

CHATEAU FONPLEGADE

GRAND VIN DE BORDEAUX

Grand Cru Classé

Grand Cru Classé, Château Fonplégade has been one of Saint-Emilion's most recognised estate's since the 19th century, its wines ranked among the top growths of one of the world's most famous wine villages. However, the changes that have taken place over the last decade have equalled or surpassed anything in its history.

The renaissance of Fonplégade in the 21st century has been down to a new team, with new ambitions and a new desire to make the best wines possible. From vineyard to label, there is a new vision that is transforming every aspect of life at the property: the way it welcomes its visitors, its protection of the environment, innovation in the winemaking and the style of the wines.

THE STORY OF A TERROIR

Historians and linguists sometimes differ about the origin of ‘Fonplégade’, but there seems to be a consensus that the word means ‘flowing fountain’ in an old dialect of the southern French language, Occitan; there has certainly been a fountain at the heart of the estate for centuries. Fed by four different springs that emerge from the limestone hill behind the château, the fountain has never run dry, and in the past has been a precious source of water for local people and their livestock. Folklore even says it was highly beneficial to young women of the parish looking to start a family. Was Fonplégade blessed by the Gods one wonders?

After water, wine came to Fonplégade in the 18th century and by 1850, when Charles Cocks’ classic reference work, ‘Bordeaux and its Wines’, was published for the first time by Edouard Féret, it placed the wine of Fonplégade among ‘the very finest growths of Saint-Emilion’.

Two years later, in 1852, Jean-Pierre Beylot bought the property and built a large country house and winery buildings.

The quality and reputation of the wine continued to improve. In the second edition of ‘Bordeaux and its Wines’, Edouard Féret rated it in 6th position in the hierarchy of Saint-Emilion’s top growths, producing ‘20-30 tonneaux’ each year. At 900 litres per tonneaux, this was a sizeable annual production for the time and it was clear that Fonplégade’s story had begun in earnest.

Meanwhile, the estate itself had changed hands several times. It first passed from the Beylot family to the Duc de Morny, then to the Countess of Galard, whose brother, Baron de Marignan, owned neighbouring First Growth, Château Bel Air. In 1874, Fonplégade was acquired by Paul Boisard, an inspired winegrower who left something of a legacy in Saint-Emilion. Edouard Féret’s glowing entry for that year provides valuable insight into why Fonplégade’s wines had earned such a good reputation: “Fonplégade is admirably situated on Saint-Emilion’s south slope. It nestles half way up the hillside, perfectly sheltered to the north and west. Thanks to its remarkable setting, the grapes here consistently reach exceptional maturity. The clay-limestone and sandy clay soils produce wines whose richness, maturity, intense bouquet and finesse have always been highly prized.” Easy to understand then that Fonplégade’s ‘remarkable setting’ was, and still is, key to its place among Saint-Emilion’s ‘very finest growths’.

Sadly, in the decades that followed, Fonplégade's fortunes changed and a tragic train of events including phylloxera, the Great Depression and two World Wars left their mark. By 1953, when it was sold by Paul Boisard's descendants to Jean-Marie Moueix, the vineyard was in ruins.

Son of Antoine Moueix (the successful châteaux owner and négociant, who had come to Libourne from Corrèze in south-central France and who helped establish the wines of the Right Bank), Moueix went to work. He and his son Armand began the restoration and his nephew, Christian Moueix, Nathalie and Marie-José (successors to Armand Moueix) continued the work. The estate was extended to 18.5 hectares, creating the vineyard we see today: 16 hectares in one single plot around the château itself and a superb 2-hectare plot of old vines on the plateau at the lieu-dit, Pourret.

Thanks to the Moueix family, Fonplégade's reputation and distribution were re-established. The renaissance was recognised by opinion formers all over the world (Robert Parker was especially admiring of the 2000 vintage) and the 20th century, which had begun so badly, ended well.

THE 21ST CENTURY: A NEW BELLE EPOQUE

American business couple, Stephen Adams and his wife, Denise purchased their first vineyard in California's Dry Creek Valley in 1995. Since then, the Adams' wine interests have expanded and now include ADAMVS, an acclaimed organic and biodynamic vineyard on the slopes of Napa Valley's Howell Mountain.

As lovers of France and its great wines, the Adams first came to Saint-Emilion on honeymoon after their wedding in the Dordogne. In 2004, they fell in love again there, this time with Château Fonplégade, which they bought that year.

