

# Anson: Tasting Cru Artisan du Médoc wines



- [Jane Anson](#)
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**Jane Anson explores the merits of the Cru Artisan du Médoc label wines and tastes some of the 2015s...**



Maxime Saint-Martin is the new president of the Cru Artisan ranking. Credit: gravesdepez.com/

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## Anson: Tasting Cru Artisan du Médoc

As the world turns towards low intervention, respectful winemaking, has there ever been a better moment for the relaunch of the Cru Artisan du Médoc label?

The name alone suggests honest, small-scale, hand-crafted wines, something that the Médoc is surely in need of – especially with Cru Bourgeois reintroducing its three-level hierarchy and so leaving the stage wide open for a simple one-size-fits-all grouping of estates from this most iconic of winemaking peninsulas.

Given all of that, it's hard not to feel that Maxime Saint-Martin is in the right place at the right time. Still not quite 30, he is the new president of the Cru Artisan ranking, having become the youngest estate owner in St-Estèphe back in 2008 when he bought his uncle's three hectares of Château Graves de Pez at the age of 21.

With a current membership of 44, we don't yet know exactly which names are going to make the new (undoubtedly expanded) Cru Artisan list, due out in May 2018.

All of this is being decided right now through tastings and assessments by one of those infamous independent committees that have always done so well in other Bordeaux rankings. In fact Saint-Martin's own wine has merely been submitted for now, although his family's Château Vieux Gabarey is a long-standing fixture.

## The human stories

It's easy to like these estates and the human stories they represent. Château Bejac Romelys, for example, is named after the owners' two children Rodolphe and Melyssa. It's a place where until 1996 they sent their grapes to the local cooperative – as did Graves de Pez – before taking them back in-house while also voluntarily reducing the size of the vineyard in 2011 from 22ha to 11ha to concentrate on manageable quality.

Several others were created from scratch by the current owners such as Garance Haut Grenat (in 1998) and Château d'Osmond (1987). Château du Ha was replanted by Cédric and Isabelle Moreau on the site on a former vineyard that had abandoned after the first world war, and where over six years from 1997 to 2003 they planted six hectares of vines, raised 10 horses and opened a 14-hectare breeding and equestrian centre, now running both businesses themselves.

They are a reminder of how normal people make wine in Bordeaux, even on the hallowed ground of the Médoc.

These guys are not fighting with the same means as their big name neighbours, and you see it in plenty of small details. Lots of mechanical harvests here – Châteaux Bejac Romelys, Gadet Terrefort, Haut Gravat, D'Osmond are all practitioners, as are at least 75% of the members.

Vines per hectare vary widely, from 5,000 at Gadet Terrefort to 9,000 at Vieux Gabarey, up to 10,000 at Coudot, Les Barrailots and Grand Brun and even 11,000 in parts of Château d'Osmond, with the average coming in at around 7,000.

Oak ageing is 12 months on average, often split between barrels and vats, unlike the 18 months you find routinely in classified properties. And less celebrated consultants oversee the winemaking – Eric Deletage, Pascale Forget, Julien Maillet, Sandra Duboscq to name a few (although of course Eric Boissenot features heavily, true Médocain that he is).

These are by their nature small scale, because the rules for membership state that the owner must live on site and oversee all activities in vineyard and cellar through to bottling. But there is no maximum size (especially since the Cru Bourgeois changed its rules so there is no minimum size, where it used to be 7ha).

The largest property from the 2006 list is Château Ferré at 44ha in Vertheuil, AOC Haut-Médoc, with the smallest almost entirely in the communal appellations such as Clos de Bigos at 2ha in Margaux. The average is 9.5ha.

‘It’s a philosophical choice in many ways’ says Saint-Martin. ‘And a financial one. The price one château pays for its annual subscription to Cru Bourgeois is equal to the Cru Artisan’s entire annual marketing budget’.

## Value

This is reflected inevitably in the price we pay for the bottle, most coming in at under €10 direct to the consumer.

Don’t expect the finessing or polish of classified Médocs. These are more in line with what you might get in the Côtes de [Rhône](#) category in terms of charm and drinkability, which is sadly still pretty rare to find consistently in the AOC Bordeaux category, although that is of course a vastly bigger challenge.

