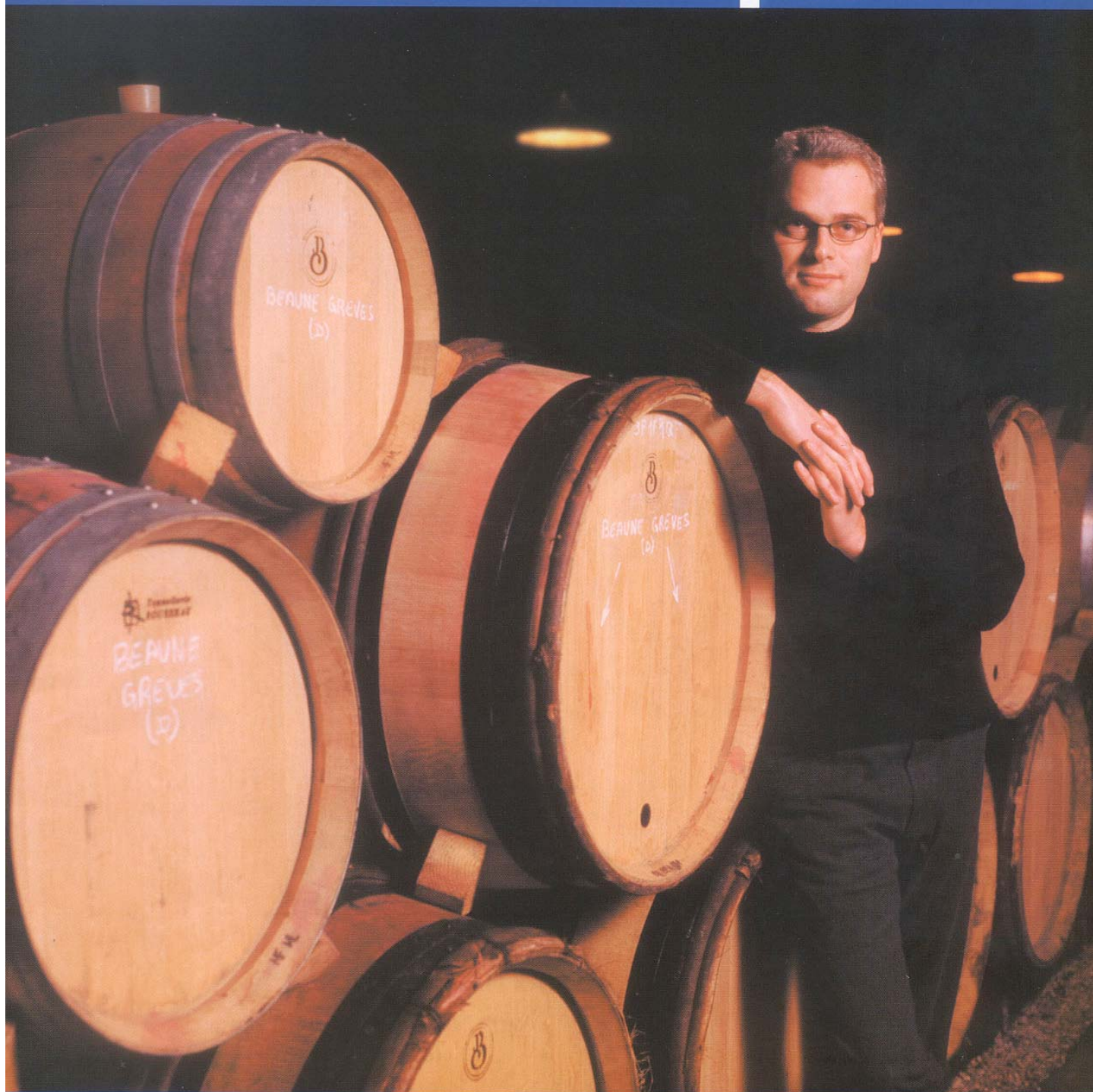


harpers

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GREGORY PATRIAT FORMULA ONE BOISSET

