



Opposites

Attract

An irrepresible Gallic duo with famous surnames, Thibault Pontallier and Arthur de Villepin are shaking up the wine and art worlds with their Pont des Arts label, as Paul Kay discovers
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SORENSEN

It's a balmy Thursday afternoon

in September, and in a plush, art-filled tasting room tucked away in a nondescript building in Central, the banter is flowing as freely as the wine. Thibault Pontallier and Arthur de Villepin, glasses of wine in hand, are taking their positions for our photo shoot, and the wisecracks and in-jokes fizz back and forward between the two in English and French. They intermittently pause just long enough for the photographer to snap a few shots before the joshing starts afresh and maintaining a straight face becomes a virtual impossibility for either.

"I'm done with wine, I want to make a pâté," jokes Pontallier. "No, I want to do a foie gras," replies De Villepin, and they both crack up once more. The pair share an easy rhythm and a natural camaraderie that's been perfected over countless hours spent together during the past three years, both as friends and as the co-founders of wine label Pont des Arts.

Visually, they could hardly look more different – De Villepin is tall, thin, impeccably groomed and dressed with sharp, almost elven features, while the shorter Pontallier's face is framed by an explosion of wild curls and his sartorial style is more relaxed. If they hadn't chosen to get into the wine trade, it's easy to imagine them cleaning up as a comedy double act. But when it comes to business, they are deadly serious about creating a brand that will put a smile on the face of wine and art lovers alike.

Pontallier, 28, moved to Hong Kong just under four years ago as brand ambassador to

the illustrious Château Margaux, of which his father, Paul Pontallier, is the managing director. De Villepin, 25, the son of former French prime minister Dominique de Villepin, arrived around six months later, and it wasn't long before the two were introduced through a mutual friend. Meeting in a wine bar, aptly enough, they hit it off instantly and spent the evening talking about French politics and their passions for various aspects of French culture: Pontallier, naturally enough, for wine, and De Villepin, whose mother is a sculptor, for art.

Resuming their conversation on a boat trip soon after, they realised there was an opportunity to do something that combined both of their backgrounds in a novel way: by creating a range of high-quality wines that featured works by artists they loved on the labels, thus building a bridge between art and wine. More than that, as Pontallier recalls, they wanted "to create a niche promoting France

abroad with art, with wine, with luxury, with beautiful events – and also promoting great Asian artists, starting with Zao Wou-ki".

The choice of the Chinese-French master was an inspired and, for De Villepin, obvious one – the painter had been a good friend of his family for the previous two decades. Zao, who was born in China but spent most of his life in France, was also the perfect artist to provide a bridge between their homeland and the place where they hoped to make their mark. Indeed, the bridge motif was something that was becoming more and more central to their fledgling enterprise, which would also be able to call on the considerable talents of Pontallier senior on the winemaking side. Now, all they needed was a name.

"We spent about six months, every day, looking for the right name for this project," recalls Pontallier. "We knew what we wanted to do, but it's difficult to sum it up." Difficult,

that is, until they thought of Pont des Arts.

The footbridge in question, which spans the Seine between the Louvre and the Academy of Fine Arts, has become a favourite with young lovers, who attach padlocks to the bridge's railings and then throw the keys into the river as a symbol of their devotion to each other. For the young Frenchmen, the name conjured up the perfect mixture of romance, art and the idea of connecting. Fortuitously, the name of the bridge also contains the first four letters of Pontallier's surname and the first three letters of De Villepin's first name.

The newly christened company then set to work creating a range of six wines, a white and two reds apiece from Bordeaux and Burgundy – a highly unusual move in France's notoriously parochial winemaking culture, and one which represented yet another bridge, this time between the country's two most famous wine regions. The next – and most distinctive – step was to visit Zao's atelier



DYNAMIC DUO

OPENING

SPREAD

Thibault Pontallier (left) and Arthur de Villepin (right) co-founded the Pont des Arts wine label

THIS SPREAD FROM TOP

The pair host tastings in a plush, art-filled room in Central; the Pont des Arts bridge in Paris is featured in the label's logo



in Paris and to begin matching the wines to the artist's paintings, a multi-layered process that was approached with an abstract appreciation for the emotions stirred by both the art and the wine, and a deep reverence for each.

"We wanted people to discover the artist through his different periods and through the whole of his life, because most people know an artist through only one painting or period," says De Villepin. "With Zao Wou-ki, it's the abstract, which is the end part of his life, but actually he painted a lot of figurative paintings. So we went through the whole selection, like a gallery would do, to show you the different faces and the different styles of the artist."

