

CHÂTEAU PALMER: DANCING TO ITS OWN TUNE

By Adam Lechmere - LE PAN / Winter 2016-2017



Sexy, seductive and singular, Château Palmer is being led to new heights by chief executive Thomas Duroux. Adam Lechmere meets the man making music with wine – and whose cows are part of the performance.

Photography by Tim Hall



In March 2016, the normally sepulchral surroundings of Château Palmer’s vaulted cellar were transformed. Amid the neatly stacked oak barrels, two of the most renowned jazz pianists working today sat down in front of a select audience. Over the next hour and a half, Dan Tepfer and Thomas Enhco – New York-based musicians who are friends but had never played together before – expressed their idea of Château Palmer through music. In their hands the annual life cycle of this great Bordeaux estate was recreated: the trill of spring rain, the clap of summer thunderstorms, the delicate crescendo of buds bursting. It was a performance that was rapturously received, with cries of “Bravo!” echoing around the chamber.

The warm, curved surfaces of cellars can produce excellent acoustics, serving to both amplify and soften sound. The management of Château Palmer certainly think so. For this was not a one-off. Since 2009, the now-annual Hear Palmer concert in Margaux has welcomed pianist Jacky Terrasson, composer Christophe Dal Sasso and his Big Band, and the AIR trio of pianist Giovanni Mirabassi, trumpeter Flavio Boltro and trombonist Glenn Ferris, among a string of world- class jazz musicians.

It’s all part of a broad approach to wine and culture that has seen Palmer gain a reputation as one of the more alternative of Bordeaux’s top châteaux, a Left Bank estate that does things a little differently. One might think that playing at one of the region’s most elegant châteaux and drinking its wines would be an attractive prospect for stars of the jazz world; an easy gig. But the Hear Palmer concert is a more demanding engagement than it sounds. For the property’s chief executive, Thomas Duroux, it’s not sufficient that a musician or group simply turn up and play. They must immerse themselves in the estate, spending at least three days there learning about the château and its vineyards. Duroux has turned down some famous names because they couldn’t manage the Thursday-to- Saturday itinerary that he stipulates.

