

[Home](#) / [Magazine Archives](#) / [Oct. 31, 2018 Issue](#) / [Columns](#)

Magazine Archives: Oct. 31, 2018



View the entire table of contents for the Oct. 31, 2018 issue.

Bruno's Bergerac

Harvey Steiman

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When British author Martin Walker moved to the Périgord in southwest France, it took the local wines a while to impress him. Now he's come to appreciate them for their own merits-and they have become increasingly important characters in his popular mystery novels.

"In the beginning it was just great to be drinking locally," he said in a recent conversation stateside. "I only found a half-dozen local vintners whose wines rose above mediocrity, but while I've been there a new generation has been raising quality. Now 30 or 40 domaines and estates can stand their ground with anyone in the world, euro for euro."

Walker now thinks the local Bergerac wines, made from the same grape varieties used in Bordeaux, just a few kilometers to the east, represent the best quality-to-price ratio in France. Though the wines are not yet widely available in the United States, Walker points to Pecharmant, a mineral-rich red; Rosette, a mildly sweet and charming white; and Monbazillac, a noble-rot dessert wine that the locals swear by as an accompaniment to foie gras.

Since 1998, the Scotland-born journalist, whose résumé includes editorships at The Guardian and UPI, has owned a home in the Périgord with his wife, food writer Julia Watson. In the deliciously food-and-wine-soaked world of his 11 "Bruno, Chief of Police" mystery novels, Walker revels in the exemplary country cuisine of his adopted home-black truffles, foie gras, duck confit, a soup garden in every backyard.

Among the delights of these well-plotted novels, with a cast of characters guaranteed to charm, are the pages devoted to Bruno's obsession with cooking (and consumption of local cheeses). The region's cuisine can stand head-to-head with any in France, but the wines, though made from the same grapes, don't get as much respect as those of Bordeaux. Martin sticks to his guns, having applied his lifelong journalistic instincts to sorting out his assessments of the wines.

He's even taken up a second career as a part-time wine writer, with a column inspired by weekly forays with a French friend to visit vineyards in the surrounding countryside. It runs regularly in The Bugle, an English-language newspaper for central France.

"We would drive out and explore a couple of vineyards or châteaux," he recalled. "I can't think of a better way to spend time. People who make wines are very agreeable people."

A chance meeting with the local policeman, Pierrot Simonet, introduced Walker to the area's food-and-wine scene. They met walking their respective Bassett hounds, discovered a mutual interest in tennis and became fast friends. Simonet turned out to be the inspiration for Bruno, who also spends his spare time teaching tennis and rugby to local youth and who cooks lavish meals with his friends every week after a few rounds of tennis. The original group now includes Walker.

"There were four of us who played at the local tennis club," Walker said. "This being France, the tennis club had a large and well-equipped kitchen. We would adjourn there to cook lunch and open some great wines. I learned about the local cuisine and what to look for in the wines from them."

Walker's wife, a former food writer for The Washington Post, Gourmet, The Sunday Times of London, The Observer and UPI, carefully edits all the food and cooking references in the novels. Walker's go-to source on wine for the books, and his own cellar, is Julien Monfort, whose Julien de Savignac is the model for the wineshop in the Bruno books.

"You can buy his Sancerre for 1.5 euros or the entire list of back vintages of Pétrus for 5,000 euros a bottle," Walker said. "He also has the best collection of Bergerac wines. It's where I realized something extraordinary was going on in Bergerac."

Enthusiasm for the Bruno books in Germany has even begat a Cuvée Bruno, a négociant wine made for the German market in partnership with Château de la Jaubertie in Bergerac. Priced at 9 euros (about \$10), the 2014 vintage is a Bordeaux-style blend of 60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 35 percent Merlot and 5 percent Cabernet Franc. A graphic of his Bassett hound, Balzac, wearing a kepi, the cap worn by French cops, beams from the label.

"I've had fun writing these books, and now the wine column and the Cuvée Bruno," he said, "but the real fun is educating myself about wine."

Editor at large Harvey Steiman has been with Wine Spectator since 1983.

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