



'It's become fashionable to produce super-concentrated wine with as few as four clusters per vine, but there's a danger the wine lacks balance. Perhaps the wine is more sexy, but where is the purity and elegance?'

THE RELUCTANT SUPERSTAR

Christian Moueix likes to keep a low profile. The trouble is, he's at the helm of the very high-profile Château Pétrus. **MARGARET RAND** meets Pomerol's man of the soil whose modesty, attention to detail and intellectual rigour make him a worthy Decanter Man of the Year

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTIAN MOUEIX WAS PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR DECANTER BY GUY CHARNEAU AT CHATEAU PETRUS, POMEROL

The last thing Christian Moueix said as we parted at the door of his offices in Libourne was 'Make it a modest piece' – a slightly difficult request, under the circumstances. He's Decanter's 2008 Man of the Year: am I supposed to damn him with faint praise? It's a tricky one, I'm sure you'll agree. But for him, accepting the honour at all was tricky. He nearly became the first person to decline it, through pure modesty. What persuaded him was that there had never been a Person of the Year from the Right Bank of Bordeaux, and accepting would be good for Pomerol. It would also be good for the people working for him. So he said yes. And I rolled up to the offices of Etablissements Jean-Pierre Moueix (JPM), wondering how on earth I was going to persuade this most private of men to talk about himself.

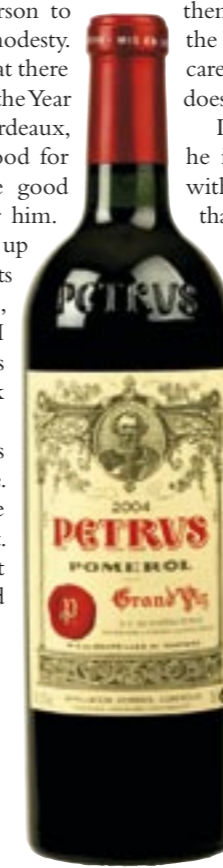
Before we talk to him, let's talk about him for a minute. Why make him Man of the Year? Well, it's not difficult. He's an iconic figure, not least because he has never chased

Moueix says that Pétrus is just 'the icing on the cake'. His real job is as a merchant

fashion. Instead he has stuck relentlessly to what he believes in – and what he believes in is terroir. His quest for perfection in its expression has made him an inspiration to winemakers around the world – and to consumers, for whom he is proof that trends are not everything in wine. His intellectual rigour is second to none: many may feel instinctively that his is the right path for wine, but Moueix can tell them why it is. And can show them: the body of work he has built up in his career speaks for itself. But, as I say, he doesn't reveal too much about himself.

I realise only gradually how private he is. He's so charming, so generous with his time, so amused and amusing that he feels like an old friend – yet when I count up what I have actually learned about him, it doesn't amount to much. Ets Jean-Pierre Moueix was created by his father, and Moueix has been president since 1991. Since 1970 he has been in charge of making Château Pétrus, and sells it exclusively for export markets, along with a selection of other Right Bank wines.

His approach to viticulture and winemaking has been most sharply defined by the rise of the powerhouse wines at the other end of the Right Bank spectrum: where *garage* wines



MOUEIX AT A GLANCE

Born: 1946

Children: Edouard, 31, who has worked for JPM for four years; and Charlotte, 29, a wildlife vet in South Africa.

Role: not just running Pétrus and other top Right Bank properties: his real job, he says, is as a merchant, buying and selling the wines of his St-Emilion and Pomerol neighbours. Moueix also buys around 70% of Pomerol's bulk wine to produce generic wines.

How does he buy a vineyard? In winter, in the rain – to see the drainage.

