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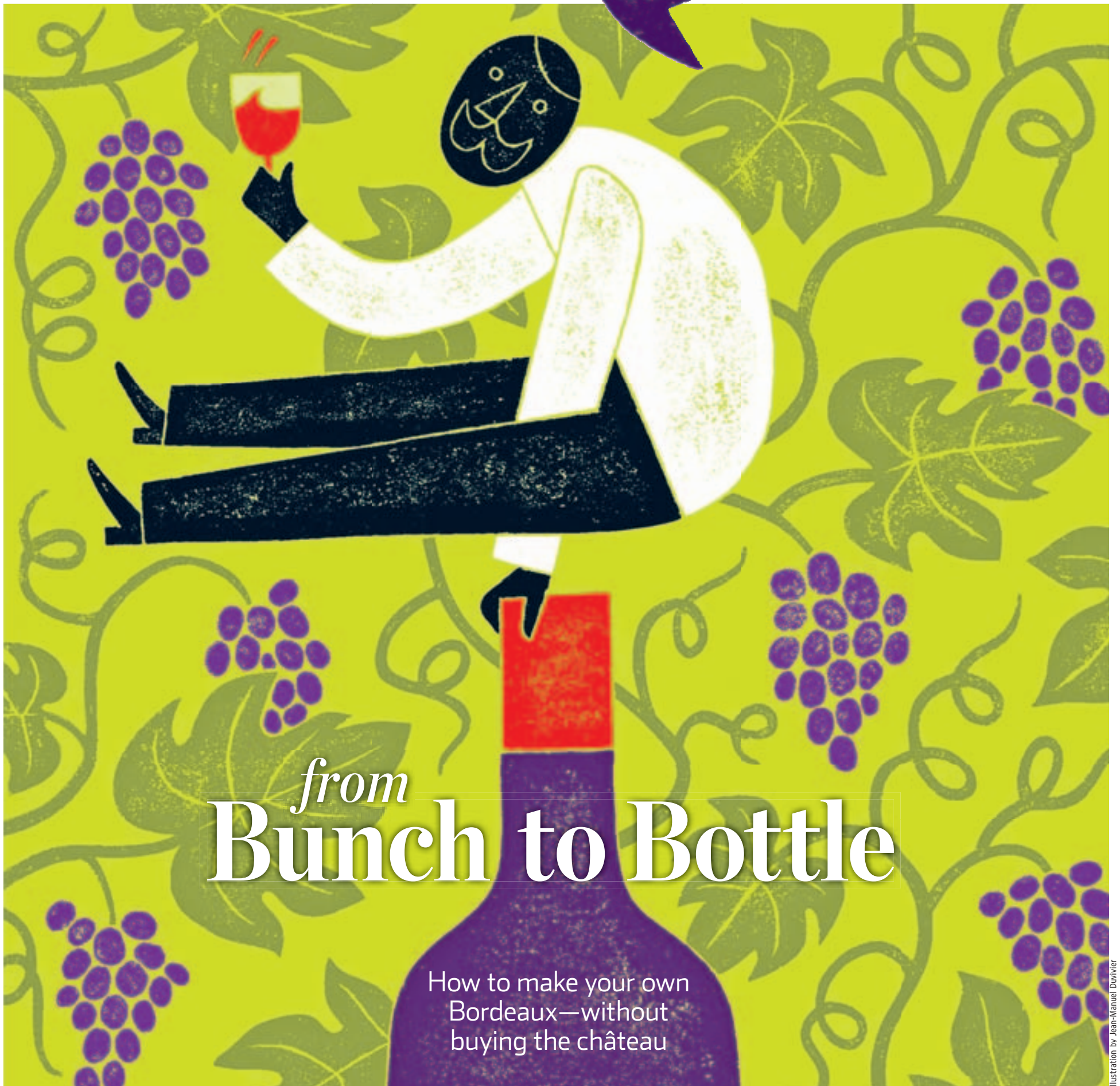
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from Bunch to Bottle

