

PIERRE SEILLAN

The annual tasting of the new Vérité vintage at London's Dorchester hotel has become a fixture in the wine world's calendar. Every October, the Jackson Family Wine team, led by its quietly spoken CEO Barbara Banke, invites a couple of dozen importers and retailers from around Europe, and one or two journalists, to taste the three Sonoma wines. There are variations—sometimes Lokoya, Vérité's sister wine from Napa, is shown. And for the past couple of years, a vintage of Vérité has been tasted alongside a selection of icon wines. Not just any icons either; in 2014, it was 2004 Ornellaia and 2004 Mouton Rothschild, 2007 Grange and 2007 Pingus, 2001 Sassicaia and 2001 Lafite. In 2015, the Vérité sights were trained a little nearer home, and we tasted 2005 Vérité La Joie alongside Harlan, Scarecrow, and Screaming Eagle from the same vintage.

Pitting your wine against the established—and expensive—greats is nothing new. Eduardo Chadwick of Errazuriz has been doing it for years with Seña. It's a statement: "We have arrived." The Vérité tastings are not blind, and of course a wine always tastes better when you have its proprietor sitting in front of you, but in the two tastings, Vérité did more than hold its own. Last October it was astonishing to note how—in terms of power and finesse, brightness of fruit, evolution, and balance—Vérité was the equal of, and in many ways superior to, those most cultish of Napa cults. A telling comment came from Greg Sherwood MW, who lists Vérité at London's Handford Wines: "People are no longer questioning the quality of these wines but finally delving into the terroir and vintage conditions that created them." The headlines in the wine press were more succinct: "Sonoma Beats Napa in Cult Cab Comparative," said one.

It being October and harvest time, there's always a notable absence at the Dorchester tasting: Vérité's winemaker Pierre Seillan. Had he been there, he would have loved Sherwood's comment, which neatly sums up his entire winemaking philosophy. "I am a terroirist in terms of the purity of the expression of the soil. I use the term *droit du sol*—the right of the soil—that is, to give the soil every chance to express its diversity inside the grape." And I'm sure he was equally happy with the Sonoma-trounces-Napa line—he looks like a man who enjoys a scrap.