Interests outside wine: Art, opera, architecture, literature, horseracing

Other companies: Autres Rivages, developed by Edouard. It handles the classed growths of the Médoc, and imports Dominus.

are associated with extreme ripeness (which Michel Rolland, for example, would call 'optimum ripeness'), Moueix is associated with a ripeness which gives less alcohol and no raisiny flavours – which he, in his turn, would also call optimum ripeness. If some parts of the Right Bank equal concentration and modernity, does Moueix equal something more Left Bank – old-fashioned, conservative? Something lighter, certainly. Less technical, less >



Above: Managing the JPM vineyards, including Château Pétrus, is what Moueix likes best: 'I like having a dialogue with the vines'

interventionist in the winery. Says Moueix, 'Michel Rolland has said that if he had my terroirs he would probably make wines like me, but he is called in like a doctor, and told to make the best wine possible.' Which still leaves Moueix as the leader of the traditionalist end of Bordeaux, a position with which he says he is comfortable. Does he ever feel embattled? 'Yes, but we know that there are cycles. I hope this is only a fashion.'

It is easy to see Moueix as the opposite of the Rolland school. Too easy. Because Rolland picks super-late and supposedly likes super-concentration doesn't mean that Moueix picks early and favours super-lightness. On the contrary, he

picks as late as possible before the autumn rains set in. He is excited to have acquired a hand in Château Belair, which he feels is capable of recapturing the status it held among St-Emilion châteaux in the late 19th century – if they 'strive for greater concentration in some vintages'. Back in 1973, Moueix was the first to start crop-thinning – something so shocking that he was denounced from the pulpit in St-Emilion, and was so criticised by his father that he had to dump the rejected bunches at night in the river.

He studied at Davis in 1968-9, after taking a degree in agricultural engineering in Paris. 'It was so exciting, being young in California,' he says. In 1970, >

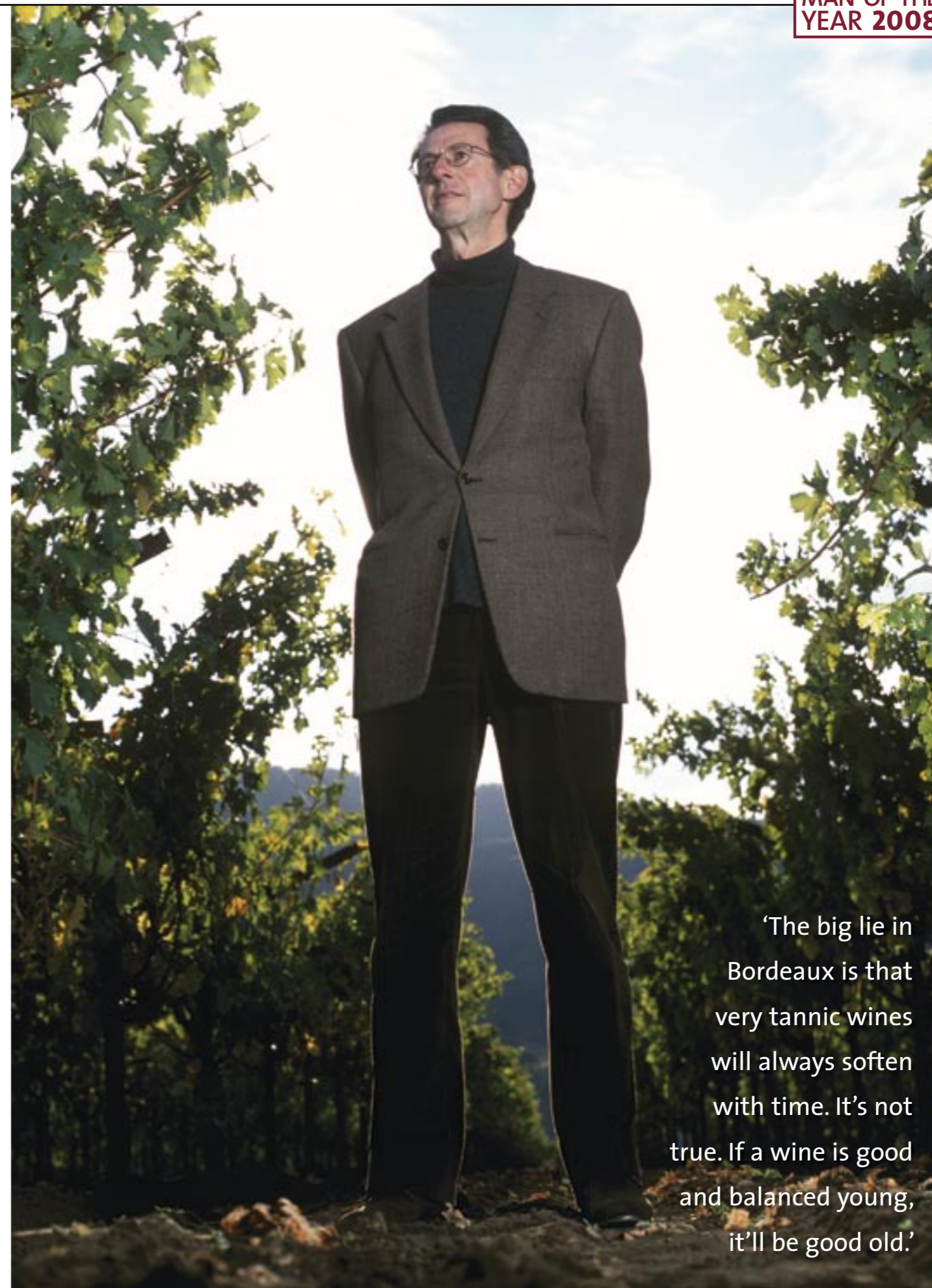
'Christian Moueix has been the reference point in Pomerol – indeed on the Right Bank – almost as long as I can remember. In a world of hype and big claims, his calm, invariably courteous voice is as familiar and reassuring as vine rows. Sober assessment and perfect attention to detail, a work ethic inherited from agricultural ancestors, unhurried judgement and elegant understatement – do these qualities sound inspiring? They are to me, and not just because of their rarity. The Moueix Pomerol estate (and Dominus in Napa) is, I always think, more like a Burgundy domaine than an estate in Bordeaux: it is the land, not the brand, speaking – and Christian is its human voice'