How to make your own
Bordeaux—without
buying the château

Illustration by Jean-Manuel Duvivier

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EATING & DRINKING

Mixing in Good Company

Now you can be a winemaker without buying a vineyard

BY WILL LYONS

A few months ago, in early spring, a group of enthusiastic wine-lovers gathered in the harvest room of one of Bordeaux's better-known Grand Cru châteaux to celebrate the previous vintage. As a 15-liter Nebuchadnezzar of the estate's 1985 was poured, glasses were raised to a banquet prepared by a two-star Michelin chef. Though 2013 was one of the region's most challenging seasons on record, the atmosphere was one of jubilation, as each of the guests had enjoyed a first-hand experience in making the vintage.

In the list of dream jobs, being a winemaker scores pretty high. My notebook is full of stories of men and women who have either made a fortune and reinvested the proceeds in a vineyard or given up their day jobs and sold the house to follow their desire to make the best wine possible. The 80 or so people seated in the harvesters' hall of Château Lynch-Bages chose a third option. Without buying a vineyard or giving up their jobs, all have made their very own barrel of Bordeaux wine.

"This has been a blast," says Pete John-

'If people are so interested in Bordeaux, it is because they want to understand'

son, a 43-year-old wine enthusiast who has flown in from Los Angeles to take part in the making of the past five vintages. "Honestly, I wish I could spend more time here but, at the moment, with work, it is just impossible."

One day, he says, he will retire to Bordeaux and be part of the whole process. In the meantime, he gets his annual vintner fix by making his own wine with Viniv, a company located in the heart of Pauillac, one of Bordeaux's grandest appellations.

Co-owned by Jean-Michel Cazes of Lynch-Bages and former tech entrepreneur Stephen Bolger, Viniv gives clients the opportunity to produce, under the guidance of Château Lynch-Bages's winemaking team, 288 bottles (one barrel) of wine for €7,350—or about €25 a bottle.

Winemaking with Viniv involves everything from choosing the vineyard plots and taking part in the grape harvest to managing the wine's fermentation, overseeing the

barrel aging (known as *élevage*) and, most important, deciding on the final blend.

"When I first started in Bordeaux, most people thought it would never work," says Mr. Bolger, a Franco-American who launched Viniv in 2007 after leaving his career in industrial minerals. "One grower said to me: 'How can you say that someone who has never made wine before is a real winemaker?' Another asked me to stop demystifying the winemaking process."

"My response was simple," he continues. "If people are so interested in Bordeaux, it is because they want to understand. They want to get on the inside, they want to understand the inner-workings. Hiding the beauty of Bordeaux winemaking is, I think, kind of counterproductive."

We're standing on the edge of Le Château, a small parcel of vineyards in Bordeaux's Canon-Fronsac region. It's damp underfoot and the spring sky threatens rain

but, despite the heavy cloud cover, the landscape is spectacular. With its gently rolling hills and lush grass, the region is far removed from the gray, flat panoramas of the northern Medoc. Behind us flow the Dordogne and Isle rivers. This is Merlot country, where the south-facing slopes and rich clay-limestone soil produce dark ruby wines with aromatics of red fruit.

I'm here to try my own hand at winemaking. It's been 12 years since I first visited the region professionally. In that time I have tasted thousands of wines and visited numerous châteaux and cellars. It has been my job to evaluate, criticize and describe the wines. But in all those years, I have never had the experience of making my own. When I met Mr. Bolger at an event in London, I jumped at the chance to empathize with the vigneron. So I have taken a few days out of my tasting schedule to see what it's like on the other side of the fence.

I say winemaking but—as it's early April—the picking, sorting and fermenting have been done and the barrel aging is under way. I'm here to test my taste buds and try putting together a final blend. As Mr. Johnson says: "I like to say that I am a fashion designer for wine. I'm picking out the materials and getting somebody else to sew them up." I've opted to work on the 2012—still challenging, but not as tough as 2013.

