



A Morning with Daren Miller from Bordeaux



It's not often that a home-grown Pennsylvania boy falls in love with a French girl and moves to Bordeaux to join a wine family (sounds like a good movie) but, hey, that's just what **Daren Miller** did! He's from York County and has been living in Bordeaux for 15 years. The family owns two estates: [Chateau Haut Beyzac](#) in the Haut-Medoc and [Chateau des Tourtes](#) in the Cote de Blaye region on the Right Bank about 40 miles north of Bordeaux. Robert Parker gave the '03 Haut-Beyzac a 91 and described it thusly:

"The super-concentrated 2003 Chateau Haut-Beyzac-Grand Vin reveals the vintage's strength in this area bordering St.-Estephe. Its inky/ruby/purple hue is accompanied by a stunning bouquet of creosote, scorched earth, creme de cassis, licorice, and a hint of smoke. Full-bodied, opulent, powerful, and rich, it should drink well for 10-12 years."

Yikes! "Creosote?" "Scorched earth?" "Smoke?" Well, the '03 vintage was a broiler in France after all. I have tasted his wines (you can, too, they are available at state stores) and the red and white wines are wonderful.

Daren comes home periodically to visit family and sell wine and has agreed to take part in a wine growers' discussion session. The meeting will be held at the beautiful new **Grace Winery** at Sweetwater Farm in Glen Mills, PA, about 20 minutes east of Chaddsford. The vineyard consultant is Lucie Morton and John Levenberg assists with the wines. It's a terrific new addition to the Pennsylvania wine scene, for information go to <http://gracewinery.com/index.php>.

This was the meeting invitation in my newsletter for this seminar with Daren Miller. It's so impressive how we can speak the same viticultural language across cultures and oceans and totally understand what we are talking about.

Daren brought French ideas to Pennsylvania that we are all familiar with, but with a French twist to them that, if we listened carefully, could help us to improve the quality of our wines here. I think we covered more viticultural territory on our drive to and from Grace than I had in 3 years at Davis.

Between the 2 chateau, Daren, who is the vineyard manager, farms about 100 hectare (250 acres of grapes). Since the properties are on either side of the Gironde River, he has to take a ferry across

and travel about 90 minutes between vineyards. St Estephe is at the northern most end of the left bank and is recognized to be cooler, and the Cote de Blaye is above St Emilion/Pomerol on the right bank. From the photos Daren showed us the viticulture looks strikingly similar to ours, at least on Sauvignon Blanc with 2,m x 1,m, VSP, fruit wire at about 36” and canopy topping out at 72”, single trunk, double guyot, 2-3’ clean strip under the vines, cover crop, 8-10 shoots per meter, leaf removal and green harvest. They have tried different fruit wire heights and found no difference in amount of disease relative to distance of the canopy and fruit to the ground. They try to achieve 1 kg of grapes per 1,5 m² of canopy. Vine density is regulated by AOC and most are 5000 vines per hectare (2000/ac), however, in the region, density can go as high as 6600 vines per hectare. They have changed from using wood to steel trellis. An important difference is humidity and rainfall are considerably less than here during the growing season, by perhaps half. He said that the climate is very similar on both sides of the river, what differs mainly is the soils and the French are all about soils. Merlot is planted in the cooler clay soils and Cabernet Sauvignon on lighter gravel soils. Haut-Medoc is actually limestone and clay whereas Blaye is sand and clay, hence the lighter, softer wines in the latter. They avoid fertile and deep soils for the best wines, in fact, he said the harder it is to plant the vines, the better the potential wine quality. They encourage roots to grow deep and will always do careful soil evaluation before planting a new vineyard. At Haut-Medoc, they planted on open land, entirely by hand using a special notched-shovel that grabs the vine just above the root ball and pushes it gently into the loose soil. The bench-grafted vines are root-pruned to 2-3 inches.

Hail is a constant threat in Bordeaux. A big storm this year just a few weeks before harvest defoliated and knocked the crop off of about 80% of the vines at Chateau Cos d’Estournel. They use drain tile to remove water from the soil.