I was tasting the 2015 vintage, which no doubt helped to seal my impression of enjoyable, satisfying wines, and one of the questions that they need to address is how to ensure consistency across the more difficult vintages.

Even here it was clear that the more northerly AOC Médoc Cru Artisans, where the weather was less consistent in 2015, had some issues and it’s definitely worth remembering that if you want to check out these wines, the 2015 vintage in Haut Médoc may be the place to start. 2016 should be fine in both Haut Médoc and Médoc.

## Low intervention

With the word Artisan on the label, I would also like to see them doing more to promote low intervention practices in the vineyard.

A few members are doing so – Château Les Graves de Loirac is working with local Chamber of Agriculture to introduce fully sustainable winemaking, and Château de Lauga and Château Lagorce Bernadas also working towards the same goal. Château du Ha, Château les Barrailots and Château Tour Bel Air uses zero chemical weedkillers (although are we really still having this conversation?).

But there are only two currently certified organics or biodynamic in the shape of Château Micalet in Haut-Médoc (which tasted blind was by coincidence one of my picks of the tasting) and Château des Gravières in Margaux. There should surely be more considering the size of these properties and the use of the word Artisan, even with the challenges of the Médoc climate.

We will see how that changes with the new listing in May – but what is certain is that by supporting these estates, you are helping secure the future of a group that has become almost a hunting ground for the classified growths over the last few decades. In the first Feret guide in 1850, for example, the tiny commune of Coudot in Cussac-Fort-Médoc has ten Cru Artisans.

Today Château de Coudot is the only one that remains. Even since the 2006 listing many names have disappeared – with Château Behéré in Pauillac among the most famous casualties, bought by Lorenzetti and incorporated into Pedesclaux. Similarly Château La Pèyre in Saint Estèphe was Cru Artisan until it was [bought by Bernard Magrez and became Cru Sanctus Perfectus](#).

There is a one good news story among the lost names though. St-Julien's Château Capdet has disappeared from the list, but only because it was sold to Charles Brun in 2015, who has renamed it Château Fleur Lauga. Brun is a seventh generation winemaker from the neighbouring commune of Cussac (Château de Lauga, one of the 44), and only managed to buy the significantly more expensive vines in St-Julien because its owner wanted to keep them in independent hands, and because he found a group of private investors to help him. He is keeping it proudly Cru Artisan.

Blind tasted by Jane Anson(at Château Moutte Blanc, 27 Feb 2018)

## Château Vieux Gabarey, Haut-Médoc 2015

93

Love the nose on this, which is as rich as the colour. Damson, brioche, soft grilled chocolate notes — it's another one that manages to deliver finesse and Médoc's signature clear menthol on the finish. This is elegant and absolutely delicious. Sweet flesh to the fruit, an excellent wine in this vintage. Just a touch short on the finish, but this is a brilliant advert for the Cru Artisan label. 30% new oak. Produced from a plot of 9,000 vines per hectare on gravel terroir between Margaux and St-Julien. It was created in 1982 by Serge St-Martin, the father of Cru Artisan's new president, Maxime. Drinking Window 2020 – 2032

## Château Moutte Blanc, Margaux 2015

93

Sweet cherry on the nose and good, firm grip from the tannins that are supporting, but not overpowering, the fruit. No need to wait too long, but you are certainly getting some Médoc typicity here, which grows through the palate. This captures the idea of Cru Artisan, not too polished or trying too hard, but still delivering the complexity and intensity that you still want from a 2015 Margaux. This should age well, definitely feel the grip in the front of the mouth. Overall well balanced. Made from just 0.4ha in Margaux. Drinking Window 2021 – 2032

## Château Micalet, Haut-Médoc 2015

92

A touch of gloss is evident from the attack, nothing too much but there is ground coffee and chocolate — notes that I have found rarely in tasting Cru Artisan wines. The tannins are perky and hold you right through the palate. This has life and staying power, no question. It positively pulls you up; the acidity is high, but it's caught by the fruit and tannins. Good quality, layers of flavour. It's certified organic, made by brothers Damien and Dominique Fedieu from sandy gravel soils. 30% new oak used. Drinking Window 2020 - 2032

