

Opening the right doors in Bordeaux

By MANNY GONZALEZ

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

travel&tourism

Editor: DOREEN G. YU

SUNDAY | JUNE 3, 2018

ONCE UPON A TIME, BEFORE I KNEW ANYTHING about wine, I won a bottle of Chateau Latour in an office bridge tournament. Stupid, ignorant, clueless person that I was, I brought it to a party as my contribution to dinner – a £100 Premier Grand Cru in a sea of £2 plonks (prices of that era).

After kicking myself for over a year, I later had the good fortune not only to live in Paris and learn about wine at leisure, but to take a several-months-long wine-tasting course under the legendary Steven Spurrier (the protagonist of the movie *Bottle Shock*).

If nothing else, Steven taught me how to pour wine in the most ergonomic, simple and therefore elegant way. But I never got around to a wine tour of any of the principal French wine-growing regions until recently. That's because a serious wine tour calls for two rare kinds of people – an Organizer and a Door-Opener.

The Organizer has to whip people into line and manage the logistics of getting a diverse group of men and women, who live in different parts of the world, together at the same time on dates fixed a year in advance, in suitable accommodations. The Door-Opener has contacts and gets you access, because fewer wineries than you think actually want to drop everything in order to watch casual visitors get drunk in the shortest possible time.

Our Bordeaux wine-touring group had its Organizer in the person of one Bobby Fabros, and its Door-Opener in the person of Gigi Montinola, both Harvard MBAs, competent and well-connected gentlemen who live only to serve others. (This left me free to relax and chat up some of the lovely young ladies who were giving the tours.)

We eventually wound up visiting about eight wineries. To be perfectly honest, and so you don't commit hara kiri over never having toured Bordeaux, wineries are a bit like cathedrals and Roman ruins. My faithful readers (all two of them) may recall my mantra about cathedrals and Roman ruins: "If you've seen one, you've seen them all."

Just about all the wineries we visited had:

- Grape vines.
- A vat where the grapes press themselves by their own weight (no more peasants in bare feet).
- A series of gigantic tanks for fermentation. Usually, these are now stainless steel and have high-tech temperature control mechanisms, but a few are still French oak.
- A discussion of fermentation with yeast (sugar into alcohol), then (for most reds and some white wines) malolactic fermentation with bacteria (tart malic acid into soft and creamy lactic acid).
- A warehouse (usually an enormous cellar) where the wine is aged in oak barrels for a few months to a few years. After aging in oak, the wine is bottled and will keep aging, for good or ill, depending on what kind of wine it is.
- Mention of how long that chateau keeps its oak barrels (two to four years), before they are sold to less fussy users like whiskey distillers.
- The tasting room is always last (in the hope that you remain sober enough to listen to the explanations during the first hour). Your guide spits after tasting, in order not to get drunk by the third set of visitors. But you should

swallow, or politely pour the remainder of your glass into an urn.

Now you know more than most people who have been on wine tours, and probably more than some wine-makers! Nonetheless, each of our visits had some unique and notable features.

Chateau Reynier (reh-NYAY) is owned by Marc and Agnes Lurton. The Lurton clan constitutes the oldest and biggest family of wine-makers in Bordeaux, almost each with his or her own winery. In Burgundy, Napa and many other places the landowner, cultivator, wine-maker and



Edouard Miaille of Chateau Siran, which flies a Philippine flag in its courtyard.



Marc Lurton explains his wine-making philosophy.



Group photo in front of Chateau Palmer.



Beauregard's Roxanne will make you want to move here and grow grapes.



Lunch at Chateau Palmer's opulent private dining room, a magnificent spread by chef Seiji Nagayama and host Damien Grelat (second from right) arranged by our Door-Opener Gigi Montinola (who can be seen in the mirror taking the photo).



Chateau Smith Haut-Lafite has vineyards as far as the eye can see and a cellar that stretches on and on.

merchant are often separate entities. In Bordeaux, if you are self-respecting, you grow your own grapes on your own land and make your own wine, in your own chateau. This makes any winery in Bordeaux a matter of passion and pride for the people behind it, and Marc is the embodiment of this spirit.

On a cold and rainy morning, he took us deep into a literal cave which serves as the chateau's warehouse, where he explained how he makes his wine. He escorted us on a virtual journey which starts with planting the vine marcots, goes on to hand-picking the ripening grapes and after many more steps culminates in marketing his products abroad.

