

CHAPTER 1

WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

The famous anecdote of the Faubourg Saint-Germain told by Brillat-Savarin, which I have used as an epigraph, reveals an educated and eclectic connoisseur who varies his wines to suit the food he eats, the weather, and his mood. Brillat-Savarin himself, another amiable judge, delighted in having been born in Belley, at the gates of the ancient capital of the Gauls, a land superbly irrigated by all the fine red wines of France: “Lyons is a town of good living: its location makes it rich equally in the wines of Bordeaux and Hermitage and Burgundy.”¹ He does not say that these wines are frequently mixed in the secrecy of the *négociant’s* warehouse, a practice that was already venerable in his time and that one hopes has now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, finally ceased.

Many poets, bacchic or other, have sung of their fondness for Bordeaux and Burgundy. Thus André Chénier, on the eve of the Revolution:

On the blessed banks of Beaune and Aï,
In rich Aquitaine, and the lofty Pyrenees,
From their groaning presses flow streams
Of delicious wines ripened on their slopes.²

Even if Thomas Jefferson passionately loved the great wines of Bordeaux, he also had a high regard for those of Burgundy, which we

know he thoroughly enjoyed on passing through the Côte d'Or in March 1787.³ In the early nineteenth century, the chansonnier Marc Antoine Désaugiers traveled as far without leaving home:

Friends, it is in preferring
The bottle to the carafe
That the most ignorant man
Becomes a good geographer.⁴

Beaune, land so highly praised,
Chablis, Mâcon, Bordeaux, Grave,
With what exquisite pleasure
I visit you in my cellar!⁵

And thus, a bit later, the bard of good food and wine, Charles Monselet:

It is one o'clock in the afternoon
When all the fine wines meet at a feast,
The fraternal hour when Lafite appears
In the company of Chambertin.

No more quarrels now
Among these valiant friends;
No more ill feelings
Between Gascons and Burgundians . . .

They have shed their cleverness
Without forsaking their style.
—After you, monsieur de Lur-Saluces!
—After *you*, my dear Montrachet.

Pommard looks smilingly upon
Suave, gentle Brane-Mouton.
To Latour no one says, "Beware!"
Not even the fiery Corton?⁶

It is probably among food and wine critics that one is likeliest today to meet the descendants of these unprejudiced and warm-hearted drinkers. In *La Revue du Vin de France* and in many other wine guides available today in France and abroad, the wines of Bordeaux and Bur-

gundy enjoy a notice that is more or less proportional to their share of the market, and the authors of the articles devoted to them show no sign of preference, either declared or concealed, for one or the other. One can only applaud this state of affairs.

In 1963 the Burgundian cellar master and wine taster Pierre Poupon adopted a very civil tone: "I am not jealous of the wines of Bordeaux. These are difficult wines for our Burgundian palates; we have to spend a long time with them, with an open mind, before being able to detect their great virtues. But they are so different from ours that I manage to like them only when I stop trying to compare them."⁷ And the Parisian journalist Bernard Frank cheerfully confessed, "I had probably never drunk a single glass of wine when I chose my camp once and for all: Bordeaux rather than Burgundy. Once and for all! But one lives and learns. Since then I have learned to put some Burgundy in my wine. . . . The palate must give way to the mind."⁸ A fine phrase, this last one, which illuminates a whole geography of wine, a geography founded upon the marriage of pragmatism and the senses.

It is true that in Bordeaux the aristocrats of the vine sometimes condescend to serve one or another of the great white wines of Burgundy at the splendid feasts they hold in their townhouses on the Pavé des Chartrons or in their châteaux. Bernard Ginestet describes a prodigious luncheon given not so very long ago at Mouton by Baron Philippe de Rothschild, one of the most discriminating gourmets and connoisseurs of the Médoc:

With the fried filets of sole, sauce tartare, a Montrachet was served, Marquis de Laguiche 1952; a marvelous wine, pale golden yellow in color, flecked with green tints. It captivated the entire table, which was unanimous in its praise.