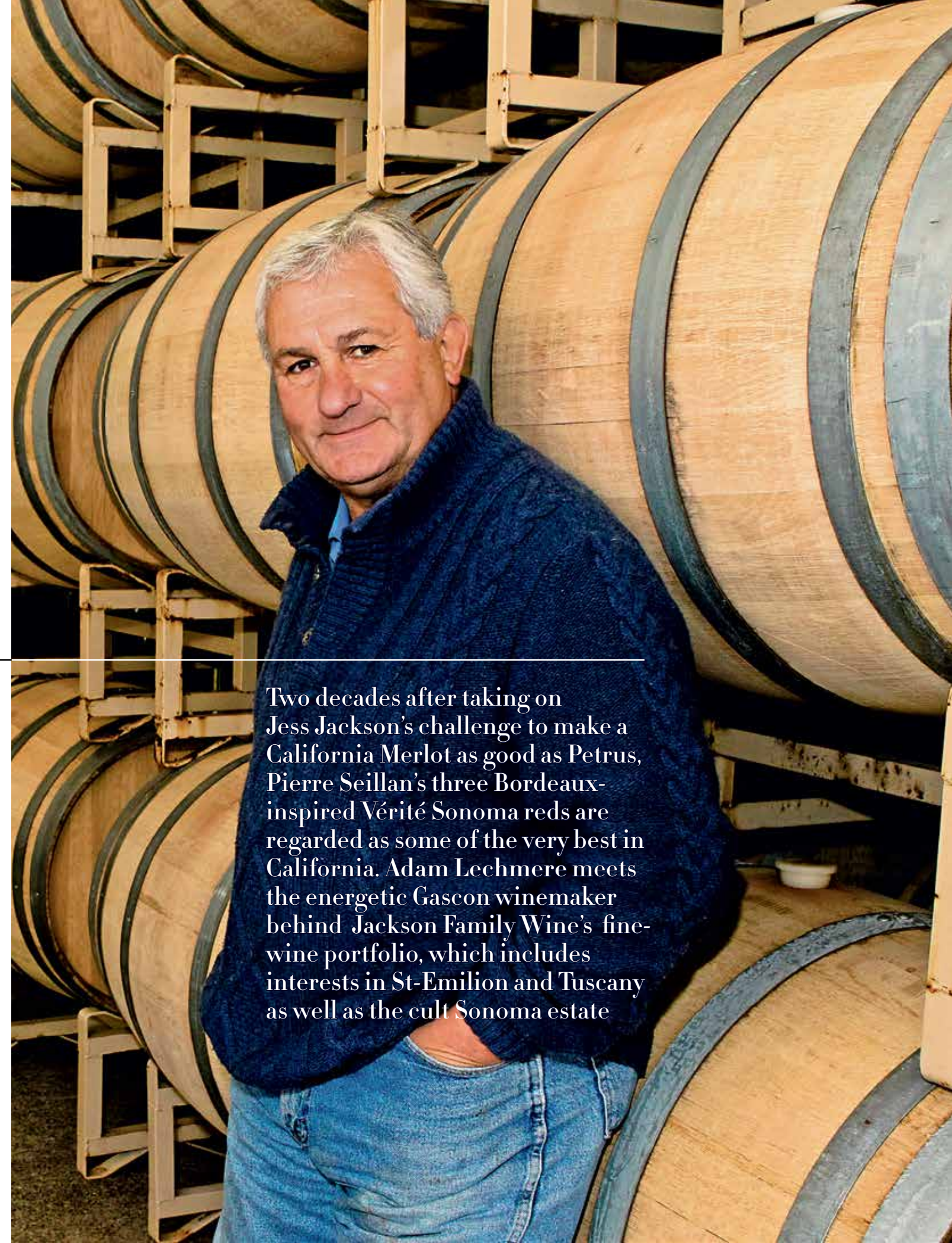
Why not?

The story of Seillan and Vérité has been told many times. Originally from Armagnac, he worked at Château Targé in the Loire (and is still very much in touch with the owner Edouard Pisani-Ferry, who calls him "one of the best winemakers in the world") and spent 20 years as technical director for seven Bordeaux châteaux—from St-Émilion, to St-Estèphe—before meeting Jess Jackson in the mid-1990s.

He now manages Vérité and other Jackson properties such as Tenuta di Arceno in Tuscany, another Sonoma property, Anakota in Knights Valley, and Château Lassègue in St-Emilion, which Jackson bought in 2003 and which Seillan now runs as a partner.

According to family legend, Jackson asked Seillan if it would be possible to make a California Merlot as good as Petrus. Seillan replied, "*Pourquoi pas?*" and, in 1998, produced the first Vérité, a Merlot-dominant blend from Sonoma and Napa fruit that is still talked of in hushed tones by the team. Seventeen years later, it has an intensely evolved nose and delicate dark fruit. It's still very much alive.

All photography courtesy of Jackson Family Wines



Two decades after taking on Jess Jackson's challenge to make a California Merlot as good as Petrus, Pierre Seillan's three Bordeaux-inspired Vérité Sonoma reds are regarded as some of the very best in California. Adam Lechmere meets the energetic Gascon winemaker behind Jackson Family Wine's fine-wine portfolio, which includes interests in St-Emilion and Tuscany as well as the cult Sonoma estate

There are now three Vérité wines based on the three great Bordeaux grapes: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc. According to Jackson's—and Seillan's—vision, each wine aims to evoke a different Bordeaux terroir. The Merlot-based La Muse is inspired by Pomerol; Le Désir, Cabernet Franc, by St-Emilion; while the Cabernet Sauvignon-based La Joie takes Pauillac as its benchmark.