REACHING FOR THE SAAR RIESLINGS TO BELIEVE

IRIS ELLMANN AUTO BARN

gregory patriat

RACING TO THE TOP

Lacking the finance to make it in Formula One, Gregory Patriat turned his attention to wine. Margaret Rand talks to an exciting young winemaker whose risk-taking nature is paying off

I was puzzled by Gregory Patriat when I met him. Is he a great winemaker, or is he a vinous firework, burning brilliantly but destined to fizzle out? But then something he said towards the end of our meeting seemed to explain him: his early ambition was to be a Formula One racing driver. Okay, most small boys want either to be a racing driver or to drive a big yellow digger, but Patriat was absolutely certain up to the age of 20 that Formula One was his destiny. It was only when it dawned on him that motor racing requires an awful lot of money that he realised he would have to make his future elsewhere.

Picture him as a racing driver and it all makes sense: the sense of speed, the feeling as you talk to him of wind rushing past your face, the insouciant risk taking. It's perfect, of course, for a *négociant* that wants to change its image as fast as possible, but it does feel incongruous in a business where the pace of change is normally dictated by the turning of the year.

Patriat joined Jean-Claude Boisset in April 2002, his brief being to put the brand at the top of the Burgundy tree. It was, according to Patriat, either do or die for Boisset: 'They had considered ending the Boisset brand.' But he wasn't taken on because of his huge experience in winemaking – because he didn't have any. Instead, Jean-Charles Boisset, the son of the founder, who had already hired Pascal Marchand for Domaine de la Vougeraie, the estate that unites all Boisset's vineyards, wanted someone with experience of vineyards. And that was something Patriat did have.

In the beginning

In 1995, he worked his first vintage, with André Porcheret, who had just returned to the Hospices de Beaune as winemaker. 'On the second day of the harvest I wanted to go home; but not after that,' he says; he was 20 that year, and having to put aside thoughts of Ferrari. The next year he went to Beaune to study viticulture and oenology for two years, but 'school for me was not the key. Learning vinification at school was a bad thing; afterwards I had to forget everything.'

But the process of forgetting didn't begin immediately. His first job was as 'a simple vineyard worker' at the Château de Chorey les Beaune. He didn't know at that point whether he wanted to specialise in vineyards or in winemaking but, he says, 'I wanted to learn'. Two years in, he picked up the telephone and rang Lalou Bize-Leroy.

Now, before you start thinking that either this is a fairytale come true, or that Mme Bize-Leroy takes telephone calls from every simple vineyard

Before the harvest in 2002 I didn't know where I was going. I knew how to vinify, but I didn't know my style. I'm now finding my style: in one year, I've formed my own opinions

worker who feels like ringing her, let me point out that Patriat's father and Bize-Leroy were already acquainted. Anyway, Patriat junior said to Bize-Leroy that it was his dream to work for her, that he wanted only a minimal salary and that he wanted to learn. She said that, yes, she knew his father, that he would be on the same level as the others and that he couldn't expect any prospect of promotion. So he started at Domaine Leroy and was there for three years, the last of them as vineyard manager on the Côte de Nuits.

And he did learn: he learnt that wine is made in the vineyard, not the cellar. 'Other estates have a point of view that is not very different, but Leroy is extreme,' he says. 'They do nothing special in the cellar; nothing unusual. She's doing nothing remarkable at all. She says she's not interested in oenological methods; nor am I. To produce a good wine is not difficult at all; it's easy to do. But you have to work twice as hard in the vineyard.'

Pastures new

Then he met Jean-Charles Boisset, and mentioned that he was thinking of leaving Leroy. Boisset said that perhaps they could do something together, and later on came up with a job offer: to give credibility to the Boisset brand.

Patriat's first task was to go through the 2001s in the cellar. He said that 80% of them had to go: 'Jean-Charles was a bit surprised, but he'd given me *carte blanche*. Only 20% were good – they weren't good enough for me, but they were good enough.'