"You spoil us, dear friend Philippe," declared Édouard Minton. "There is hardly anywhere in all of Bordeaux, except in your home, that one can drink white Burgundies of such quality. This one is truly magnificent. We don't have such wines."

"Glad you like it, my dear Édouard. For a long while now I have

exchanged two or three cases of Mouton every year for some Montrachet from my friend Philibert. Do you know how large his vineyard is? Hardly more than two hectares! I serve this wine only to those who are worthy of it. But I find it agreeable to let my taste buds wander through other lands.”⁹

The scene and the dialogue are no doubt unusual (and probably slightly retouched by Ginestet for effect), but nonetheless they are quite plausible, for they feature Philippe de Rothschild, the peasant who lived in silk pajamas, as he liked to say, and who translated Shakespeare in bed—a man as far removed from commonplaces as he was from ordinary wines. Anybody else in Bordeaux would have served a white Haut-Brion or a Carbonnieux—indeed a dry Doisy-Daëne or a “Y” d’Yquem—on such an occasion.

It is probable, too, that Philibert de Laguiche, thanks to the fruit of these exchanges, sometimes arranged surprising marriages for his guests in Burgundy. Let us imagine the scene. In his Château de Chaumont, in the Saône-et-Loire, the marquis is entertaining Robert Drouhin, the director of the venerable house of Joseph Drouhin in Beaune. Drouhin has the privilege of cultivating 2,625 hectares, as well as making and selling the hundred or so hectoliters of Montrachet produced by the Laguiche family, which for three centuries has possessed the largest parcel (out of a total area of almost 8 hectares) of this appellation. The menu includes a *lièvre à la royale*, the hare having been marinated for a long time and slowly simmered in the lees of the wine to be served with the dish, which for any self-respecting Burgundian would be a *grand cru*, either Gevrey or Vosne. The guests are surprised to find themselves presented instead with a very dark wine in a carafe (the practice in Burgundy is to serve wine in bottles). A nectar whose provenance they cannot guess sends them into ecstasies. “Our red wines from the Côte de Beaune are too delicate to stand up to wild rabbit,” Philibert de Laguiche observes. “Rather than resort to the nobility of the Côte de Nuits, I thought that the structure and smoothness of a 1945 Mouton

would go well with the powerful and sensual aromas of the noblest game of our fields.” One might invert the tale and imagine a Volnay escorting an *agneau de Pauillac* roasted over vine stock and shoots, the lamb being accompanied by a few boletus mushrooms sautéed in the Bordelaise manner; or, more daringly, a fully mature Sauternes with an Époisses almost past its time, followed by—indeed, served with—a slice of warm gingerbread from Mulot et Petitjean in Dijon. A fireworks display for the nose!

A VERY FRENCH QUARREL

Exchanges of this sort are unfortunately exceptional in both the Gironde and the Côte d’Or.¹⁰ Seldom do they do each other such favors. Ask the natives of these two universally renowned wine-producing regions about each other, or read what they have written, and you will not find the slightest sign of sympathy or fellow feeling. They are not from the same world—a fact they miss no occasion to proclaim loudly and clearly. Not content to ignore each other, hardly tasting each other’s wines, they delight in denigrating each other, more or less fiercely.

The Bordelais are annoyed by the subtle smells of the great pinots, by their color, which is often less bold than the reds of the Gironde, and by the fact that these wines nonetheless manage to overwhelm the head and the senses with lighthearted ease. They are a bit jealous, too, of the best chardonnays, tinged with the flavor of honey like their sweet, strong white wines, yet at once dry, full-bodied, and round. But above all they are irritated by the division of minuscule appellations into a multitude of parcels belonging to many owners: to the Bordelais mind, such a practice is incomprehensible and unjustifiable.¹¹ Jean-Paul Kauffmann, who, though he is not originally from the Gironde, sang the praises of its wines for years as the editor-in-chief of *L’Amateur de Bordeaux*, comes straight to the point: “The system of classification of Burgundies is a work of art, but, like all works of art, it contains an ele-

ment of mystery. Its beauty is a real puzzle. . . . Burgundy, with more than a hundred different appellations, is as complex as the duchy of the same name in the time of Charles the Bold. With fifty-one hectares, the Clos Vougeot consists of some ninety parcels divided among eighty different owners. Nothing lasting can be built on such subtleties."¹²