But Bordeaux isn't mentioned much now. These are Sonoma wines, and Seillan is impatient with any idea that he's following any template. "My goal was never to copy Bordeaux. If you copy, you don't learn." They are considered by Robert Parker (who has handed down eight 100-point scores) and by European aficionados as among the very finest wines Sonoma can offer.

Seillan is an evangelist for Sonoma terroir, for its "complex topography and soil diversity" and for its temperature variation. "Petrus has three types of soil. I can make a better Merlot because we have 20 types of soil with more complexity," he likes to say. "As soon as the sun sets by 5 or 6 o'clock we start to get the wind from the Pacific. Yesterday morning [in early May] at 7am it was 5°C [41°F]. On the hottest day in summer, the early morning temperature can be 10°C [50°F]. This is a blessing. On top of the hill with the rocky soil, your vines stress in the heat. And if it continues hot at night, the juice from the berries goes back into the roots, and this creates raisining and elevation of sugar by diminution of ratio of juice to skin. This is what I don't like."

Selection and control

To say Seillan pays attention to detail is an understatement. He is a champion of the minimal. He barcodes selected vines to monitor their progress after suckering. He discusses the vital differences between cane and cordon training (he says anyone who suggests cordon for one of his vineyards should be fired) and spends some minutes explaining the business of canopy management and its importance. His daughter Hélène (who is a young winemaker of considerable talent, with her own Sonoma cuvée, the Cabernet Franc-based Cenyth) says, "It's like we're manicuring the vineyard."

Selection and control could be the Seillan motto. He picks early, his goal to be between 23° and 25° Brix (12.8–13.9° Baumé). There's nothing too unusual in being low down the Brix scale in Sonoma nowadays, but it still contrasts vividly with the Napa average of 25–30° Brix. It's a balancing act. "In Sonoma there's more fruit expression, more complexity, and more spice, but the tannins are very difficult. If you want to capture the fruit, then you need to harvest not overripe. But then your tannins may be astringent and aggressive."

But high-altitude Sonoma has the great advantage of cool nights, which allow ripe grapes to retain acidity. "So you have more fruit than Bordeaux, but you have the acidity." Does he ever add acid? "You're talking to the wrong man. I never add acid because I pick early. Many people need to because they pick at 28 or 30° Brix, and all the natural acid is gone, as well as the flavor of the fruit."

Vinification is in multiple small tanks. There's no one happier than a winemaker with money in his pocket for tanks, and Seillan "bought a lot," as he put it. The Merlot for 1998 Vérité came mainly from the Jackson Park Vineyard in Bennett Valley, whose 89 acres (36ha) Seillan split into 37 different blocks—not such a common practice a decade and a half ago. Oak selection is paramount, and Seillan exploits to the full the Jackson-owned

stave mill in the Vosges. Bordeaux journalist Jane Anson noted that every barrel comes stamped with a GPS coordinate pinpointing where the tree stood.

There's a picture of Seillan in a stetson on the cover of the French magazine *Vigneron*, astride two rocks, every inch the lantern-jawed frontiersman. He's a powerful, bull-necked figure, holding forth in heavily accented English, swallowing words in his urge to vocalize his passion. He's alarmingly indiscreet—on the subject of how the Bordelais managed their canopies in the 2003 heatwave, he lambasts their "stupidity"; and don't get him started on how much he dislikes the new building at Cheval Blanc. He and his unflappable wife Monique (who translates some of my questions, to his obvious annoyance: "I understood perfectly well; if you keep interrupting, I lose track of what I'm saying") are engaging company, unguarded and so absolutely convinced of the quality of their enterprise that you can't help but be seduced by their enthusiasm.