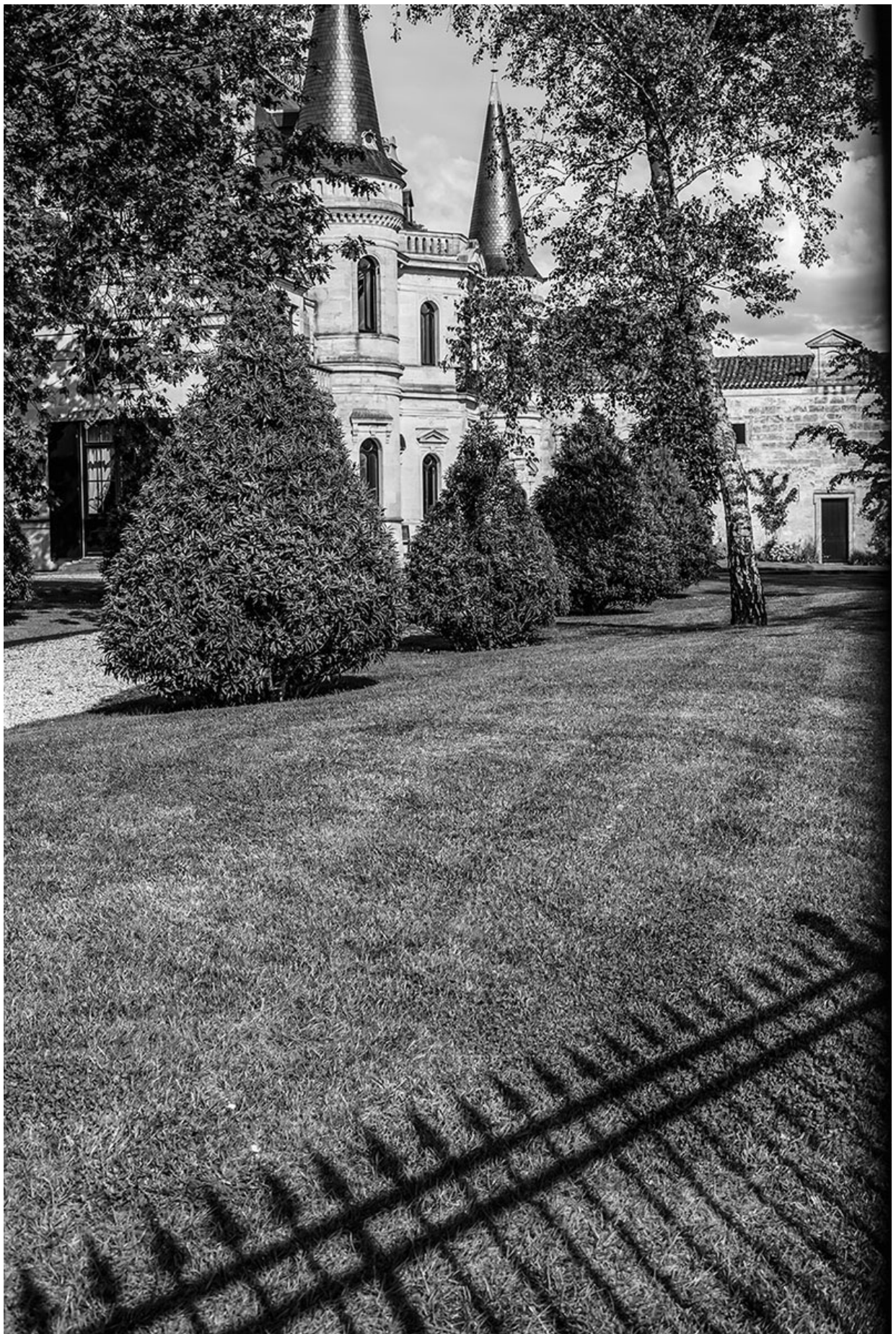


At Château Palmer (above), pruned vine wood is mixed with cow manure to produce compost for the vineyard, while wildflower meadows (this image) promote biodiversity. The estate hopes to achieve biodynamic certification in 2017

Tepfer and Enhco were willing to do the full Palmer experience before performing at the 2016 concert. Having been wooed by Duroux over dinner at Per Se in New York, the pair were invited to witness the 2015 harvest before then arriving a full two days prior to the March event, engaging in further vineyard tours plus dinner and a tasting with Duroux. “What was most memorable for me were the lengths he went to in order for us to understand the life of the château,” says Tepfer. “He wasn’t just putting on a gig: he wanted to place the spirit of the place in front of us.”

The spirit of this estate, in the middle of claret country, is more unconventional than its classical turreted façade would suggest. The current chief executive, who turned up for his interview, aged 34, in jeans, embodies this unorthodox approach. “I didn’t for a moment think they would take on someone as young as me,” says Duroux, who was working for Robert Mondavi at the late Californian grandee’s then Super Tuscan estate, Tenuta dell’Ornellaia, when he threw his hat optimistically into the ring. This is Palmer though, and hire him they did.

More than a decade later, Duroux is firmly ensconced, and expanding the estate’s remit. While fine wine has been Château Palmer’s *raison d’être* ever since British Major General Charles Palmer took over the property two centuries ago, other cultural pursuits form an increasingly important sideshow. Today, besides the music, guests will find art exhibitions and cattle herds at the estate. Palmer is slowly turning into a self-sufficient utopia, a holistic universe in which everything – from the meat on the vineyard workers’ dinner tables to the sheep that graze between the vines – boasts a local provenance. “We want to live at Palmer, and of Palmer,” says Duroux.





Classical architecture meets baroque and a touch of the Renaissance at Château Palmer (top left), where sheep graze and fertilise the vineyards, and acacia trees flourish – their flowers frequently referenced in critics’ tasting notes.

In the kitchen, helmed by Seiji Nagayama (plating dish, below), a locavore philosophy reigns. “We want to live at Palmer, and of Palmer,” says chief executive Thomas Duroux (top right)





It's a few weeks after the concert, and Duroux is leaning on a stick he plucked from a hedge, gazing at the cattle. "What a beautiful life, to be a cow at Château Palmer," he says. I can't disagree. It's a bucolic scene: the sun-dappled meadow, the drowsy hum of insects, the heady scent of damp earth and wild flowers. Ultimately, though, no matter how harmonious the estate – or the music – Palmer will be nothing unless it produces great wine. And it ticks that

box, too.

