
VIVA BORDEAUX!

Suneeta Sodhi Kanga visits the Robert Giraud winery and is bowled over by the experience

As a professional wine appreciation educator in India, I was filled with excitement as I waited with my two daughters in our hotel lobby in Bordeaux city centre for John Lujan, the export manager at Vignobles Robert Giraud, to pick us up for our scheduled winery visit.

We had already been in Bordeaux for two warm June days. We had spent time at the Fête le Vin along the Garonne riverside. We had revelled in the newly opened La Cité du Vin, which can be best described as a Disneyland for wine lovers. We had drunk wine and eaten gourmet food and enjoyed the grand 18th-century harmony of Bordeaux city centre, which is unmatched in all of Europe. We had also been spoilt silly on a day trip to Cognac town. And we now eagerly awaited our first ever Bordeaux châteaux visit to Robert Giraud.

Bordeaux lies around 500 km to the southwest of Paris on the banks of the Garonne river. The Garonne and the Dordogne are tributaries of the mighty Gironde River that

traverses throughout the Bordeaux region. Most of the wineries are situated along the riverbanks – the left bank, the right bank and in between the Garonne and the Dordogne, also known as *entre-deux-mers*.

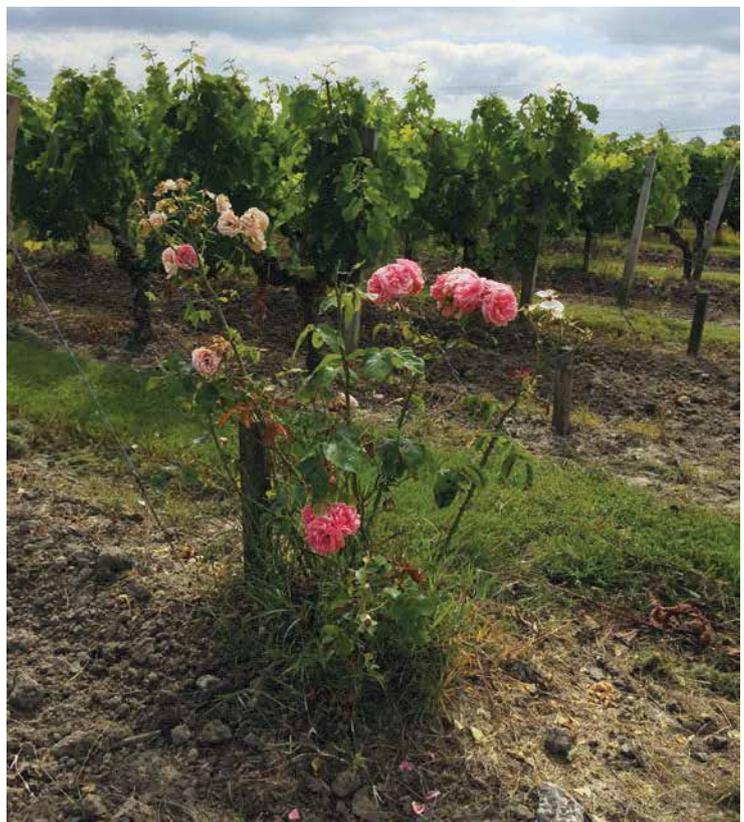
After a 40-minute drive from our hotel we reached the right bank of the Dordogne river. Bordeaux is famous for its clay, limestone, sand and gravel soils. As we walked through the vineyards, our host John Lujan explained Bordeaux's unique locational advantage of being situated on the 45th parallel north. This latitude, at which the sun is visible for 15 hours in summer, is considered ideal for wine growing and is why Bordeaux produces some of the best wines in the world. Fine wine is made 80% in the vineyard and only 20% is due to the winemaker's skills. The grape varieties in red Bordeaux are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot. Cabernet Sauvignon is the main grape on the Left Bank while on the Right Bank it's Merlot. The whites are Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon.



Château Timberlay, a family-owned 14th century wine estate. Right: A rose bush at the end of a vine row. Timberlay is an eco-friendly estate

The Robert Giraud vineyards are an impressive 125 hectares in a single block, producing over 600,000 bottles a year. The company is known for its authentic, quality-driven wines. Its quest for quality and ecological production has been recognized in the Terra Vitis Certification for ecological wines. Terra Vitis is a national federation which groups together associations of winegrowers from several French regions whose objective it is to set up an integrated method of production, which is mid-way between organic and traditional viticulture. No herbicide or insecticide is used.

Our next stop after the vineyard was the Château Timberlay wine production area. Interestingly, the château got its name from falling trees or timbers during night storms.





Rows of new French oak barrels for ageing premium wines at Château Timberlay. Left: Hard at work cleaning barrels

The grapes are picked by hand and the wine is aged in new French oak barrels that are kept in a separate church-like cellar

We were led through a room full of cement fermentation tanks that are still used here, in contrast to the steel tanks now used in most modern wineries. In the cellar we met a burly employee who looked like a Gaul straight out of an Asterix comic book and was singlehandedly cleaning the oak barrels.

