

Vendanges in Bordeaux

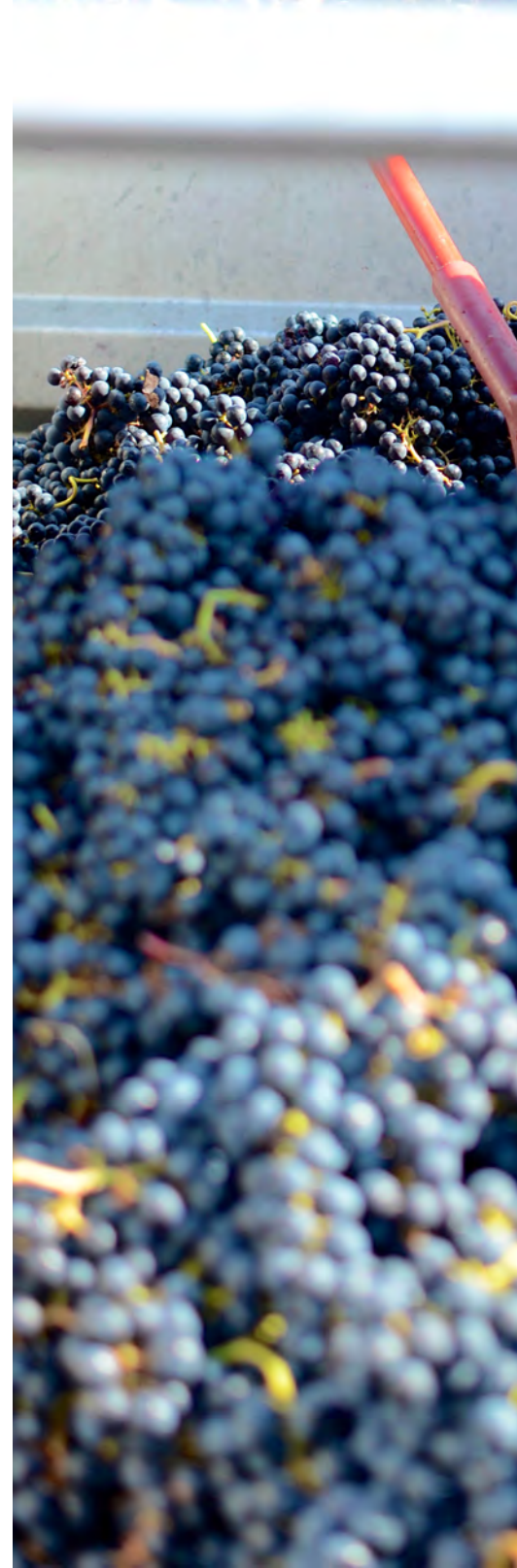
Picking with a Purpose

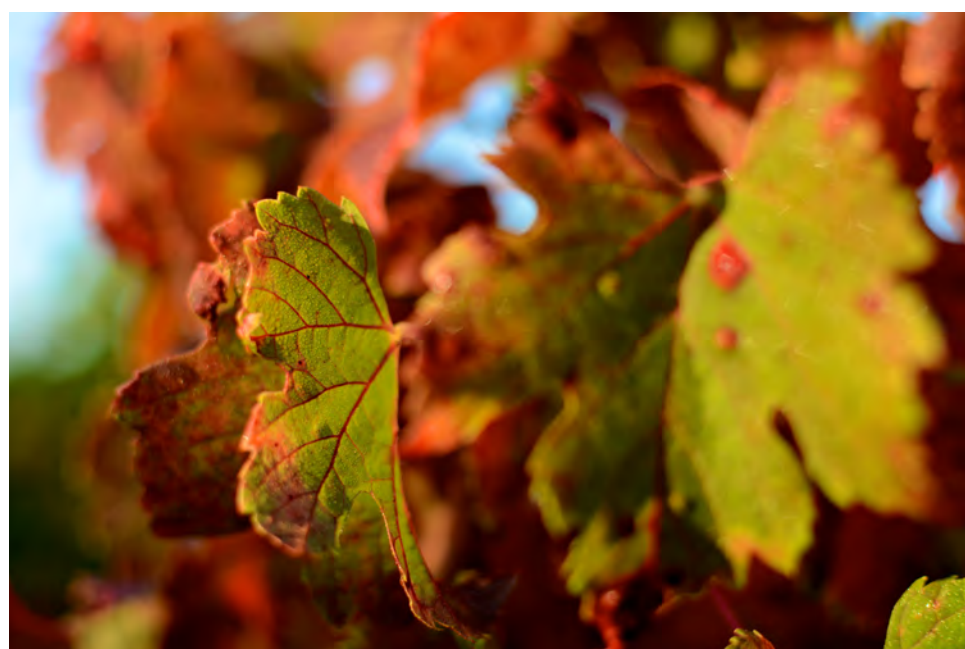
By Leah Walker

My alarm shakes me from my sleep, and from my king-size bed at Hôtel Fouquet's Barrière, I see the darkened Eiffel Tower. The hundreds of Justin Bieber fans who clogged Fouquet's entrance and the Avenue George V the day before have disappeared. At 5:30 a.m., Paris is still in a slumber. Haussmann buildings are dark and streets are essentially deserted. Early morning in Paris is special, and something I don't see nearly enough.

