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BUSINESS DAY

A Wine of One's Own? They'll Drink to That

By ALESSANDRA STANLEY JULY 2, 2016



Blending wine with Viniv in Bages, France. "I think it's fun at dinner parties to pour my own wine for friends instead of something banal," one client said. Guia Besana for The New York Times

The French region of Bordeaux is the sacred home of Château Lafite Rothschild and Château Margaux, so it would seem unlikely that wines named Duke of Juice or Bone Ami would come from there.

But some winemakers insist on it. And they are entitled, because they pay \$12,500 to \$25,000 a barrel or \$44 to \$87 a bottle to create personalized Bordeaux wine and labels.

Château Lynch-Bages, a celebrated producer known for rich yet refined reds, also operates [Viniv](#), a niche company that helps clients create their own custom blends. These clients select the vineyards and tinker with the taste, but leave the grape harvesting, crushing, aging, barrel-racking and shipping to the experts at the chateau.

“I had dreamed about someday buying a vineyard, but it’s a very capital-intensive and thankless business,” said Sébastien Boucraut, 46, a French commodities executive based in Dubai who flies in with two longtime friends to sample their Viniv creation. “I thought this was brilliant. You can make your own wine with all the advantages and none of the inconveniences.”



Nicolas Labenne, right, a technical director for Château Lynch-Bages, helping a client blend wine.
Guia Besana for The New York Times

They named their wine Racine Carrée de Neuf, or “square root of nine” in French. The three share a tech background, hence the nerdy label.

It sounds a bit like Build-a-Bear for oenophiles, but Viniv has cachet and a growing clientele across Europe, Australia and the United States. D.I.Y. cabernet sauvignon isn’t the only enticement. Stephen Bolger, 52, the C.E.O. and founder of Viniv, describes his business as an “experiential luxury company.”

And “experiential luxury” is the new Birkin bag. Nowadays, marketing experts say, the affluent are not content merely to own expensive things, like Cartier watches or Ferraris. Increasingly they prefer to collect one-of-a-kind moments, and perhaps post them on Instagram.

“Wealthy tourists don’t want to sit with other tourists; they want to connect with real people and get a story, something they can describe as a really cool, unbelievable experience,” said Jack Ezon, president of Ovation Vacations, a luxury travel agency that arranges for clients to dance in a rehearsal of the Bolshoi Ballet, throw pots with Peruvian artisans or design their own shoes in the Salvatore Ferragamo studio. (Mr. Ezon also does bar mitzvahs — in Sardinia.)



From left, James Board, Richard Perris and Will Ledger, Viniv clients, visiting a cabernet sauvignon vineyard in Saint-Estèphe with the Viniv cellar master Thierry Cowez, in background.

Guia Besana for The New York Times

Travel agents like Mr. Ezon are selling veritable virtual reality: a fantasy adventure with real people and no goggles.

Conspicuous consumption hasn't gone away. Sales of yachts, sports cars and jewelry are higher than they were before the 2008 financial crisis, according to Wealth-X, a research firm that focuses on U.H.N.W.I.: ultra high-net-worth individuals.

But the global recession did calm things down a bit at the top end. "There was a values shift after 2008 away from ostentatious materialism," said Marie-Cécile Cervellon, a professor of marketing at the French business school Edhec. High-end consumers are instead spending on personal fulfillment and family bonding, albeit in rarefied places.

Jeff Fromm, a partner at the Barkley ad agency and co-author of "Marketing to Millennials," calls it a version of a "millennial mind-set" that is spreading across generations. "One in four millennials would prefer to pay money for an experience rather than for a product," he said.



Jean-Michel Cazes, the patriarch of the Lynch-Bages family. Guia Besana for The New York Times

In 2014, the Boston Consulting Group warned, “No luxury firm can ignore the accelerating shift from ‘having’ to ‘being.’”

Pete Johnson discovered Viniv in 2010 when a friend in a cigar club told him he was making his own wine in Bordeaux. “I said: ‘What do you *mean* you’re making wine in Bordeaux? That’s what I want to do.’”

Mr. Johnson, 45, a custom cigar maker and entrepreneur in Los Angeles, has made five vintages since then, including Bone Ami, in homage to his Rottweiler, and Tatouage French for tattoo, in homage to his ornately inked forearms. (Duke of Juice is also his.) He figures he has spent more than \$150,000 making wines at Viniv, not including airfare and hotels.

“I am making the best possible wine for my palate,” he said. “This isn’t your two-buck Chuck.”



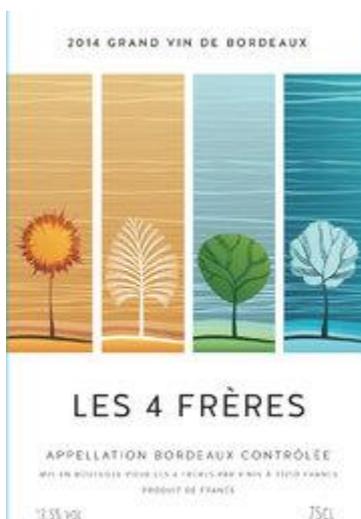
A label from a personalized wine.

There are other Bordeaux chateaus that try to give visitors a sense of ownership. Typically they allow visitors to adopt a plot of vines or personalize their bottles.

