

Château Kirwan - the faithful servant celebrating its anniversary

The years 1855 and 1926 are two important dates in the history of Château Kirwan and the Schÿler family. The first was when the château received its 3rd Grand Cru classification and the second was when Armand Schÿler bought the property. Now we are gearing up for the 100th anniversary in two years!

Caption: Château Kirwan has been in the family for almost 100 years.

Château Kirwan is a wine I remember fondly from the past. It was on all the best wine lists around the country and even then gave a lot of wine for the money. One of the reasons was the owner of the château, Jean-Henri Schÿler, also a partner in the great trading house Schröder & Schÿler, in Bordeaux. His excellent contacts with the then Vin & Spritcentralen meant that we received a generous allocation of the already sought-after wine.

He was also consul for Denmark in Bordeaux, a position proudly inherited by his son Yann, who also became consul for Sweden and Norway. They struggled for a while in the 1990s and had to bring in outside financiers after some family members sold their shares. Jean-Henri Schÿler, led the effort to return ownership to the family after 1997.

Now times have changed again and Bordeaux wine in general is struggling. At Château Kirwan, however, the mood is positive. The wine was very well received at the last tasting and Yann Schÿler, who now owns the château with his sisters, Nathalie and Sophie and their brother-in-law, is optimistic.

- "Our investments have really started to show," says Yann in perfect Swedish, as we walk around the grounds.

As befits the occasion, we start in the vineyard adjacent to the castle. We are now in Margaux, on the famous Cantenac plateau, which consists mostly of a well-draining layer of gravel with clay underneath. The clay helps to retain water in dry years. The soil is considered the best in the Médoc.

- We have 37 different parcels that we vinify separately, after a thorough analysis of the soil that we did in 2018. Cabernet sauvignon (45%) and merlot (30%) dominate, cabernet franc (15%) and petit verdot (10%) complement and in 2014 we planted a few hectares of carmenere that are included from the 2017 harvest. The reason is that it is less sensitive to powdery mildew, so it could be interesting going forward. One hectare is replanted every two years to ensure the long-term quality of the grapes," says Yann.

Kirwan is in the process of converting to organic farming, a natural step forward for the chateau.

- "We are focusing on biodiversity and planting trees and shrubs around the vineyards," says Yann. "We fight mildew as gently as possible, but we won't be growing biodynamically, we want the freedom to choose yeasts and bacterial cultures for the malolactic fermentation. Since 2017, they have the French classification Haute Valeur Environnementale class 3 and are now aiming forward.

Climate change has obviously had an impact on Bordeaux. Getting grapes to ripen is no longer a major problem; on the contrary, the heat waves of recent years have caused a lot of trouble. Merlot grapes, which ripen early, are particularly affected, but the risk of mildew and oidium is still high if the spring is wet.

After investing in the vineyard, work began to refurbish the production facility.

The work took two years and in 2017 the new state-of-the-art facility was inaugurated, at a cost of €6 million. All grapes are harvested by hand and quickly transported to the cellar. There, a sorting table awaits, where the bunches and then the grapes are sorted

a total of two times. They are then lifted into steel containers and dropped into one of the 37 tulip-shaped concrete tanks where fermentation takes place. Alcoholic fermentation and malolactic fermentation take place simultaneously. The process is called co-fermentation, a fairly new method that reduces fermentation time, softens tannins and protects the wine from instability.

Each tank contains 70 hectoliters of grapes from a separate location which is carefully mapped in the vineyard. No pumps are used, everything is done by gravity.

Instead of classic remontage, the skins are allowed to sink to the bottom through an ingenious system.

The pressing is done gently with a state-of-the-art vertical press and the press wine gives 60 barrels that are distributed by quality.

The oak barrel cellar consists of several hundred oak barrels from twelve different suppliers, nine from France and one from Austria.

- The combination of the oak barrels is as important as the assemblage of the different wines. The wine rests on the oak for 18-24 months depending on the vintage. The total production is around 200,000 bottles, of which slightly more than half are Grand Vin, says Yann.