Since the arrival of the couple ten years ago, Fonplégade has seen a period of unprecedented regeneration. The vineyard, cellars, winery buildings and the stunningly elegant château have all undergone careful renovation by experts and craftsmen.

THE VINEYARD: A TAPESTRY OF TERROIRS AND VINES

At first glance, the vineyard looks to be situated on the classic clay-limestone soils found at the foot of Saint-Emilion's southern slope - the type of soils that have forged the reputation of Saint-Emilion wines over the centuries.

On closer inspection, it becomes clear that Fonplégade's 18.5 hectares are, in fact, a tapestry of diverse soil types, made up of sand and gravel soils at the foot of the slope, sand and clay half way up, then clay and limestone on the terraces and, finally, almost pure limestone on the plateau.

Building on this natural diversity of soils is the planting, again more complex than it first appears. Although Merlot accounts for 90% and Cabernet Franc 10%, the various ages of the vines (some more than 40 years old), the different densities of planting, growing methods and exposition to sun and wind all combine to make each of the 27 plots totally individual. "It's as if we've been given a palette of colours to create the best work of art with," says estate manager, Eloi Jacob, whose words are echoed by cellar master, Franck Jugelmann: "The terroir dictates the way we vinify. Each plot has its own character and natural vitality that will be reflected in the wine, whether it's minerality, density, structure or elegance."

PIONEERING ORGANIC FARMING

Stephen and Denise Adams took the meticulous, hands-on approach to caring for the vineyard a step further when they introduced organic viticulture to the team. The Adams had long been fervent advocates of organics, which according to Denise Adams is 'fundamental to their way of life and well-being', and Fonplégade became of the first estates in Saint-Emilion to be farmed organically. It was awarded full organic certification by ECOCERT at the beginning of 2013.

Eloi Jacob is now more than convinced of its benefits, "These days we stop to admire a flight of hoopoes when we're working in the vines and the rabbits are back along with butterflies, ladybirds and the occasional fox," he says. "Organic farming has resulted in faster phenolic ripening. Plus, the wines are fresher, with a touch more acidity and much more length."

The introduction of organic viticulture, the restructuring of the vineyard, hand-picking, the use of shallow trays to transport the grapes as well as three stages of sorting all illustrate the desire of Fonplégade's owners to bring a new way of thinking and working to the estate, while preserving its heritage. As Stephen Adams says:

“Denise and I approach the 150-year history of Château Fonplégade with respect and humility. Château Fonplégade was here long before we were and it will be here long after we are gone. We are stewards of this land: it is a responsibility and a privilege. While we are very proud of what we have accomplished over the past decade, our legacy as vintners will ultimately be judged 20, 30, or 40 years from now. This legacy will be reflected in the vitality of the land and the quality of our wines as they age.”

REVOLUTION IN THE WINERY

The conviction that the greatness of a wine begins in the vineyard and is preserved and enhanced through perfectionism and attention to detail in the winemaking, is shared by Stephen and Denise Adams and each member of their team.

Innovation at the service of inspiration is nowhere less apparent than in the winery and cellars. 12 oak casks, ranging from 60 to 100 hectolitres each, have been installed. This allows Franck Jugelmann to carry out all-important micro vinification as well as traditional cap-punching or pigeage to gently extract colour and tannin. 20% of the harvest is vinified entirely in 500-litre barrels. 25% of the wine macerates and undergoes malolactic fermentation in 674-litre concrete egg vats, while the remaining 75% goes through the process in new oak.

The same spirit of innovation has also led Jugelmann to invent a radically new, vertical 400-litre barrel, developed in partnership with local cooper, Quintessence. Named The Pearl because of its shape - round at the bottom with a top opening just wide enough to take the grapes and must - the barrel is made from fine-grained, mature French oak. The reason for this unconventional shape, he explains, is to use the inverse pressure of compressed air to press down the cap and carry out a natural form of cap-punching.

Quite simply, the narrower shape of the barrel prevents the must from rising to the top and blocks it in the middle, trapping the juice (which will eventually become the Grand Vin) below. Above it, the grape sugars, transformed by the yeasts into alcohol, form a gas that builds up, much as in a pressure cooker, and exerts pressure on the cap, forcing it down into the juice. Not only has the process removed the need for pumping-over, this totally natural form of cap-punching extracts the maximum amount of good tannins from the skins and pips in a very gentle way, protecting the quality of the harvest.