Let it be said, too, that the Bordelais hardly get along with these crafty, food-loving peasants, whose hands are calloused and deformed by manual labor, their heads habitually covered by an old cap; who roll their *rs* and who are given to telling crude jokes when they get together, drinking to excess like their ancestors, the bearded Gauls and ancient Burgundians. None of this prevents them from having access to large piles of money, in the form of real estate and business profits both, which they spend on expensive foreign cars like so many vulgar *nouveaux riches*.

Some years ago, the television host Bernard Pivot devoted his Christmas show to the subject of good eating and fine wine. One of his guests, the Bordelais Jean Lacouture, expressed a rather favorable opinion of one glass he was given to taste. On learning that it was a fine Burgundy, Lacouture replied, "Burgundy, really? I had no idea. It's excellent, but just the same I prefer wine." Some years later he acknowledged having issued this backhanded compliment, saying that he still did not understand Burgundies and could fully appreciate only Bordeaux.¹³ It is true that poor Jean Lacouture is much to be pitied, suffering as he does from a dramatic impairment of the faculty of taste known as anosmia, or insensitivity to smells—a fatal impediment in the case of Burgundy!¹⁴

In saying as much, however, Lacouture was only following in the steps of François Mauriac, perhaps without knowing it. Father Maurice Lelong recounts a delightful anecdote told to him by the superior general of the Dominicans, Father Martino Stanislao Gillet. Gillet was living in Dijon and hoped to be elected to the Académie Française. Mauriac, accompanied by another academician, paid him a visit. The candidate took his guests to Aux Trois Faisans and ordered, altogether correctly, a bottle of Burgundy. At this point, Lelong relates,

one of the Immortals, congenitally devoted to a certain vineyard of the Gironde, doubtfully pursed his lower lip. There was a long silence, the kind that occurs when a faux pas has been committed. The eyes of the guest searched the eyes of the host, who now found himself in a state of most painful anxiety:

“It’s wine,” said the most reverend father, who told this to me with a certain bitter amusement.

“I shouldn’t have thought so,” replied M. François Mauriac, with the inimitable tone of false naivete for which he was famous.¹⁵

The epilogue to this story will not come as a surprise: Father Gillet never became a member of the Academy. Mauriac, for his part, naturally placed Bordeaux, his Bordeaux, at the pinnacle: “For me, the superiority of Bordeaux comes from its naturalness: it is born of my earth, of my sun, and of the attentive love that my people devote to it. . . . The primary virtue of Bordeaux is honesty.”¹⁶ Extraordinary—to think that honesty has always reigned along the Quai des Chartrons!

Philippe Sollers, another Bordelais, has expressed himself still more explicitly on this point, and far less good-naturedly:

True wine exists only in Bordeaux. I would like to make it clear that wine which is not from Bordeaux is a false wine. . . . Of course, there is Burgundy! But it’s too full-blooded; it doesn’t have the circulation, the sifting of the various states of matter that you find in the wines of Bordeaux. It isn’t by chance that one says “beef bourguignon,” for the wine accompanying it is indistinguishable from the sauce. I know that the French much like this sort of thing, but then again, I don’t much like the French.

