



VINEYARD

BORDEAUX

Belgians producing
top Bordeaux wines

Dirk De Mesmaeker

PHOTOS

Andrew Verschetze







BELGIANS IN THE BORDEAUX REGION

There are about 35 of them: Belgians who produce wine in the Bordeaux region. This remarkable fact alone is already reason enough to write an in-depth book about it.

Numbers aren't everything, because quality is more important than quantity. In that sense, the Belgian winemakers in Bordeaux have achieved excellent results.

It doesn't matter in which appellation they work; the wines that are produced by the Belgians are clearly appreciated. This is illustrated by the numerous awards these wines have won worldwide, as well as the many positive reviews from the specialised press.

It says a great deal that out of hundreds of other international winegrowers, all of these Belgians have managed to establish a strong position in one of the world's most famous and prestigious wine regions, and that they have done so in a positive way. It also indicates that they work with a lot of respect and care as well as with an eye for top quality. Above all, they're incredibly passionate.

One of the great things about this is the exceptional variety. Not only the great diversity of wines that these Belgians bring to the market, but also the men and women that produce the wines. They are Flemish and Walloon, younger and older winemakers, wealthy investors and small, do-it-yourself winegrowers. They all share the same passion for good wine, and each one puts their wine region on the map in their own way.

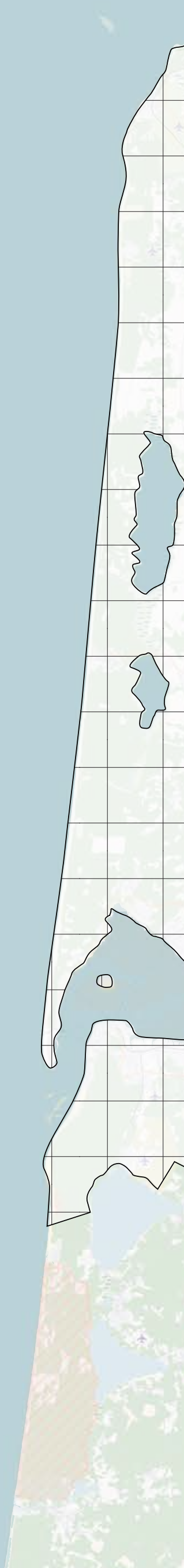
In a wine world that knows no boundaries and where the competition is more intense than ever, our wine makers in Bordeaux deserve all of our respect.