In the Margaux appellation, Palmer's reputation is second only to Château Margaux itself; indeed, in many ways, it rivals its illustrious neighbour. Its vineyards abut those of the great first growth (you can see Margaux's mighty Palladian façade rising above the trees a few hundred metres to the north), but the wines are very different. Palmer's are known for a perfumed brightness and, in older vintages, a floral delicacy that is the hallmark of the estate, along with a greater reliance on Merlot (as opposed to Cabernet Sauvignon) than is typical of the Left Bank. "It's one of the clearest examples of a wine that transcends its classification," says Noah May, a wine specialist at Christie's auction house. "Palmer is officially a third growth, but in great vintages, it's a first growth in all but name."





There is clearly consensus that Château Palmer is a wine estate at the top of its game. “I don’t think Palmer has ever made better wine,” says Adam Brett-Smith, managing director of fine wine merchant Corney & Barrow. “It’s silken and supple, super- refined – it’s just an incredibly sexy wine.” At Britain’s most venerable merchant, Berry Bros & Rudd, fine wine buying director Max Lalondrelle says Duroux has “turned an already powerful brand into a wine that can rival the best first growth”.

The prices certainly live up to such a billing: top vintages including 2000, 2009 and 2010 are on the market for more than US\$350 a bottle. Palmer often trades at a significant premium compared with many estates ranked higher in the 1855 classification, and can be twice the price of second growths such as Cos d’Estournel and Léoville Las Cases. Brett-Smith finds selling its wines to price-sensitive drinkers “a difficult prospect”, but Duroux is unapologetic. “We sell, so that means there is demand,” he responds.

It’s all a far cry from the days of Major General Palmer, whose acquisition of the château that was to bear his name was, it seems, a spur-of-the-moment decision. Palmer, then a colonel under the Duke of Wellington, met the beautiful but impecunious Marie de Gascq during a stagecoach journey to Paris in 1814, shortly after the Battle of Toulouse. The journey was long, Palmer was buoyed by the financial rewards of military success, and de Gascq was looking to sell the family château. The coach driver reported that his passengers were “turbulent”, though whether this was due to the state of the roads or to the widow’s succumbing to Palmer’s charms is not recorded. Captain Gronow, a celebrated diarist of the time, notes only that her story had “not only a wonderful effect upon his susceptible heart, but upon his amply filled purse”.





Palmer's fortunes over the decades have been as turbulent as that fateful journey. The major general fell on hard times, and was forced to sell; the château was taken over by a mortgage corporation in 1844, before being bought by brother-financiers Émile and Isaac Péreire nine years later. It was the Péreires who built the château as we know it today, but their improvements came too late for the 1855 classification, when Palmer made only *troisième cru classé*.

Under the subsequent ownership of the Mähler-Besse and Sichel families, who bought it as part of a syndicate in 1938 and still own it today, Palmer has thrived. “We’re very lucky in our owners,” says Duroux.

Beyond even the importance of benevolent owners, though, ask any great winemaker what constitutes the essence of their wine, and the answer can usually be whittled down to one word: place. Still leaning on his stick, Duroux widens the argument. He talks about the slow turn of the agricultural year in which every component counts, from the owners and workers to the sheep and the cows.

*The vines reawaken in spring, and need to be carefully tended to maximise the yield and quality of the grapes,
as they edge slowly towards harvest*





He's an old-fashioned man in many ways. True, he's in charge of a multimillion-dollar business (intellectually, he tells me, he enjoys the financial challenge of running Palmer), but in his vision for the château he reminds me of those English gardening aesthetes of the early 20th century: Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. Bell's love of the "dithering blaze of flowers and butterflies and apples" in her walled garden at Charleston in Sussex would strike a chord with Duroux. He reels off a dozen different wild flowers – *souci des champs* (marigolds) and *mauve sylvestre* (mallow), *camomille matricaire* (chamomile) and *coquelicot* (poppies) – that grow in the cover crop in the Palmer vineyards. He intends to plant peach, cherry, fig and pear, and bring back the hedgerows for the insect and animal life they support. Vegetable gardens will supply the kitchen. "I'm more interested in vegetables than I am in expanding the vineyard," he says.

The search for the perfect expression of place is akin to that of an artist seeking the perfect line while knowing it is eternally elusive. "We create our own challenge here," says Duroux. "We're never happy with what we've got; we always want to find more. We want to go deeper and deeper into the *terroir* – that last five percent is the most difficult to reach, and the most exacting."

