

ALAIN BRUMONT

His path to success has been far from smooth, but this Madiran-based producer has managed to surmount every obstacle he has encountered, making some of southwest France's most lauded wines along the way.

Stephen Brook meets a man defined by his persistence and tenacity

For three hours, Alain Brumont whizzed me around his properties, greeting his staff, checking the bottling line, sampling some of the newly fermenting wines and then driving me to some of his best vineyards, explaining the terroir of each.

At every stop he leaped from his truck to show me how his vines were trained, while also showing me the errors of others: 'Look at those rows! The guy's a biodynamic producer. That's well and good, but he's got 16 bunches per vine, while I never have more than nine. It'll show in the wine, I promise you.'

That wine is Madiran, and the top cuvées, from other estates as well as from Brumont, are often pure Tannat. It was not always thus.

Although historically Tannat had been the main – and in some cases the only – variety planted in this deeply rural, hilly area of southwest France, by the 1970s many producers had planted Bordelais varieties as well. This was partly to soften Tannat's ferocious tannins, but also to add volume, since Tannat is fairly low-yielding.

In an interesting footnote, Brumont told me: 'Everyone talks of how Syrah from Hermitage was sent to Bordeaux to improve poor vintages. That's a myth, and that's confirmed by my friends Guigal and Chapoutier. What they did use was Tannat.'

In 1985, Brumont released the region's first pure Tannat for many years: his barrique-aged Château Montus Prestige. It was inspired by a visit to Bordeaux in 1979, just as similar visits caused a revolution in Barolo and Barbaresco in Italy. This Prestige wine caused a sensation and his reputation was made. It was a satisfying moment for a man who had started with almost nothing.

'My father owned Château Bouscassé. At the age of 16 he made me leave school and work for him.' Brumont took over Bouscassé in 1979 and bought the abandoned Château Montus in 1980. There were no vines, so he planted 18 hectares. It's not entirely clear how he financed his purchases; there seems to have been a measure of wheeler-dealing.

ALAIN BRUMONT AT A GLANCE

Born 20 April 1946
Education No formal training after age 16
Main properties In Madiran, Bouscassé (80ha); Montus (60ha)
Family Married to Laurence, his third wife. Two children, two stepchildren



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'Remember, at that time, no one valued terroir here. But I chose my plots carefully. I made massal selections and planted a low-yielding clone of Tannat to ensure quality. I also picked my vineyards by hand at a time when nearly all my neighbours were using machines. They thought I was crazy.'

How, I wondered, did he choose the terroirs where he wanted to plant? 'Instinct. I just had a nose for good soils and microclimates. As Léonard Humbrecht from Alsace told me, you need to imagine the wine you can make.'

Building an empire

He expanded swiftly. 'The best terroirs were on slopes that were often hard to work. Hardly anybody wanted them, and they were going cheap. At that time, farmers preferred to grow wheat in the valleys rather than grapes on the hillsides.' But he admits he isn't infallible, and sometimes he has had to pull out or sell parcels that didn't meet his expectations.