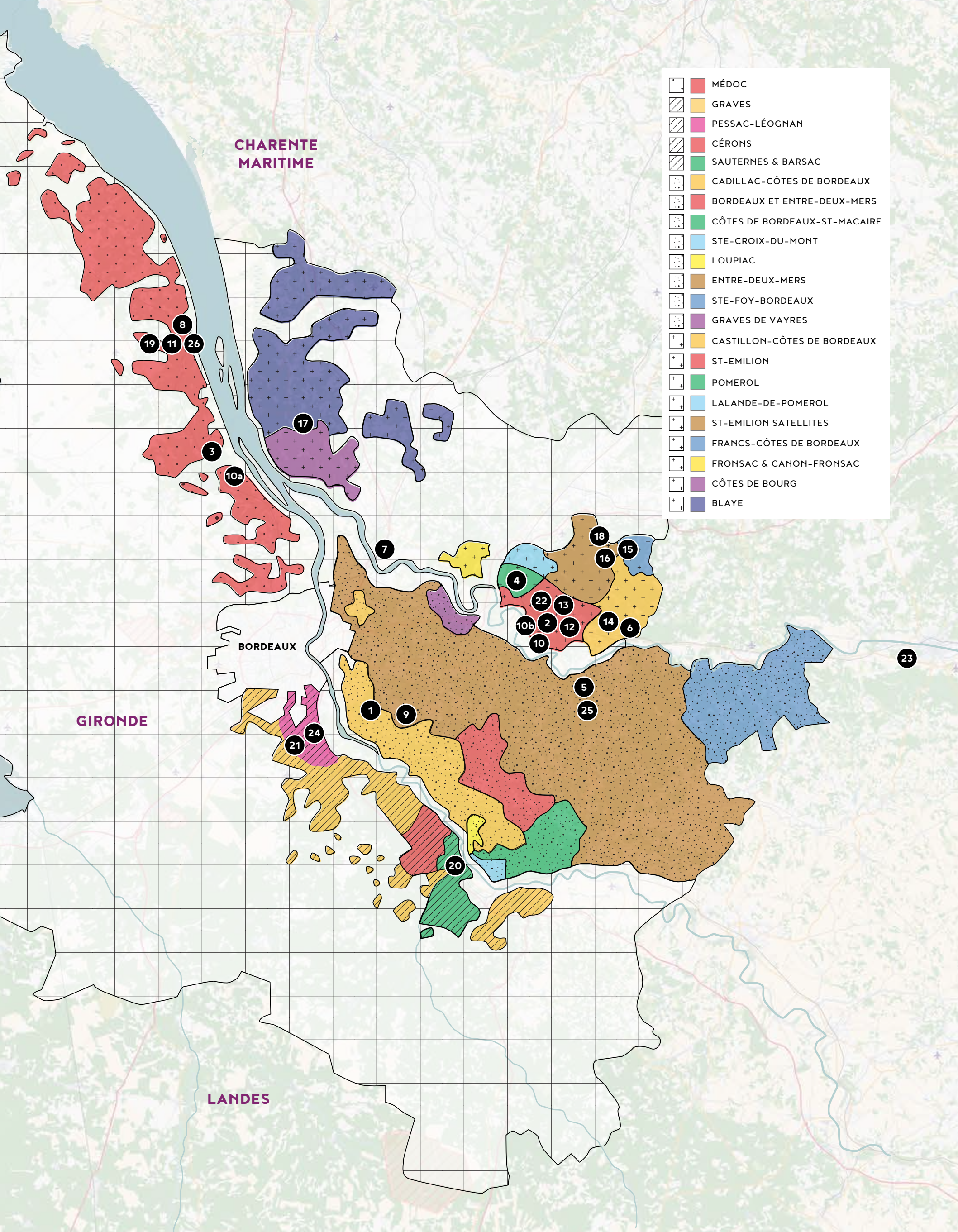
Behind every good wine there is a great story. I truly hope that the stories, enriched with Belgian colours, which you'll find in this book, will intensify your desire to taste the wines. I'm sure you won't regret it!

Dirk De Mesmaeker

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CHARENTE
MARITIME

BORDEAUX

GIRONDE

LANDES

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| [Pink box] | PESSAC-LÉOGNAN |
| [Red box] | CÉrons |
| [Green box] | SAUTERNES & BARSAC |
| [Yellow box] | CADILLAC-CÔTES DE BORDEAUX |
| [Red box] | BORDEAUX ET ENTRE-DEUX-MERS |
| [Green box] | CÔTES DE BORDEAUX-ST-MACAIRe |
| [Blue box] | STE-CROIX-DU-MONT |
| [Yellow box] | LOUPIAC |
| [Brown box] | ENTRE-DEUX-MERS |
| [Blue box] | STE-FOY-BORDEAUX |
| [Purple box] | GRAVES DE VAYRES |
| [Yellow box] | CASTILLON-CÔTES DE BORDEAUX |
| [Red box] | ST-EMILION |
| [Green box] | POMEROL |
| [Blue box] | LALANDE-DE-POMEROL |
| [Brown box] | ST-EMILION SATELLITES |
| [Blue box] | FRANCS-CÔTES DE BORDEAUX |
| [Yellow box] | FRONSAC & CANON-FRONSAC |
| [Purple box] | CÔTES DE BOURG |
| [Blue box] | BLAYE |



CHÂTEAU PABUS

AMERICAN-FLEMISH WEDDING IN SADIRAC

The story of Kris Couvent, owner of the Huis Vossen wine store in Lennik, reads like a good novel. Couvent worked as a winemaker at Château Pabus in Sadirac when the charming estate came into the hands of a wealthy American who loved Bordeaux wines. Since that time Kris Couvent has been making wine on behalf of the American investor, and no effort has been spared. The wines of Château Pabus are being made using the very best and latest technologies. They have quickly reached the top of the Bordeaux Supérieur appellation and now they can easily be compared to very best wines from other excellent appellations.