Viniv caters to clients who are willing to commit the time, travel and expense — and break a Bordeaux taboo. Mr. Bolger offers customers three grape varietals from 13 different vineyards, allowing them to mix a cabernet sauvignon from Pauillac with a merlot from Pomerol. For the wine establishment of Bordeaux, blending grapes from different appellations is the vintner's equivalent of fantasy football, or eugenics.

"I recently had an older farmer who refused to sell me his vines," Mr. Bolger said. But he also said rejections were rare because Viniv wines are not commercially sold; they are savored by their creators.

"This isn't a gimmick," Mr. Bolger said. "It's a real and entirely different way of producing fine wine." And make a splash. "I think it's fun at dinner parties to pour my own wine for friends instead of something banal," Mr. Boucraut explained.



A label from a personalized wine.

Many clients say they go there not just to make wine, but to enter a sophisticated world closed to ordinary tourists.

In the spring, the vineyards around Pauillac are lined with wild poppies. Wisteria twists over the walls of stately chateaus and medieval churches. The bistros serve oysters from Arcachon Bay. And Mr. Bolger organizes tastings and private meals at neighboring chateaus, including even Chateau Petrus, which for ordinary tourists is harder to visit than Norad.

Château Lynch-Bages also provides private tours, tailored to V.I.P. customers. "It's very intimate, not a typical tour where they give you a thimble of wine and a canned speech," said Hank Werronen, 73, a retired health care executive and entrepreneur in Arlington, Va. He discovered Viniv after winning a trip to Bordeaux at an American Heart Association benefit auction. "I'm not just making a wine, I'm making a memory," he said.

He blended one barrel in 2015 with the 2014 vintage, then in 2016 recruited friends to share the cost of five more barrels with the 2015 vintage. "It's the engagement that is so rewarding," Mr. Werronen said. "You develop deeply personal relationships with the winemakers of Château Lynch-Bages: It's a family business."



A label from a personalized wine.

The owners of Lynch-Bages, the Cazes family, are multigeneration winemakers, led by the patriarch, Jean-Michel Cazes, 81, who looks like a better-fed John Huston. His grandfather, a farmworker, bought the vineyard during the 1930s depression when most of the grand Bordeaux family vineyards went bust.

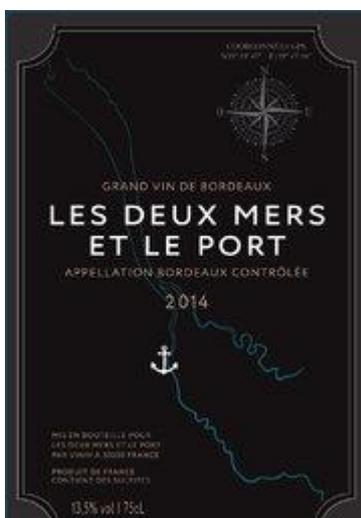
In the early 1970s, when the wine business was particularly bad, Mr. Cazes began courting American tourists and welcoming them to his own chateau. By the 1980s, the dollar was so strong that his wife, Thereza, felt besieged by houseguests. He said Mrs. Cazes eventually put her foot down. “She told me, ‘I am tired of

having breakfast with total strangers in their pajamas.’”

In 1989 he converted a nearby 18th-century stone farmhouse into a hotel, [Château Cordeillan-Bages](#), with an outdoor pool and a Michelin two-star restaurant. A newly renovated premium room costs about \$395 in high season. The tasting menu at the restaurant is \$195, not including wines, so Viniv clients can run up quite a bill.

Château Lynch-Bages gets about 20,000 visitors a year. Viniv has more than 500 clients.

Over the years, Mr. Cazes developed Bages, a tiny, once-deserted farm community into a microvillage of about 100 residents that looks like a set from the movie “Chocolat.” There is no pharmacy or post office, but the family created a charming bistro, a boulangerie and a gift shop that sells books and wine but no gaudy souvenirs. “We are not Mont-St.-Michel,” Mr. Cazes said primly.



A label from a personalized wine.

Nor is it Napa, though the idea for Viniv came from there. In 2004, Michael Brill, 51, an entrepreneur and wine lover, founded [Crushpad](#) to provide expertise and winemaking facilities to clients — lawyers, investment bankers, tech entrepreneurs — who wanted to make their own. “It was awesome, until the economy imploded,” Mr. Brill said.

Crushpad fell on hard times and closed in 2012, but by then Mr. Bolger had paired up with Mr. Brill to create a Bordeaux branch, which he spun off into its own company in 2009. Viniv really took off, he said, when the Cazeses became co-owners in 2012, adding their prestige and winemaking operation to the project.

Mr. Brill now has a different start-up, [Cruzu](#), which he describes as a crowdfunding platform for wine. Clients fund winemakers' projects in return for a portion of the wine and the profits.

There are other online oenology options in the United States. In Paterson, Wash., Columbia Crest has [the Crowdsourced Cabernet](#), a project that allows fans to vote online on such decisions as how long to age a wine and how "vivacious" it should be. The inaugural 2014 vintage was released in June, and participants had first dibs to buy a case. They couldn't taste the wine, of course, but they voted for a C.E.O., as in "crowd executive officer," who was flown in and tasted on their behalf.

Viniv clients get to actually taste their wines. Mr. Werronen said he invited his wine partners to blind-test their blend with a French one in the same price category, a Petit Haut Lafitte that sells for about \$40 to \$50 a bottle.

The verdict was unanimous, Mr. Werronen said. "We thought ours was measurably better."

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