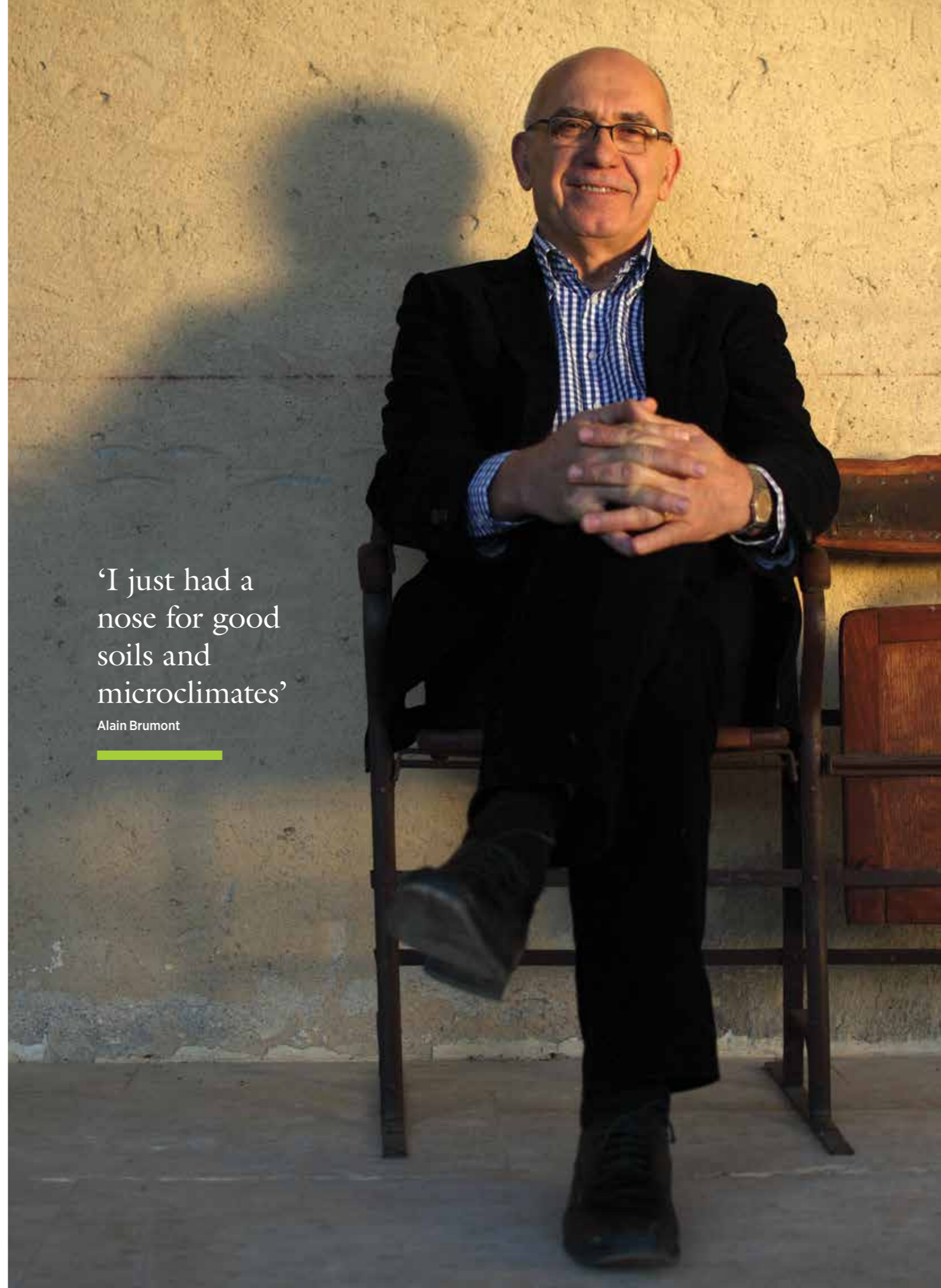
He has also stopped farming organically. 'I used to, but stopped, as organic viticulture doesn't require environmental actions, which I'm keen on. These days we repackage all our plastic and cartons, and the kitchen waste is fed to our chickens.'

Brumont, with his inextinguishable energy, likes to push things to extremes. Some cuvées, such as Montus XL, are pure Tannat aged in wood for 40 months; both his Prestige bottling from Montus and his Bouscassé Vieilles Vignes spend two years in 100% new oak.

Unfortunately, he expanded too fast, perhaps from over-confidence, and in 2004 the business was threatened by some severe financial difficulties. His costly conversion of the château at Montus into a luxury hotel, and the construction of a huge new winery at Montus, may have contributed to the setback.

But it was short-lived, and Alain Brumont soon bounced back. Precisely how he managed to keep his empire alive and thriving is hard to discern, but he did so.

In addition to the 300ha he owns or controls in Madiran, he buys from a further 300ha in the Côtes de Gascogne, creating a >



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range of inexpensive wines that transcend the very commercial image of that appellation. And while he would claim that his top Tannats are among the finest wines of southwest France, he has also created the brand Torus, made with fruit sourced from young vines and intended for relatively early drinking.

Always moving forward

Now in his early 70s, with his third wife Laurence and her son Antoine by his side, he shows no sign of slowing down. Although very much the boss of the operation, he dislikes any notion of hierarchy. Each lunchtime, he sits down at Bouscassé to enjoy a good lunch with his team and with any visitors, whether from the wine trade or from his extensive private clientele. It was the same set-up when I visited Brumont 20 years ago, and it hasn't changed.

He likes to hold forth, but is not easy to interview, and his slight regional twang sometimes makes him hard to follow. As does his tendency to leap from topic to topic, so that a response to any question can follow tangents such as 19th-century vine training, Gascon chicken breeds and his method of sterilising barrels. All very interesting, but not always to the point.