Château Pabus in Sadirac has undergone a complete transformation since 2012, the year in which Kris Couvent and Robert S. Dow reached a business agreement. The winery, located approximately 15 kilometres from Bordeaux, is still charming because of the simple, but incredibly stylish château. It was built in the 18th century by the architect Victor Louis. He was also the man who designed Le Grand Théâtre, one of the best-known buildings in the city of Bordeaux.

While the château still looks the same on the outside, inside it underwent a thorough makeover. The largest investment was made in the vinification room, which is located behind the little château. Here absolutely nothing was spared in terms of cost and effort. The result is a high-tech *chai* (vinification room) that is completely temperature controlled. Even more, the temperature of all the separate vats and the room in which they stand is controllable and adjustable

from a distance. In short: a *chai* with state-of-the-art technology! Behind the château, one will also find the offices, a tasting room and a stunning roof terrace with a view of the château and the vineyard.

The entire vinification process at Château Pabus takes place in a natural way, according to the law of gravity. No pumps are used, in order to prevent the crushing of the grapes. 'The grapes are like caviar. All of the leaves and twigs are completely removed before the grapes are vinified,' says Kris Couvent.

VINIFICATION INTÉGRALE

For the production of wine at Pabus there are no limits to the technical aspects and the use of materials. Only the best is good enough. Furthermore, Kris Couvent is assisted by two very experienced oenologists: Michel Rolland and Bruno Lacoste.

Together they have decided to make the wine at Château Pabus according to the methods of *vinification intégrale*. It means that the grapes are placed in wooden casks immediately after the (manual) harvest. This is different from the traditional method, namely in stainless steel tanks. Both the alcoholic and malolactic fermentation take place in the cask. The major advantage of this method is a much better

and subtler integration between the wood and the fruit of the grapes. Any further vinification is done entirely in one and the same cask.

At Château Pabus, new oak casks with a 500-litre capacity are used. Immediately after the grapes are stored, dry ice is added. As a result,

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Kris Couvent from Lennik (centre) and Robert S. Dow, a good example of a very successful Flemish-American marriage in Bordeaux.



the temperature in the cask drops to about 2°C. At this temperature not even alcohol fermentation takes place, but a pure maceration does, which results in maximum extraction of colour and taste from the grapes.

'This process results in beautifully rounded wines that leave an impression of sweetness on the palate,' says Kris Couvent. 'These are wines made for the

future, that have a lot of storage potential and concentration. In terms of quality they are comparable to a Premier Grand Cru Classé, for example.'

In the appellation Bordeaux Supérieur, which includes the wines of Château Pabus, there are only a limited number of wineries using vinification intégrale. In addition to Château Pabus, other wineries that use this method include Reignac and Le Girolate, two top-notch wineries in the region.

Vinification intégrale is the crème de la crème in terms of winemaking. It's an expensive method though, because a new 500-litre cask easily costs 3000 euros.

Meanwhile, from the 500 litres of grapes put into the cask only 250 litres remains at the end of the process. No need to worry though as Château Pabus prefers quality over quantity.

Not all of the grapes are of the necessary quality to be processed with the vinification intégrale method. This is why Château Pabus also has stainless-steel vats. These are designed to vinify the second wine (and all other wines) of the estate.

Only the very best quality grapes, produced by vines that are at least 10 years old, are eligible for vinification intégrale. If the harvest is a bit disappointing, for example due to poor weather, no vinification in wood takes place. Instead all of the grapes are placed into the stainless steel vats. By following this precept, Château Pabus has an answer for every possible scenario.

The vinification also takes place per plot and the assemblage of the wines is only done at the very end of the process.







The soil of the vineyard in Sadirac consists of loam, clay and gravel. The grapevines never have to deal with drought stress, because of the clay in the substrate. The water stays in the clay, and as result the plants get the necessary amount of water during hot summers.

At Château Pabus the focus is on quality rather than quantity. This is why the vineyard is maintained with the greatest possible care and also the reason why the grapes are harvested manually.