Hugh Johnson

'Christian is a great wine merchant, great winemaker and, moreover, a great person. He is always discreet and thinking about other people. I have learned a lot from him and I am proud to work with him and to share his friendship'

Yasuhisa Hirose, president, Enoteca

PHOTOGRAPHS: GUY CHARNEAU; CLAY MCLACHLAN/CLAYPIX.COM



'The big lie in Bordeaux is that very tannic wines will always soften with time. It's not true. If a wine is good and balanced young, it'll be good old.'

DECANTER HALL OF FAME: PAST RECIPIENTS

2007 Anthony Barton	Bordeaux	1994 May-Eliane de Lencquesaing	Bordeaux
2006 Marcel Guigal	Rhône	1993 Michael Broadbent	London
2005 Ernst Loosen	Mosel	1992 André Tchelistcheff	California
2004 Brian Croser	Adelaide Hills	1991 José Ignacio Domecq	Jerez
2003 Jean-Michel Cazès	Bordeaux	1990 Prof Emile Peynaud	Bordeaux
2002 Miguel Torres	Penedès	1989 Robert Mondavi	California
2001 Jean-Claude Rouzaud	Champagne	1988 Max Schubert	Australia
2000 Paul Draper	California	1987 Alexis Lichine	Bordeaux
1999 Jancis Robinson MW OBE	London	1986 Marchese Piero Antinori	Florence
1998 Angelo Gaja	Piedmont	1985 Laura and Corinne Mentzelopoulos	Bordeaux
1997 Len Evans, OBE AO	Australia	1984 Serge Hochar	Lebanon
1996 Georg Riedel	Austria		
1995 Hugh Johnson OBE	London		

