

## Feature



A view of the wine production area of Château Figeac in St-Émilion, where wines are re-classified every 10 years.

## Thierry Manoncourt (1918 – 2010)



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Over the years, Bordeaux has given birth to many great wine people – men and women who, with their winegrowing skills, energy, dedication and hard work, enriched the wine world that we live in. Some have grown to become legends in their own lifetime, their influence and decisions shaping the Bordeaux we know today, achieving respect and admiration of their own peers and competitors.

Thierry Manoncourt was such a man. His death on August 27 has closed a chapter and marked the end of an era. Certainly for Bordeaux, but quite possibly for the wine world as a whole. It also opens a new page at Château Figeac, his beloved estate in St-Émilion, where he died peacefully in his sleep, aged 92.

After serving in the French army during World War II, Manoncourt studied agriculture and geological engineering. In 1947, he was entrusted with the reins of Château Figeac, which had been in his family since 1892.

After many years of neglect, absentee owners and general dereliction Manoncourt put all his energy and enthusiasm, as well as geological expertise, into the life and wines of the once famous property. The estate soon became his lifelong work and passion, and within a few years he managed to put Figeac back in the limelight.

By the mid-1950s Figeac had regained its reputation as one of Bordeaux's top wines and Manoncourt became one of the most important people in the

region. Being one of the first people to recognise the importance of collectivity and unity, together with a number of Saint-Émilionais, he pressed the authorities to establish the classification of St-Émilion. This was enlisted in 1955, with Figeac being recognised with the distinction of Premier Grand Cru Classe 'B'.

The early 1960s were spent communicating the qualities of the estate and St-Émilion as a whole, which culminated with him being elected as Premier Jurat (head of a body that promotes the wines of St-Émilion) in 1964, a position he held till 1987. Under his leadership, the Jurade travelled extensively and the wines of St-Émilion gained enormous success worldwide, especially in the UK and Belgium.

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This was also a time of great technological advances and investment in the wine world and the start of what was later to become the era of great quantum quality leaps.

In a tireless search for improving quality, Manoncourt was one of the first people in Bordeaux to use 100 per cent new oak barrels for his wines as well as one of the early advocates of the benefits of stainless steel.

Respectful of tradition and typicity, but at the same time embracing modern technology, way back in 1970 he installed 10 stainless steel vats to complement – not replace – the traditional oak vats at

Figeac, and in 1971 he commissioned the building of an underground cellar for bottle ageing. All of this was inspirational for the region's wine growers and many followed his example with investment both in vineyards and wineries.

He was also one of the first people to open his doors to interested visitors, with Figeac receiving in excess of 4,000 people a year. In the late 1980s he was joined at Figeac by his son-in-law, Comte Eric D'Aramon, who is today in charge of the estate's wines. Even after Manoncourt officially retired, many in St-Émilion still looked upon him as an inspirational father.

Over the years, Manoncourt played an important part in many associations and committees, including the *Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux*, the *Institut National des Appellations d'Origine* and other various departmental and national wine authorities. In 2009, he was given the *Légion d'honneur* by the French government.

I have known Manoncourt for the past 18 years and I know he appreciated all the honours he received, but he probably gained most satisfaction each time he saw people enjoying his wine.

Although he had delegated the running of Figeac to his son-in-law, he and his wife Marie-France remained highly visible at Figeac, giving many dinners and receiving dignitaries from all over the world. At one such dinner in 2007, the oldest wine poured was the 1950 Figeac. The wine prompted the guests to give the Manoncourts a spontaneous ovation.

I vividly remember the first time I met him at Figeac. Then, not very fluent in French, he was one of the first French wine people whom I truly understood when he talked about wine. I don't know whether it was his very well-spoken French, his reputation, or the Figeac 1982 that we were tasting, but what is for certain is that I was truly impressed with the approachability and



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presence of the man. Since then, my French has improved and I have been lucky enough to meet Manoncourt frequently. Over the years he and his family became very fond of the Maltese and he was actually planning to visit Malta early next year. Some years ago a Maltese TV crew interviewed him at home.

I have many fond memories of various occasions with him. One time, after seeing me having difficulties closing my cufflinks he walked to me and told me: “Normally my wife does this sort of thing, but I don't mind being my wife for a second or two”. He then closed my cufflinks.

One other time, I and a few other Maltese turned up unannounced to play tennis at Figeac's courts after a big lunch. Marie-France made lemonade while he opened a few bottles. The tennis was terrible, but the reception we got was fantastic.

Every time I met Manoncourt I felt very honoured to be in his

presence. For some reason or other I felt I learnt something new. Whether this was because Figeac is one of my favourite wines I don't know; but it is more likely that it was because whenever I visited Figeac I saw what wine is all about. History, family and continuity.

Everybody who loves St-Émilion is going to miss him. He was in many ways the embodiment of all that is best there: the warmth of welcome, and the combination of tradition and pride in history with the modern world.

His funeral took place on August 30. Over 1,000 people attended, including neighbouring winemakers, the staff of Château Figeac, and countless merchants and courtiers of the Bordeaux wine trade. Six remembrance books were placed for those present to record their memories. I just wrote: “We lost a friend”.

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