Seillan is forthright about his own abilities, and he happily berates fellow vigneron for their shortsightedness. Only he understood the importance of retaining the canopy in the European heatwave of 2003. "All the Bordelais were stupid because they followed protocol" and pulled leaves as normal, thereby cooking the grapes. Only he decided not to prune back after the hailstorms of 2009, instead leaving a shoot for new growth, against the advice of his team and just about everybody else. "I was obliged to say, 'I take the decision, I am the boss.' Sometimes you have to be radical. That was an epochal decision."

Combining Old and New Worlds

With this verve and single-mindedness, Seillan is perfectly at home in America, where they love that sort of thing. He's not the type to blend into the landscape, and he's in similarly bullish humor when I meet him at Château Lassègue. It's slightly disorienting. This is en primeur week, and I've come directly from Cheval Blanc and a chat with Pierre Lurton, whose fine tailoring and Bordeaux reserve couldn't offer more of a contrast to Seillan's cowboy boots and proprietorial swagger.

Lassègue is a nicely situated estate in the commune of St-Hippolyte on the St-Emilion Côtes, with well-managed vineyards, 45 to 60 years old, sloping gently down to the southeast. It's a good neighborhood: Canon-la-Gaffelière is situated on the same limestone-clay soil, which becomes increasingly sandy as it gets farther from the plateau. To the west are the vineyards of châteaux Bellefont-Belcier and Larçis Ducasse, then Pavie. Higher up toward the town of St-Emilion is Château Ausone.

Before a drive around the vineyards, we have a look at the machines. Hélène Seillan had told me in Sonoma that her dad was like "a child with a new toy" when he first set eyes on his new optic sorter. Here, the handsome stone courtyard of the château gleams with a battalion of shiny new equipment. There's the optic sorter, box-fresh, along with a new Burgundian disc-plow and a couple of spiffy new blue tractors. "We have the best technology at any level." He shows off the new railings, the stone imported from Gascony. ("This is the same stone as the cathedral of Auch. Look at this. We created all this.") The

Opposite: Chalk Hill in Sonoma, where Pierre Seillan appreciates the high-altitude vineyards where the cool nights allow the grapes to retain good levels of acidity.

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micro-cru philosophy is as important in St-Emilion as Sonoma. In the winery, there are 31 tanks, the smallest being 4,000kg, all temperature controlled; the barrel room, he says, “is the biggest in Europe.”

Vérité, Lassègue, and Tenuta di Arceno, are all under Seillan’s control, and he’s working on the first vintage of his personal property in the family homeland of Côtes de Gascogne, but I get the impression there’s a lot riding on Château Lassègue. His splendid contempt for the Bordelais (he calls the multimillion-euro Cheval Blanc *chai* “a stupid building,” and the admittedly hideous Château Faugères development up the road “a jail”) implies an urge to show them what he’s made of. Is there also a feeling that despite the undoubted success of Vérité, Bordeaux remains unmoved? He’s certainly less well known here. In Sonoma, those who haven’t met him express a wish to do so. In Bordeaux, most people know Lassègue as “the property that Jess Jackson bought” and little else.

His ambition is to take Lassègue into the upper levels of the St-Emilion classification, to premier grand cru classé B, alongside such estates as châteaux Canon, Canon-la-Gaffelière, La Gaffelière, Troplong Mondot, and Valandraud. He missed the 2012 classification because he couldn’t show the required ten vintages, but he also disdains the whole process. “The classification is a mess! They wanted to get me into court, but we stayed away. I don’t get involved in politics.”

Indeed, the politics of St-Emilion is febrile, and it’s difficult to get an unbiased opinion. Seillan’s neighbor and friend Alain Vauthier, of Château Ausone, reckons that when the new classification comes around in 2022, there will be a slew of applications for promotion. Moreover, the criteria have changed. “The doors are open because the most difficult factors—commercial, local history, recognition—play very little part in the final grade.” Vauthier suggests terroir is worth little nowadays. “Wine tourism and participation in a film” count for more, he told me (presumably in a sideswipe at Angélus, whose wine has appeared in the past couple of Bond movies).

