



*Decanter* Man of the Year 2016

# Professor Denis Dubourdieu

A rare combination of winemaker, consultant, researcher and teaching professor, Denis Dubourdieu has inspired leading winemakers in his home region of Bordeaux, and far beyond. Jane Anson profiles a true visionary >







## Denis Dubourdieu at a glance

**Born** 1949 in Barsac

**Studied** Agronomy and economics in Montpellier, then a Masters in Oenology at Bordeaux University

**Lives** Château Reynon in Côtes de Bordeaux-Cadillac, with wife of 40 years, Florence

**Children** Jean-Jacques and Fabrice

**Owns** Châteaux Doisy-Daëne, Cantegril, Doisy-Dubroca (to be reunited with Doisy-Daëne), Reynon, Clos Floridène and Haura. All organically run since 2012. Also has a 5% stake in Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey, owned by Silvio Denz

**Director** Institute of Vine and Wine Sciences (ISVV), Bordeaux

**Published** More than 200 scientific papers and numerous handbooks on oenology. Member of the advisory board to Jancis Robinson's *Oxford Companion to Wine*

**Won** Grand Prix de l'Académie des Sciences for his work on Sauvignon Blanc aromas

**Consultancies** Over 80 estates, including Cheval Blanc, Yquem and Margaux (Pavillon Blanc)

**Known as** 'The Pope of white wine' and 'The professor of Bordeaux'

**Hobbies** Horse riding, sailing, economics

**Likes to say** 'Let me give you a clear example'; 'Let me be precise'

Or we could more simply list Jean Ribereau Gayon, Emile Peynaud, Pascal Ribereau Gayon, Yves Glories, Bernard Donèche... and now Denis Dubourdieu. All professors at the Bordeaux school of oenology who have transformed our understanding of wine-making in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Dubourdieu's reach may prove to be the widest of all, as he has been instrumental in creating Europe's largest wine research centre. Bordeaux's Institute of Vine and Wine Sciences (ISVV) provides 10,000m<sup>2</sup> for research and education on wine topics covering not only science and oenology but technology, law, humanities and economics. Sandrine Garbay, Véronique Sanders, Olivier Berrouet, Pascal Chatonnet, Valerie Lavigne and Jean-Charles Cazes are among the thousands of students to have studied under Denis Dubourdieu here or in the former faculty of oenology. And besides its own projects, the ISVV works in partnership with research centres in Australia, New Zealand and Germany to boost winemaking knowledge worldwide.

## Theory in practice

All of this would be reason enough to crown Dubourdieu as *Decanter's* 2016 Man of the Year. But he is also a celebrated winemaker in his own right – not only of the 1855 classified Château Doisy-Daëne in Barsac, but of seven properties totalling 120 hectares across the southern stretches of Bordeaux, including Clos Floridène, which he created from scratch in 1982 – an unusual feat among Bordeaux's centuries-old traditions.

**Left:** among Dubourdieu's clients are three Bordeaux first growths – Châteaux Cheval Blanc, Margaux and d'Yquem



LET'S START WITH a roll call. The causes of premature oxidation in red and white wines. The origin of the vegetal, green pepper taste typical of underripe grapes. Practical measures to combat the barnyard smell of the brettanomyces yeast. The identification of molecules responsible for aromatics in Sauvignon Blanc grapes and other varieties. The molecular structure of noble rot wines. Best practice in the vineyard and during fermentation to ensure the most aromatic wines in the final glass... all research projects that Denis Dubourdieu either carried out himself or was instrumental in overseeing. He has published more than 200 research papers, and been cited in others' work almost 7,000 times – more than any researcher in Bordeaux's history.

## Timeline of major achievement

1949

Born at Château Doisy-Daëne in Barsac



1975

Begins thesis at Bordeaux University under Pascal

1976

Marries Florence David and takes over running Château Reynon when her father dies just a few months into their marriage



1978

Fabrice born



1978

Completes PhD on molecular structure of botrytised grapes





**Above: Château Reynon, like Dubourdieu's other estates, has been farmed organically since 2012**

He is also a consultant who works across Bordeaux, Alsace, Burgundy, Sancerre, Rhône, South Africa, Egypt and Japan. Among his clients are three Bordeaux first growths – châteaux Cheval Blanc, d'Yquem and Margaux (for its white wine), along with Haut-Bailly, Pichon Comtesse de Lalande (see p70), Louis Jadot, Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Domaines d'Ott, Pio Cesare and Laffort Oenological Products (for whom he has developed more than 50 strains of commercial yeasts, reinvesting all profits into his laboratory for further research).

This makes Dubourdieu a rare combination of winemaker, consultant, researcher and teaching professor. 'All different aspects of my

work have fed and stimulated each other,' Dubourdieu says. 'I have always enjoyed research that leads to practical solutions, and I have always asked questions when making wine about why things happen the way they do. Trying to understand in order to do better has been the guiding force of my life.'