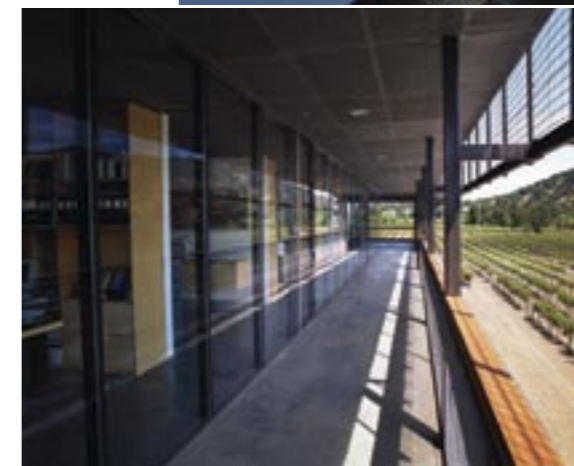
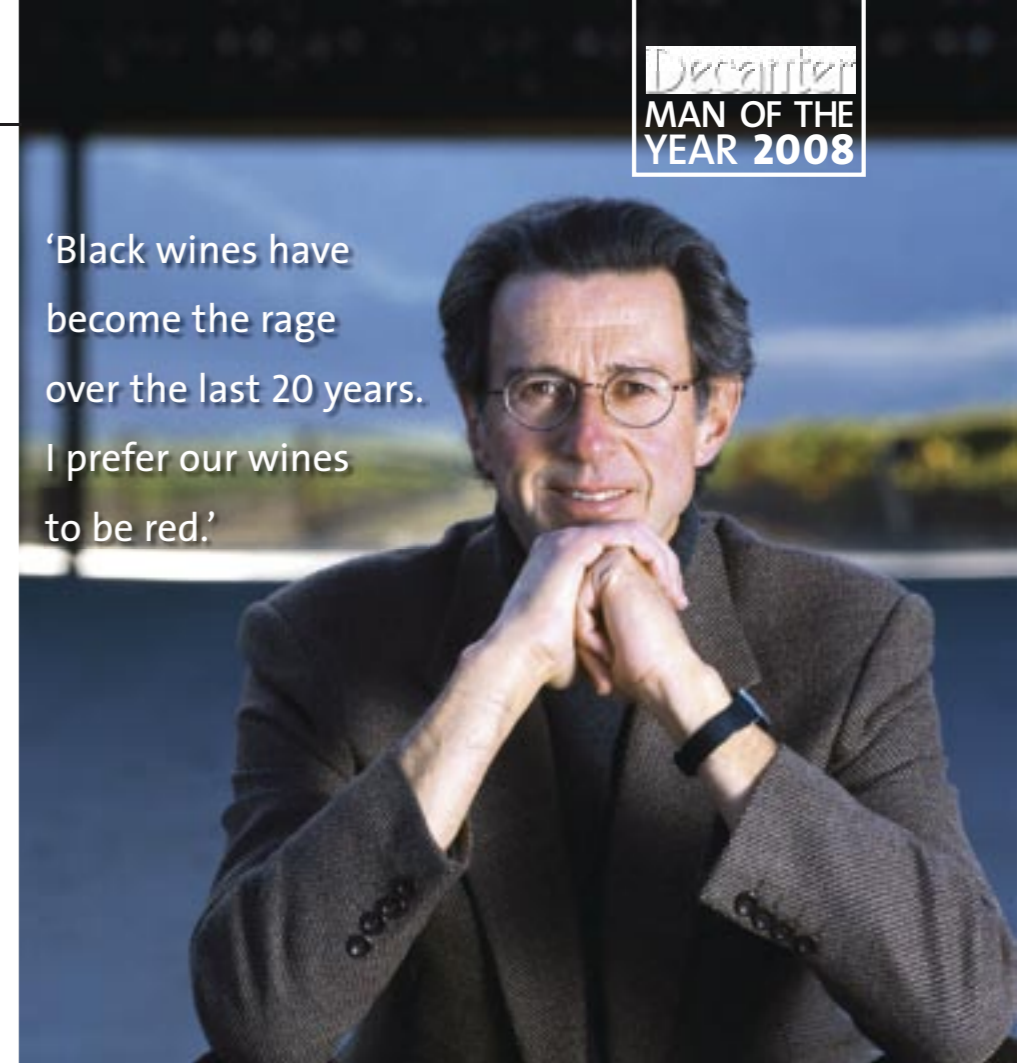
however, it was back to Libourne, where his father put him in charge of the company estates, and he ran them until 1977, when his father decided he needed him on the commercial side. The estates were the châteaux that JPM had acquired since Jean-Pierre founded the firm in 1937. They included Magdelaine in St-Emilion and, in Pomerol, Lagrange, Latour à Pomerol, La Fleur Pétrus, Trotanoy and half of Pétrus, which JPM managed. In subsequent years more properties have been added: La Grave, Certan Marzelle, Providence, Hosanna, and the management of Lafleur Gazin. And most recently, a share of Belair.