He likes to design equipment or have it tailor-made, and is keen on technological



Above: Château Montus, bought by Brumont in 1980

innovations. 'If the air conditioning at the warehouse breaks down, the walls have been designed so that the interior will lose just one degree Celsius in three months!'

Aware that French summers are becoming increasingly torrid, even in a region used to

dry heat, he is working on a kind of shutter system with movable blades that can protect vines from direct sunlight. He has a dizzying number of other projects on the go, such as promoting local gastronomy, raising Noir de Bigorre black pigs on the pastures at Montus, and producing caviar from the Adour river. His two chefs bake bread daily, made from flour sourced from a local organic farmer. And in his spare time, he consults for two large estates in Morocco.

With his chief winemakers at the helm for many years, the wines have not suffered from inconsistency. The main ranges are divided between the two properties. Bouscassé is on clay-limestone, and has the very old vines lacking at Montus.

'Bouscassé is a terroir that permits me to plant other varieties to blend with Tannat, whereas Montus has *galets rouges*, the large stones similar to those at Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Here I plant mostly Tannat, but Cabernet Sauvignon also works well, and is blended into the basic Madiran.'

The Brumont wines are quite extracted and benefit from long ageing. 'Tannat doesn't oxidise easily, which is an advantage, but it also has very high acidity, so even at maximum ripeness levels it can retain freshness.' Wines tend to be released about

four years after harvest, so Brumont undertakes the initial ageing in his cellars.

For some reason, the Madiran producers decided that the ideal name for their white-wine appellation should be Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh, rather than something more self-explanatory (and pronounceable). That's a shame, as it obscures the fact that the whites can be very good indeed. Brumont chooses the Petit Courbu grape for his dry white, which comes in two versions: the first, Les Jardins Philosophiques, fresh and unoaked; the second, Montus Blanc Sec, given long ageing in 600-litre barrels and in Austrian ovals. There are sweet wines too, from the Petit Manseng grape popular in Jurançon. Like sweet Jurançon, sweet Pacherenc is made from grapes dried on the vine, not botrytised.

Brumont, ever aspiring to the heights, produces up to three versions of the sweet wine, depending on sugar content and residual sugar. The fruit for the top bottling, Frimaire, is often picked in December, and the wine is aged for two years in new oak; it can have up to 150 grams per litre of residual sugar. Madiran is warmer than Jurançon, so Petit Manseng in Madiran doesn't always deliver the intensity and high acidity of the latter region, but the Brumont wines do not have any softness or sag. ➤

Photograph: Nicolas Marty

Brook's pick: the best of Brumont

① Château Montus, Blanc, Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh Sec 2012 92

£29.95-£35.95 (2013) Christopher Keiller, Hennings, South Downs Cellars, WoodWinters
The full straw colour is a bit alarming, but there's no oxidation here. The nose is waxy, with apricot aromas. Rich and creamy, this is very concentrated and spicy, lifted by fine acidity. It displays energy as well as opulence, and it's long. **Drink 2020-2022 Alcohol 15%**

② Château Montus, XL, Madiran 2000 95

£82 Thorman Hunt
Opaque red. Despite the bottle age, the nose remains surprisingly closed. In contrast, the palate is rich and concentrated, with dark chocolate and black fruits blending together. Yet it has drive and freshness too, and fine tannins. There's nothing overbearing about it, for all its power. The finish is exceptionally persistent. **Drink 2020-2032 Alc 15%**

Château Montus, Cuvée Prestige, Madiran 2009 93

£54.75-£59.99 (2002) AG Wines, Hedonism, Hennings, Joseph Barnes Wines Direct, The Smiling Grape Co
Even in its eleventh year, the colour remains opaque red. There's a wealth of plum and black-cherry on the nose, with a perceptible oakiness and a chocolatey tone. Suave and very rich, it shows depth and spice as well as immense concentration, but it's balanced by high acidity that keeps it taut. Powerful and long. **Drink 2020-2035 Alc 15%**

③ Château Montus, La Tyre, Madiran 2009 93

£101.68-£109.48 (2011) Cru, The Wine Society, Wineye
A selection of the best grapes of a single plot in the commune of Castelnau-Rivière-Basse. The nose is lush and damsony, showing a seductive richness of fruit. Velvety and very concentrated, it nonetheless has vivid acidity

and spice. The alcohol gives it a peppery and long, bitter-chocolate finish. Perhaps too much of a good thing, but this is undeniably impressive. **Drink 2020-2032 Alc 15%**