Pontallier expands upon his partner's explanation. "The flavour of a wine is abstract, so the best way to understand it is visual," he says. "We wanted art to be the perfect metaphor to understand the wine, and for the wine to help in better understanding the painting as well." As an example he cites the Bordeaux sauvignon blanc, the vibrant and exotic flavours of which are reflected in the vivid and

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energetic colours of Zao's (*Untitled*) *Saint Tropez*. By a similar token, they chose watercolours for the white wines and oils for the reds.

The concept took flight at an early Pont des Arts wine dinner at The Peninsula Hong Kong, when – as the night progressed and people began to get merry – guests started asking for wines by the colours of the paintings on the bottle. "At first, I thought it was lacking in respect for the wine," says Pontallier, "but then I liked it because it meant people were completely associating the wine with the painting. It's a new way to think about wine and to appreciate it."

Officially launched in Courchevel, France, at Chinese New Year in 2012, the wines proved a hit, first with the sommeliers of private clubs and five-star hotels in Hong Kong that the pair approached directly, then through the private clients and collectors who now make up about 70 per cent of Pont des Arts' business. They have since expanded into 12 countries, including Japan, Russia and the United States, and are on sale in

Lane Crawford in Hong Kong, Galeries Lafayette in Paris, selected duty-free outlets and on Cathay Pacific, but not in wine shops. "I like this idea that we are doing this fashion-slash-artistic way of selling wines," says Pontallier. "So not to be in the classic wine shop on the shelf, because you would not have so much sense [of the brand], but to put the exhibition boxes of the wine in a luxury shop – I think it's a bit more interesting."

Sales of the 2010 vintage have been strong, particularly for the limited-edition display case featuring all six wines. They also created various large-format bottles of their wine and an Armagnac that featured extra-rare *eaux-de-vie* from 1888 housed in a bottle specially crafted by Lalique, which was limited to just 88 bottles. Next up is another Armagnac, the last in the Zao Wou-ki series, before Pont des Arts begins 2014 with its second artist collaboration. *Hong Kong Tatler* is sworn to secrecy on the identity of the artist, but suffice to say he is a giant of contemporary Chinese art.

But while further expansion seems a given, the duo are adamant that they will remain true to their original ethos. "We don't want to do big volumes and we'll never do big volumes," says De Villepin. In fact, their thinking sits at the other end of the spectrum, in even more bespoke, more exclusive offerings. A cognac and a champagne are in the pipeline, while sculptured bottles that are literally works of art, and a limited-edition series of watches combining horology with art, are just two of the ideas they are mulling over. They are also considering wines – and artists – from other countries, and are excited by the idea of collaborating with an artist to create a one-off painting to pair with a barrel of an exclusively blended wine, thereby creating the ultimate bespoke wine pairing for high-level collectors.

The possibilities seem endless. And yet, Pont des Arts remains at heart a brand built on an unabashed desire to create products of high quality and meaning.

"I think it's important that, when we did all this, Thibault still works for Chateau Margaux, and I still have an activity on the side [as CEO Asia for a medical company called MedTAG], so we didn't make any compromises," says De Villepin. "It was a passion project. We were not looking for the money but we were looking to do a project we were proud of and could share with people."

There's a beat before Pontallier says with a wink, "Me, I only did it for the girls," and the laughter starts flowing once again. ■



Zao Wou-ki: Beyond Life

PONT DES ARTS will bring the curtain down on its Zao Wou-ki series before the year's end by launching an Armagnac called Reserve Special: Beyond Life. Featuring Zao's 1954 work *Ciel de Paris* (*Sky of Paris*) on the label, it is a fitting conclusion to the collaboration, and pays final homage to the artist, who died in April of this year. "We wanted to do something exceptional, something unique, something symbolic," says Pont des Arts co-founder Arthur de Villepin of the product, which will comprise *eaux-de-vie* at least 50 years old.

Born in Beijing in 1920, Zao studied in Shanghai before moving to Paris in 1948, where he was influenced by the works of artists such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Klee and Joan Miró. During the last 20 years of his life, he

and his wife formed a close friendship with the De Villepin family, which Arthur recalls fondly. "I love his art, I love the guy," he says. "He was all about the work. What was abstract for us was completely real for him, and he would see beyond what was visible."

Although Zao will never see the final act of his collaboration with Pont des Arts, De Villepin is confident that he would have appreciated the spirit, in both senses of the word. "Zao Wou-ki loved the fact we were building a bridge between generations," he says. "He knew his work was mainly famous among the elite people, older people, art people, and he liked the idea of us being 60 years younger and doing this bridge to a new generation." See www.pontdesarts-wine.com



DISCERNING TASTES
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Pontallier, who still works for Château Margaux, has a passion for wine; renowned Chinese-French artist Zao Wou-ki in his atelier in 1958; the painting on each Pont des Arts label reflects the wine within

IMAGE: 1958, ZAO WOU-KI IN HIS ATELIER, RESERVED RIGHTS