High quality grapes form the basis of good wines. Only the very best grapes are eligible for *vinification intégrale*.



WINE IN AMPHORA

Kris Couvent is contemplating the idea of making some wines in amphora in the future, and he has a good reason for this. Sadirac, where Château Pabus is located, has been known for its pottery since ancient times: vases and objects were made from the clay that can be found in the soil. More precisely it's the so-called *argile bleue*, blue clay, which can be found 80 centimetres below the surface.

Employees who were working in the garden of Château Pabus accidentally discovered the remains of an old pottery kiln from the 14th century that, according to researchers, was used until the beginning of the 20th century. Kris Couvent made sure that the archaeological find was restored to its original state.

ORIGINALLY WHITE

The vinification process at Château Pabus is currently only red wine, but Kris Couvent would like to distinguish himself with white wines as well. In this regard the choice for the Vioignier grape is very interesting. 'Unlike Sémillon or Sauvignon, Vioignier is not a common grape in Bordeaux. However, it is a very noble, original and interesting grape,' says Kris Couvent. Great examples are the wines of Château Grillet, a top appellation in Côtes-du-Rhône in which 100% Vioignier is used.

Vioignier is a grape variety that's not officially recognised in Bordeaux. However, at Château Pabus they're not particularly concerned about this. In addition, some wineries already use Vioignier, including prestigious names such as Château du Tertre (Margaux).

The composition of the soil was what particularly inspired the winemaker from Lennik to choose Vioignier. Besides gravel and pebbles, Sadirac has loam in the soil. 'Sometimes this is also called "cold soil". Until recently it was not seen as the best terroir, but due to global warming this kind of soil now offers more benefits. The maturation of the grapes in this kind of soil is relatively slow. Because of the layer of clay, the winery also never has a shortage of water, not



even in the very dry periods that have occurred over the last few years. The climate is increasingly changing in a way that favours a grape variety like Vioignier. And if it does rain, the 25-kilometre drainage system in the vineyard will dissipate the excess water.'

For the same climatological reasons Kris Couvent also gave the order to plant Malbec grapes in a small portion of the vineyard. In the past this grape was quite common in Bordeaux, but it disappeared almost entirely in the 19th century due to the phylloxera crisis. This crisis was caused by an aphid that entirely destroyed the harvest. After the crisis Malbec never regained its previous popularity. However, the grape is gaining ground again because of its slow maturation and good resistance to heat.

Cabernet Franc, a grape that normally thrives in warmer soils such as those of Médoc, might possibly have a promising future in the Sadirac region as well.



AT THE TOP OF THE APPELLATION

Château Pabus has everything it needs to make the very best wines, wines that can easily hold their own in comparison with a Grand Cru Classé. However, the Château Pabus winery is part of the appellation Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur. This is a very broad appellation with 6500 active winegrowers, and unfortunately not all of them make good quality wines.

Kris Couvent has been an advocate for a new system for years, in which the better wineries from the large Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur appellations would receive a separate classification. Among other things it should be based on a strictly defined set of benchmarks.

ESPRIT COUVENT

Kris Couvent has a special connection to another winery as well: Château Lamothe de Haux. During his studies at Bordeaux University he often lived at the estate and he still has emotional and commercial ties with the estate today. Kris Couvent is currently making white wines at Lamothe, which are brought to the market under the L'Esprit Couvent label.

These wines are L'Esprit Couvent Blanc and Cuvée Bent Van Looy, named after the singer and artist who has designed the wine's label since 2011. Bent Van Looy has been closely involved in the production of the cuvée and he partly determines its taste and the composition.

The Cuvée Charlotte, named after one of Kris Couvent's daughters, is also made at Château Lamothe. Just like the Cuvée Bent Van Looy this wine is made with Sauvignon Blanc, Sauvignon Gris and Sémillon.

Besides his own wines made under the Esprit Couvent label, Kris Couvent also heads up the distribution of the Château Lamothe wines. In order to keep everything running smoothly, Couvent has concluded a business agreement with Damien Chombart, owner of Château Lamothe.