His career might have been very different if, back in the early 1970s when he had just graduated from studies in Montpellier, he had been accepted for the post of assistant director of Château Latour. 'They turned me down, and from there I decided on further studies in oenology, encouraged by Pascal Ribereau-Gayon, who became my mentor and friend.' ➤

*'Trying to understand in order to do better has been the guiding force of my life'*

**Denis Dubourdieu**

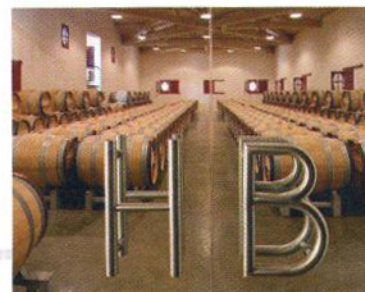
Photograph: François Poincet

**1982**

Further doctorate on filtering and fining botrytised wines. Buys land to form Clos Floridène and begins teaching at Bordeaux University

**1987**

Valérie Lavigne (also a former student) joins the consulting group



**1998**

Becomes consultant to Château Haut-Bailly, marking beginning of red wine consultancy ➤

**1981**

Jean-Jacques born



**1987**

Begins consulting for estates other than his own, at first specialising in white wines with partner (and former student) Christophe Ollivier







Above: Dubourdieu created Clos Floridène from scratch in 1982, in an attempt to prove that great wine can be created outside the main classifications

He might then have chosen to focus purely on research, but in 1976 his new wife's father died just a few months after their wedding, leaving them the option of either selling his Château Reynon in Côtes de Bordeaux-Cadillac, or trying to run it themselves. Forty years later, they still live there.

'In some ways, this meant that it was by chance that I embraced becoming a teacher, winemaker and consultant.' Then he smiles, fully aware of what he has achieved in all areas. 'But I guess I could have done all three badly, and I hope that has not been the case.'

One of the remarkable things about Dubourdieu's winemaking success is that it has been achieved largely away from the spotlight of classified Bordeaux. 'The system of Bordeaux is stacked against the little guys,' he says with characteristic bluntness. 'The decision to buy land in Pujols-sur-Cirons to create Clos Floridène was an attempt to show that great wine is possible outside the big >

*'Dubourdieu's success has been achieved largely away from the spotlight of classified Bordeaux'*

## Decanter hall of fame: past recipients

2015	Alvaro Palacios Spain
2014	Jean-Pierre and François Perrin Rhône
2013	Gerard Basset OBE MW MS England
2012	Paul Symington Portugal
2011	Giacomo Tachis Italy
2010	Aubert de Villaine Burgundy
2009	Nicolás Catena Argentina
2008	Christian Moueix Bordeaux
2007	Anthony Barton Bordeaux
2006	Marcel Guigal Rhône
2005	Ernst Loosen Mosel
2004	Brian Croser Adelaide Hills
2003	Jean-Michel Cazes Bordeaux
2002	Miguel Torres Penedès
2001	Jean-Claude Rouzaud Champagne
2000	Paul Draper California
1999	Jancis Robinson OBE MW London
1998	Angelo Gaja Piedmont
1997	Len Evans OBE AO Australia
1996	Georg Riedel Austria
1995	Hugh Johnson OBE London
1994	May-Elaine de Lencquesaing Bordeaux
1993	Michael Broadbent MW London
1992	André Tchelistcheff California
1991	José Ignacio Domecq Jerez
1990	Prof Emile Peynaud Bordeaux
1989	Robert Mondavi California
1988	Max Schubert Australia
1987	Alexis Lichine Bordeaux
1986	Marchese Piero Antinori Tuscany
1985	Laura & Corinne Mentzelopoulos Bordeaux
1984	Serge Hochar Lebanon

## Timeline of major achievement (continued)

1999

Begins work on the creation of a multi-disciplinary wine centre in Bordeaux with Alain Rousset, president of Aquitaine regional council

2006

Jean-Jacques and Fabrice begin working alongside their father at Château Doisy-Daëne

2014

Buys Château Doisy-Dubroca from Louis Lurton to reunite with Doisy-Daëne. The two were part of the same estate until the early 19th century

2000

Takes over from his father at Château Doisy-Daëne



2009

Official inauguration of the Institut des Sciences de la Vigne et du Vin (ISVV) on 23 June







**Above: Denis Dubourdieu and his wife Florence, with sons Fabrice (left) and Jean-Jacques. The family residence is Château Reynon**

classifications, if the terroir is right. This spot is the continuation of the deep limestone plateau of Barsac, and is a terroir for dry whites above all. It's one of very few in Bordeaux of this quality.'

He adds: 'My father Pierre taught me to taste white wine, and in particular Sauternes. He passed to me his obsession with purity on the nose and palate of a wine, and it's an obsession I still have today.'

## Opening minds

Dubourdieu's decision to create a property from scratch, and his choice of initially concentrating his research on dry whites (after his PhD on the molecular structure of botrytised grapes) tells you a lot about his ambition, and his stubbornness.

