

# Forbes



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I scout the globe for the best experiences in food, wine and travel.

## **This Winemaker Hunts Trees To Help Make The Perfect Wine**



Winemaker Pierre Seillan hugs a future wine barrel in the French forest.

Pierre Seillan, winemaker for [Château Lassègue in Bordeaux](#), has invited me to France to learn more about his winemaking philosophy, which is exactly why I am standing next to a 160 year-old oak tree in the Vosges forest. The forest might seem to be an unlikely place to begin a winery tour, but Pierre is an unlikely individual. We've all heard vintners talk of "time spent on oak" when referring to their winemaking regimen. However, Pierre Seillan is the first winemaker to tell me specifically *what forest* each of his barrels comes from and how the differences influence his wine. Seillan has been crafting wine for 47 years—traveling between Bordeaux, California, Gascony and Italy. He is refreshingly authentic, unassuming and affable, it's easy to forget that underneath the casual farmer's garb beats the heart of a detail zealot, unwilling to let any aspect of his winemaking go soft.

Everything matters to Pierre, including sourcing the perfect trees for his barrels. Which is why we are starting this conversation in the woods. Admiring a particularly stately oak specimen, Seillan sighs, "What is true for the vines is true for the tree, terroir matters everywhere." Jean-Marc Pernigotto, the general director for Merrain International, an oak stave producing company, nods in agreement. "Pierre is very precise, he quizzes me about the soil, he smells the bark. We've visited the most famous forests in France together," Pernigotto tells me as we walk the forest, trailing behind Pierre. Indeed, Pierre tends to wander off like a beagle chasing a particularly compelling scent. His fascination comes honestly, as the son of a cork tree farmer, he has a long history with trees and the outdoors.

During our forest excursion, Seillan is especially smitten by the spine of a 160 year-old oak, showing its potential as a tree of import for barrel making. He says he loves the oak quality, but what I suspect is really going on is his love for the forest, nature's peace and the quiet provenance of a good wine. There is something so essentially farmer in Pierre; he's far more enamored with the dirt, trees, rain and climate than he is with wine dinners and collector prices. Owning the experience top to bottom is his passion, nurturing each and every piece that enters into his wine.

The forests in France are managed by the government, part of a program that began when Louis XIV's military advisors felt compelled to build a better shipping fleet to compete with England. To build a better fleet one needs tall, strong, straight trees. Today the average age of a mature harvest-ready tree is 200 years. There are no massive specimens such as we might see in the United States. These trees are lean and solid, the product of slow steady growth, which over hundreds of years ensures a rip-tight grain, ideal for aging wine and controlling porosity.

We finish up admiring the trees and are rounded up and herded to the next stop: the Merrain International stave mill because, of course, Pierre has a partnership with this aspect of winemaking as well.



Pierre smells aging staves—a winemaker’s high.

Stave (an individual section used to make an oak barrel) production involves several layers of cuts and trims to ensure an absolutely pristine curvature and blemish free piece. Staves are then labeled according to which forest they came from and left to age 24 months to 30 months.

And that’s merely the stave. Seillan also has a say in the cooperage, which is next on our stop. Here the staves are assembled into barrels. Each barrel is labeled with the specific forest provenance and toasted precisely to Pierre’s specifications (which he prefers not to share). The toasting recipe, the oak forest provenance and stave creation all play a role in Pierre’s winery theater where each piece is composed to build a wine that, in Pierre’s words, ”reflects the message of the soil.”

I’m tired just thinking about all of the oak options until Pierre, along with his daughter Helene, the assistant vigneron, shows me his fermentation room. The grapes for the flagship wine, Lassègue, Saint-Émilion Grand Cru, are harvested and fermented by individual lot. Rather than toss all of the Merlot into one tank and ferment at one time, Pierre, ever the composer, ferments each and every block separately (31 separate fermentations to be exact). Let’s pause a moment and do the math: 14 different types of wood, 31 different merlot lots, 3 grape varieties—a virtual palette of colors with which he paints his perfect wine. This ultra-precision (micro-cru philosophy) does indeed yield a superb wine. His Lassègue has threads of spice woven together with dark, ripe red fruits and framed by an elegant, vibrant structure.

To prove his point about oak terroir, Pierre hosts a tasting of his merlot—all have been aging the exact same time, but in different woods. I admit skepticism, and no small amount of anxiety, (what if I can’t taste the difference?) Oak is surely oak. Yet, after the tasting there can be no doubt; trees have a unique taste, some impart grippy tannins, some impart soft, smoother texture and some just add a whiff of spice. How he recalls each and every nuance is a marvel of taste memory...which is why he is the winemaker and I am the wine drinker.



Pierre with his trees. Note how straight and narrow the trunks are.

The story begins where it ends, with the wine and the farmer. Leaning on everything nature has to share, Pierre makes the wine that talks to him, one that is an ideal, ultimate expression of the season and the vine, complimented by the perfect marriage of oak. Matchmaker that he is, Pierre's combinations yield powerfully elegant wines with supple curvy tannins, coffee and chocolate, spice and balance. I wax poetic over his wines, they are so heady and divine, but Pierre, naturally humble and at ease in his jeans and sneakers, just smiles at the compliment, shrugs and says, "I'm just a farmer." Indeed.

Pierre's Bordeaux Wines:

Lassègue, Saint-Émilion Grand Cru, the flagship wine.

Les Cadrons de Lassègue, the second label to Lassègue.

Château Vignot– from the estate's foothill vineyards.