First, though, I want to see the vines that my grapes have come from. After Canon-Fronsac, we head into St.-Émilion to visit more Merlot grapes before making our way to the other side of the Gironde, where Cabernet Sauvignon thrives on the spectacular gravel plains of St.-Estèphe and Pauillac. Each vineyard produces grapes that impart a different character. For example, Pauillac possesses more power than the tightknit, tough tannins of St.-Estèphe.

It's a jigsaw that will hopefully come to-



EATING & DRINKING



HAPPY BLENDING
Clockwise from top left, St-Estèphe vineyards; the author testing a blend; Daniel Llose at work; the barrel room; pondering possibilities in the tasting room; opening some 2012; detail of a fermentation vat; personalized corks for Pete Johnson's blend; Château Lynch-Bages in the bottle; inspecting vines with Stephen Bolger



gether in the blending room above Viniv's winery in Pauillac, where I'm joined by Daniel Llose, who oversees winemaking at Lynch-Bages and has been blending wine since the 1970s. I tell him I want to make something quite refined—what the French refer to as *classique*. This is predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon, which has more structure than the big fruit of St-Émilion Merlot. Mr. Llose explains that, first, you have to find the wine's backbone. But he quickly adds that he's just there as a sounding board—the makeup of the wine is entirely my choice. I feel a little like I'm back at school having to perform for my schoolmaster.

I start off with a straightforward Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot blend, made from vineyards in St-Estèphe, Pauillac and St-Émilion. The structure is right, but perhaps a little too Cabernet-dominated. It needs more finesse. So I try Cabernet Franc from a parcel in St-Émilion—replacing 10% of the Cabernet Sauvignon with Cabernet Franc adds more elegant aromas. I try a third blend with more Merlot. It doesn't work; there's too much flesh and the wine loses its bite. The fourth is fresher but a little overcooked. And so we go on, sniffing, tasting and swirling. It's complicated, but fun.

After an hour, we have five blends. Undecided, I sit down and taste them all again. I keep coming back to the second. I love its smell—the Cabernet Franc just adds something. That's my blend. Sometimes, Mr. Llose says, you get it right early on.

With my final wine complete, there is only one thing left to do. Would I like to go ahead and buy a barrel? I look at the wine and envisage myself writing a check. Then I remember the difficult growing season... The beauty of wine is that there is always another vintage. Maybe next year.



Bottle Shock: The Ups and Downs of Making Wine

In 2008 Stephen Cronk, 50, resigned from his job running a large sales division for a telecommunications company, sold his home in London and headed to Provence with his wife, Jeany, and their three young children, to realize his dream of becoming a winemaker. He chose to become a *négociant*, buying and blending wine to create rosé under the Mirabeau brand.

What prompted the decision to ditch your corporate life for that of a vigneron?
Shortly after we bought our family house in London we went to visit some friends near Perpignan in southwest France. They asked me how much I had just spent on our new marital home. When I told them the answer, they said "Stephen, this vineyard you have been walking past for the last half an hour is

for sale for the same price as your small terrace house with little or no garden." That was when I had the idea to buy a vineyard, and spent the next 10 years figuring out how to do it.

Why did you choose Provence?
After a great deal of research I realized that we didn't have enough capital to buy a wine estate—I'm not a multimillionaire banker who never has to work again—so we decided to go down the *négociant* route. We picked Provence because we loved their style of wine and saw Provence as a wine region that still had potential.

What has been the biggest challenge?
Making the wine has been fairly straightforward, but selling the wine into new markets has been the hardest part.



Any regrets?
None. I'm not making much money and it's hard work. But it's what I wanted to do and if you know what you want to do in life, it is important that you go and do it.

—Edited from an interview with Will Lyons

Nicolas Heron for The Wall Street Journal (9); Stephen Bolger / VINIV (corks)

Jasper Dalqilish Photography