

## Left Bank on the Right: Jean Faure 2007–2018

BY NEAL MARTIN | SEPTEMBER 08, 2021

I have always been fascinated by the three neighboring *châteaux* that lie along the Saint-Émilion/Pomerol “fault line”: Cheval Blanc, La Dominique and Jean Faure. Their vines conjoin, yet they all enjoy different standings and styles of wine. I’ve covered Cheval Blanc many times in the past; incidentally, readers can look forward to an update of recent vintages in the future. La Dominique was profiled a few months ago in my report, [An Education: La Dominique 1989-2015](#). But I confess to being less well acquainted with Château Jean Faure. I visited several times when they hosted tastings for the Cercle de Rive Droite but never really got to know the château properly. I found the wines a little unpredictable, as you may have read in [my report on their 2018s](#). That did not dissuade me from investigating Jean Faure further, and after speaking to the winemaking team, I found that my newfound insight reshaped my perception of this estate.



*This aerial shot perfectly shows the line of Saint-Émilion estates that border Pomerol: from the top left-hand corner in the distance, Cheval Blanc, then La Dominique, and finally Jean Faure in the foreground.*

### History

Jean Faure is a historic estate that first appears on the famous De Belleyme map from the late 18th century. It was rated highly by Féret in early editions of the *Bordeaux et Ses Vins* guide. The 19th-century editions list two properties with the name. One is “Château Corbin et Jean Faure,” owned by Paul Chaperon, who was then proprietor of L’Évangile, and one is “Jean Faure,” owned by the Penaud family. One assumes the two Jean Faures merged at some point and Corbin cleaved away

to form a separate estate. By the 1940s, Jean Faure had passed to the Loubat family, who owned Château Ripeau, and by the 1960s it was under the aegis of Michel de Wilde.

In 1976, Michel Amart took over the administration of the estate. He vowed to see Jean Faure reclaim its 19th-century status and sought promotion to Premier Grand Cru Classé. In fact, the opposite happened. In 1985, Jean Faure suffered not only an ignominious relegation, but accompanying scathing words from assessors that noted “notorious deficiencies in the running of your cru’s estates, principally as regards oenology... They are not of a corresponding quality to that of a Grand Cru Classé.” Ouch.

Current managing director Marie-Laure Latorre suggested that an acrimonious divorce distracted the previous owners from giving the vineyard its due TLC. Maybe that is true; however, I am not convinced that it is the *only* explanation. Demotion came only two years after Amart had acquired expensive new Alliers barriques and hired Michel Rolland as a consultant. Tasting a Cabernet Franc-dominated wine after a succession of sensual, rounded Merlot-driven Saint-Émilions can make it feel jarring, exaggerating traits of greenness. Assuming that the tastings were conducted blind (and I hope that is the case), I wonder whether this contrast threw off the assessors. After all, Amart claimed that no official had visited the estate. Whatever the reason, Amart lodged an appeal with the Minister of Agriculture, but to no avail. He would have to wait for the next classification.

In 2004, Jean Faure was acquired by Olivier Decelle, who had made a tidy sum in frozen foods and the music industry. Like his predecessor, he vowed to reclaim the estate’s good name; the difference is that he succeeded. Jean Faure was finally restored to Grand Cru Classé status in 2012. In 2018, Decelle appointed winemaker Marie-Laure Latorre, who had previously worked for a Bordeaux négociant.

### **Vineyard and Winemaking**

To discover more about the estate, I arranged a Zoom call with Latorre and communications director Camille Poupon. They began by explaining how proprietor Olivier Decelle started to make changes after acquiring the property.

“When Olivier Decelle arrived in 2004, he stopped the use of chemicals. Step by step, he ceased using pesticides because he was living at the property. He started the conversion to organic in 2014 and was certified in 2017. At the same time, we introduced biodynamic methods, and we certified with Biodyvin from the 2020 vintage.”

I asked Latorre about the issue of mildew, an increasing threat as the weather has tended to be rainier earlier in the growing season.

“We had big problems with mildew in 2018, as it was so wet and warm. But from July conditions improved, even though we lost a lot of Merlot. The Cabernet Franc does not suffer so severely as it is less sensitive to mildew, partly because it buds three or four weeks later. The second reason is that Cabernet Franc has smaller leaves, so it is easier to apply the copper. We have found that we can use less copper in the beginning of the growing season. For the first treatment we used 200gm/ha but now we use 80gm/ha because we spray an infusion of *consoude* [comfrey] that strengthens the vines’ natural defenses. We also use chamomile, nettle, valerian and so forth.”



*Camille Poupon and winemaker Marie-Laure Latorre in the barrel cellar at Château Jean Faure.*

On the subject of Cabernet Franc, I pointed out that some winemakers have lamented the quality of clones in recent years, encouraging many to propagate their own vine stock.

"This year we have begun a *sélection massale* program on one hectare of vines. This commenced 10 years ago with Lilian Bérillon, a nursery in the south of France [Bérillon also works with Cheval Blanc and Ausone]. They selected some vines together with other wineries in Saint-Émilion. In addition, there are two new Cabernet Franc clones currently in nurseries that seem really good, and they will be available to buy from next year."

I asked about the current composition of the vineyard.