## Clos de Bigos, Margaux 2015

92

The finesse of the aromatics is in evidence and the tannins have some bite, they close down around the fruit and hold on tight. This clearly needs time to open, but it's really very enjoyable and it's a level up in terms of ageing potential. Black fruits with some slate tones. This comes from a tiny 2ha estate of

gravel and sand soils. Vinified in cement before 18 months of oak ageing. Drinking Window 2021 – 2032

## Château de Coudot, L'Excellence, Haut-Médoc 2015

91

Needs a little time in the glass to open up, which is a good sign for a young wine. Slightly clumsy oak on the finish but it is charming. It has good, textured fruit; unfussy black brambly and damson fruits. Alcohol inches a little higher, but there is still some sense of restraint and it gives a good mouthfeel. Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

## Château Le Bouscat, Haut-Médoc 2015

91

This starts well, with good juiciness through the palate. The tannins are insistent; they are right there watching over the entire palate as it evolves and unfurls, ready to catch any stray pieces of fruit. This is good, it has an enjoyable earnestness, and seems to sum up Cru Artisan. This château is located in St-Laurent du Médoc, between St-Julien and Pauillac. Owned by Lucienne and Roger Parfait, now run by their children: Jean-Philippe, Béatrice and Claire. Drinking Window 2019 – 2028

## Château Fleur Lauga, St-Julien 2015

91

The silky fruit is evident right from the first nose. Things close down pretty fast on the palate, and this is clearly going to need a few years to settle in before opening up. I keep coming back to the aromatics and smiling — there is clear fruit here and good texture. This estate used to be called Capdet, until 2014 when it changed owner and was renamed. Drinking Window 2020 – 2030

## Château Graves de Pez, L'Irrésistible, St-Estèphe 2015

91

Rich raspberry and cedar on the nose, backed up by cherry on the attack, which softens to redcurrant as a shot of acidity comes in through the mid palate. Medium weight, with plenty to enjoy — a fresher expression of 2015, with real charm. Aged in 50% new oak. Only 1,000 bottles made. Drinking Window 2019 – 2028

## Château Les Graves de Loirac, Médoc 2015

90

Owner Jean-François Gillet works with the local chamber of agriculture to introduce as many low-intervention practices as possible. There's a touch of sexy burnished oak going on here. It has impact and a silky texture, with some lovely fruit to back up the oak. A flavourful wine and a good deal of texture for your money at Cru Artisan level. A little short, it lacks the complexity of its more revered brothers on the peninsula, but this is good. Vines planted on gravelly soils close to the estuary at Jau-

Dignac-et-Loirac (a village where I have found a few excellent growers incidentally). Drinking Window 2019 – 2028

## Château de Coudot, Haut-Médoc 2015

90

An interesting piece of history here: in the first Feret guide in 1850, the tiny commune of Coudot in Cussac-Fort-Médoc had 10 Cru Artisans. Today, this is the only one that remains, owned by Joël Blachard. Deep in colour, rich and almost brooding, an immediate and clear distinction between Médoc and Haut-Médoc. Layers of mouthfilling fruit, good balance, a touch of a dip through the mid-palate, but there is plenty to feast on along the way and the tannins are firm yet pliable. Aged in both barrels and tanks. Drinking Window 2020 – 2030

## Château Graves de Pez, St-Estèphe 2015

90

This wine is not yet officially Cru Artisan, but has been submitted for the next listing (due out in May 2018). Light ruby red in colour and expression. This feels unforced, unfettered and vibrant. Not as intense as some, it's medium bodied but it does have really flavourful fruit, with a good seam of acidity for balance. Pretty and slightly floral, this is good quality and for early drinking. The grapes from this vineyard were sent to the local cooperative until 2009, when the family took them back to make and bottle on site. Drinking Window 2019 - 2029

## Château Garance Haut Grenat, Médoc, 2015

89

Rich purple in colour; a lovely 2015. Subdued on the nose at the moment, with hints of dark spice. This has elegance and poise, though it's withheld right now. The fruit is not overly generous for such a good vintage, but definite potential. There are clear spicy notes coming in from the generous percentages of both Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Opens well in the glass too, this is really one to look out for. 30% new oak was used. Old vines at an average of 63 years, this estate was created by Laurent Rebes in 1998 and has Eric Boissenot as the consultant. Drinking Window 2020 – 2030