Managing these estates was exactly what Moueix liked best. He loves vines; loves watching them, checking on them, 'having a dialogue with them', as he puts it. To be out in a vineyard is pure pleasure for him: 'when I have nothing else to do on a Sunday in winter, I'll go pruning.' His wife Cherise prunes with him, and when cars arrive, they hide. Pruning is almost an obsession with him: it's the foundation of the wine, the reason he can be non-interventionist in the winery. His dream is to have just one acre of vineyard and do everything himself, from pruning to picking. Does this mean he has a secret yen to be a *garagiste*? Er, no. 'I would drink the wine myself. But I'd like to end my life like that, cultivating my garden.'

Career-wise, though, things were inevitably different. 'When you begin your career at this level it's hardly a personal achievement. And in 1981 I had a desire to create something on my own.' He was 35 at the time, and where else would he look but California? He went prospecting in the Napa Valley in 1981, and found the Napanook vineyard in Yountville. This he turned into Dominus, saying at the time that it would take him 20 years to make a great wine. 'After 10 years, in 1991, I made a very good wine. I hope to make a great wine one day. It takes time to understand a vineyard.'

Dominus is a private venture, and despite its motto of 'Napa terroir, Bordeaux spirit', through discretion, Moueix never serves Dominus in Bordeaux. 'It's not an achievement, yet, but it's part of my daily life. Each morning, from 5am until 6am, I work on California. I receive faxes overnight with

'Black wines have become the rage over the last 20 years. I prefer our wines to be red.'



Above: Moueix founded Dominus, in California, in 1981. He works from 5am–6am daily on Dominus: 'a way to escape'

every detail: which rows they've pruned, draft invoices – I run the company from here, though I have excellent management there. It's a way to escape, the best time of my day.' He and Cherise visit six times a year, for a week at a time, and he closely follows the harvest and takes all the major decisions.

A perfectionist, then? You bet. Cherise talks about his 'relentless quest for perfection': 'he pushes himself, he always has to go further; he never feels he has done a good job. He has a Catholic sense of being unworthy. Never feeling he's good enough has propelled him to achieve >

Christian Moueix is, superficially, one of the most self-deprecating producers in the world. But beneath that 24-carat charm lies steely determination and a sense of purpose that has had him and his wines ploughing an often lonely furrow dedicated to subtlety, classicism and ageability'

Jancis Robinson MW

'He has a style of politeness and natural courtesy that belong almost to another epoch. But his activity as both producer and negotiant is a model of up-to-date success, achieved with a rare absence of self importance. Above all, for me, he is a true and trusted friend'

Anthony Barton, Château Leoville-Barton

'Our only talent is to be respectful of terroir'. So Christian stated modestly at an event last year. When one considers his influence, both inspiring and restraining, on the wines of the Libournais over 25 years of dramatic changes in the region, it is also true that terroir should be respectful of Christian Moueix'

Steven Spurrier

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLAY MCLACHLAN/CEPHAS; BRUCE FLEMING/CEPHAS

greatness. He has a sweet soul.'

