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A CUT ABOVE

Michel Duclos is pruner to the stars, a man who can improve a château's wine simply by applying his instinctively brilliant way with a pair of secateurs. **Margaret Rand** spends a day with Duclos (and his dog) to try to uncover the secrets of his trade

"You want me to explain to you the work of 40 years in one day?" asks Michel Duclos, somewhat rhetorically. "It's simple. It's all about simplicity. Everything should be as simple as possible." Michel Duclos is a pruner—but not just any old pruner. Michel has been champion pruner of France and now crisscrosses Bordeaux, and indeed the world, coaxing vines into balance. That's why we are standing in a Pomerol vineyard one February morning, gazing at vines belonging to Château La Fleur-Pétrus. Michel is armed with the tools of his trade: his secateurs, his dog (a Jack Russell called Leeloo), and his hat. Does he ever remove his hat? No, he says, never. He shows me his car: The back seat has more hats, in case he feels like a change.

Vines in February, to the untutored eye, all look horribly alike. The initial post-harvest tidying-up has been done, so what we have here are bare vines that are about to be reduced to small black stumps. The next half hour will determine most of the potential quality of the 2011 vintage from this parcel. On vines that are out of balance, the maturation of the grapes will be uneven. If the crop is too heavy, there will need to be a green-harvest. Michel doesn't approve of green-harvesting. "Ideally it is never necessary. At the Moueix level, you might remove individual grapes or bunches, but that's all." That, to him, is logical and natural; and everything he advocates can be reduced to these principles—of logic, of nature; of commonsense, of order.

And, I should add, of instinct. Michel is dyslexic and short on technical training but long on intuition. "I have a facility for understanding nature," he says. "I touch the soil, I greet the trees. It's an obligation to understand nature, to feel it. I can look at a vine and know it." His first attempt at pruning was nevertheless not an unqualified success. His father has a property in Entre-Deux-Mers, and at the age of 12, Michel was sent out to do some pruning. "I had 100 vines to do, and I did them faster than my father or my brother. It was the first big error of my life. My father told me never to come back."

Forgiveness clearly followed, because he worked at the family domaine until he was 26, before moving on to other properties. And then one day he decided to enter a *concours de taille*. He came second that time, but as he says, "I'm very competitive"; he entered more competitions, all over France, and finished as French champion. How does a *concours de taille* work? You're given 30 minutes to prune a row of vines, and you're judged on neatness and the general quality of your work. Winning the national championship got him on television, and top châteaux began to seek him out. "It's a dream," he says, "meeting all these people"—and he laughs, delightedly.

But we're still in the vineyard of La Fleur-Pétrus, and the vines are waiting. What is he going to do? Basically, he's going to take the vine back to how it was last year. He's been tending these vines for a long time; major repairs are not necessary. "The four elements that guide me are

All photography by Margaret Rand

soil, air, water, and sun." And then it's observation. These vines are pruned to single Guyot; he leaves five buds on each vine and whips the rest of the buds off with the secateurs. "One single cut," he says—there's no dithering, no indecision. "You can kill a vine with secateurs. You have its life in your hands."

The number of buds is what we all focus on, and it's certainly the way to control the crop. Five buds will give nine or ten bunches, which will be about right here for the *rendement*. "Fifty hectolitres per hectare is good, 45 is better, but 15 is unbalanced," he says. When we visit Château Gaby in Fronsac later in the morning, we see vines where he has left six or seven buds on vines on limestone soil, and seven to eight buds where there is more clay. For the past three years, says Damien Landouar, the manager of Gaby, they've been getting a steady 42–45hl/ha—and no more green-harvesting. "Michel has worked here for three and a half years, and we really see the change in the vineyard.

Michel's faithful Jack Russell Leeloo attempting to make a bung into a snack; gnarled vines of the type that might make Michel Duclos incensed

We had a big problem with pruning. It's not normal to prune to 18 buds and then cut half off in July. The balance of the wine has changed now. There's more fruit, more maturity—exceptional maturity.

"In the first year, we needed the people in the vineyard to understand the work, and Michel came for one or two days a week to teach them to prune. The balance improved in the first year. Before, the veraison would be uneven. You'd have two bunches next to each other, and one would be green and one red, and then you get different maturity on the same vine. Now the maturity is even. That means we can vinify differently. It's in the difficult years, like 2006 and 2007, that we see the difference."

"The biggest mistake, all over the world, is to prune by habit," says Michel. In another parcel of vines he prunes to three buds, and then he comes upon a vine where, last year, six were left. Does he cut it back to three? No, he leaves six, to calm its vigor. "The ideal circumference of a cane is 10mm [0.4in]," he says—more, and it's overvigorous; less, and it's a bit feeble.

A Socratic approach

It can, however, be a bit of a tussle to get such direct answers out of him. He has a Socratic way of dealing with questions. Ask him how to judge the vigor of a vine, and he says, "Come and stand next to me." Then: "Which of us can carry more? On the back or on the shoulders? Uphill or down? And what about sleep? It's the same with vines. If you double the buds, you will get twice this year, but next year it will be tired. It's easier to work for eight hours every day than 16 hours a day for two days. You must not tire vines." Michel says he prunes vines to live 100 years. "Badly pruned vines die earlier."