WINES OF POWER AND CHARM

In addition to its talented team, Fonplégade draws on the expertise of consultant oenologist, Michel Rolland. His association with the property began in 2004 and this, along with the creation of a second wine, Fleur de Fonplégade, has been key to the evolution of the wine in terms of quality and concentration. The excellent 2005 vintage marked a turning point but it was probably in 2007 that the increase in finesse and elegance really became apparent. For many, 2010 is the finest vintage of the decade at Fonplégade, with complexity on the nose and balance and length on the palate - a fitting testimony to years of hard work. Today, the wines of Fonplégade combine the power and charm, structure and smoothness that only greatest terroirs of Saint-Emilion can produce.

WELCOME TO FONPLÉGADE

One of the biggest changes to have taken place since 2004 is the way Fonplégade has been opened up to a wider public. The property is now open every day of the year, with the exception of Christmas Day and New Year's Day - a little Napa Valley thinking in Saint-Emilion.

As visitors approach from the main Libourne – Bergerac road, the château stands out on the hillside, its elegant orangery and graceful old cedar tree punctuating the landscape. A welcoming Tasting Room, as one might find in the very top wineries of California, is staffed by multi-lingual, trained personnel. It is the first stop for visitors, who get a true taste of the life of a Grand Cru Classé through the private visits with tastings that take place every day. Booking ahead is advisable and full details can be found on the Fonplégade website: www.fonplegade.com or by calling 00 33 (0)5 57 74 43 11.

The Tasting Room also boasts a well-stocked boutique that has all the wines from the estate (including its rosé) plus those from Pomerol growth, Château L'Enclos, which is also owned by Stephen and Denise Adams and run by the same team as at Fonplégade. There are lots of attractive, wine-related products and books - you can even take home Fonplégade's own-recipe jam, made from redcurrants grown on the property!

Fonplégade's willingness to open its doors wide is also seen in its participation in Saint-Emilion's annual music festival, Les Grandes Heures de Saint-Emilion. For avid music-lovers and accomplished pianists, Stephen and Denise Adams, the opportunity to combine music and wine is one of the highlights of the year.

DISTRIBUTION

Not surprisingly, distribution of Fonplégade's wines is a mixture of the classic - and the new. Since the 2010 vintage, the wines have been sold via the brokers and merchants of the place de Bordeaux, who export the wines around the world and offer them, en primeur.

Less usual, however, especially for a Grand Cru Classé, is the volume of wine bought at the property itself by the 5,000 or so visitors who come to Fonplégade each year.

Even more uncommon is the Fonplégade Club de Vin, which was launched in 2009. Although the concept of a wine club is widespread among top wineries in the USA, it is still very rare in France. The club's role, says Denise Adams, is to create a community of like-minded wine lovers by offering them a real experience of the property. Membership of the club, which is free, includes shipments of wines to members' homes, accompanied by wine-paired recipes from Fonplégade's chef, information on the vintage and tasting notes, complimentary visits to the property for members and guests and invitations to the quarterly Fonplégade themed receptions. Based on wine and food, these attract guests from all over Europe. Again, full details of the Club de Vin are available at www.fonplegade.com.

The Club de Vin is just one example of the all-embracing changes that have taken place at Fonplégade in the past decade. This quiet but radical revolution combines fresh-thinking on protection of Fonplégade's terroir and the quality of the wine along with respect for the expertise of its team and a desire to share it all with the world at large.

For one of Saint-Emilion's most brilliant rising stars, the future looks bright indeed.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

APPELLATION: AOC Saint-Emilion

SURFACE AREA: 18.5 hectares

SOIL: clay limestone

VINES AVERAGE AGE: 25 years

VARIETIES: 95% merlot, 5% cabernet franc

CULTIVATION: organic viticulture

YIELD: 8,500 plants/ha for 35% of the vineyard
6,500 plants/ha for 65%

HARVEST: by hand with crates of 10 kgs

VINIFICATION: filling 12 oak vats of 60 and 100 hl by gravity
alcoholic fermentation in vats and in complete barrels (20 to 40%)
malolactic fermentation in barrels or in egg-shaped cement vats

MATURING: 80% new oak barrels during 18 months

SECOND WINE: Fleur de Fonplégade

PRODUCTION: 70,000 bottles on average

OWNER: Stephen and Denise Adams

MANAGER: Eloi Jacob

CELLAR MASTER: Frank Jugelmann

OENOLOGIST CONSULTANT: Michel Rolland

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