Chateau Smith Haut-Lafite (smith oh luh-FEET) is one of the largest of the grand cru properties. As pieces of land go, Smith Haut-Lafite is pretty spectacular, with vineyards stretching as far as the eye can

see, and so extensive a barrel cellar that it recalled the closing scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Its owners are a billionaire couple who made their money in athletic wear, then retired to pursue a more gracious lifestyle. This brings to mind the joke: How do you make a million dollars owning a vineyard? Answer: Start with two million.

Chateau Siran (see-RAH) has been owned by the Miaihle (myee-igh) family for over a century and a half, making them one of the oldest wine-growers in the region. The chateau has a Philippine flag in its courtyard, and a *kalesa* on display. This is to recall the ancestor whose Irish family had made its fortune in 19th-century Manila. She married a Miaihle, then provided some serious money with which to improve the chateau.

Our host Edouard recounted how another ances-

tor rather foolishly refused to submit a sample for the great French Wine Classification of 1855. As a result, Siran is not officially a grand cru, though it is good enough to be. Thus, the wines sell for perhaps half what they ought to. If you ever see Siran on a wine list, snap it up.

Chateau Beauregard (bō-reh-gahr) has been extensively modernized, while its exteriors retain a centuries-old look. Its adventurous new owners are challenging many traditions, for example using concrete vats for fermentation, and accepting high-end paying guests in luxurious suites (making it a great choice for touring Bordeaux by car). Our guide at Beauregard was Roxanne, a vivacious French-Spanish lady. She gives a terrific wine tour and is generous on the pours.

Chateau Palmer is not generally open to the public, but if you have the right Door-Opener on your team, not only is it open, it rolls out the red carpet. Export manager Damien Grelat, who is working hard to develop their Asian market, personally gave us the full tour.

Then he took us inside the chateau living quarters, opened their private dining room and served us a superb lunch complete with in-house Japanese chef and in-house French butler, printed menu and a mini-vertical

tasting. That was by far our most memorable meal of the trip, and expressed the best of Bordeaux high-level hospitality.

And finally, there was Chateau Pichon-Longueville. Despite rather frigid temperatures, our guide Marion bravely took us out into the open fields to discuss soil conditions (well-drained, with big pebbles to store heat to mitigate cold nights), roses (planted at the end of each row as an early-warning for aphids) and insect sex lives (disrupted by pheromones released as part of modern organic viticulture).

Marion had the cutest French accent (in English) you ever heard, a charming habit of crossing her legs at the ankles while talking and a smile that warmed even the coldest day.

The author is resident shareholder of Plantation Bay Resort & Spa in Cebu.

A Visit to the Bordeaux Wine Country

By Manny Gonzalez, Resident Shareholder, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa



Group picture in front of Chateau Palmer. From left: the author, Gigi Montinola, Rico and Melinda Limjap, Carl Stoops, Kathy and Bobby Fabros, Bessie Tan-Fuller, and Betty and Ed de Leon.

Once upon a time, before I knew anything at all about wine, I won a bottle of Chateau Latour in an office bridge tournament (this was in London). Stupid, ignorant, clueless person that I was, I brought it to a party as my contribution to dinner - a £ 100 Premier Grand Cru in a sea of £ 2 plonks (prices of that era).

After kicking myself for over a year, I later had the good fortune not only to live in Paris and learn about wine at leisure, but to take a several-months-long wine-tasting course under the legendary Steven Spurrier (the protagonist of the movie *Bottle Shock*).

If nothing else, Steven taught me how to pour wine in the most ergonomic, simple, and therefore elegant way (see our staff in action at Plantation Bay Resort & Spa!) But I never got around to a wine-tour of any of the principal French wine-growing regions until recently. That's because a serious wine-tour calls for two rare kinds of people - an Organizer, and a Door-Opener.

The Organizer has to whip people into line and manage the logistics of getting a diverse group of men and women, who live in different parts of the world, together at the same time on dates fixed a year in advance, in suitable accommodation. The Door-Opener has contacts and gets you access, because fewer wineries than you think actually want to drop everything in order to watch casual visitors get drunk in the shortest possible time.

Our Bordeaux wine-touring group had its Organizer in the person of one Bobby Fabros, and its Door-Opener in the person of Gigi Montinola, both Harvard MBAs, competent and well-connected gentlemen who live only to serve others. (This left me free to relax and chat up some of the lovely young ladies who were giving the tours.)

We eventually wound up visiting about eight wineries. To be perfectly honest, and so you don't commit hara-kiri over never having toured Bordeaux, wineries are a

bit like cathedrals and Roman ruins. My faithful readers (all two of them) may recall my mantra about cathedrals and Roman ruins: "If you've seen one, you've seen them all."