After lunch (and more about lunch in a minute), we come across some vines that make him incensed. They're old, gnarled, and picturesque—just the sort that you might photograph as a symbol of all that is wonderful about wine. "They won't fruit," he says simply. How does he know? "*C'est mon métier*"—it's my job. Well, good. "The canes will grow from old wood. They won't fruit. They're sick, they'll die." They can be wobbled in the ground like bad teeth; they're growing moss, and he knocks it off angrily. And sure enough, elsewhere in the vineyard there's a pile of dead vines. "They died because of bad pruning, nothing else."

How much poor pruning is there in Bordeaux? Or to put it another way, how much Bordeaux could be improved by better pruning? According to Michel, "99.9 percent." Not just Bordeaux, either—it's a worldwide problem, he says. And he works in South Africa, Chile, China, Italy, and the USA, so he sees a good few vines.

But: lunch. And Leeloo. You can't really talk about Michel without Leeloo getting into the picture. (Dog haters can skip this paragraph.) Michel and I have lunch at a local restaurant, where we take a table for three—the third chair, of course, is for Leeloo. As the steak arrives, she begins to get restless, and the penny drops. "You feed that dog at the table, don't you?" I say, all shocked Englishness. Yes, he says, and he does. And I did, too—with the result that, for the rest of the afternoon, I am Leeloo's new best friend. Every conversation is punctuated with the gentle pressure on my foot that means Leeloo has brought a stick for my attention. And if it's not Leeloo, it's passing cars hooting and waving at Michel. He knows a lot of people. "But my dog is more famous than me," he says.

The form of the vines

Back to the vines. The thing we haven't talked about yet is the form of the vines, but Michel is keen on this. He likes regularity and homogeneity in a vineyard: tidiness, with each vine having just the right space, and each vine standing up nice and straight. The sort of vines that twist in every direction before arriving at the cane are not his sort of vines at all. A vine that stands 10cm (4in) below the first wire (we're talking about single Guyot on the Right Bank here) is his ideal, and spaced so that the buds don't have to compete for space. "If the vine isn't straight, it's more difficult to work the soil, and the buds are less accessible. There will be less aeration and more rot... You must respect the distance between the first and second wire—it's the biggest disaster you can make." And you want a straight trunk, because that gives a clear route for the sap, "an *autoroute* for the sap. The sap must feed each bud efficiently. It's like us carrying a weight in different ways: You get different results." (He comes across a slightly weak vine, for example, and cuts it back to three buds, because it's easier to carry a weight from your shoulders than at the end of your arm.) In a twisted vine, he says, the sap can't get around.

Is this anthropomorphizing nature too much? I would say not. Michel says he can feel whether a vine is well or sick. It is, he says, the physiology of each vine that interests him. And the results are there in the glass

Is this anthropomorphizing nature too much? I would say not. Michel says he can feel whether a vine is well or sick. It is, he says, the physiology of each vine that interests him. And the results are there in the glass. At La Clémence in Pomerol, where he has been working for ten years, the trunks are straight, the three to four buds evenly spaced. Enologist Florian Fresselirat praises Michel's effect on the balance of the wine and practices cold maceration for five to ten days and manual *pigeage*—techniques for which you need to be certain of the quality of your tannins and, thus, the even maturation of your grapes.

The vines here are pruned to *Guyot mixte*—that is, single Guyot, but with the cane one side of the vine one year, the other side the next year. Double Guyot is more complicated, he says, more difficult to get right. "A pruner will make more mistakes with double Guyot than with single Guyot." At Château Rochebelle, in St-Emilion, there is double Guyot, and some vines have the "Y" above the wire, some below. The results, he says, are different. It's a question of how the weight is carried.

Different proprietors want different things from Michel. At Château Jean Faure, there were major repairs to be done to the vines, and the owner wants to raise the yields to optimize the quality of the grapes. So Michel has lopped off great lengths of old, twisted vine to simplify their form. He finds a bud lower down that won't fruit the first year but that will produce a cane, which will produce a bud that will fruit the following year. He's taken 20 years of growth off some vines. Ten to 12 buds had been the norm; now, for better balance, he's taking it down to five or six, which is enough for the *rendement*. It hadn't been done badly in the past here, says Michel; it's just that it could be improved.

So how does he tackle a new vineyard—and does he prefer to work with young vines or old ones? His answer to this is superbly diplomatic: Do I, he asks, prefer babies or grandmothers? He likes both—but if he's caring for a new vineyard from scratch, he will prune three times in the first year, rather than leaving it untouched from planting in about May through to the following March. Do this, he says, and then you can train it in four or five different ways.

If he's arriving at an already established vineyard, however, the first thing he does is ask the owner what he wants. (And what is possible.) Of course, everyone says they want better quality—but what sort of grapes? "Then I go and look at the best vines on the property and get to know them." And he sometimes finds that what people say and what they do are different things. Repairing a badly pruned vineyard may take ten years or longer. Psychology, he says, can take up five or six hours of an eight-hour day; but nevertheless he's found time to prune some 5 million vines in his life so far. That's 150,000 a year, or 250 an hour. The work of 40 years. Simple. ■