A more measured assessment comes from the French critic Michel Bettane. “I’m impressed,” he told me. “They’re doing a very nice job. The vineyards are well situated, the slopes are good, they are well cultivated, everything is state of the art.” But, he went on, the wine isn’t at the top level yet. “Maybe in five or six years, they will be there, but at the moment that’s not the case. The wines don’t have the complexity, refinement, or length. This is not the terroir—man is more important than terroir.” In short, it is the winemaker who counts.

A third of Lassègue’s exports go to the United States, where it is habitually described as bridging the gap between the Old and New Worlds. “Château Lassègue combines the best of Old World principles and New World technique,” as the east coast importer Esprit du Vin has it. Tasting Lassègue alongside Seillan’s American portfolio, one is transported to Bordeaux—the 2005 has much more pronounced herbaceousness, the tannins austere, the fruit on the damson-sloe spectrum rather than plum and blueberry. The 2009 and 2010 still give little away, the 2010 especially showing really sinewy tannins. They are polished, well-made wines, but to my mind they have an international sheen. I don’t for a moment suggest they have anything like the extraction or overenthusiastic oaking of Château Pavie (Seillan is a connoisseur of oak), but they have an unrestrained quality—they demand notice.

This, of course, is good for the US, where it is carried by dozens of merchants and goes down very well. A third of Lassègue’s sales go to Europe and the UK, but still it is not well known. Fine+Rare in London, one of the few UK merchants that list it, reports sales of “a couple of cases in the last year.”

Altitude and vision

Back in Sonoma, over lunch (where Banke served the ’98) at the Vérité Estate a few miles east of Healdsburg, Seillan talks of his deep affection for the region. He says he considers it the finest place on earth for the Bordeaux varieties and Pinot Noir, and his eyes sparkle when he tells me there’s a helicopter trip planned for the afternoon.

We lift off from Santa Rosa airport in gorgeous spring sunshine and head west toward the Pacific coast. The Russian River winds below us, through steep wooded hillsides, Seillan pointing out the features as we pass. “That’s Bennett Valley; there are the micro-crus. Now Knights Valley. And that”—pointing to an ice-blue lozenge of water—“is Peter Michael’s reservoir.” This part of Sonoma is wild, the high-level vineyards bare patches on tree-covered hilltops. “We had a few llamas down there, but the mountain lions killed two of them.” We cross over into Napa, and the contrast is striking. The flat valley floor is a carpet of vines, and great wineries—Darioush, Opus One, Inglenook, Mondavi—line the road. It looks prosperous, while Sonoma looks untamed. “Nineteen years ago, it was an audacious move to come here,” Seillan says. “That’s why Jess Jackson was a visionary.”

Jackson was also a man dedicated to his family. (In the few years before his death, he set the estate in order, ensuring that “fiscally we were in good condition,” Banke told me.) Spend time with the Seillans and the wider Jackson family, and it soon becomes clear how tight-knit they are. Banke’s daughters Julia and Kate are intimately involved in the company and close friends with Seillan’s son Nicolas and daughter Hélène. (Banke says, “Julia and Hélène are the terrible twins.”) The latter is now a serious winemaker in her own right, having been taught by her father from a young age, and she discusses early picking dates and Brix levels with the same sharp focus. Cenyth is her blend: After two years making it under Seillan’s supervision, in 2011 he left her to do it alone. “He told me to just make the wine according to what I wanted, and he’d come back in six months to taste it.” In similar style, he left her to do the Vérité blends in 2013. “She will bring a new parameter to the wine,” he says.