Just about all the wineries we visited had:

- Grape vines.
- A vat where the grapes press themselves by their own weight (no more peasants in bare feet).
- A series of gigantic tanks for fermentation. Usually, these are now stainless steel and have high-tech temperature control mechanisms, but a few are still French oak.
- A discussion of fermentation with yeast (sugar into alcohol), then (for most reds and some white wines) malolactic fermentation with bacteria (tart malic acid into soft and creamy lactic acid).
- A warehouse (usually an enormous cellar) where the wine is aged in oak barrels for a few months to a few years. After aging in oak, the wine is bottled and will keep aging, for good or ill, depending on what kind of wine it is.
- Mention of how long that chateau keeps its oak barrels (two to four years), before they are sold to less-fussy users like whiskey distillers.
- The tasting room is always last (in the hope that you remain sober enough to listen to the explanations during the first hour). Your guide spits after tasting, in order not to get drunk by the third set of visitors. But you should swallow, or politely pour the remainder of your glass into an urn.

(Now you know more than most people who have been on wine tours, and probably more than some wine-makers!) Nonetheless, each of our visits had some unique and notable features.

Chateau Reynier (reh-NYAY) is owned by Marc and Agnes Lurton. The Lurton clan constitutes the oldest and biggest family of wine-makers in Bordeaux, almost each with his or her own winery. In Burgundy, Napa, and many other places the landowner, cultivator, wine-maker, and merchant are often separate entities. In Bordeaux, if you are self-respecting, you grow your own grapes on your own land, and make your own wine, in your own chateau. This makes any winery in

Bordeaux a matter of passion and pride for the people behind it, and Marc is the embodiment of this spirit.

On a cold and rainy morning, he took us deep into a literal cave which serves as the chateau's warehouse, where he explained how he makes his wine. He escorted us on a virtual journey which starts with planting the vine marcots, goes on to hand-picking the ripening grapes, and after many more steps culminates in marketing his products abroad.



Marc Lurton explains his wine-making philosophy.

Chateau Smith Haut-Lafite (smith oh luh-FEET) is one of the largest of the *grand cru* properties. As pieces of land go, Smith Haut Lafite is pretty spectacular, with vineyards stretching as far as the eye can see, and so extensive a barrel cellar that it recalled the closing scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Its owners are a billionaire couple who made their money in athletic wear, then retired to pursue a more gracious lifestyle. This brings to mind the joke: How do you make a million dollars owning a vineyard? Answer: Start with two million.



Smith Haut-Lafite's infinity cellar.

Chateau Siran (see-RAH) has been owned by the Miaihle (myee-igh) family for over a century and a half, making them one of the oldest wine-growers in the region. The chateau has a Philippine flag in its courtyard, and a kalesa on display. This is to recall the ancestress whose Irish family had made its fortune in 19th-century Manila. She married a Miaihle, then provided some serious money with which to improve the chateau.

Our host Edouard recounted how another ancestor rather foolishly refused to submit a sample for the great French Wine Classification of 1855. As a result, Siran is not officially a *grand cru*, though it is good enough to be. Thus, the wines

sell for perhaps half what they ought to. If you ever see Siran on a winelist, snap it up.



Edouard Mialhe with Door-Opener Gigi Montinola (rightmost).

Chateau Beauregard (bō-reh-gahr) has been extensively modernized, while its exteriors retain a centuries-old look. Its adventurous new owners are challenging many traditions, for example using concrete vats for fermentation, and accepting high-end paying guests in luxurious suites (making it a great choice for touring Bordeaux by car). Our guide at Beauregard was Roxanne, a vivacious French-Spanish lady. She gives a terrific wine-tour and is generous on the pours. *(Gracias de nuevo, Roxanne; un día tendràs que venir vernos o en Filipinas o en Nueva York.)*