Not content to leave matters there, Sollers went on to indulge a taste for doubtful historical commentary that would have brought him a defamation suit in the courts of Dijon: “It is no use to recall the immemorial struggle between Armagnacs and Burgundians—this is a fundamental reality of French history. There is a France of ports and a continental France, a France of the periphery and a France of the land, a

France of trade and a central, centric France, which conjures up for me the various episodes of the closing of the nation—the incessant reproduction of the peasant spirit of collaboration with foreign powers, German or Russian—the supreme tragedy of which in France is Pétainism.”¹⁷ Sollers reverted to this theme a few years later: “I loathe Burgundy, it is a wine of sauce and blood. . . . It is necessary just the same that people be made aware of the fact, and recognize that Burgundy is not wine, it is a drink used for making sauces. The more Burgundy one consumes, the more one has the terrible sensation of drinking something bloody, not to mention the dreadful heaviness of the land that one senses in it as well. For me, then, anyone who likes Burgundy (and Beaujolais) is, let’s face it, a hick.”¹⁸

Everyone knows that one of the emblematic monuments of Bordeaux is the *Porte de Bourgogne*, thus named by the Marquis de Tourny, the royal intendant of the province in the mid-eighteenth century, in honor of the Duke of Burgundy. A local merchant recently had the genial idea of using an image of it on the label of one of his generic Bordeaux Supérieur wines, which he intended to call *Les Portes de Bordeaux*. After all, it would have been unthinkable to market a wine from Bordeaux under the name *La Porte de Bourgogne*; and yet this would have been an honest gesture, elegant and droll at the same time.

Last but not least, there is the example of the great geographer René Pijassou, who concludes his magnificent treatise on the viticulture of the Médoc—the result of fourteen years of meticulous research in the archives and among the vineyard owners—by paying tribute to the “greatest center of the civilization of vine and wine, that which produced the great vineyards of the Médoc.”¹⁹ Even so, like Philippe de Rothschild and other true wine lovers, Pijassou himself is not averse to serving good Burgundies at his table (white Burgundies, of course). Did Mauriac have such “honest” elegance?

The domaine owners of Burgundy, for their part, fail to understand the red wines of Bordeaux, which give themselves up to the nostrils and taste buds with such difficulty until they have reached maturity,

especially if cabernet sauvignon is predominant. The sweet white wines of Bordeaux sicken Burgundians, and in any case they do not know what to drink them with. The notion that one might produce the same wine on domaines of several dozen hectares belonging to a single owner has been totally foreign to them since the Clos Vougeot was dismantled in the nineteenth century. They distrust the Bordelais practice of skillful blending, so contrary to their devotion to single grape varieties, small-scale production, and small parcels.²⁰ Most of all, they dislike the pretensions of the lords of the great Bordelais estates and the wine merchants and brokers of the Chartrons, with their light southern accents (and English intonations), their bow ties, their tweeds (old, but impeccably tailored), and their handmade English shoes (worn, but well polished). Many years ago the Parisian poet Raoul Ponchon, a man who seldom, if ever, touched water, and who inherited the capital's ancient predilection for the wine of Burgundy, dashed off a few lines that no Burgundian today would disavow:

Oh! never to have been trailed
By a lackey serving me Bordeaux;
I make no bones about it,
It's Burgundy I prefer above all.²¹

Jean-François Bazin, a former president of his region and bard of Burgundian viticulture, recalls that during his childhood Bordeaux was practically never mentioned in the family home of Gevrey-Chambertin. No bottles of Bordeaux appeared on the table: "We abandoned it willingly to its medicinal vocation and to its sad fate as the 'wine of the sick,' contenting ourselves with [drinking] the 'wine of the healthy.'"²² People made fun of the shape of the Bordeaux bottle, stretching their necks and hunching their shoulders. A more serious cause for complaint was the stingy Bordelais custom of allowing guests to taste only a little wine from the barrel: "When you visit a cellar [here] at least you are offered something to drink. Unlike in Bordeaux."²³ Jean Laplanche, a professor of psychoanalysis and formerly the owner of the Château de Pommard,

had a cruel experience of this practice not long ago, in 1989. “Since then,” he says, “whenever I receive visitors from Bordeaux in my cellar, I give them a glass of the newest wine in casks, and then I announce: ‘The *visite bordelaise* is over. Now begins the *visite bourguignonne*’”—and, with it, the opening of a dozen bottles, some of them quite old, going back through all the great years.²⁴ Ah, what sweet vengeance!