Next, we were taken to the Château Timberlay Prestige collection area. Here the wines are made from the best fruit from the best plots of Château Timberlay. The grapes are picked by hand and placed in shallow baskets and the wine is aged in new French oak barrels that are kept in a separate church-like cellar. The serene silence in the cellar almost seemed to contribute to the sanctity of making perfect, prestige wine – a necessary ingredient to the art and science of winemaking, which is more a religion than a profession in Bordeaux. After that we stopped at a massive, noisy industrial warehouse where we witnessed the



working life of a wine merchant or *négociant*, in activities that include storage, bottling, packing, shipping, etc.

John explained that “*négociant*” is the French term for wine merchant – the person who assembles the produce of smaller growers and winemakers and sells the result under its own name. *Négociants* buy grapes – and also wines in various states of completion. Robert Giraud is one of the few *négociant* companies in Bordeaux whose forward-looking strategy is rooted in a large vineyard holding and several generations of winegrowing. Its headquarters, production facilities and logistics centre are grouped together on the same site. Every possible Bordeaux appellation is present under the Robert Giraud umbrella – from the entry level Vin de Tables to the highest end Grands Crus Classés and En Primeurs.

It was now time to put the wines to the taste test. We entered the tasting room and were stunned not only by its magnificent view but also by the sight of the Indian flag fluttering outside in honour of our visit – a warm gesture of friendship from our hosts!

The tasting included 10 wines representing different terroirs from the Robert Giraud portfolio. John explained each of the wines and their characteristics. We re-tasted them after they were allowed to aerate and were amazed at how well they opened up. On such occasions, it is a good idea to use the ample number of spittoons that are provided in the tasting room. From simple easy drinking Bordeaux AOC wines to full-bodied aged wines, from white wines to the world famous Bordeaux red blends were tasted. The more memorable ones were the Marquis de Paty 2014, a Bordeaux AOC, the ROC de Bernon 2012 from Puisseguin-Saint-Émilion and the one that we tasted last – La Collection 2012 from Margaux.

Robert Giraud wines have won several accolades and awards over the years, the most recent being the highly prestigious Bordeaux



Bottles being stacked for labelling and shipping; Left: Spittoons in the Timberlay Prestige collection cellar

Red Oscar 2016 for Domaine de l'Étalon d'Argent 2014. The Bordeaux Red Oscars is an annual wine competition judged by major international retailers, wine professionals and journalists – a tough lot to please!

We had built up quite an appetite with all the walking and tasting and now looked forward to our lunch with the third generation president of Robert Giraud, Philippe Giraud, whose hospitality matched his fine wines. The lunch lived up to the château's reputation and was the finest in my memory in several years. It included several courses and showcased different wines from the Robert Giraud portfolio. We enjoyed delicious preparations of salmon and duck along with award-winning wines that included Château Timberlay Prestige Cuvée Marie Paule Bordeaux Supérieur 2009 and the Château Cotes de Rol Saint-Emilion Grand Cru 2001.

Having said our goodbyes to the warm and charming Philippe Giraud, we were set to

Robert Giraud wines, left to right: Cremant Blanc Brut, Chateau Timberlay Prestige, Little Mermaid Chardonnay-Colombard and La Collection Médoc



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leave, but John insisted that we visit the ancient underground cellars at La Vignole, home to the Blason Timberlay Bordeaux brand. Blason Timberlay is blended and aged in a winery located over an ancient limestone cellar with a sprawling maze of chalk caves, some dating back to Roman times. Blason Timberlay makes easy drinking, contemporary wines that come in stylish and good-to-present packaging.

All good things must come to an end, as did our visit. It had been a symphony played to each of our senses. Splendid scenic surroundings, a wealth of learning, fantastic wines, gourmet cuisine, perfect grace and warm hospitality – all these are the ingredients, when packaged, that go into in an elegant bottle of Bordeaux wine from Vignobles Robert Giraud. ❖

VISITING BORDEAUX

Tours of wineries or châteaux are available throughout Bordeaux, allowing wine lovers not only to learn how their favourite wines are made and aged, but also to taste the wines and stock up on bottles to take home. Appointments for winery visits need to be made in advance and are mostly private one-on-one experiences. Ours was made a month before our visit.

The ideal months to visit are April to September. Please keep in mind that there are no tours on Sundays and August is vacation time for the French; most wineries will be shut. It's wise to wear comfortable shoes and clothing so that you can enjoy the long walks and vagaries of the weather. Carry a few layers to avoid being taken by surprise.

ROBERT GIRAUD WINES FOR PURCHASE

Robert Giraud wines are imported and distributed in India by Lakeforest Wines and Flipsydee India.

Price list at Lakeforest Wines, Gurgaon, Haryana:

■ Robert Giraud Cabernet Sauvignon 75cl	₹1,800
■ Robert Giraud Chardonnay 75cl	₹1,800
■ Robert Giraud Merlot 75cl	₹1,800
■ Robert Giraud Sauvignon Blanc 75cl	₹1,800
■ Robert Giraud Baron De Vassal Bordeaux Blanc 75cl	₹2,200
■ Robert Giraud Romefort AOC Bordeaux Rouge 75cl	₹2,200
■ Robert Giraud Château Tonneret St Emilion 75cl	₹4,000
■ Robert Giraud La Collection Medoc 75cl	₹3,300
■ Robert Giraud La Collection Margaux 75cl	₹8,000

At Flipsydee, Mumbai:

■ Andersen Series	₹2,390
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