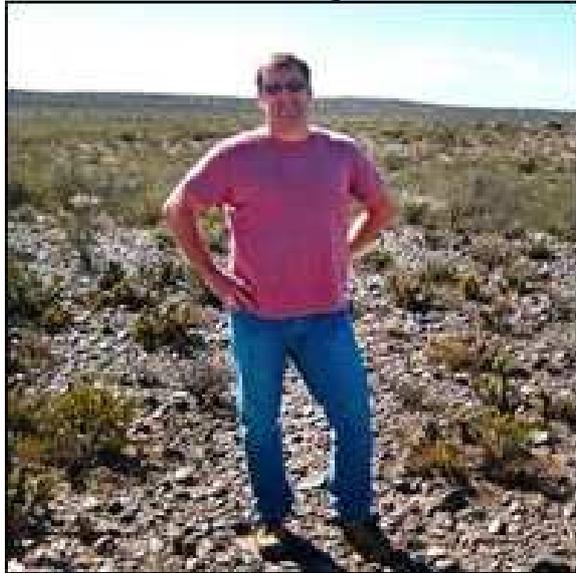


stirring the lees with james molesworth



James Molesworth

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Catching Up with the Professor of Bordeaux

A sit-down with Denis Dubourdieu, vigneron behind the dynamic **Château Doisy-Daëne, Clos Floridène and more**

Posted: Dec 13, 2011 2:30pm ET

A youthful-looking 62, Denis Dubourdieu has a swoosh of dark, wavy hair that shows just a few hints of gray. With his reading glasses hanging around his neck, he has a well-cultivated professorial look, fitting for a man who could easily be called the professor of Bordeaux.

Since the 1970s, Dubourdieu has taught at the University of Bordeaux, and during his career, his influential research on white wine vinification and aging helped revolutionize how white Bordeaux is made today. He works at over three-dozen estates, heading a wine consulting company now staffed by some of his former students.

In addition to helping others, Dubourdieu is also a vigneron in his own right, heading up Denis Dubourdieu Domaines, a family company based at his home property of [Château Reynon](#) in the Côtes de Bordeaux town of Beguey and headlined by his flagship estate of [Château Doisy-Daëne](#) in Barsac.

On my most recent trip to Bordeaux to taste the bottled 2009s, I finally got to sit down with Dubourdieu and taste through his various properties, focusing on his still-to-be released 2010s.

"Welcome to Doisy-Daëne," said Dubourdieu proudly as we walked to the vines located just behind the winery in the tiny hamlet of Gravas. Dubourdieu's grandfather Georges bought the estate in 1924 and ran it through World War II, eventually turning it over to his son Pierre, who was there until 2000. Third-generation Denis and his wife, Florence, are now joined by sons Jean-Jacques and Fabrice, the fourth generation to help run the family properties, which now produce approximately 42,000 cases annually.

Though known for his whites, Dubourdieu's portfolio also includes excellent reds.



Denis Dubourdieu Domaines

The stately Château Reynon: not a bad spot to call home.

The workhorse bottling, often checking in at just \$20 a bottle, is the **Château Reynon Premières Côtes de Bordeaux 2010**, which blends 80 percent Merlot with 10 percent each of Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. The red vines at Dubourdieu's home estate are planted on gentle rolling hills of clay and gravel soils. The wine is sleek and racy, featuring the bright acidity of the vintage, with a beam of

minerality cutting through the mouthwatering cassis fruit.

The **Château Haura Graves 2010** is the latest addition to the Dubourdieu lineup. It is made from a 32-acre estate Dubourdieu has been renting since 2002 (he signed a 25-year lease to manage the estate rather than see it disappear, as the aging current owner could no longer manage it), which features two hills of all-clay soils drained by a stream that runs between them. The 60/40 Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot blend offers slightly darker briar and kirsch notes but stays racy and pure through the finish. Dubourdieu has apparently taken a shine to the estate. It produced only sweet wine from the Cérons appellation when he found it in 2002, but he has added new plantings of red varieties and has increased production from about 830 cases to 5,000 cases annually.

At the 99-acre **Clos Floridène** estate, the main soil type is more gravel than clay, so there is a higher Cabernet Sauvignon percentage (70 percent) in this blend than other Dubourdieu reds. Merlot from the limestone parcels holds down the other 30 percent of the blend, and the **Graves 2010** sports the darkest profile of the three reds, with a sappy edge to the kirsch and blackberry fruit, laced nicely with sleek acidity and driving through a polished finish.

All three reds are ripe, but pure and refined, relying on finesse and minerality rather than sheer power.

"I want a more gentle extraction for the reds," explained Dubourdieu. "So for example, I still do a *rémontage* twice per day, but I only move one-third the volume of the vat, rather than the entire volume. A wine shouldn't be from every part of the grape. It should be made from the best part of the grape. And that allows me to use some press wine in the final blend as well, because there hasn't been any over-extraction to begin with, so the press wine isn't overly austere."

Dubourdieu's dry whites are equally pure and driven, starting with the **Château Reynon Bordeaux White 2010**, made entirely from Sauvignon Blanc fermented primarily in stainless steel, with a small percentage in wooden vat.

"I want just the hint of texture from oak, but no oak flavors," said Dubourdieu of the wine, which has great cut, with bony lime, gooseberry and chalk notes that sing nicely through the pure finish. As with the red, it typically chimes in at \$20 or less in the U.S. market, making it a super value. But despite that, Dubourdieu noted that the idea of "value" in Bordeaux is sometimes a tough sell.

"People don't believe there are values in Bordeaux," he said. "But this region is so large, and there is great *terroir* all around. Step outside of the big names and there are some great values."