④ Château Bouscassé, Vieilles Vignes, Madiran 2010 92

£32.99-£39.99 (2008) AG Wines, Joseph Barnes Wines Direct, The Smiling Grape Co, Thorman Hunt
The black-fruited nose is almost Porty, with thick blackberry aromas. Very rich and concentrated, like most Brumont Madirans this shows a great deal of heft and power. The tannins are still a touch brutal, giving a solid and monumental style, with a long, spicy finish. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 14.5%**

⑤ Château Bouscassé, Argile Rouge, Madiran 2011 91

£22 (2015) Thorman Hunt
One third each of Tannat, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, from a single

parcel on red clay soils, rare in France's southwest, resulting in a more supple style of Madiran, though it can still age well. Inexpressive on the nose, yet suave and concentrated, with formidable texture and spice, polished tannins, and a long, velvety finish. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 14.5%**

Château Montus, Madiran 2010 91

£29.99-£34.99 (2014) Christopher Piper, Corks, Philglas & Swiggot, Selfridges
Tannat with 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, grown on steep slopes of rounded pebbles. A nose swathed in black fruits, but with a rich herbal quality too. Very ripe and juicy, it has concentration and sucrosity without jamminess. Taut, spicy, good acidity, ample power, though perhaps at the expense of finesse. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 15%**

⑥ Château Bouscassé, Frimaire, Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh Doux 2010 94

£49 Thorman Hunt

Made from fruit picked on 10 December. The colour is a full gold, while the sumptuous nose has aromas of oranges, peach and honey. It's the Petit Manseng that gives this

wine its leanness and precision, as well as its bright flavours of mandarins and apricot. Silky but dry, this shows amazing length. **Drink 2020-2032 Alc 13%**





The hero of Madiran

Brumont is a fighter, as he's had to be all his life, deprived of parental support and plain broke at the start of his career, and again midway through it.

The unwillingness of some growers to sell him land persuaded him to use his employees' names as fronts for such acquisitions. He wanted to increase the density of plantings at his top vineyard, La Tyre, but, he says: 'I was refused permission by INAO, so I suspect there were intrigues against me, especially when someone came down from Bordeaux to plant a vineyard and was granted the same density that was denied to me.'

He confesses to a willingness to flout regulations or expectations when he thinks they impede quality. His first Montus vintage was made from unusually young vines; some of his sweet Pacherencs broke with tradition by having very high residual-sugar levels. Yet all that mattered to him was making the best wines of which he and his vines were capable.

Alain Brumont is a heroic figure: driven, probably exasperating at times, controlling yet convivial, obsessed by terroir and quality, free of false modesty yet no braggart. It can't be an accident that his top employees have stayed with him for decades.

Nearly 40 years after his first vintage, he has created a stunningly consistent range with wines at all price levels. His long-aged Montus XL impressed me hugely on my recent visit, as did the costly La Tyre bottling and the experimental Montus Tannats, aged for up to 10 years. But the same goes for the

Above: Brumont poses in front of his top vineyard, La Tyre, located on Madiran's highest slope at 260m

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inexpensive wines, such as the dry Pacherenc Les Jardins Philosophiques and the barrique-aged Menhir Côtes de Gascogne, an equal blend of Tannat and Merlot – not the apotheosis of pure Tannat that Brumont so worships, but still a delicious and affordable bottle that is excellent for everyday drinking.

However, the mainstays of the range are the wines he makes under the labels of his domaines. The production of Bouscassé Madiran is substantial, and it is made from 60% Tannat, given a long maceration and then aged in one-third new barriques. The Bouscassé Vieilles Vignes, meanwhile, is pure Tannat from vines at least 50 years old, aged in new oak for two years. Brumont describes it as the most classic of his wines, often requiring 10 years to deliver its full potential.

The Montus rouge is Tannat with 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, but these grapes are grown at a high density on entirely different soils some 11km from the Bouscassé property. This wine is aged for about 14 months in up to 80% new oak. The domaine's Prestige bottling comes from a south-facing 4ha parcel of Tannat, and it spends two years in new oak, bottled without filtration. The same parcel is used for XL. This can spend up to four years in new 600-litre barrels, which sounds way over the top, but it's beautifully judged.

Alain Brumont, quite simply, has mastered all the wine styles – red, dry white, sweet white – native to his region. Once a lone voice, he has succeeded in lifting up the standards throughout Madiran, now surely one of the great red wines of France. **D**