'Bordeaux was, and is, a red wine region, and there was some resistance to research into whites. But there was such a lack of understanding about the processes behind its production, and it was clear to me that this was an area where I could really make an impact.'

It's fair to say that he has more than achieved that aim. Dubourdieu's research, and that of Valerie Lavigne after him, have revolutionised the way we understand and produce white wines. He found it difficult to be heard in other regions at first, but today consults for, among others, Louis Jadot in Burgundy (and has worked with Comtes Lafon in the past), Pouilly Fumé's Château de Tracy, and Domaine Trimbach in Alsace.

Ironically his successes in this area ➤

## Man of the Year tributes

*'Denis is not only a legend in his field, but he is a great friend.*

*He has been an invaluable mentor, helping me to learn and understand the importance of precision viticulture in the creation of a great wine. To follow his methods, wherever in the world you are, gives your wines the chance to express a real sense of place – a return to purity and authenticity'*

**Frédéric Rouzaud, Champagne Roederer**

*'He is involved in every aspect of modern viticulture and vinification, and is a joy to work with – Denis' culture, his talent and his sensibility are very rare. He is able to capture the true identity of a terroir and its owner, and respects the*

*characteristics of both'* **Véronique Sanders, Château Haut-Bailly**

*'I'm so happy it is Denis Dubourdieu's turn; modest academics are often overshadowed by media stars. Denis reinvented Bordeaux's beautiful white wines for a new era'* **Hugh Johnson OBE**

*'When we were looking for a European oenology advisor for the new Oxford Companion to Wine, Denis was the obvious choice. He has a world view and an unrivalled perspective, encompassing the practical and the academic. Always energetic, cheerful and down-to-earth, he has been a very positive influence on Bordeaux'*

**Jancis Robinson OBE MW**

*'Denis is a great gentleman. His reputation as a scientist is internationally established, but it is his humble approach to wine – his respect of the terroir, the appellations, the grape variety and the traditions of every estate he consults for – that sets him apart as unique and unrivalled in the world. He is a mentor, a friend and a vital pillar in our family estate'* **Pio Boffa, Pio Cesare ➤**





**Above: Château Doisy-Daëne will incorporate the vines of Château Doisy-Dubroca, purchased in 2014**

threatened to hold back his career in red wine, and for the first 10 years of his consulting business he was employed only for whites, until Véronique Sanders at Château Haut-Bailly asked him in 1998 to bring his sensibility and sureness of touch to this most elegant of classified Pessac Léognan reds. He has been instrumental in the growth of Haut-Bailly in the years since, and says its qualities of complexity and restraint are the ones he most respects and admires.

## Thirst for knowledge

He is looking at retirement from the ISVV in 2016 – partly due to recent health challenges – but like any true researcher, he remains focused on the unknown. ‘There is still much to learn. We need more explanation of taste, about the role of the different types of tannins. The obsession with over-extraction and over-maturity continues, and there is still a lack of objective criteria for picking, so the temptation is to wait indefinitely if the weather allows. It’s a fault of Bordeaux; we used to pick too early, and now we pick too late’.

And through the stubborn lobbying for the ISVV – few people saw the need for it at first, and he had to bring together over a dozen independent research organisations and universities, all while raising the €26 million it took to design and build – he has created a place where that research can more easily happen. ‘I had a vision for what Bordeaux could be, to bring oenology out of its cocoon and join it up with the other parts of wine, from history and economy to art and culture’.

But whether scientist, producer or teacher,

## Man of the Year tributes (continued)

*‘Denis Dubourdieu follows in the steps of legendary Bordeaux oenologists like Emile Peynaud. Not only has he taught so many now-renowned winemakers, but his research into white wine vinification has influenced thousands more around the world. He is a man with a true passion for what he does, and has a great palate – tasting with him is always an education!’*

**Dominique Lafon, Domaine des Comtes Lafon**

*‘Denis taught me everything I know about wine. He possesses an immense knowledge but, above all, he has a very rare and precious quality: he knows how to pass it on – and enjoys it. He’s permanently searching for improvement, and that is why he succeeds in producing such great wines, year after year’*

**Caroline Frey, Domaines Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Château La Lagune**

*‘Since we first met, I’ve been struck by the passion that inspires Denis to reveal the beauty of wine in all its complexity and diversity. He also has a remarkable sense of observation – anticipating problems and, above all, solving them before they occur’*

**Dr Alex Marchal, University of Bordeaux, Faculty of Oenology**

Dubourdieu shares with all *Decanter* Men of the Year a love, above all else, for the wine and the land that it comes from. ‘The difference that the application of science can make is huge,’ he says. ‘But you need terroir to be able to elevate the science to art. The taste of wine is mysterious – indecipherable in many ways – something that we are better able to feel than to understand.’

‘It doesn’t destroy what I have done to admit this, but the truth is that we all should show humility in the face of terroir.’ **D**

Jane Anson is *Decanter’s* Bordeaux correspondent, a contributing editor and a columnist for the magazine and [Decanter.com](http://Decanter.com)