

Pontet Canet reassessed

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Was Alfred Tesseron's embrace of biodynamics justified? James Lawther MW finds out.

In 2005 Alfred Tesseron, owner of Ch Pontet-Canet, having succeeded his father Guy in 1994, made the decision to turn the 81-ha (200-acre) vineyard over to biodynamic cultivation. It was a bold move at the time, especially for a classed growth, but made after a period of some reflection with pesticides already abandoned in 2001 and weedkiller in 2003 and a conclusive biodynamic trial on 14 ha in 2004. In the driving seat was the committed technical director Jean-Michel Comme.

Official certification was a goal from the start but the process was delayed when in 2007 a decision was taken, and subsequently regretted, to spray for an attack of downy

mildew. Back on the straight and narrow immediately afterwards, Pontet-Canet was eventually certified organic by Ecocert and biodynamic by Biodyvin in 2010 (and then by Demeter in 2014). The tasting described below, held at the château late last month, presented the 11 wines produced since certification.

Apart from the hiccup in 2007 there has been no turning back from the biodynamic way since. If anything, the move has been reinforced and methods improved with sustainability also added to the equation. Vine trimming has been eliminated. Compost prepared at the property is used on individual parcels where required. A group of ten Percheron horses work about half the vineyard to minimise compaction of the soils. The plants required for the herbal preparations (nettles for fertiliser, field horsetail to apply on vine pruning wounds or to help fight mildew, etc) are sourced locally and stored and prepared in a specifically appointed *tisanerie* (herbal store room), as are the biodynamic preparations such as 500 (horn manure) and 501 (horn silica). Since another devastating attack of downy mildew in 2018 the property is now equipped and organised to treat the whole vineyard with the permitted copper and sulphur treatments in a day, tractors employed rather than horses.

In the cellars the cuverie has been steadily improved, with 80-hl concrete vats replacing larger stainless-steel ones in 2005, and in 2017 40-hl concrete vats added. These and the building that houses them are biodynamically sanctioned, the insulation for the building provided by natural hemp, gravel from the soils used in the construction of the walls and vats and – apart from 12-volt LED lighting – no electricity is installed (the metallic framework, however, is fully grounded).

In terms of production the grapes have been manually sorted and destemmed since 2017, indigenous yeasts are used for the alcoholic fermentation and since 2012 about 35% of the annual production is aged in concrete amphorae (with 50% in new oak barrels and 15% in one-year-old barrels). A geothermal plant has supplied energy since 2017.

Apart from the philosophical viewpoint, the changes imposed have clearly had an effect on the nature of the wine – as was originally planned. As Alfred Tesseron told me some years ago, ‘The leitmotif is not the organics but making better wine.’ Pontet-Canet suffered from a lack of investment in the 1970s and 1980s, so the vineyard was in poor shape, but a programme of replanting was put in place which continued through the 1990s providing the solid base from which the cru has progressed in the new millennium. It was perhaps a shame the tasting did not include a couple of vintages that preceded the biodynamic certification in order to measure the transformation.

There were, however, points to be gleaned. Pontet-Canet is a naturally powerful wine but a greater emphasis on the quality and purity of the fruit came through, as did, generally speaking, a refinement in the tannins, while the typical characteristics of freshness and the aroma of blackcurrant were maintained. The flagbearer for this more refined style was clearly the 2019, a view endorsed by Alfred Tesseron and his daughter Justine, who joined the team in 2015. The wines also clearly referenced vintage conditions, as you would perhaps expect from a more 'natural' method of production. Hence, vintage variation was underscored.

The other change I thought noticeable was the moment Pontet-Canet changed from 100% oak ageing with the introduction of a percentage of amphorae. It's possible that the toasting of the new oak barrels has also been toned down (and extraction generally modified) but if a faint charry edge and some dryness was still evident in the 2011 and 2010, and even the 2009 served from jeroboam at lunch, this was no longer the case from 2012 onwards, the year the amphorae came into use. Biodynamics clearly play a role at the property but it's the detail that counts as well.

As an aside, the aperitif and open-air lunch that followed the tasting allowed the participants the chance to have an informal sip of some other biodynamically produced wines. Highlights included a vibrant Meursault Les Narvaux 2007 from Dom Leroy, majestic Chambertin 2012 from Dom Trapet, rock-solid L'Ermitage 2011 Ermitage (sic) from Chapoutier, and a slow-burning Pingus 2015. It's always best to keep an eye on what's going on elsewhere.

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 29 September to 17 October.

