

Bernard Portet

Co-Founder and Vice Chairman
Clos du Val

5330 Silverado Trail, Napa
65,000 cases



PHOTO: PRISCILLA UPTON

Bernard Portet co-founded Clos du Val 35 years ago. He had learned to taste into the future when his father was *régisseur* at Chateau Lafite. There were three years of wines cellared at Lafite and his father would have Bernard taste each year's wine,

from its adolescence to maturity. Bernard, born in Cognac and raised in Bordeaux, loved those tastings. He loved watching and learning from his father. Once his father brought home a 1934 Chateau Lafite, which he served at Sunday lunch. It was this wine that firmly fixed Bernard's footsteps in his father's. He went to college in Toulouse and Montpellier to study viticulture, agronomy and enology, convinced then, as he is now, that winemaking begins in the vineyard. When Bernard finished his studies in 1968, he took off for California to have a look at its wine industry. Next, he served in the army and was stationed in Morocco, where he also taught agriculture. Upon his return to France, Bernard met John Goelet, an American entrepreneur interested in wine.

Like Bernard, John had long-term connections with wineries and vineyards. His forbears included Francois Guestier, who was at Chateaux Lafite and Latour for half a century, and Francois' son Pierre Francois, who owned Chateau Beychevelle for a period of time, and was a partner in Barton & Guestier. John was familiar with Bernard's qualifications and knew he'd recently been in America. At the time, John was looking for a chateau manager for a project in Bordeaux. That deal fell through, but John and Bernard had hit it off, so John sent Bernard on a search for other vineyard opportunities John might fund and Bernard oversee. Bernard traveled not only

to the United States, but also to Australia, Morocco, South Africa and South America. "I was looking for properties through Cabernet-tinted glasses," says Bernard.

In Australia, he advised buying property that has become Taltarni Vineyards. While the grape-growing conditions of Chile also appealed to him, its political climate did not (however, Chile is where Bernard met his future wife). It was Napa Valley that really caught Bernard's attention. Bordeaux, Médoc, Lafite were his models and Napa Valley fired his imagination. Its climate and terroir, while not 100 percent like home, were a blend of what he knew, where he was raised and what he was looking for. He liked the vineyard soils of lighter broken rock in Oakville and Rutherford, south of St. Helena; however, the wines were a bit hot to his French-trained palate. Bernard looked further south, in Stags Leap, and found what he wanted: that same heat during the day, but cooler nights. 120 acres of orchard and pasture were purchased in the fall of 1971 and Clos Du Val was underway.

In 1972, Clos du Val planted its first vineyards to Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Zinfandel. Bernard says Merlot "brings volume, complexity, freshness, and velvet" to Cabernet. Next, Cabernet Franc was planted, which Bernard calls "very flowery, violet, delicate in the mouth, not as full as

Cabernet Sauvignon, less tannic, silk. It refines the Cabernet.” Malbec and Petit Verdot weren’t needed because Merlot contributes the suppleness Malbec might, and Bernard finds Petit Verdot rough, although he says it can be good in small amounts and has good tannin structure.

Bernard also undertook making the first Clos du Val vintage with fruit purchased from nearby Steltzner Vineyards. Dick Steltzner was an experienced vintner with good Cabernet Sauvignon fruit for sale. Like most of the vintners of the era, Dick was very helpful. He even became Clos Du Val’s first vineyard manager. Since there was no winery yet, Bernard rented space in back of Cuvaision and with his brother Dominique’s help, made 5,000 cases of wine that went into 100 percent new thin-staved French oak barrels (Clos Du Val later switched to the thicker-staved ones for export) and stored in space rented from Oakville Partners (now Napa Wine Company). That wine was released in 1974 and in 1975 was among six American Cabernets chosen for the 1976 Paris Tasting (it later won the re-match of 1986). Bernard says the impact of the Paris Tasting has been enormous. He calls it “a beautiful thing,” saying it doesn’t matter who placed first, but that “the tasting went around the world.”

The Stags Leap area proved ideal for Cabernet. In 1973, Clos du Val bought

an adjacent 32 acres of prunes and hay on which to plant more vineyards and build a winery. The winery design is simple but practical (there are no caves because if they dug, Bernard says they would hit water). Although Bernard thought they would do no more than 15,000 cases, he planned the winery for 30,000. Over the years the winery has expanded and is now handling about 65,000 cases, depending on the vintage. In 1973 Clos Du Val also bought 180 acres in Carneros, off Buhman Avenue, for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, which it planted in 1979, thus completing John’s vision for Clos Du Val.