With a great roar of laughter, Laplanche admits that he now enjoys a glass of Bordeaux once it has matured, but that in the past he had always found that it resembled the ink he used as a schoolboy.²⁵ As an eminent member of the *Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin*, and despite two official and reciprocal visits, he notes that the members of his brotherhood have never managed to establish close, friendly relations with their counterparts in the Bordelais *confréries*. Laplanche adds that on the wine lists of restaurants in Burgundy one always finds at least two Bordeaux wines—a small gesture, to be sure, but better than nothing, since the like of it, he says, is never found in the Gironde with Burgundies.²⁶

It must be admitted that exchanges of courtesies of this sort, whose value is inevitably a matter of opinion, testify to the existence of a geographic barrier between two impenetrable worlds. With the death of Jean Calvet in Beaune and the recent failure of negotiations between Château Smith-Haut-Lafite and Château de Pommard, financial investment in one region by a house from another is hardly ever contemplated anymore.²⁷ Yet the requisite capital is lacking in neither Burgundy nor Bordeaux. It is invested instead in Languedoc or abroad.

To hope to be able to heal the rift, and one day to move beyond it, we need to understand its origins, and therefore to examine not only the whole cultural and economic history of the two regions, but also the people who manage the vineyards, their customers, and, incidentally, various aspects of the natural environment. To use the term *incidentally* in this context may seem an affront to the viticulturalists and the many professional experts who assist them in their work—soil scientists, agronomists, biologists, chemists, oenologists, lawyers, bankers, and

geographers, all of whom have devoted years of research to explaining the nuances of winemaking. Yet after listening to Philippe Sollers, one cannot reasonably suppose that a few hours of sunshine and a bit more or less gravel will suffice to bridge the gap.

Roger Dion, in his masterly *Histoire de la vigne et du vin en France des origines au XIXe siècle* (1959), which remains a revolutionary piece of scholarship even today, was right to insist on the importance of the consumer: what connoisseurs want, producers achieve by bending the land to their will. If the wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy do not resemble each other, this is largely because of their distinctive histories, notwithstanding the indisputable differences between the soils and climates that gave birth to them. Conversely, it is a very clever person who can tell what separates certain *vins technologiques* made in California from ones made in Australia, even though these places are some twelve thousand miles apart and their physical environments still more distinct from each other than those of Bordeaux and Burgundy. The reason these wines are so similar, of course, is that their customers are the same (right down to their culturally cloned taste buds), the methods of cultivation and vinification are the same, and the multinational firms that market them are the same. This may sound a bit like the caricature drawn by Jonathan Nossiter in his film *Mondovino* (2004), whose principal target is the American giant Mondavi. But Nossiter forgets that small is not always beautiful: there are large, impersonal multinationals that make fine wines, and there are small, friendly firms that produce plonk.

Bordeaux and Burgundy do not really resemble each other, either to the nose or in the mouth, but this is because, when they are honest, they are at heart geographical wines—*vins de terroir*, if you like. They are the product of different human temperaments, which have created and developed different wine-growing environments in different political, economic, and cultural contexts. My purpose in writing this book is not to widen the gulf between them (Bordeaux/Burgundy is one of those oppositions that the French are so fond of, like right/left, pro-European/

Eurosceptic, inherited wealth/self-made fortune, believer/unbeliever, Catholic/Protestant, city/country, sea/mountain, soccer/rugby, PC/Mac, Larousse/Robert, and so on),²⁸ but rather to remind my readers that there are only good wines and bad wines; that among the good ones there must be enough to please all tastes; and that the more one drinks them, if they are at all well made, the more one's life is enriched.