Deep, opaque colour. Plenty of depth and reserve. Intense crème de cassis and spice aromas with a slight charry note behind. The sweetness of the ripe fruit is evident but a minerally freshness pervades all the same. Texturally smooth, the tannins finely honed. Glow of alcohol on the finish. Youthful and with backbone for ageing but that charry note of oak sits in a little. Bit of dryness when returning to it at the end of the tasting. (JL) 14.5%

Drink 2022 – 2040

Ch Pontet-Canet 2011 Pauillac**15.5**

60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 15 to 29 September. An early harvest with a little more Merlot in the blend as the Cabernet was affected by rain at the finish, explained Michel Rolland (consultant oenologist at the property since 1999).

Garnet hue. Leafy, dark fruit notes, the charry oak again present in the background. Palate fresh but angular and sharp edged, the fruit less emphatic and the tannins raw and chewy on the finish. One of those austere 2011s that may never come around. Definitely needs food. (JL) 13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2030

Ch Pontet-Canet 2012 Pauillac**16**

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 4 to 17 October. First vintage in which amphorae were used for ageing (for about 35% of the production).

First bottle corked. A second bottle seemed a little reductive at first, then opened to the fruit. Soft, supple and sweet, this has an easy-going, approachable feel, the tannic structure light, the emphasis on the fruit. Misses the gravitas of a top year but pleasant early drinking. (JL) 13.5%

Drink 2020 – 2030

Ch Pontet-Canet 2013 Pauillac

15.5

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 30 September to 10 October.

Pale garnet, light at the rim. Perfumed, pleasant with leafy, red-fruit notes.

Rather light and fluid on the palate, the acidity present and the tannins green and drying on the finish. Well-handled but shows the weakness of the vintage. Clearly for early consumption. (JL) 13%

Drink 2019 – 2026

Ch Pontet-Canet 2014 Pauillac

17

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 29 September to 10 October.

Crimson to the rim. Initially subdued but opens with aeration. Firm, minerally and upright with dark-fruit notes and a dash of mint. Tannins compact and fresh.

Really quite classic and Pauillac in style but the appealing fruit makes it approachable already. A pleasant surprise among the less celebrated years. Should be good value. (JL) 13.5%

Drink 2020 – 2034

Ch Pontet-Canet 2015 Pauillac

17 +

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 18 September to 3 October.

Deep colour to the rim. Rich and concentrated but the aromatics a little blurred.

Dark fruit with initially a hint of black olive. Palate supple, opulent with powerful but polished tannins. Lacks a little precision but plenty of depth and flavour and just enough freshness. Worth waiting to see how it develops. (JL) 13.5%

Drink 2025 – 2040

Ch Pontet-Canet 2016 Pauillac

17.5 +

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 28 September to 12 October.

A strapping, broad-shouldered wine. Purple-black to the rim. Pronounced blackcurrant-pastille aroma and flavour. Enormous depth, the palate full and intense, the fruit sweet but a saline edge on the finish. Exudes power with its massive tannic frame. Certainly not for the faint-hearted but has the capacity to age. (JL) 14.5%

Drink 2026 – 2045

Ch Pontet-Canet 2017 Pauillac

16 +

64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 18 September to 4 October. The vineyard was hit by frost twice in April.

Crimson hue but lighter and more transparent at the rim. Open and expressive already with red and dark fruit notes and a hint of leaf and mint.

Medium to light-bodied, the palate supple and fruit forward, the tannins light but fresh and fine. Holds a certain charm but not for the long haul. (JL) 13%

Drink 2023 – 2032

Ch Pontet-Canet 2018 Pauillac

17 +

70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 24 September to 5 October.

Two-thirds of the crop was lost to mildew. A sort of essence of Pontet-Canet – what you imagine a special cuvée would be. Deep, purple-black colour to the rim. Dense and intense on the nose with a bit of reduction at first but gradually opens to cassis and black olive. Lots of dry extract, the tannins firm, dense and powerful. A bit too much of everything but should age. (JL) 14.5%

Drink 2028 – 2045

Ch Pontet-Canet 2019 Pauillac

18

65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 23 September to 10 October.

Deep purple hue. Pure, elegant and precise, the fruit at perfect pitch, the aromatics complex and refined. Tannins finely edged but firm and present.

Altogether great harmony and poise. Upright but seductive at the same time. A very complete wine. (JL) 13.5%

Drink 2027 – 2050

Ch Pontet-Canet 2020 Pauillac

17.5

60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 4% Petit Verdot.

Harvest 14 to 30 September. First vintage of new technical director, Mathieu Bessonnet, previously Jean-Michel Comme's deputy. Barrel sample.

Deep, bright purple-black hue. Lifted and pure on the nose with blueberry and blackcurrant notes. Palate fresh, firm and minerally, the fruit creamy and pure. Tannins more assertive than in 2019 and still a little chewy on the finish.

(JL) 13%

Drink 2028 – 2045