The halls at Gare Montparnasse are all but empty, a far cry from the madness that will ensue in a few hours. Coffee and croissant lines move quickly and announcements can actually be heard. A small crowd gathers around the massive departure board waiting for tracks to be announced. I scan the board for train #8461 to Bordeaux. It's harvest season, and I'm going to the famed French wine country, along with employees of Hôtel Fouquet's Barrière, for vendanges.

Not just about Merlot and Malbec, this three-day trip has a mission. Fouquet's has created a charitable sustainability development project, along with Marie-Laure Lurton, the owner of three châteaux in the Médoc area of Bordeaux: Château La Tour de Bessan in the Margaux Appellation, Château de Villegeorge





in the Haut-Médoc appellation and Château Duplessis in the Moulis en Médoc appellation. Since 2009, the collaboration between these two respected French brands has raised approximately €271,000 that have benefited the Bordeaux region.

In the beginning, the project resulted in the reforestation of 40 hectares in the municipalities of Gabardon. Trees were planted to offset the impact of a large solar plant located in Bordeaux. This environmental effort is a natural extension of Fouquet's business practices. With 'Dignified Luxury' as their motto, Fouquet's is the first hotel in Europe to be Leading Green certified for incorporating sustainable practices into their hotel and restaurants. From solid waste recycling to energy-saving elements to Fair Trade products, the hotel

proves that luxury can have a conscience.

On this Friday morning, a party of twenty is southbound out of Paris. It's an eclectic mix of Fouquet's employees that includes everyone from managers to maids. My French is terrible, but I can sense the excitement on the train. It's an honor and privilege to be chosen to participate in vendanges, and one look at the itinerary tells me why. The trip isn't just about picking grapes for charity. There are also plenty of wine and gastronomic experiences thrown in for good measure. It's just one of the many reasons why I love France. There's no such thing as all work and no play, especially when it comes to vin and culinary.

Three hours by train and two more



by bus and we arrive at Château de Buros in Escalans, an area known for Armagnac and which feels like the rural West Texas of my childhood. I climb onto a flatbed trailer attached to an old tractor. Behind the wheel is Mr. Barrère, the mayor of Escalans. He takes us to a brush-covered labyrinth used to lure and capture palombe on their yearly pilgrimage to Africa. With ropes, pulleys and nets, catching the birds is about tradition rather than food. Then it's on to the mayor's farm for an introduction to courses Landaises, a mix of gymnastics and bull fighting. Specific to the region, it combines

bloodshed. I'm shown a part of France I never imagined existed.

A fog covers Médoc, and there is a chill in the early-morning air. Clad in hot pink polo shirts especially designed for vendanges, the group boards the bus bound for Château La Tour de Bessan. The fruit is ripe, and we have a field to pick. Just as in previous years, Marie-Laure Lurton takes the sustainably-grown grapes gathered by Fouquet's for fermentation, maturation and bottling. In the spring, those bottles are auctioned off at Fouquet's in Paris. This year, as in last, the money raised from the auction will not go



to planting trees, but rather invested into a child-focused community center that serves the 27 towns of the Communauté de Communes des Landes d'Armagnac. (We toured the much-needed facility the day before.)

Armed with aprons, baskets and razor-sharp clippers, we take to the field. The more ambitious men strap hulking green plastic containers to their backs. Row by row, we work with precision to relieve the Merlot grapes from their vines. Once our baskets are full, we dump the grapes into buckets. Like turtles, the men slowly climb the ladders and empty

the bulging buckets into a mechanical sorter hitched to a tractor. It's a process that will be repeated dozens of times over several hours. It's backbreaking labor, especially with the warm sun beating down, but the exuberance of the group has only slightly faded with the morning's cool breeze. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most, and it is being relished.

The culmination of a food-, work- and wine-filled weekend is a Saturday night gala dinner. Dressed in attire fitting the occasion, we gather one last time to celebrate a job well done. Kisses and gratitude

are exchanged, while various vintages of Ms. Lurton's wines are savored. I look around the room and, for a second, try to decipher the French being spoken, before breaking into a broad smile.

This is a unique opportunity, and one that's not lost on me. I've gotten to experience vendanges in one of the most respected wine regions in the world, alongside the staff of Hôtel Fouquet's Barrière, a storied French luxury brand. I've peeked into the culture and traditions of southwest France and developed a dangerous taste for Armagnac. Most important, I've had a small hand in helping a

community and that warms me more than any Bordeaux Merlot.

Several months later, I receive a DVD, a video compilation of the time in Bordeaux. I'm reminded of the renowned pastry chef and young sommelier who worked beside me, as well as the eccentric mayor of Escalans in his sheepskin vest. My mouth waters just thinking of Marie-Laure Lurton's wine, and I long for the fall landscape of Medoc. I learn that the fruits of our labor raised €43,000 at the Fouquet's auction, confirming that the ability to give back is one of the greatest luxuries of all.