In doing so, L'Esprit Couvent has become the umbrella structure under which Kris Couvent has placed not only his wines and wine growing activities but also his wine business in Lennik and other projects and partnerships: vineyard management consulting, communication and networking...

AN ESTATE WITH A GREAT FUTURE

The story of Kris Couvent as a winegrower (and wine seller) is far from over. The goal is clearly defined: to rise to the top of the appellation and take the Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur appellation itself to a higher level! The ambition of Château Pabus' winegrowers is evident, as is the much-needed capital.

The Sadirac estate, which has grown to 20 hectares over time, is not only a place for top wines. For example, organic vegetables will also be grown and horses are going to be kept to work the land.

Fortunately the Flemish winemaker and the American investor have a great connection, and not only on the business level! Increased sales in the U.S. are proof that a growing number of people appreciate Château Pabus wines. But Kris Couvent wants to convince not only American wine lovers but also those around the globe, that Château Pabus offers high-quality wines. This will also translate into increasing production from 60,000 to 70,000 bottles by 2025.

'An ambitious goal that will take a lot of time, but we'll convince people through our quality,' said Kris Couvent. 'In comparison with the well-known top wines, which have become almost unaffordable, the wines of Château Pabus are a little bit more expensive than average wines. However, the quality in the bottle is significantly higher and that's why we're doing it.'





Vinification intégrale is the crème de la crème in terms of winemaking. From the initial 500 litres of grapes put into the cask, only 250 litres remains at the end of the process.

Nothing is left to chance, especially during the harvesting and the vinification. Only the very best is good enough at Château Pabus, nothing is spared in terms of cost and effort in order to produce top wines.



A rigorous selection of the grapes not only takes place in the vineyard, but also when the grapes arrive in the nearby chai, immediately after harvesting. Excellent grapes form the basis of great wines.









AMERICAN LOVE FOR BORDEAUX

Robert S. Dow, the owner of Château Pabus, is a very successful American businessman. During his varied career, he has received a number of awards.

Following his military service in the US Army Robert S. Dow decided to study at the Newark College of Engineering, where he earned his BS (Bachelor of Science Degree) in civil engineering. Subsequently, he studied at the N.Y.U School of Engineering and Science, followed by business courses at New York's Columbia Business School. Meanwhile Robert S. Dow worked at his great passion: fencing. He was part of the American fencing team during the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Robert S. Dow started his professional career as a quantitative analyst at Lord Abbett & Co., where he also completed the Columbia MBA-programme. Ten years later Robert S. Dow became the head of the fixed-income division at Lord Abbett. He was promoted to the position of managing partner in 1996. Robert S. Dow managed to increase the firm's assets from 18 to 135 billion dollars, which made Lord Abbett & Co. one of the 30 largest investment-management concerns in the United States.

At the same time, Robert S. Dow initiated several other projects. For example, from 1990 to 2005 he was a trustee of Tuxedo Park School. Since 2002 he has also been a board member of the Peter Westbrook Foundation, an organization that teaches young and underprivileged New Yorkers the how to fence. Dow introduces them to values like discipline, hard work and perseverance.

Robert S. Dow is also the treasurer of the Christina Seix Academy, which was established by his wife. This independent school, which is located in Trenton, New Jersey, gives children from single-parent families with financial problems a full education. He also established a scholarship at the New Jersey Institute of Technology to assist students. Dow received the prestigious title of Doctor of Science for his outstanding career and his commitment to helping others, awarded by the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

New challenge...

'After forty years in finance, I was looking for something new to get my teeth into. My daughter knows I love Bordeaux wines, so she persuaded me to invest in a property in the area. After a couple of visits, we fell in love with Château Pabus. I wanted to make sure it would continue to be run using modern methods, so in 2012, I entrusted its management to its former owner, Kris Couvent, a Belgian wine merchant. Our determination knew no bounds. We were ready to do everything to elevate Pabus to the pinnacle of the appellation and undertook some serious work on the property. As part of our obsession with quality, I decided to call in the best experts and engaged Michel Rolland and his lieutenant Bruno Lacoste. Our shared objective was to promote precision in the vineyard and rational winemaking to bring out the very best of our terroir. With our dream-team in place, our outlook is serene.'



