

**Special Introductory Offer To WINE SPECTATOR Magazine**

**Classifieds: Click Here**

**Free Wine of the Week Newsletter**

Enter your e-mail

Go

**Wine Spectator**  
Home

Sept. 16, 2004

Site Map | E-mail | Print

SEARCH

Please sign in

Home > Archives > September 30, 1997 > A Cut Above

**A Cut Above**

E-mail Print Subscribe Save this article

**September 30, 1997**

**A Cut Above**

**California sends skilled vineyard workers to Europe to help with vineyard conversions**

Armed with vineyard skills honed in Northern California, a team of six Mexican vineyard workers spent two months this summer grafting new grape varieties onto existing vines at châteaux Cantemerle and Carbonnieux in Bordeaux. They also worked in Burgundy, Switzerland, Germany and even England.

Most manual vineyard work in California is performed by Mexicans or Mexican-Americans. Grafting specialists, such as those who recently visited Europe, command \$18 per hour in California. The French paid them \$20 per hour, plus travel expenses.

Using techniques developed in the United States, the Mexican workers are able to graft a young Cabernet Sauvignon cutting, for example, onto a 10-year-old Cabernet Franc vine. Within a year, the grafted vine will produce the new grape variety. Even white grapes, including Chardonnay, can be grafted onto red grapevines such as Pinot Noir.

"It's better than replanting a new vine," said Daniel Bonnaud, vineyard manager at Château Cantemerle. (New vines do not generally produce a commercial yield until they have been growing for three years.) "This way, we only lose one year; we preserve the age of the vine and [thus] the quality of the wine."

Château Cantemerle grows 167 acres of vines in the Haut-Médoc region of Bordeaux and makes a red wine blended from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. The château is currently converting 25 acres of Cabernet Franc to Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot, which will undoubtedly change the final

- Sign In
- WS Weekly
- Wine Ratings
- Daily Wine News
- Forums
- Dining
- Travel
- Archives**
- Wine Basics
- Vintage Charts
- Collecting
- Wineries
- Wine Retailers
- Calendar of Events
- Classifieds
- Wine Jobs
- Gift Shop
- Back Issues
- Advanced Search
- Full Access
- Wine School
- Help



Click here for the current issue

- MAGAZINE SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES**
- Subscribe to Wine Spectator
  - Give a Gift
  - Renew
  - Pay Online
  - Customer Service

**NEW COURSE!**

**Discover California Cabernet!**

Discover different cabernets at various price points

Explore top cabernet wineries and grapegrowing regions and much more ...

**Wine Spectator SCHOOL**

**Enroll Today!**



[Impact Databank](#)  
2004 Edition:  
[Click to Order](#)

[Please Sign In](#)

blend and flavor of future vintages.

"There is a lack of structure and concentration in our Cabernet Franc," Bonnaud explained. "It's weak in color and tannin as well." By increasing the amount of Cabernet Sauvignon and, to a lesser degree, Petit Verdot, Cantemerle believes it will make a more powerful wine. "Our goal is to improve quality. We want to compete with the big names."

Even big names like Château Cheval-Blanc--known for a blend that features a high percentage of Cabernet Franc--are getting into the grafting game. In 1996 Cheval-Blanc grafted 2,800 Cabernet Franc and Malbec vines (about an acre's worth) to Merlot.

Worldwide Vineyards, founded by Paul Birebent, is the French company that contracts elite Mexican grafters to work at European wine estates. Birebent discovered U.S. techniques while on a trip to California 15 years ago. He tested the grafting technique known as "t-budding" on vines at his 400-acre vineyard in Corsica. "The neighbors would come and ask him to do a little for them as well," said Birebent's son, Pierre, who helps coordinate the transatlantic operation from his home in Napa Valley.

In 1988, Corsican separatists blew up the Birebents' winery, and the family moved to southern France, where they set up a vineyard management company specializing in grafting. "Most of our work is in the south [as in Languedoc], but now it's moving to Bordeaux and other areas," Pierre said.

Do Frenchmen graft vines themselves? "We get the best results with the Mexicans," said Cantemerle's Bonnaud, stating that no other grafters will guarantee him 90 percent success in the vineyard grafts.

"We've been teaching a lot of people in France [to graft]," said Enrique Martin del Campo, 34, one of Worldwide Vineyards' Mexican team members. "It takes a few years to learn the techniques and be fast. But the French will never be at our level as quick."

--Jeff Morgan

9/30/97

[Back to Menu](#)

If you are interested in purchasing reprints of a recent article, please contact the Reprint Department at [reprints@mshanken.com](mailto:reprints@mshanken.com).  
(Minimum quantity: 500 copies)

[Purchase back issues of Wine Spectator magazine](#)

---

[Wine Spectator job opportunities](#)

---

[Sign In](#) | [Wine Ratings](#) | [Daily Wine News](#) | [Dining](#) | [Travel](#) | [Archives](#) | [Wine Basics](#) | [Vintage Charts](#) | [Collecting](#) | [Wineries](#) | [Wine Retailers](#) | [Forums](#) | [Calendar of Events](#) | [Classifieds](#)

Looking for a great wine?

Find it at a great wine shop.

CLICK HERE to find a retailer near you.