



A PROUD FRENCH FAMILY WINERY TACKLES

THE MASSIVE CHINA WINE MARKET

Like many small wineries in France, Helene Ponty's family-owned winery in Bordeaux found it difficult to break into the booming China market. But with the help of a trusted Hong Kong partner and a high quality wine that is well priced, she is determined to fill a niche for Chinese wine lovers.

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It was only this year that French national Helene Ponty made the strategic decision to move to Beijing. With the aid of her Hong Kong partners, Grand cRu Management Ltd., Le Ponty Wines Ltd. was created to help bring a selection of her unique family wines to those who want to taste wines made in France's most highly reputed wine producing region - Bordeaux.

Wines and Bordeaux have been linked since ancient times, when the Bituriges Vivisques, a Gaulish people, planted biturica vines on the banks of the Garonne to supply decent tipples to the Romans. This vine flourished in the ocean-influenced climate and adapted well to the region's soil. However, Bordeaux's golden age arrived in the 18th century when the region developed a thriving trade with Africa and the Caribbean, transforming the harbour into France's largest port.

"Le Ponty Wines is our family winery which was started by my grandfather, Victor Ponty, in 1905," says Helene Ponty, Director, Le Ponty Wines Ltd. "The vineyards are located in Canon Fronsac, Bordeaux, a very small appellation,

one of the smallest in Bordeaux – right next to Saint Emilion. The estate has remained in our family ever since its founding. After my grandfather, it was my uncle who handled things and now it's my dad, taking care of everything and continuing this long tradition of my family's involvement with wine. The fact is, everyone in the family pretty much works in wine."

In 1925, Victor Ponty started producing wines from the Chateau du Pavillon estate. This four-hectare property has belonged to the Ponty family for almost 100 years, and is also the family home. Today, Michel Ponty and his family still live there, in the middle of this vineyard. In 1938 his son Jean Ponty joined the family efforts by starting producing wines from the Chateau Grand Renouil estate.

The Ponty family have also been involved in the Canon Fronsac appellation. Today 'dad', Michel Ponty is the president of the appellation. His task is to promote the appellation, to make sure that people know about Canon Fronsac, and that the name is recognised - because it is an appellation with



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considerable history. Michel Ponty continues to improve the reputation of their family wines with his wife and four children.

"The Canon Fronsac appellation was famous in the nineteenth century and even before that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Duke de Richelieu, Governor of Guyenne, was based in Fronsac who very much enjoyed the local wine, to the extent he began supplying it to the French kings," notes Ponty.

"However, after the French Revolution, the fame of the area's wines waned, and production diminished. In recent years, though, this is being remedied and efforts are being made to promote the appellation."

Merlot is the dominant grape variety in Canon Fronsac, giving the wine a good structure and richness, while Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon grape varieties are also produced. Canon Fronsac wines are known to be elegant and sophisticated, although they keep strong tannins. The aromas of the wine include red fruits and spices, as well as truffles for older wines.

Le Ponty currently carry five wines from their vineyards in Canon Fronsac: Chateau Grand Renouil, Canon Fronsac; Chateau du Pavillon, Canon Fronsac; Petit Renouil, Canon Fronsac; Blanc de Grand Renouil, Bordeaux Blanc; Clos Virolle, Bordeaux Superieur. The white, the Blanc de Grand Renouil, is only produced in small quantities. Every year, only 4,000 bottles meet the quality criteria and are eagerly sought after by wine connoisseurs.

"In Bordeaux all the vineyards are really small, especially if you compare the situation to that of California, where vineyards might be

200 or 300 acres. In Bordeaux, for our Ponty family, all together we have 12 acres, and that's usual in Bordeaux. Recently, though, there has developed a trend for big companies, big investors, to buy a few vineyards and put them together. But for people like my dad, that own traditional vineyards, the preferred average size is still very small."

Chateau Grand Renouil is considered one of the best wines in Canon Fronsac, and is regularly honoured by the most highly reputed wine publications. The wine has been part of Canon Fronsac since the 18th century, and the current 60 year old vines give the wine strength and complexity. Since the Ponty family bought the estate in 1936, this small estate (5.5 hectares) has always had a great reputation with wine connoisseurs.

Situated in a beautiful valley, where the Renouil brook flows, the distinct location of the estate gives the wine its subtle flavours, says Ponty. The vineyard is open to a light breeze that moderates the heat throughout the day. The combination of this microclimate, clay-chalky soils, and old vines of Merlot grapes (100 percent) give complex and sophisticated tannins to the wine. Chateau Grand Renouil wines tend to age slowly and beautifully, and so can be kept for a long time.



but no one is sure who is reliable, or if they are going to get paid. Yet, they want to sell their wine, it's a dilemma," she adds.

There is no shortage of demand for French wines however, and in the instance of Bordeaux, the very name is meaningful to Chinese wine lovers.

"French wines have a very good reputation. I think the name Bordeaux itself carries weight. The name is associated with really good wine. It has been around for such a long time. The region is renown for its family-size wineries, that also operate on a smaller scale. Even the labels are different and the wine itself! When people think of Bordeaux they think of small wineries, of a long heritage and of tradition."

While Hong Kong has become more sophisticated, in China it is a mixed market with some wine drinkers that are quite sophisticated, whereas others are new to wine drinking, says Ponty.

"In China they are keen to learn. This means in China we have to adapt to different kinds of customers. Feedback so far is really good. Most of our wines are Merlot grape varieties so they pair very well with Chinese food - with red meat, roast duck or chicken. The Chinese also appreciate it when they learn that our wines are from a family winery, and that they come directly from our own winery.

"The buyers like it when I tell the story of our history and they are also welcoming us to invest by placing our wines on the Chinese market. Really, they like the taste of our wines in general. They want to go to Bordeaux, to see the winery.

"The way I see it, there is a gap in the China market - less so in Hong Kong - where you can find really expensive wines, and you can find really average wines, but these too, are expensively priced!"

"The niche which is needed is for wines that can be sold for a good price but that are of fine quality. And we are trying to fill that gap. Right now we can provide very good value and a lot of people are looking specifically for this. A good priced wine, but of good quality as well." In China, Le Ponty wines sell in a range from 250 to 700 renminbi. ▲

The China market

In recent years both Hong Kong and China have become attractive markets for international wine sellers, large and small. Says Helene Ponty: "When you are a small family affair it is really difficult to get into China. And if you do not know somebody, someone you can trust, it is hard to enter this market. I see that others in Bordeaux are really worried about working in unknown territories, particularly in Hong Kong and China, and going into business with people they do not know. They want to be in these developing markets and in particular in China, but they don't know how to do it.

"There was a spot of luck with us in our meeting someone we trusted, who introduced us to those that they trusted and we went with that. Distributors from China arrive in Bordeaux and want to get big quantities for distribution



Opposite:
The Ponty family,
from left: Helene's
brother Olivier, a
student, Helene Ponty,
her father Michel and
sister Anne, also a
student, and brother
Vincent who works
with Michel in the
vineyard.
Right: Helene at the
annual Hong Kong
Wines and Spirits Fair