During construction, the 1973 vintage was fermented at Carneros Creek Winery in fermenters still in use. 1974 was Clos Du Val’s own first crush, and the press broke down. Frank Mahoney trailered his all the way from Carneros Creek to help. Later, when a pump failed, Trefethen and Mondavi offered theirs on a “bring it back the next day” basis. Bernard says it is so different in France where everyone worries, “What if...? What if...?” Bernard joined a technical group that still meets from time to time. In the 1970’s its twenty or so members included Chuck Carpy, André Tchelistcheff and Bob Mondavi. They met at Vintage 1870, Yountville to share everything every month, to argue, discuss, and put everything on the table. Bernard says it left an indelible mark—“the working together, sharing all that knowledge,

dynamism, and power of wine. It was marvelous.” In those days, whatever was needed, colleagues provided. Chuck Carpy and Bill Jaeger teamed up and persuaded thirty wineries to form what has become the Wine Service Coöp, a collaboration that has lasted 35 years. “That spirit!” says Bernard, admiringly. Also in the 1970’s, while talking at lunch, Dick Lemon, a lawyer, mentioned developing a chamber music group. Clos du Val promptly became its original sponsor and was the performance site for a number of years. (John and Maggie Kongsgaard now head up this organization with its season of concerts in Napa Valley Opera House.)

Clos du Val’s vineyards were originally planted to AXR-I rootstock. In the replant of the 1990’s, necessitated by phylloxera, several changes were made besides rootstock in a comprehensive planting, drainage and irrigation plan that took five years to implement. An irrigation pond was dug, and vines per acre quadrupled, although the old row orientation of NE-SW was kept. Much of the Zinfandel was pulled; Clos du Val now makes Zinfandel only for export. The biggest surprise was that Clos du Val didn’t get the increase in crop volume it estimated. Volume stayed the same, but Bernard says the quality of the fruit intensified.

At harvest, after picking, fruit is crushed and destemmed and put into fermenters.

Only Pinot Noir goes through a cold soak. Clos du Val inoculates with French yeasts and, because there is plenty of color, ferments until dry in a matter of days. For two weeks the new wine is tasted every day for softness, for that tannic evolution between rough and soft. When it is right, the wine is pressed, with press wine kept separate from free-run. The wine then goes into French oak and 5 to 10% American oak. 25 % of the barrels are new every year. In barrel the wine is racked from time to time. The first four months after pressing allow lots of flexibility in blending. Some lots go into vertical oak tanks, which are very good for malo-lactic fermentation. Some finish malo-lactic fermentation in the barrel. Bernard likens blending to building a pyramid. Each time wine is moved, it is like placing one block on top of one another, ever upward. As many as 25 wines a day are tasted in the building of the pyramid. The tastings are reliant on numbers—pH, percentages of alcohol, total acid—as guides, but numbers are not the determinant. Bernard stresses that the numbers come *after*. Tasting is subjective and a diversity of wines to build, to blend with is so important. 20 months later, at the end of February, or 24 to 28 months later for the reserve program, the decisions have been made and the wine is in barrel ready to bottle.

In 1999, Clos du Val hired John Clews to help with winemaking and in 2001, hired

Al Wagner to assist with the vineyards. John is now in charge of both vineyard and wine production. Although Bernard still takes part in winemaking, he now spends half his time in traveling abroad, to oversee properties in Australia, Chile and France. To all the changes at Clos du Val, Bernard says,

“Vive la différence: terroir, balance, elegance, complex wines with a long finish. The flavors of wine should wedge their way into the flavors of the food. As the flavors of the food melt away, flavors of the wine come through. Clos du Val has stayed its course. Methods may change, but the style has been maintained. It is more generous now, but it has maintained its classicism. The wines are more forward, fleshier, and riper with more black fruit. John Clews understands our philosophy, but he has also brought a worldview [to Clos du Val]. We evolve as the world of wine does.”

Bernard continues to prize Napa Valley’s spirit of cooperation, as he appreciates its beauty. He says with great confidence, “You can’t, can’t compare it to anything in the world.” Although his daughters are married and live in Chile and Australia, his son Olivier, who lives in the Bay Area, directs wine imports for Wilson Daniels of St. Helena, here in what Bernard calls the “fabulous Napa Valley.”