Two million euros were invested in a new winery, with 41 wooden vats (he makes 41 different wines) with an average volume of 12 barrels each. Patriat dislikes much technology in the cellar and works biodynamically, bottling on the appropriate days, but since the brand owns no vineyards, working the vines biodynamically is not possible. 'Some growers are not far from organic. We forbid weedkillers and chemical fertilisers, and oblige our growers to work the soil.'

The company bought finished wines before; it was a classic *négociant* set-up. Finding grapes to buy was apparently 'really easy; many estates are more open than they were to selling grapes, via a courtier. We buy from 35 different growers, small quantities from each, and we have some very famous estates.' Leroy? 'No.'

There are the sort of controls that one would expect from a good viticulturalist: Patriat visits each grower eight to ten times between March and August, insists on the yields he wants and breaks contracts if growers don't stick to his

GREGORY PATRIAT

Born: 4 September 1975
Educated: Beaune and Dijon
Interests: Racing cars

rules. 'We broke three contracts in 2002, two weeks before the harvest, when they didn't do the green harvest we asked for.' The average yield is 22 hectolitres per hectare (hl/ha): 'Over 40hl/ha is Rosé de Provence; you can extract nothing interesting. Chardonnay can be good at 40-45hl/ha. They were probably going to the maximum before, or above.'

His favourite vineyards are those affected by millerandage: 'I'm the only one to look for sick vineyards. They look like bonsai vines, but they give an incredible concentration to the wine. I learnt that at Leroy; she had some Volnay Santenots that looked really sick. The growers would point at it and laugh, but it was really concentrated wine. I will show growers the rows I want, the millerandé ones.'

So Patriat stepped neatly from managing vineyards on the Côte de Nuits to making wine. 'I realise now I was courageous,' he says. He calls himself a viniculteur, to describe his dual role as an oenologue who goes into the vineyards; and on both accounts he has to move fast. 2002 was 'a good first step. 2003 will be better, and we will progress every year with winemaking and ageing. In four or five years we will be where we want to be.'

Fast learner

When I say to him, 'But you'd never made wine before; how did you cope?' he replies that at Leroy he was always in the cellar, helping with the winemaking, even if he wasn't there officially. 'I knew exactly what to do,' he says. But then he adds, 'I didn't think the 2002s could be so good - I'm not someone who's sure of what he's doing... Before the harvest in 2002 I didn't know where I was going. I knew how to vinify, but I didn't know my style. I'm now finding my style: in one year, I've formed my own opinions.' He describes his style of wine as 'fine, elegant; Pascal's wines are fuller-bodied and more concentrated. But we have the same philosophy.'

This philosophy abhors tannins and enzymes, doesn't fine or filter but does chaptalise 'a little', though 'for me, alcohol is not important'. His ideal is to use 100% one-year-old barrels, though at the moment he's still using 20-25% new. And

gosh, the risks he takes. 'In 2003, 40% of the wooden vats had stuck fermentations. So I put the wine into barrels with 15 grams per litre of sugar and the fermentations finished slowly; it wasn't a problem.' He says that he might ring friends if he had a real problem, but he doesn't have anyone to call on regularly.

The 2002s are very impressive, focused, complex and serious - words that one would never have used of Boisset wines in the past. So hats off to Patriat, and to Jean-Charles Boisset, who has had the determination to turn the wines round and the bravery to take on an untried winemaker to do it. Because Patriat really does give the impression that this is wing-and-a-prayer winemaking. 'I take risks because I don't know what the risks are,' he says, and one might infer a slightly edgy relationship with the more traditional oenologists at Boisset, who might be forgiven for thinking him bonkers.

He follows his instincts, and so far they've been right; all great winemakers, just like great artists or musicians, follow their instincts, possibly rationalising their decisions afterwards. But what will happen as Patriat gains experience? Will he grow more cautious as he realises the risks? And do cautious racing drivers win races? ■