The future is assured, then, but Seillan is hardly into his 60s and he shows no signs of relaxing. He is a complex and driven character, straddling the New World and the Old, sometimes uncomfortably, it might seem. There may be nothing left to prove in Sonoma—Vérité is equally fêted on both sides of the Atlantic—but Bordeaux is still to conquer. I wonder if he will do it. He’s utterly at home in Sonoma; Vérité is a masterpiece of terroir interpretation. But St-Emilion is a different proposition. Its soils and slopes are one thing; its politics are a different proposition altogether. It reminds me of that age-old theme of Henry James: the bluff, innocent American among experienced Europeans. Seillan’s not American, of course, so the analogy’s skewed, but I have a picture of him in my mind, patting the optic sorter at Lassègue. “This is the best equipment money can buy,” he said, and for a minute he didn’t seem very French at all. ■



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TASTING NOTES

1998 Vérité Sonoma / Napa

(90% M, 10% CS)

A cold, wet year produced very little usable Merlot in Sonoma, so one third of the fruit was from Napa. Wonderfully dry and dusty potpourri nose. On the palate, the fruit is evolved, damson still opulent but showing signs of age; lovely hint of cedar, tannins release parsimonious juice, the whole balanced, fresh, long, just beginning its interesting descent into old age.

1998 Vérité La Joie Sonoma / Napa

(70% CS, 30% M)

The Merlot was so challenging in 1998 that Seillan wanted to try another style, so La Joie was born. Very fine tobacco-leaf nose, dense, dark fruit on the palate, austere and more Bordeaux-like than the Merlot, tannins firm and dry, hints of herb, persistent length with welcome juice.

2004 Vérité La Joie Sonoma

(65% CS, 20% M, 10% CF, 5% PV)

Tarry perfumed nose with sweet, ripe black cherry and damson. Fruit carries through satisfyingly to the palate, with saline notes and brisk minerality, very intense chewy tannins, hints of camphor. The tannins are there, young and vibrant to the end, dry but releasing spurts of juice. Lovely.

2004 Vérité La Muse Sonoma

(86% M, 7% CF, 4% CS, 3% Mal)

Lovely dense, sweet nose, with ripe plum and damson, then on to restrained coffee and mocha, sour plum; saline/mineral texture, very open and fresh, a sense of juice and freshness.

2004 Vérité Le Désir Sonoma

(47% CF, 49% M, 4% CS)

A wonderfully fresh nose—cigar, a note of hay—showing some age now, sweet ripe fallen damson and potpourri, lovely earth and dark, spiced chocolate, camphor. Velvety tannins enriched with black cherry, freshened by racy acidity. Delicious.

2005 Vérité La Muse Sonoma

(88% M, 10% CF, 2% Mal)

Intense mineral nose, graphite, ripe damson, sloe, cigar. Tightly wound, sweet, textured tannins; lovely length, goes on and on.

2005 Vérité Le Désir Sonoma

(50% CF, 39% M, 9% CS, 2% Mal)

Earth and mocha on the nose, the palate closed now but with a wonderful sense of potential opulence, brooding dark fruit, tannins holding back a reservoir of delicious juice hardly released at present. It’s all there and ready but incredibly youthful still.

2005 Verité La Joie Sonoma

(67% CS, 12% M, 12% CF, 7% PV, 2% Mal)

Bright ruby hue. Wonderful nose brimming with character, dark fruit, cassis hidden, sweet oak, cedar, snapped nettle stem. Palate dancing with fruit and sweet tannin, acidity releasing juice, flavors of coffee with some zest of orange, dry tannins quenched by juice, superb structure, and mouthwatering length, beautifully balanced.

2007 Vérité La Joie Sonoma

(68% CS, 15% M, 8% CF, 5% PV, 4% Mal)

Gorgeous cedar (old armoire) nose, velvety almost Porty raisined grape aromas, potpourri. Still very young, a bit closed now, tightly wound tannins holding out the promise of juice to come; overall fresh and brimful of potential.

2007 Vérité La Muse Sonoma

(85% M, 10% CF, 5% Mal)

Toasted oak on the nose, meaty and savory notes hint at very ripe redcurrant, even tending to jam. Palate with powerful tannins, ripe, fresh acidity carries through to finish, though there seems a slight disjoint in the integration of acidity, tannin, and oak. Lovely length, and as the wine opens in the glass any angularity softens.