Yann Schÿler is very proud of the site, but points out the winemaker and manager Philippe Delfaut who joined Kirwan in 2007. At the time, he had eleven years' experience at the cult Ch. Palmer, which is next door. For the assemblages, they have the new star Eric Boissenot as a consultant. He has taken on the mantle of the famous Michel Rolland, now that he has more or less retired.

We enter the tasting room where the 2019 and 2020 Charmes await, followed by the 2020 Grand Vin, the 2021 2022 and the 2023 Premier Vin.

- Our wine is built like a house. Cabernet Sauvignon is the foundation, Petit Verdot provides strength and stability, Merlot provides the decor. Furthermore, cabernet franc is the decoration like flowers on the table or the paintings on the walls," says Yann.

The description really gives a sense of the wines which all have a great generous aroma and an elegant, charming taste. There are certainly vintage differences, the 2021 Grand Vin contains no merlot but still gives a big generous taste for being so young. After the tasting, a fantastic dinner is offered, where Yann personally grills a Côte de Boeuf over an open fire in the magnificent castle kitchen. As befits the occasion, the wood is dried pruned vines and this is accompanied by an absolutely incomparable Grand Vin 1978 that has aged with great pleasure.

Bordeaux was long known to be inaccessible to wine tourists. The great châteaux only welcomed professional wine judges and celebrities. This has changed in recent years, and Kirwan is at the forefront there too. Today they receive around 15,000 visitors annually with both tasting, purchase in the store and tour. Not least the fantastic castle garden with its rose garden is a destination in itself. The city of Bordeaux has named them one of the best wine destinations in the area. The next generation of Schÿlers is now active at the chateau, with Sophie Schÿler Thierry's stepson Stanislas in charge of development and communication.

Yann Schÿler assumed his father Jean-Henri's responsibilities, both for Kirwan, the trading house and the Consul General title now for Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Yann spent a lot of time in Scandinavia, especially Sweden, as a young man and speaks the three languages fluently. His Danish wife Marie-Louise is Head of Communications at Rémy Martin after 25 years in the wine business, so there is a lot of experience in the family! Yann is an important man in the Bordeaux wine trade, holding board positions in the most important places. Not least when it comes to La Place where most of the great wines are traded. More about that next door.

Everyone talks about La Place, not least during April, when over six thousand wine connoisseurs invade the city.

Then it's the premier tasting, the latest vintage is sampled from barrels for the market to determine the price.

The system originated in the 18th century when the aristocrats lived in their castles and were reluctant to mix with the common people, as merchants were. Brokers, known as courtiers, acted as intermediaries and, in return for a percentage, brought together sellers with keen buyers. Castle owners were happy because they got paid before the wine was bottled; merchants were happy because they could sell the wine at a higher price two years later.

Today, the market is different. The aristocrats have been replaced by banks, insurance companies and large industrial groups. But the system remains in place and despite some critics, most people consider it a good solution. The trading houses distribute the great wines, where demand is greater than supply, in a fair way all over the world

Tellingly, some wine producers outside Bordeaux have joined the system, Spain's Vega Sicilia being a good example. Italy's Super Tuscan is another example.

It is also seen as a way to protect against counterfeiting, with fewer middlemen it is easier to track the provenance of the most sought-after bottles.

This year's premier tasting resulted in a 30% drop in price, which most people see as normal in a struggling economy.

There is nothing wrong with the wines!

Captions:

Hundreds of oak barrels from twelve different producers leave their mark on the wine.

Philippe Delfaut plays a key role as site manager and winemaker since 2007.

This year's harvest is underway! Yann shows the flowering vines outside the modern winery.

The freshly harvested grapes are left to ferment in 37 tulip-shaped concrete tanks, one for each separate location.

The rose garden in front of the château is stunningly beautiful.

Château Kirwan receives over 15,000 visitors a year, unusual in the somewhat closed Bordeaux.