In his quest for answers, Duroux takes inspiration from the connection between music and wine. "I don't want to go too far with it, but Hear Palmer is two days when music and wine speak together," he says. "There's a similarity between jazz improvisation and what we do in the winery. With jazz you take an old theme, improvise and improve. In the same way, we look at every new vintage with knowledge of the past."



The 66-hectare vineyard has an unusually high proportion of Merlot vines for the Haut-Médoc, producing wines that are especially plush

Such comparisons are an exercise fraught with danger; pretension is always just around the corner: "Pauillac is Wagner, but Margaux is Puccini" – that sort of thing. Yet Tepfer finds an explanation that has resonance: "Just as a great wine is the purest unobstructed expression of *terroir*, in many ways the job of improvisation [in music] is to make yourself available to everything that is happening around you, and to let it speak through the music. Your mission is to express how you are at that moment, where you are, who you are."

Duroux himself has come full circle in his career. In 2016 Chiara Mondavi, granddaughter of his former boss, took up a six-month placement at the estate. Part of her remit is "to work on beauty at Palmer", Duroux tells me. "She doesn't know it yet," he adds with a chuckle, as if it's a great jape he's about to

spring on the unsuspecting intern. A challenging assignment, no doubt. But after spending a day at Château Palmer, I begin to understand why it makes perfect sense for Duroux to conceive such an apparently nebulous job description. Either way, Duroux doesn't seem overly concerned. "All this, it's not a religion, it's not dogmatic," he says. "It's just enjoyment."



EDITOR'S CUT: CLICK THROUGH THE GALLERY TO SEE EXCLUSIVE PHOTOS ONLY AVAILABLE ONLINE



Top Vintages

Château Palmer

The estate's stunning marriage of Margaux's magical scent and the plummy opulence of a great Médoc cru classé comes through a higher proportion of Merlot than is usual on the Left Bank. Its velvety richness beguiles when young, and then it matures into something altogether more splendid. Either way, it is hard not to be passionate about Palmer.

Serena Sutcliffe



Notebooks display the harvest records of vintages past

1945

As this is my birth year, I know I am prejudiced, but Palmer 1945 is a real blockbuster. It is huge and tannic and yet, now, wraps you in its plush embrace. Let it happen.

1961

I remember this soaring to the top at a 1978 blind tasting of the 1961s in the Netherlands, against all the first growths. Overwhelmingly lush, vital and ‘in your face’ then, it is softer and more mature now, but the layers and plump dimension remain, along with the long finish of the vintage. A star from the start.



Apart from Palmer itself, the estate's range includes a small-production dry white – an unusual blend of Muscadelle, Loiset and Sauvignon Gris – and second label Alter Ego, suited to earlier drinking. The estate likens the distinction between Palmer and Alter Ego to that between “symphonic pieces and their jazz adaptations”

1962

This is here simply because, on some occasions, I have enjoyed it as much as the 1961, which must make it the bargain of the century. This time, it is the elegance, finesse and breed of Margaux that combine with the rich and supple character of Palmer itself.

1982

This is magic in jeroboam – evolving so well, and so sweet and appealing. A particularly notable appearance was at the château, with Alain Passard's pigeon and black truffles. The large format seems to add plumpness to this wine, while retaining the youth.



Today, scientific analysis of grapes and wines in the lab is important to the winemaking process

2010

This vintage shows that Palmer is now really ‘motoring’; still Merlot-dominated and a great combination of black fruit and perfect structure. Outstanding – and the persistence on the palate indicates a very long life ahead.

2015

Still in its infancy, but a huge success for the property and for Thomas Duroux. Maybe the biodynamic element has given it the verve and brightness; certainly the weather provided the power and opulence, and Palmer itself bestowed the velvet-curtains effect.



Margaux's St Michel church, set amid the vineyards

SHARE: [!\[\]\(919a2cb85b99741a73c0c31a427236a8_img.jpg\) FACEBOOK](#) [!\[\]\(c9cd5a1c35167a83f09a35036fe5dcbd_img.jpg\) TWITTER](#) [!\[\]\(ae1936640fabdea8c18f922ca69733fe_img.jpg\) GOOGLE+](#)

TRENDING

MAGAZINE

ABOUT

SEARCH

© 2017 LE PAN, LPM Communications Ltd. All rights reserved.