People say that he is modest, and he is: 'bowing himself out is very characteristic,' says wine writer Hugh Johnson. But being modest is not the same as being moderate. Moderate he is not. Even his generosity is immoderate: I went away with books on Diego Giacometti, a couple of whose pieces are in Moueix's art collection, and Gentleman Princeteau, two of whose canvases are in the JPM tasting room. (When he stayed with Hugh Johnson once, he arrived wearing an Hermès tie with frogs on it. Johnson admired it, and made the inevitable joke; when Moueix had gone, Johnson found the tie left behind, as a present.)

He's a big collector of art. He has a sculpture by the world-famous Richard Serra in the garden – he loves that minimalism, which in this case takes the form of three slabs of corten steel, each of which weighs 43 tonnes. The piece was originally entitled Threats of Hell, but Moueix was going through a difficult time himself at the time, and he couldn't stand it. He asked Serra, whose pieces are site-specific, to change the title. Serra agreed, and the piece is now called Hopes of Paradise, from The Rubayat of Omar Khayyam.

Then there's architecture: the Dominus winery was designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, and it's made of metal cages filled with rocks; it's a beautiful, harmonious building, but also severe, austere. 'It reads like him,' says Johnson. And he's right –

underneath the charm, the impeccable clothes, one senses a core of austerity. Moueix is hard on himself. When he was young, he travelled Asia barefoot on \$1 a day; there is, one might infer, something of the rigour of the monk about him.

How risk-averse is he? One's impression is that he's not rash; and yet one of his less predictable passions is horse-racing. 'He inherited a gambling instinct from his father,' says Sebastian Payne MW of The Wine Society. And every harvest means taking risks. 'Cherise can't sleep at harvest time, but I can.' Is his feeling for the weather part of this? 'I think about the temperature all the time. I have a thermometer in every room in the house.' Certainly he's intuitive. Payne says that Moueix seems to have the knack of predicting the quality of a vintage as early as the previous March. 'It's to do with the weather on Palm Sunday when he comes out of church – the way the wind's blowing, or something. He's often right. He was right about 2007.'

Moueix is the sole owner of JPM, this being the half of his father's business that came to him. 'My father was a very astute businessman', he says; astute enough, too, to divide his company between his two sons. As well as the châteaux, he'd bought the négociant firm of Duclot, where Moueix's elder brother Jean-François trained. Proprietor of Duclot as well as numerous fine wine shops in Bordeaux and Paris, Jean-François ('very brilliant, but not a man of the soil' says Moueix) is the owner

'A well deserved recognition for one of the most articulate advocates of fine wine. Christian has not only carried on his family's tradition in Bordeaux, but has brought that experience and rigour to his personal creation in the vineyards and superb wines of Dominus'

Paul Draper, Ridge Vineyards

'I salute Christian as a man of great integrity and intellect. Through his efforts Château Pétrus has reached great heights and world renown'

Abdallah H Simon, former chairman, Seagram Chateau & Estates Wine Co

of Petrus. 'My wish is that by the end of 2008 I will put some distance between myself and Pétrus,' says Moueix. 'We will still distribute Pétrus, but I want to be a consultant rather than the man in charge. To have been in charge from 1970 to 2008 is plenty of years. We need a younger team, which has already been named. Olivier Berrouet, the son of Jean-Claude [winemaker and technical director at JPM for 44 vintages, and just retired to become a consultant] is in his late twenties, and will train to become technical director of Pétrus. We're moving slowly: that's the style of the family.'

What of the future? 'The best wine is still to be produced,' says Moueix. 'I am enthusiastic, but being *Decanter* Man of the Year already has a feeling of the past. I hope I will produce better wines in the coming years than I ever have.' **D**

PHOTOGRAPHS: GUY CHARNEAU



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