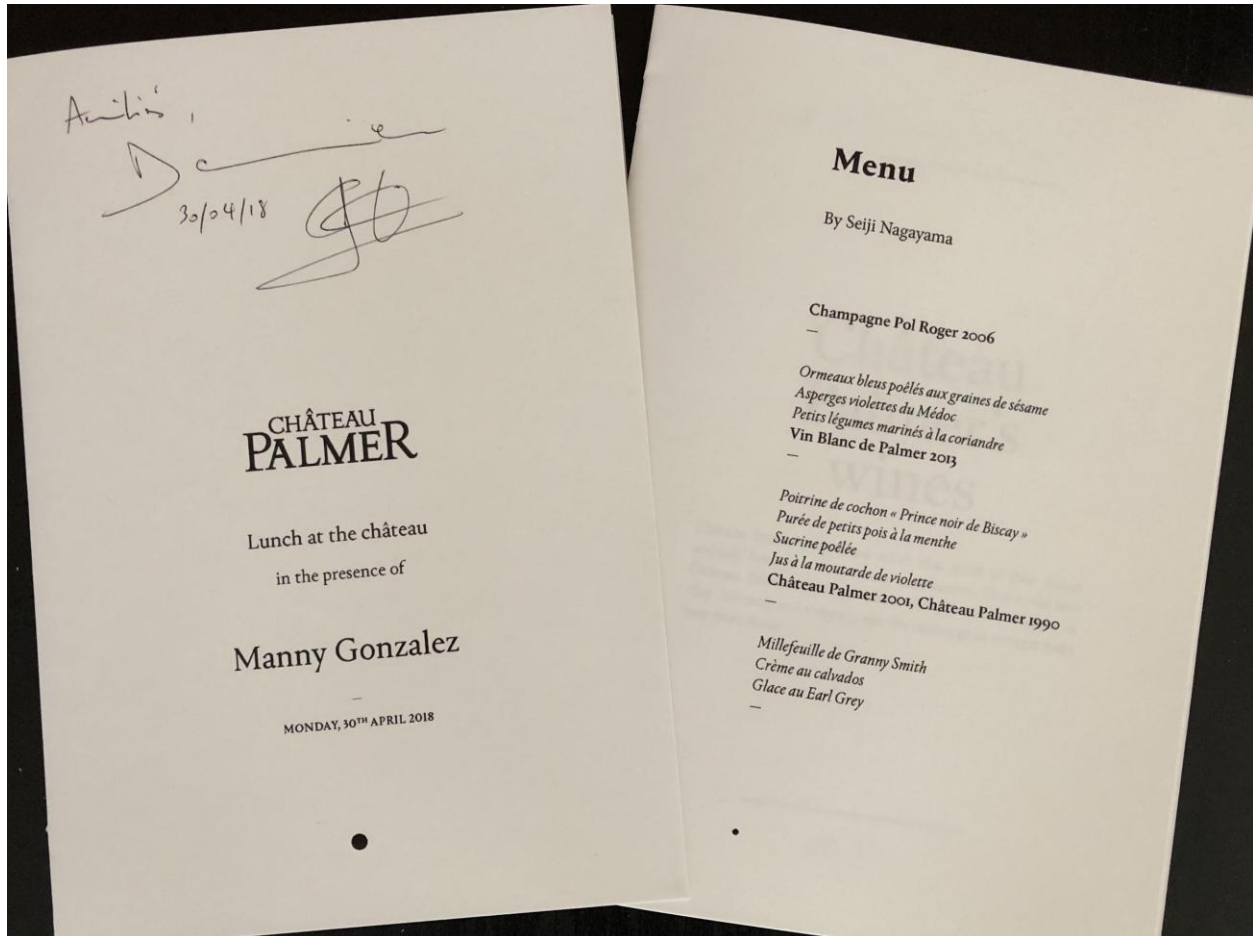
Beaugard's Roxanne will make you want to move here and grow grapes.

Chateau Palmer is not generally open to the public, but if you have the right Door-Opener on your team, not only is it open, it rolls out the red carpet. Export Manager Damien Grelat, who is working hard to develop their Asian market, personally gave us the full tour.

Then he took us inside the chateau living quarters, opened their private dining room, and served us a superb lunch complete with in-house Japanese chef and in-house French butler, printed menu, and a mini-vertical tasting. That was by far our most memorable meal of the trip, and expressed the best of Bordeaux high-level hospitality.



Lunch in Chateau Palmer's magnificent private dining room, a generous spread by over-the-top host Damien Grelat (with beard), made possible if you are friends of Door-Opener Gigi Montinola (taking the picture, in the mirror).



This is how to throw a lunch.

And finally, there was Chateau Pichon-Longueville. Despite rather frigid temperatures, our guide Marion bravely took us out into the open fields to discuss soil conditions (well-drained, with big pebbles to store heat to mitigate cold nights), roses (planted at the end of each row as an early-warning for aphids), and insect sex-lives (disrupted by pheromones released as part of modern organic viticulture). *(Vous voyez, Marion? Je vous ecoutais très attentivement.)*

Marion had the cutest French accent (in English) you ever heard, a charming habit of crossing her legs at the ankles while talking, and a smile that warmed even the coldest day.



Organizer Bobby Fabros at far right. At Pichon-Longueville, Marion puts on her best smile for the photographer (the author).



Really. (Allow me my illusions.)