## Château La Tessonnière, Médoc 2015

89

Good structure to this wine; silky texture, firm and bright black fruits, with gentle spice — there is a dash of Malbec in here along with Petit Verdot. A great sense of balance has been achieved here, I can see a lot of enjoyment ahead for the clay-limestone soils in Bégadan and Civrac. Good for food because there's a firm seam of acidity, as so often in the Médoc. Aged in both barrels and vats. From the fourth generation of the Colemyn family. Drinking Window 2019 - 2028

## Château de Lauga, Haut-Médoc 2015

89

Dark glass-staining crimson, these Haut-Médocs look far more like 2015s than the Médocs. This has brooding tannins and grip, definite potential for ageing and the ambition for it, too. Cassis and menthol notes, as well as some clear oak that gives power and structure, though it's not burnished or overly sexy. Located in Cussac-Fort-Médoc, just south of St-Julien, on gravelly soils. Touch of Carménère in the blend here and 10% new oak used. The winemaking consultant is Eric Boissenot. Drinking Window 2020 – 2030

## Château Gaston-Rena, Haut-Médoc 2015

89

Ripe, with rich chocolate and damson flavours, this is a generous red, with attractive aromatics that carry through to the palate. A little too sweet on the finish, as there are some caramel oak notes. A wine with a sense of occasion. Drinking Window 2019 – 2029

## Domaine Grand Lafont, Haut-Médoc 2015

89

These colours go deep, there's no messing around with their Médoc heritage. Some hazelnut notes on the attack here, which deepen across the palate. It's a little strangulated at times but it has impact and focus. A touch of drying oak comes in on the finish, but the fleshy black fruits hold out. Drinking Window 2019 – 2028

## Château Moutte Blanc, Haut-Médoc 2015

89

Good, ripe brambly fruits; well-defined, unpolished and unfussy. Firm uplift and tannins, should age well. Rich red fruits as it progresses through the palate with some Médoc finesse. Slightly drying finish. 70% new oak. The same estate has a wine in Margaux AOC. Drinking Window 2019 – 2028

## Château Lagorce Bernadas, Moulis 2015

89

A touch lighter in colour than some, with smoked ruby red fruit notes, caramel brioche along with the black cherry. There are some clear grilled cloves and cinnamon. It's smooth and easy drinking, there's no need to wait too long for this. This is enjoyable if a little simpler in expression than some. The estate has 2.2ha (1.7 in production) planted to 9,000 vines per hectare, owned by Martine Valette. Drinking Window 2019 – 2028

## Château Haut-Gravat, Médoc 2015

88

Made by the fifth generation of the Lanneau family working just over 9ha. Rich cherry red, the oak is a little dominant on the first nose. But on the attack there is very clear black cherry, it has real personality and spark. An early drinker, with good acidity and sense of lift. Cheerful. Drinking Window 2018 – 2025

## Château d'Osmond, Haut-Médoc 2015

88

Colour is still dark and there's some clear cassis fruit that's slightly softened, with some caramel oak apparent on the nose. This has clear ambition but it's a little strangled on the finish. Located in Cissac between Pauillac and St-Estèphe. 20% new oak used. Drinking Window 2019 - 2029

## Château Ferré, Haut-Médoc 2015

88

There is a lot to enjoy in this wine; it's a little austere compared to some, but with clean fruits, well extracted. It's just a little on the fresher side, which pulls the sides in a touch. This should unfurl and age well for at least a decade. Drinking Window 2020 – 2028

## Château Tour Bel Air, Haut-Médoc 2015

88

This has arms and walls, no doubt, plus ambition. A little stockier than some, the register of fruit is dark and brambly, but the finish is just a touch abrupt, with some slight drying, or at least quickening, oak. The vines are planted over two distinct terroirs — one gravelly and one more sandy. Owned by Patrice Belly, aged for 18 months with 12 months in oak, eight in bottle. Drinking Window 2019 - 2028