"There is 75% Cabernet Franc, 23% Merlot and 2% Malbec. [These figures differ significantly from those listed on their official website, which states only 50% Cabernet Franc.] Cabernet Franc is important. It defines the style of the wine. The silver lining of the [previous owners'] divorce is that none of the Cabernet Franc vines were ever replaced. We have some Cabernet Franc from the Fifties and though we cannot verify, since there are no official records, we believe some could have been planted in 1923. The *cépage*ment is basically the same, though there is one large parcel of Malbec that was changed to Cabernet Franc."

Of course, the one anomaly is the 2017 vintage, when a late spring frost devastated many Right Bank vineyards, including Jean Faure.

"I arrived in 2018," Latorre explained. "My first job was to do the blending for the 2017, when we lost 90% of the production. The blend is 97% Cabernet Franc and 3% Malbec, but we only have five bottles left. People think it is a Loire wine when they taste it."

I put it to Latorre that getting the right balance between Cabernet Franc and Merlot can be tricky when the percentage of the former is high.

“With 2015, we felt we lost part of our identity, as the Merlot was very expressive and strong, so you don’t see the Cabernet Franc. We try to find the right maturity for the Merlot without overshadowing the Cabernet Franc. The 2018 vintage was great because you could pick when you wanted, and we decided to pick the first Merlot at the beginning of September so that the fruit was not overripe. In 2016, the blend was more complicated because the Merlot was so powerful. We tend to have more acidity, and the wines are *droite* [straight] when they are young, and their longevity is not evident.”

There have also been changes in the winery.

“In turning organic, we have had to reduce our use of SO<sub>2</sub>, and so in 2018 we decided to stop introducing SO<sub>2</sub> at the beginning of fermentation and just add it when the wines are transferred into barrel. Cabernet Franc has a low pH, and if you make the blend at the beginning [of the *élevage*], you can use less SO<sub>2</sub>. We use 50% new oak and also 12-hectoliter oak vats because it suits the Cabernet Franc.”

## The Wines

Jean Faure becomes more interesting the more you are acquainted with it. The tasting and the subsequent discussion with Latorre and Poupon heightened my curiosity, especially as an ardent fan of Cabernet Franc. This vertical, from ex-château bottles sent by the estate, covered most recent vintages back to 2007. The two oldest vintages, the **2007** and **2008 Jean Faure**, have both held up well, especially the former, which is commendable for the year, even if it is beginning to look a little fatigued.

Perhaps the most surprising feature was the disparity between the 2009 and 2010 vintages. The two are often close in quality, albeit stylistically different, but the latter has far better terroir expression and freshness. Whereas the **2009 Jean Faure** felt as if it was trying too hard and suffered some overripeness on the nose, the palate on the **2010 Jean Faure** had more backbone and acidity and a cheeky smear of dark chocolate enhancing the finish. The **2011 Jean Faure** was the big surprise. Tasting chronologically, I usually anticipate a step down after tasting 2009 and 2010, but this 2011 constitutes a hidden gem in a challenging vintage. It presents a very appealing bouquet of espresso and mint and a well-balanced palate that exudes a little leafiness without letting it run the show. This might be the only time I preferred a château’s 2011 to its 2009. The 2011 also has the upper hand over the **2012 Jean Faure**, a wine that I pilloried from barrel. While I was not as brutal in my assessment in bottle, I couldn’t help feeling that the 2012 is a little dour on the finish.

I expected more from the **2014 Jean Faure**, which doesn’t really “kick on” toward the finish – a shame after the very promising nose. That is compensated by an excellent **2015 Jean Faure**. Perhaps because of its higher Merlot component, the 2015 is more seductive and rounded, but shows wonderful balance and excellent *mineralité* toward the finish. The **2016 Jean Faure**, which reverts back to the Cabernet Franc, has difficulty matching the sensuality of the 2015, coming across a little chewy and stolid. I would love to taste the 2017 simply because of its unusual blend following frost damage, but since there are only a handful of bottles extant, I will have to persuade the team to martyr one when I next visit. Finally, the **2018 Jean Faure** came just a few weeks after my initial tasting, where I expressed a desire to re-taste. This bottle showed more freshness and vigor, not to mention less greenness on the palate. This explains my higher score.



## Final Thoughts

My discussion with Poupon and Latorre, together with the vertical of recent vintages, altered my perspective on Jean Faure, and I gained greater appreciation of the role that Cabernet Franc plays. Like Lafleur in Pomerol, the high proportion of that variety can make Jean Faure stick out in horizontals, and not necessarily in a good way, so it is wise to take a long-term view and cellar bottles for several years. This is ancient history now, but I suspect that the reason for Jean Faure's demotion in the 1980s is that its Left Bank character made it feel jolting. What I would like to see is more consistency from vintage to vintage, because underperformers such as 2009 and 2016 tarnish the estate's reputation in the eyes of consumers who – let's face it – have a plethora of Saint-Émilions to choose from. The key is to make sure that the Cabernet Franc is completely ripe every year, and global warming may well give Jean Faure an advantage here. I'm intrigued to see what the future holds, and I look forward to tasting forthcoming vintages with my new understanding of where this wine is coming from.

## [See the Wines from Youngest to Oldest](#)

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