 it was as low as 19hl/ha but in 2008 it was 35."

Their holdings consist of three main blocks that are sub-divided into smaller parcels. The first lies around the château on clayey soil, with some Merlot vines planted in 2000. Here, the fruit is separated at harvest since the vines on the upper two-thirds of the incline are more stressed and produce better-quality fruit that provides more alcohol to the final blend.

The second block lies to the north of the l'Église St-Jean, where vines are being re-trained closer to the ground. It includes a subplot known as Cabernet de l'Église, an intermingling of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Nearby, there is another subplot, Grand Vigne, which is pure Merlot planted in 1937 and 1940 on more gravelly soil with a decent proportion of clay. Their age lends the wine the tannic backbone. It is habitually the last to be picked. The third block, located between Trotanoy and Feytit-Clinet (see p.440), is called La Soulatte and covers 4.44ha with Merlot only.

In 2010, Ronan completed on two significant purchases, the first acquisition consisting of three parcels that had been part of Château La Bassonnerie (see p.485): Des Ormeaux (1.75ha), Barrail du Grand Sentier (0.21ha) and Jardin des Pres Cassats (0.31ha). This was augmented by 0.7ha located close to Château Montviel (see p.527). Ronan told me that

Ronan was thrown in at the deep end. He had to finance and oversee the construction of a new winery and reposition Clinet within the Pomerol hierarchy. One assiduous decision that he made was to halve the price of the 2000 vintage. What may have perturbed the accountant introduced an affordable wine to a new generation of consumers who could no longer afford the top Pomerol names. Although prices had come down, quality was going up and Château Clinet is now a name on everyone's lips, a name that is firmly in the ascendant.

while he believes the latter has the potential to form part of the Grand Vin, he might use these additional vines to bolster the production of the second label, Fleur de Clinet.

Due to the total absence of any historical documents about this estate, it is impossible to discover any changes in the vineyard over the last century.

What is for sure is that they purchased part of the vines located between the l'Église St-Jean and the Syndicat de Pomerol offices when Château Nouvelle Église (see p.529) was broken up.

There is also an additional, rather “unloved” block of Cabernet Sauvignon that only produced something worthy in 2004, when it was vinified separately.

I ask how Ronan tackles the logistics of picking – not straightforward when you have several dispersed parcels.

“We start with [the vines near the] Syndicat and then move on to the young vines,” Ronan informs me, finishing off the remains of his Italian feast. “Then we pick the young Merlot and finally the older Cabernets. We usually recruit around 40 people at the harvest, including 15 or 20 to man the vibrating sorting table.”

Vinification

Château Clinet lies close to Clos l'Église; a compact, white, two-storey building constructed in 2004 with the winery annexed onto the side on what was originally the surrounding garden. Upstairs are offices that appear to be populated by an army of young women; downstairs the reception is furnished with a chinoiserie, glass coffee table, leather chairs and rather garish 1980s photographs (like those Blu-Tacked to teenagers' bedroom walls c.1984).

Awaiting my beer that may or may not arrive, I enquire about Ronan's approach to the vinification.

“I want to preserve the berries from oxidation and reduce crushing. We transfer the must in 400kg vessels, known as a *cuvon*, that run on rails over the vats. Here the must is crushed so that it has the consistency of caviar. We have 11 thermo-regulated wooden vats: nine 60hl and two 40hl that replaced the stainless-steel vats in 2004. We don't fill them completely, just two-thirds so that we can use *pigeage* with a little pumping over and *mouillage* (a short pump-over designed to keep the skins and seeds in the cap wet). I feel that adds to the creamy texture of the wine. We age 50% of the pressed juice and usually blend that back so that it represents 8-10% of the Grand Vin to lend it tannins and fatness. We use 60% new oak and the rest one year old. The barrels are sourced from five coopers, with an emphasis on Demptos and Darnajou. The wine was matured entirely in new oak until 2003, but we changed when we started using the wooden fermentation vessels. All malo is completed in barrel where the wines remain for around 16 months – though again, this used to be longer: up to 28 months.”

In 2009, Ronan produced a one-off barrel to be sold to family and friends. The barrel was from a 350-year-old oak in the Tronçais forest felled in 2006 and used to make 56 barrels, of which 10 were sold at auction.

Ronan was one of the lucky bidders and the fruit of the old Merlot vines from Grandes Vignes is having the pleasure of being raised in this special vessel. The wine will be called Speciosa Seposito, inspired by the Latin name for a special cuvée that was once reserved for the highest members of the clergy.

Wine

There was a time in the 1990s when I feared that Château Clinet was turning into a vinous equivalent of that masochistic sports master: full-bodied, sinewy, loud and demonstrative. These were not the virtues of a great wine, and Ronan has moved away from this style of Pomerol. I ask him what kind of wine he seeks to make.

“I aim to have more density and volume,” he answers, “to integrate the oak well and maintain freshness.”

The performance of Château Clinet came under the spotlight with two vertical tastings, the first hosted at Clinet in May 2009 and the second hosted by Bordeaux Index in London in February 2011 that included every vintage from 1987–2008.

Older vintages of Clinet are rarely sighted, but Ronan opened an antiquity in 2009. The 1940 had a remarkable nose that showed little sign of oxidation. The frail wine was kept alive by its citric thread that imparted a tang of orange rind on the finish, and though it soon became volatile, I was still afforded a fleeting glimpse of a once half-decent Pomerol relic. The only other encounter with an ancient Clinet is a rather moribund 1952. I haven't tasted any wines from the 1960s or 1970s; apparently I am not missing much.

