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## Design your own wine

**Viniv's state-of-the-art winery in Bordeaux lets you create your own bespoke claret**



**[By Victoria Moore](#)**

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The Cabaleyrans harvest

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Stephen Bolger says the “eureka moment” came in 2007 when he was reading an article in Fortune magazine about a company that allowed individuals to produce their own customised high-end wines in Napa. “I thought, ‘Oh my goodness if that concept works in California with Americans, imagine if it were set up in the cradle of wine-making, in France. Specifically, in Bordeaux.’”

Seven years later and the American is CEO of [Viniv](#), a company based in Pauillac and co-owned by Jean-Michel Cazes of [Chateau Lynch-Bages](#) that does just that: allows fine wine enthusiasts to have a say in creating their own bespoke claret. At a minimum price of £6,900 for 288 finished bottles (the contents of one barrel) the chance to make choices on which vineyards the grapes come from, take part in harvesting their own grapes, select what kind of oak it goes into and spend an intensive session with one of the region’s top winemakers poring over the final blend, does not come cheap. But for a man (or woman) who already has a large cellar and little or no connection to the wines that are in it, I can see the appeal.

VINIV announced this week that it has appointed [Berry Bros & Rudd](#) as its exclusive agents for Hong Kong and the UK, a move it hopes will attract more than the 400 clients who have so far elected to make wine with them since the company began with its first vintage in 2009.

The initiative is probably just the sort of novelty that Bordeaux needs as it prepares to launch its ill-starred 2013 vintage, but I take my hat off to Stephen Bolger who managed to persuade the traditionalist Bordelaise that this was a good idea during the heady gold rush days of the last decade. It helped that he is half-French and fluent in the language. He also has the all-American can-do attitude that meant his lack of wine experience – his background is in the tech and industrial sector – was no obstacle. “My first move was to go through the alumni network of my old university in Chicago. I found someone who owned a vineyard in Burgundy, called, and flew there a week later.” That contact told him: “Your idea is actually crazy and I don’t think it’s going to work but your biggest problem is that Bordeaux is not a market where the quality fruit gets sold so first you need to contact the go-betweens, the courtiers.”

Bolger did just that, cold-calling his way through the courtier directory. He got to D before finding someone who didn't just hang up. The contact network expanded from there and now includes some of Bordeaux's best-known names. He says Stephane Derenoncourt helped him hunt for pieces of land. Eric Boissenot, who consults for four of the five First Growths, is an adviser. The dedicated VINIV winery has been set up in a building that once housed the winery for the second wine of Lynch-Bages, whose wine-making team oversee the technical operation and provide an educational contact-base for clients.

Wine is made from grapes grown on 14 small plots of land on which Bolger has negotiated, "long-term contracts." These range from 60 rows of 50 year-old cabernet sauvignon tucked behind Pichon Baron in Pauillac to parcels in Canon-Fronsac. "The first thing we do is discuss with the client what style of wine they like which usually produces a discussion about left bank versus right bank. Some like to be hands on, come to each of the vineyards, touch the soil and choose everything right down to the design of the label. Others like to give us the money, glance at the monthly vineyard updates we send and tell us to get on with it. They can help with picking if they like – free labour! - though it's not possible to give more than two or three days notice and I usually find that after an hour in the vineyard, with sticky hands and a tiring back, the first question they ask is, 'Stephen, do you know where I can get a coffee round here?' Then I next see them seven hours later when they come back to help with their fruit at the sorting table."

It's an intriguing proposition. Bolger doesn't like the word gimmick, but it's fair to say that unless you already had an extensive wine collection at your disposal then dropping close to £7,000 (the equivalent of £287.50 a case for those looking to compare with en primeur prices, but this includes delivery) on a single wine before you knew what the vintage was like or had had the chance to taste it (imagine if you hated *all* the blend possibilities....) probably isn't something I would do. But for the man who has everything and wants to get closer to his wine...

CONTACT

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