

**Sommelier guides, helicopter transfers, tastings with châteaux owners... such are the joys of bespoke wine tours, says John Stimpfig. Illustration by Chris Burke.**

**F**or any oenophile, there are few more inspiring, tantalising or hair-tingling drives than the D2 heading out of Bordeaux into the heart of the Médoc peninsula. But it's just before Macau that your pulse really begins to race. There, the road becomes the famous Route des Châteaux as it bisects the star-studded communes of Margaux, St Julien, Pauillac and St Estèphe.

The roll call begins with Château Lagune in Margaux followed by Cantemerle, Kirwan and Prieuré Lichine. St Julien sees the triumvirate grandees of Léoville Barton, Léoville Las Cases and Léoville Poyferré. Next are Pauillac's heavy hitters, Mouton and Latour, as well as the two Pichons. Finally, there are the magnificent estates of Lafite and Cos d'Estournel. In the wine world, this is the holy of holies. To some, it's heaven on earth.

Except that in this other world, these pearly gates are firmly bolted, as are the châteaux's elegantly shuttered windows. With one or two exceptions, the message to the casual visitor from the aloof and aristocratic Bordelais is, unequivocally, "Keep out." It's all so very different from the reception one might receive in places such as the Napa Valley, the Cape or Margaret River. There you can expect tasting rooms, tours, restaurants and shops stacked full of bottles and branded merchandise. But rarely does this happen in France and most certainly not around these grand Médocain vineyards and cellars.

Nonetheless, the guardians and owners of these historic estates have at least thawed a degree or two towards the tourist dollar in recent years. Now, most estates will condescend to receive "guests" as long as you make an appointment, pay your fee and don't expect too much in return. Similarly, they will let you in if you are travelling with a bus-load of star-struck wine groupies, provided you have a proper guide to lead the pilgrimage.

But what do serious collectors do if they want a private wine holiday in the sought-after regions of Bordeaux, Burgundy or Champagne without the angst of organising it themselves or the agony of joining a coach party of wine geeks? The answer is to hire a specialist wine travel company equipped with all the requisite contacts, experience and know-how. French Wine Explorers, for instance, has been running this kind of personalised, guided wine tour for individuals, couples and small groups since 2001. Lauriann Greene is company president and principal wine guide. "We make our tours as flexible, exclusive and luxurious as clients want them to be," she says. "We can get them into the very top hotels and restaurants and take them around in a private limo or a helicopter, if that's



## IF YOUR NOM'S NOT DOWN...

what they want. More importantly, though, we pride ourselves on getting them VIP access to the most prestigious properties in France, including the leading domaines in Burgundy or all first growths of Bordeaux."

This is the added value for the connoisseur. Not least because the service goes beyond opening doors to these historic estates. A good operator will secure you a personalised tour and tasting where you will have time with the winemaker, cellar master or owner, depending on which property you happen to be visiting.

"Guests invariably receive a warm welcome precisely because we have a such a good relationship with all the

top châteaux and domaines," says Greene. "One reason for this is because our guides are bilingual wine professionals who are regarded as part of the French wine business. Some are qualified sommeliers, others are oenologists, one is a wine merchant and one is even an owner of a wine property in Sauternes. "In this business, you need credibility and contacts. Without them, you won't be accepted into the very greatest châteaux," Greene adds.

Mike Satzberg, an investment banker and passionate wine collector from Los Angeles, recently went on a four-day wine tour with his wife and two friends, which was organised by French Wine Explorers. The company also

arranged a holiday in Paris and a one-night stopover in the Loire Valley for the group before they drove down to Bordeaux for a non-stop, four-and-a-half-day wine tour.

"On an average day, we visited three estates. But on one occasion, we asked Lauriann to do five, which she managed to pull off at short notice," says Satzberg, who visited some of Bordeaux's finest properties on both banks of the Gironde. "I'd briefed her in advance which châteaux we wanted to visit and they were able to put almost all of them into our itinerary. Out of choice, the only first growth we visited was Mouton, which was fabulous. But so, too, were Cos d'Estournel, Angéus and Pichon Baron, where we tasted the current vintage as well as a barrel sample and some older vintages, too. Certainly, we felt quite privileged to be there.

"From the perspective of an American who'd never been to Bordeaux, I felt as if we got into places and saw things we couldn't have done on our own. Moreover, having Lauriann to interpret was very important to having a meaningful experience – especially when the conversation turned technical."

Another specialist company arranging this level of tailored wine tourism is the UK operator Arblaster & Clarke. It has