The **Château Doisy-Daëne Bordeaux White 2010** is also made entirely from Sauvignon Blanc grown on shallow soils atop limestone bedrock. Fermented in barrel (just 15 percent new), it shows a bracing edge along with a range of enticing clementine and kafir lime fruit, and a long mineral finish. The dry whites from the sweet wine areas of Barsac and Sauternes are often overlooked, but they are much improved over the last generation, led in part by the consistently outstanding Doisy-Daëne bottling.

"The dry whites are no longer just botrytized fruit that was picked for sweet wines but kept out of the main wines for lack of quality," explained Dubourdieu about the shift.

"Instead, the dry whites are now made from early harvested fruit, before botrytis develops, and they are vinified to be dry wines. They're fresher and purer."

The **Clos Floridène Graves White 2010** combines equal parts Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon grown on the same *terroir* as Doisy-Daëne, but in an area that runs several degrees cooler during the growing season, according to Dubourdieu. Just a touch of new oak is used on a portion of the Sémillon, while the Sauvignon is fermented in tank. The result is a crunchy, invigorating white loaded with lime and honeysuckle notes and a long, steely finish that should open nicely with medium-term cellaring of three to five years.

In line with the sleek reds, all three of the dry whites feature pronounced minerality and lively acidity, a noticeable departure for Dubourdieu, whose penchant for *skin contact* and *bâtonnage* in his early years resulted in richer-styled whites.

"But today, the climate is changing, and we need to adapt our winemaking to that," said Dubourdieu. "I am doing less skin contact and using less new oak than 10 years ago. I only like oak if it adds complexity to the wine."

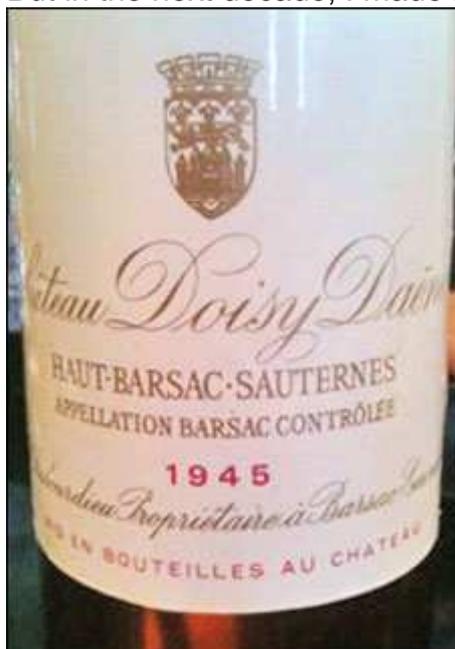
From there we move to the sweet wines, starting with the **Château Haura Cérons 2010**, made from a blend of 70percent Sémillon and the rest Sauvignon Blanc. It's a prime introduction to the sweet wines of Bordeaux, with plump glazed peach, fig and tarte Tatin notes lined with a hint of citronella.

From a 44-acre estate, the **Château Cantegril Barsac 2010** is plumper still, with more peach and apricot fruit, more glaze, and a gentle, lingering finish that shows a flicker of spice. [Note: Barsac is allowed to use the Sauternes appellation, and all of Dubourdieu's Barsac bottlings carry either a Barsac- or Sauternes-designated label, depending on the market they are intended for. Wines bottled for the U.S. market specifically are labeled Sauternes, but gray-market sourcing may mean U.S. consumers could see either label. They are the same wine.]

The **Château Doisy-Daëne Barsac 2010** is fermented in barrel initially and aged there for six to eight months before being moved to stainless steel tank for the rest of its aging prior to bottling. It shows a lovely, creamy feel, with lush apricot, fig and pear fruit, and plenty of depth in reserve. This young wine still has a lot of stretching out to do.

The luxury bottling here is the **Château Doisy-Daëne Barsac L'Extravagant 2010**, a rare Sauvignon Blanc-only selection that Dubourdieu only produces in top vintages. As Sauvignon Blanc bunches are tighter in form than Sémillon, Dubourdieu waits until an entire bunch is affected by botrytis, rather than making several passes through the vineyard (called *tris*) to select portions of the looser-formed Sémillon. The wine checks in at 12.5 alcohol with a whopping 200grams of residual sugar but doesn't show any oxidative hints, instead marked by sleek, tight candied lime, persimmon, fig and quinine notes. Just calling it "long" doesn't do it justice. Since 2003, the wine has seen only one year of new oak aging followed by one year in tank (instead of two years in new oak), resulting in the tighter, racier profile.

"Want proof that the climate has changed?" asked Dubourdieu rhetorically. "The first vintage for L'Extravagant was '90, and then I only made '96 and '97 in that decade. But in the next decade, I made it in every year except '00 and '08."



James Molesworth

Every wine has a story. Some are better than others, though.

Dubourdieu finished the tasting by pouring a last wine blind.

"This wine has a story," he said as he poured a lovely dark amber-colored wine that provided a kaleidoscope of saffron, date, cashew, roasted coconut, maple and salted caramel notes backed by a long, marzipan-tinged finish.

"My father was off fighting in Italy when there was a very, very hot spring. The vine shoots jumped out to 40 centimeters in April, when suddenly there was a severe frost and everything went brown. My grandfather sent my father a telegram asking for advice. He had never seen anything like it, and he feared the entire crop was gone for the year, which was not a good prospect at the time. My father sent him a message back, telling him to prune down to the last bit of green at the base of the shoot, hoping that would spur some lateral shoots that might [set some fruit](#). It worked, and they got a yield of 10 hectoliters per hectare [0.74 tons per acre] and made two barrels of juice off the estate. That was two barrels more than most people had that year. That was **1945**, and that's the wine you're drinking now."

Dubourdieu held up his fingers in the V for victory sign, breaking into a wide smile.

"Thank you," he said.