An Interview with Philippe Bascaules

What made you decide to start a career as a winemaker? Was it intentional or did it just evolve?
As a student, I was particularly interested in nature, science and mathematics. It was a flexible mix that could have led to me in many different directions, but it was ultimately a love of the land that led me to become an agronomist. My move into oenology was inspired by the passion communicated by the producers I met during my first year. It’s a passion that links people in the wine world in a very unique way.

What makes a truly iconic wine?
What is an “iconic” wine? I don’t think that there is any fixed definition – it’s a very personal thing. I prefer to talk about “great” wines.
Technically speaking, a great wine should possess fantastic aromatic complexity and structure, but I believe that it should also be a little it mysterious, like a perfume. I find wines that are extremely fruit-driven too obvious, too eager to please. I want a discrete, yet multi-faceted aromatic range that delicately reveals itself as the wine evolves in the glass.
The structure is vital to hold the different flavours together, however, it needs to be both strong and soft at the same time. If you compare silk to cotton, silk is extremely tightly woven and, therefore, very strong, yet it is also inextricably soft.
It is this delicate balance that interests me in a great wine, not aggressivity and power.

If you had to name your 3 all time favourite wines, what would they be?
In my career, I’ve had the opportunity to taste some spectacular wines, however, the wines that are the most memorable are linked to emotions.
But if I have to chose three: Margaux 1900, Margaux 1929, Lafite 1959.

What is the one wine you have never tasted but hope to?
Romanée Conti

What do you hope to bring to Inglenook?
Rigour, intellectual honesty and passion.
My 21 years at Château Margaux have given me an unparalleled experience and understanding of what makes a great wine. However, I’m not here to make a mini-Margaux. It’s important that I make these wines from the vineyards, not from a pre-conceived idea in my head.
I don’t particularly agree that winemakers are artists, because we rarely start with a blank canvas. I believe that my job is to understand the terroir and then use meticulous selection and careful vinification to extract the best possible wine from the estate.

How different are the winemaking techniques and philosophies?
Let’s not forget that my experience at Inglenook is extremely limited for the moment. So far, I am observing and learning. I will no doubt make changes in time, but we’re in mid-harvest and I have to respect that work that has been done up until now. I’m not here to make changes just for the sake of making my mark. The raw material is already very good. My job is to make it exceptional.
You will have more leeway with winemaking techniques here, is it tempting to make the most of that liberty, or try, wherever possible to stick to the traditional methods?

I believe that our role is to observe and understand before intervening, so that we don’t get it wrong. Irrigation is a good example of this, as it can lead to vineyards becoming so homogenised that they no longer express their inherent terroir. New technology is not always the solution and should be handled with care. I think that the best way we can help nature is by not making things too easy.

Perfection doesn’t exist, so we shouldn’t strive to create perfect wines. The idea of perfection, in anything, lacks charm.

The interview with Captain Niebaum is quite chillingly insightful. What have you seen of the Inglenook estate that makes you understand why he believed he could produce wines here that could rival the best of the world?

When you taste wines like Inglenook Cabernet Sauvignon 1941, or the 1951 Pinot Noir, it is obvious that this is a great terroir. I’m still learning about the terroir, however, in the run up to harvest, I have been able to observe the different parcels, watching how they reacted differently to the recent rainfall, monitoring their maturity and vinifying the separately so that I can taste the different components before deciding the final blend. We are also working with a French geologist to study the parcel limitations, as some of them may be sub-divided in the future. This parcel-by-parcel analysis will give me the lexicon I need for the future, to truly understand the Inglenook terroir, but I’m already starting to appreciate the enormous potential of the estate.

2011 appears to be an atypical vintage, with fears of rot. Do you think that there are more similarities to what you know in Bordeaux this year, than a typical “easy” Napa vintage?

I’ve seen a lot worse in Bordeaux! This is my first vintage, so I don’t have anything to compare it to, but everything is looking good so far. I prefer to wait for ripe grapes, even if there is a little bit of rot, than harvest unripe grapes. Unripe grapes will never make a good wine. 2011 doesn’t worry me.

How important is the impact of vintage here?

You need to ask me that question again in a few years.

Generally speaking, I want to make the winemaking more instinctive and sensorial, based on careful observation and understanding of nature. We can see that some parcels have reacted differently to the rain we had in early October and that is all linked to the terroir.

After all of these years making Margaux, what is it like to be making new wines?

Extremely exciting and revitalising. Everyday I’m learning something new from the people around me.

How involved is Francis Ford Coppola in the winemaking?

Paradoxically, after all of these years spent piecing the original estate back together, Francis has only recently started to feel comfortably giving his opinion on the wines, which is thanks to Stéphane Derenoncourt. Stéphane taught him that you don’t need to be a qualified winemaker to give a qualified opinion on the wines.

The role of the owner is extremely important and Francis is well suited to that role as he is keen to understand, discover and listen. There is good communication between us, based on honesty and respect – values that are vital to both Francis and myself.

Will Stéphane Derenoncourt still be consulting? How do your roles work? Did you know him from Bordeaux?

Yes, Stéphane will continue to consult for Inglenook. His role is different to mine. He is there to offer me his advice, to bring in an external viewpoint. I will listen to his advice and combine it with my own experience and understanding.
Your role at Margaux was quite low profile, quite a contrast to your role here. Was that something that you wished to develop?

The most important thing for me is to constantly grow as a technician. If I believe and respect my leader, I will happily follow, which explains why I spent 21 years at Margaux. I turned down several offers before the Inglenook opportunity came along. I now have the role of General Manager and I’m very much looking forward in developing into that role. However, at the moment, the main thing on my mind is the 2011 vintage. There is a great team already in place here, so I’m letting them continue with their jobs while I’m totally concentrating on the technical aspects.

How much exchange between winemakers is there in Napa and Bordeaux? As everyone seems to what to make a Bordeaux blend, you could become quite an icon. How will you deal with that?

I hope that I will be able to exchange with like-minded winemakers here in Napa, as I did with my colleagues in the other First Growth chateaux. That type of exchange is vitally important. I’m sure it already exists. If it doesn’t, it soon will.

I have heard mixed comments in the valley regarding scores. Those who say that you live and die by scores tend to be making power bombs. Those who say they don’t care appear to be making more elegant, refined wines that reflect the terroir, rather than the palate of a wine writer. How much pressure is there on a winemaker to achieve those scores?

I don’t believe that a great wine is necessarily the most powerful wine, and vice versa. I think that it’s important to communicate around the inherent values of the estate and the terroir and not be afraid to be different. Obviously, that is easy to say coming from a First Growth, but I’m convinced that it is equally relevant here. Eating overly spicy food is more of a challenge than a pleasure.

Good ratings are essential to selling wines; however, one should never make a wine to get a score, as that’s the best way to fail. You should make the best wine possible that is true to its terroir.