They use machines a lot and believe sincerely that there is no quality loss with machine harvested grapes. In fact, the machine offers much more flexibility, being able to harvest at night or on a moment’s notice before a storm. For a region like ours, it’s important to cull out unripe, diseased and damaged fruit before the harvester gets into the vineyard. The new machines pick fast and clean. They have an older Gregoire over-the-row that is used only for harvesting. The only grapes that are hand-harvested are used for cremant. The best vineyards are sorted by hand, eight people along a conveyor removing pink berries, stems, leaves and petioles. Vineyard equipment is shared coop-style among a group of vineyards. For example, they have four leaf removers (everyone wants to use them at the same time). When I was in Bordeaux we noted the curious practice of using a flame device to burn leaves to open the fruit zone. Daren claims this is a very effective method and that the singed berry skins do not impact wine quality. They do a lot of work themselves but have three workers at Haut-Beyzac and six at de Tourtes.

Daren is a strict believer in regulating vine yields and the relationship between yield and wine quality. The crop is set when they winter prune to double guyot, short 4 bud cane but 16 bunches is too much and they will green harvest later.

They use an interesting method to control vine vigor in vigorous areas – pre-pruning vines directly after harvest to reduce the carbohydrate accumulation in the vines, which helps to devigorate the vine in the following season. I wouldn’t recommend that for our region since we need the CHO for winter hardiness.

Like here, mornings are damp with dew so they have disease problems similar to ours, downy mildew, powdery mildew, some black rot and botrytis. They use many of the same pesticides as us to keep vines clean. We talked a lot about esca and flavescence doree (grapevine yellows here) and Daren said these are currently the biggest viticultural challenges to vineyards in France. As with us, there are no treatments, only the control of the propagation system and insect vectors. He uses a tow-behind sprayer very much like our typical Cima airblast sprayer. They are very careful about controlling downy mildew, especially late into the season. They, too, have a grape berry moth, as well as other insect pests.

Selling wine in the global marketplace is perhaps the greatest challenge to the business, although their wines are in the sweet spot of price point in the international market. The winery participates in many wine fairs in France, and other EU nations. They also sell wine in SE Asia as well as the US, where dealing with large distributors is a major challenge.

We tasted five wines, which appear in Pennsylvania under the Chateau Philippe Raguénot (PR) label and are designate either Haut Medoc or Cotes de Blaye.

- 2010 PR Cote de Blaye Blanc from 80% Sauvignon Blanc and 20% Semillon is tank fermented and very fresh, clean, bright with nice acidity and fruity flavors. A wonderful summer sipper.
- 2009 PR Prestige is 100% Sauvignon Blanc, barrel fermented in 400 liter puncheons for 7-8 months, and clearly shows the oak with a creamy texture and greater complexity.

Both white wines sell in the \$10-13 range in the US.

- 2008 PR Cote de Blaye Tradition is a blend of 80% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon with some oak (3-4 months), as expected soft, fruity, round Merlot fruit, a simple and delicious red wine. \$14 in the U.S.
- 2009 PR Haut-Medoc (made at Chateau Haut-Beyzac), also from 80% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon only this wine reflects the soils with its rich, dark fruit, chewy tannins but still with nice acidity that adds freshness. It's \$15 here (8 euros in France).
- We also tasted a wonderful rose with lunch. Very bright cherry fruit with good acidity.

He explained that the soils are the main difference between the red wines.

We also tasted three Grace wines:

- 2009 Chardonnay (outsourced fruit)
- 2010 Chardonnay (a blend of estate and outsourced grapes)
- 2010 Rose

Each wine showed its youth but had unique character, the rose in particular being very fresh and floral. An earlier barrel sample of estate Merlot showed balance and concentration.

Two Eastern wines showed a strong resemblance to the Bordeaux wines in style and composition:

- 2005 Wolffer Estate Cuvee Christian is 100% Merlot from the south fork of Long Island. This wine was picked after the big storm and shows remarkable fruit and depth for the conditions, but lacks a full mid-palate and finish.
- 2007 Manatawny Creek Vineyard Meritage (Berks County) has real concentration, tannin and structure with a nice balance of tannin and acidity. This wine has some real stuffing.

I would like to thank Daren for sharing his valuable time at home with us. This kind of trans-oceanic conversations can only help to benefit both sides. It was exciting to meet at the beautiful Sweetwater Farm and Grace Winery. Chris LeVine and his family, and innkeepers/vineyard manager/wine maker Sean and Farrell Kramer are the consummate and most gracious hosts. I have little doubt that we will be seeing more of Daren and have future visits to Grace.

FYI – Chateau Phillippe Ragueneau wines are available at the Media, Springfield and Wayne PLCB stores. Daren also sells electric pruning and vine tying equipment through his brother in York. Contact Mitch Miller for more information at 717.586.2082 or visit www.infaco-usa.com



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