2007 Vérité Le Désir Sonoma

(44% CF, 44% M, 8% CS, 4% Mal)

Wonderfully savory, tarry nose, then bright, fresh tannin and acidity on the palate. Fresh and dense, opening out to juice and sweetness of blackberry and blackcurrant fruit, integrated oak and acidity and leading into a pure, concentrated finish. Magnificent.

2011 Vérité La Muse Sonoma

(89% M, 7% Mal, 4% CF)

Very elegant restrained nose, with hints of briar fruit and damson and ripe plum, sweet cherry, tobacco leaf with an undertow of fresh nettle. Sour plum and damson on the palate, snapped stalk greenness, not dense but a feeling of lightness and open freshness. Length elegant, the tannins tactile and chewy, delivering welcome fresh juice.

2011 Vérité La Joie Sonoma

(74% CS, 10% CF, 7% M, 6% PV, 3% Mal)

Lovely fresh nose, savory, mint and Marmite, some medicinal and saline notes. Structure and precision, tannins tightly wound, dense dark damson fruit in high register, ending in tannins with dry grip releasing back-palate juice. Savory, saline length.

2011 Vérité Le Désir Sonoma

(54% CF, 36% M, 5% CS, 5% Mal)

Opulent nose with dark chocolate and coffee—roast fresh coffee—with ripe briar fruit. Palate perfumed, ripe dark fruit at first, then redcurrant,

coffee, and chocolate, mouthwatering freshness from the acidity. Dry, arrow-sharp tannins dissolving to juice. A tour de force.

2012 Vérité La Muse Sonoma

(85% M, 11% CF, and 4% Mal)

Sweet early-summer blackberry nose, with iodine, minerality, spice, leather, violet, and dark chocolate. Seductive and coltishly young, freshly roasted coffee beans with cocoa powder. Powerful tar and briar on the palate, with sour cherry, violet, black-fruit juice, very fresh ripe powdery tannins. The lovely gauche elegance of youth.

2012 Vérité La Joie Sonoma

(76% CS, 12% M, 8% CF, and 4% PV)

High tobacco notes on the nose, then fresh young blackcurrant with leaf. Toasty sweet roast coffee and cocoa. Lovely tight-grained texture to juicy tannins. Round and voluptuous, mouth-filling acidity with ripe small damson giving waterfalls of juice, exuberant, unrestrained, with a length that goes on forever.

2012 Vérité Le Désir Sonoma

(64% CF, 24% M, 8% CS, and 4% PV)

Dusty sweet nose with hay, lovely quality of freshness and presence—this is the most precise of the wines, mouth-coating fine chalky tannin and fresh ripe plum and sweet black-cherry fruit, very dark earthy chocolate, perfumed, notes of truffley forest floor, exotic spice. Both opulent and elegant, and utterly delicious. The finest of the three.

2010 Château Lassègue St-Emilion Grand Cru

(60% M, 30% CF, 10% CS)

Intense nose with damp earth and bright black fruit. Closed now, peppery damson fruit with crunchy coffee beans and tight, sinewy tannins; it opens up after a few hours and develops warmth and a reservoir of juice behind the tannins. Will be lovely in five years.

2009 Château Lassègue St-Emilion Grand Cru

(80% M, 13% CF, 7% CS)

Initial barnyard flavors, earth and sweet rot, damson and dark red plum on the nose, tannins fresh but juicy and much more forgiving than the 2010 though with real grip, the fruit tart, dense and tarry and set off by graphite and licorice, a certain heat at the end.

2005 Château Lassègue St-Emilion Grand Cru

(60% M, 35% CF, 5% CS)

Sweetness on the nose, with overtones of raspberry on black cherry and hay. Fine mineral and smoke palate, well-balanced, powerful, tart fruit jostling for position. Modern and very polished.