## Château des Graviers, Margaux 2015

88

There is definite depth to the fruit, but I get almost Brett here, although it clears. There's certainly less precision. This is mouth-filling and enjoyable, it should age well but needs a little more definition. There are gravel outcrops in this vineyard that heads up to 23m at its highest point, making it one of the loftiest points of the Margaux appellation, in the village of Arsac. Touch of Malbec, Petit Verdot and Carménère in here, along with the three classic grapes of the Médoc; so giving this the full six allowable red varieties. 25% new oak. Vineyard worked biodynamically. 25% new oak, owned by Christophe Landry. Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

## Château Les Barrailots, Margaux 2015

88

Dark plum in colour, you can feel those tannins curling up along the side of the mouth before even taking a sip! This is still young and fairly subdued. The oak is a little evident right now, and overall the tannins are overpowering the fruit. It opens after 10 minutes in the glass, but remains subdued. This château has 7ha of gravel soils planted to 10,000 vines per hectare, owned by Yannick Martin-Brunet and worked entirely manually with zero weedkillers. Also, as an aside, it has a Braille label. Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

## Château Haut-Blaignan, Médoc 2015

87

This has some deft damson fruit, with good texture and clear menthol notes. Feels like a classic Médoc — restrained, elegant, majoring on dark fruits. A little underpowered through the mid-palate.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2026

## Château du Hâ, Haut-Médoc 2015

87

Juicy, dark bilberry fruits, with good tannins and some brioche notes. This is fairly sweet and it comes the slight twist of vanilla, making it an easy early drinker. The vines were replanted by Cédric and Isabelle Moreau on the sandy-gravel and clay-limestone soils, on the site of an older vineyard that had been abandoned after the First World War. Drinking Window 2019 - 2026

## Château Grand Brun, Haut-Médoc 2015

87

Produced from 10ha of gravelly soils in Cussac-Fort-Médoc, the vineyard was created in 1988 from the purchase of several small plots. This closes things down, a little medicinal, with some cloves, as well as notes of cinnamon and coffee. Not fully cohesive right now, but these firm tannins will unfurl over the next few years and it deserves a chance. Drinking Window 2020 – 2028

## Château Tour du Goua, Haut-Médoc 2015

87

Stately on the nose, a little subdued but there are lively black fruits when you give it a minute to open. The fruit is well matched by cinnamon and black pepper, with firm tannins. Not fully open yet, and it slightly tails off on the finish. But, in terms of value for money, this is well worth exploring. The château is owned by brothers Alain and André, their 15ha is located in Cussac-Fort-Médoc, the last commune before you arrive at St-Julien-Beychevelle. Drinking Window 2020 – 2030

## Château Bejac Romelys, Médoc 2015

86

This starts well, with round supple dark red fruits, some raspberry and soft berries, gentle tannins even at two years old. A left bank signature comes through in the sense of restraint, and the fresh acidities. Although those same acidities start to become a little overly present towards the close, with slightly drying oak. This does not reveal itself as well as some in the glass. Owners Sylvie and Xavier Berrouet created the estate in 1986, but up until 1995 they sent the harvest to the local cooperative cellar. They today practise careful ageing — 12 months for the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon (one-third new oak), 18 months for the Petit Verdot (the only grape that they harvest by hand). Drinking

Window 2019 - 2025

## Château Vieux Gadet, Médoc 2015

86

Firm extraction, deep colours, lacks any violet vibrancy at this two year stage. Oak regime a little less polished than we are used to in the Médoc, this is a little drying on the finish. Again, the real pleasure here is upfront on the attack, but the close of play is a little subdued. Drinking Window 2019 – 2025

## Château Lamongeau, Haut-Médoc 2015

85

The aromatics are fairly high, with some sweet damson notes and a touch of spiky acidity. Soft tannins — this is an early drinker. Drinking Window 2019 - 2018

## Château Gadet Terrefort, Médoc 2015

84

The fruit is just a little stalky, I get some pyrazine and the oak doesn't feel fully integrated. There are soft fruit flavours, and clearly they tried to control the extraction. A reminder perhaps that the Médoc (this is up past Lesparre as the peninsula narrows) were more affected by rain in 2015 than the Haut-Médoc. 30% new oak was used. At 38ha, it's from a relatively large property for a Cru Artisan. It's run by Anaïs Bernard, granddaughter of the founder Fernand Bernard. Drinking Window 2018 - 2022