The 1986 is a respectable Pomerol, defined by the savouriness of the Cabernet Franc, with roasted chestnut towards the drying finish. Large formats might hold more pleasure than bottles, but I suspect even they are in gentle decline. The 1987 is a little one-dimensional on the espresso-tinged nose, the palate marked by stern, obdurate tannins lacking some flesh towards the finish but gaining harmony with time and ending up not a million miles away from a mature, off-vintage Lafleur (see p.300). It deserves a light applause.

The 1988 is superior, with touches of Christmas cake and leather on the nose and a Rhône-like, animally personality. Overall it is a well-balanced, mature Pomerol, yet it loses composure towards the citric finish.

I have been fortunate to encounter both the 1989 and 1990 on several occasions and they are both sumptuous wines, perhaps a little rustic, but so full of complexity and character that they are impossible to resist. At over 20 years of age, they are perhaps Jean-Michel Arcaute's greatest legacy and continue to offer immense pleasure, even if the prices have become prohibitive and there does appear to be bottle variation.

The 1991 is surprisingly good, although I maintain that a number of wines from this maligned vintage were “emboldened” with more than a soupçon

of 1990... not that I am accusing Clinet of such a practice! It has a lively bouquet and the Cabernet Franc lends it a simple, feral finish. It is preferable to the enervated, weedy 1992 that reflects the difficult growing season and is surpassed by the 1993. This is a pleasant surprise, with an intense bouquet, hints of dried Italian meats and a nicely focused palate. The 1994 is not quite at the same level, dominated by opulent Merlot on the entry and coming across as a little obvious compared to the previous vintage. The palate is a little overworked, the tannins very grippy and lacking finesse and elegance.

Ronan explained how he now feels less coerced to push the wines harder once they are in vat since the work has all been done in the vineyard in terms of picking and selection. He is seeking to make Clinet more approachable in its youth, responding to the fact that many customers inhabit cities and are either uninterested or unable to cellar wines over many years. Hence recent vintages are picked later and endowed with higher alcohol levels, usually a minimum of 13.5 degrees of alcohol compared to 12-12.5 during the 1980s.

Henceforth, Clinet entered a period where I feel that they were almost trying to work the wine too hard. When I discussed this period with Ronan, his feeling was that, during the 1990s, Jean-Michel sought to improve Clinet in the winery by working the skins and extracting harder. This is evidenced by vintages in the latter half of the 1990s, where the oak begins to obfuscate the personality of the wine. The 1995 was rather pinched, the 1996 not bad for the vintage, but missing charm and vivacity. You may as well opt for the 1997, which sports a ferrous bouquet and a fine, grippy palate.

To be frank, all the vintages until 2003 seem generic, as if they were trying to iron-out the highs and lows of the growing seasons, and the winemaking speaks louder than the wine itself. Even the 2000 – the best wine of the period – seems to be denied a sense of joie de vivre, of passion.

Things begin to turn around with the 2004, the first vintage that looks the growing season in the eyes and aims to exceed its limitations.

Although the 2005 is a very commendable wine, it is actually the 2006 that convinces, with its cashmere tannins and the panache that I believe Ronan is seeking. This is a wine that seems to be coming into its own in bottle. Even the 2007 should not be overlooked, while the 2008 is splendid and is a fine precursor to the fabulous, voluptuous 2009.

Clinet has been trying to find its way following its outstanding successes at the end of the 1980s and the untimely death of Jean-Michel Arcaute. After a period of using excessive new oak and trying to fashion a “blockbuster” Pomerol, Clinet has honed its style in recent, highly acclaimed vintages. It’s still a comparatively opulent, full-bodied, perhaps you could say “modern”, take on Pomerol, but there is now more purity and personality. Clinet is beginning to find its voice again.

Finishing off the dregs of his beer and mopping up the last crumbs of his pizza, it is time to depart. Ronan certainly has grand ideas for Clinet, as evinced by his expansion of the vineyard and investments in the winery. But like Jean-Baptiste Bourotte at Clos du Clocher and Bonalgue (see p.138, p.94), he understands the sensitivity of the market, the need to build prudently over time. Starting so young and inexperienced seems to have instilled a sense of humility and he learned a great deal in these early

years. This has put Clinet on a firm footing with a string of lauded wines, and the estate is currently producing wines that stand shoulder to shoulder with the 1989 and 1990. And with that, I have sensed a karma settling on Clinet. His reception and office always has a relaxed atmosphere, always welcomed by a smiling Ronan or one of the “Clinet Girls” (why, he even had the nous to hire a girl from my home county of Essex). Ronan has settled into a groove, found his way both in terms of how he runs this famous bijou estate *and* with the style of Pomerol he creates.

I get back into my car and switch on the radio, pausing to admire Little Willie John’s blistering and, to my mind, definitive take on *Fever*. I glance into the wing mirror to see if “Speedy Gonzales” is limbering up for the 15K sprint back to Clinet.

He will probably arrive back before I do.

Memorable wine #4

Château Lafleur 1955

October 2003

Basel, Switzerland. A colleague from Tokyo head office and I chaperoned a rather “testy” Japanese sommelier to visit a potential supplier. A feast of fine wines ensued over dinner among which was a Château Lafleur 1955. Perhaps it was the moment I became entranced by this enigmatic wine. It was a highly enjoyable soirée and everyone was having a good time. At least I thought they were. Upon returning to our hotel, the sommelier threw a hissy fit. Something utterly inconsequential had upset him during dinner. He turned into a five year old and sulked on his bed while we did our best to mollify him, only to make him even more agitated. I gave up and went to bed around three o’clock. Unbelievably, the rattle was still being thrown out of his pram the following morning. Thankfully, I was due to return home to London. I bid them adieu, admonished the sommelier *sotto voce*, and caught the train back to Geneva, during which my company phone was pick-pocketed by a gang of kids, who ran up £2,000 of charges to Uganda by the time I realised it was missing. See p.300.