

SAGA | SAINTE-FOY CÔTES DE BORDEAUX (33)



What on Earth?!

“FIVE MINUTES”: THAT’S ALL THE TIME YVES PICANT NEEDED IN LATE 1986 TO PURCHASE AROUND 20 HECTARES OF VINES ON THE EDGE OF THE ENTRE-DEUX-MERS AS PART OF A COOPERATIVE. 36 YEARS ON, CHATEAU HOSTENS-PICANT HAS MADE A NAME FOR ITSELF AND IS HELD IN HIGH ESTEEM IN THE WORLD OF WINE. THE STORY OF A LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN WHICH HAS PUT THE SAINTE FOY CÔTES DE BORDEAUX APPELLATION FIRMLY BACK ON THE MAP.

By Jefferson Desport, photographs by Alain Benoît (Studio Deepix)

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Firstly, it's worth mentioning the view. In this easternmost part of Entre-deux-Mers, on the border of the Gironde, Dordogne, and Lot-et-Garonne departments, the topography unfolds with long undulations. It falls then rises again, outlining a landscape of hillsides edged with vines and forests. The statistics on population don't lie and there's no complaints from the wild game here—or from the mailman, for that matter: In Lèves-et-Thoumeyragues, five miles away from Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, census officials have counted just 36 inhabitants within a single square kilometer. It's highly unusual to have neighbors here. No bad thing. GPS is also recommended. It was this unspoilt panorama, enriched by 50 shades of green, that first convinced Yves Picant to purchase this property which would later become Château Hostens-Picant, one of the leading wineries in the Sainte-Foy Côtes de Bordeaux appellation. But back in December 1986, while the overall picture might have caught your eye and piqued your interest, the view was quite different: a crumbling building and about twenty hectares of vines were the estate's only redeeming features. It doesn't matter how different it looked back then. Yves Picant only had eyes for this vineyard. For this view, rather. Better still, he could picture himself there. It was love at first sight. Explosive. The kind that messes with your head and torments your soul. 36 years on, after the presidential elections last June—another tumultuous life event—the magic is still there. Taken from what is now the Hostens-Picants' garden, the photo hasn't aged a bit. "He signed on the dotted line after five minutes," recalls his wife, Nadine.

"I could picture this vineyard's potential straight away"
YVES HOSTENS-PICANT

At the time Yves Picant was a lover of fine foods and wine, but by no means a winemaker. And yet there is a world of difference between the kitchen and the cellar. This importer of medical equipment spent his day-to-day life on the road, a long way away from the subtleties of blending wines and selecting barrels. But this Arcachon native and adopted Parisian always retained links with the region and a fondness for south-west France. It was while on a round trip to the Bay of Arcachon, as a favor for a friend, that he ended up stopping in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande. Although he had already visited other wine estates, this was "a no brainer", he says. Done deal. So he returned to Paris with a sales agreement in hand. However, there was still another job Yves Picant needed to tackle, one much trickier than engaging in financial negotiations: He had to break the news to Nadine. Several days passed before he decided to take the plunge— and she wasn't particularly pleased when he eventually spilled the beans: "I called you all the names under the sun," she admits. That's when Yves Picant had another lightning bolt moment. What would his wife do there, in this remote corner of Gironde, 15 miles away from Saint-Émilion and half an hour's drive away from Bordeaux? "I'm a Parisian from Paris," she continues. A graduate from Nanterre University with a master's degree in History, she was a financial advisor for the Rothschild Group at the time. She was also a complete stranger to the subtleties of blending wines and the joys of *écoulage*, running off the wine in the vinification process. It seemed like a different world. Yet there she was, the unexpected owner of a vineyard, living proof that the distance between two planets is actually quite small after all...all you need is a little electricity. Although she initially arrived at the property overwhelmed with doubt, convinced that there was no future for her outside the French capital, any reservations she had dissipated immediately. The same causes and the same effects—just like her husband a few weeks prior, she fell under the vineyard's spell. Against all odds, the adventure of a lifetime began. Particularly so, because Yves was convinced that this was where he would make his wine. "I could see this vineyard's potential straight away," he points out. At this early stage it hadn't yet dawned on him "the amount of work that would be required." And yet, everything needed doing—renovating the house, redesigning the vineyard, and quitting the cooperative. But before all that, changing the name of the property came top on Yves and Nadine Picant's priority list. "There are Grangeneuve estates everywhere," she explains.

Previous pages, from left to right: Gabriel, Edouard, Yves, Charlotte and her husband, Nicolas, with their son Félix; Nadine, Valentine and her husband, Michel, with their sons Alexandre and Simon.



Yves et Nadine Hostens-Picant



Nadine et Valentine Hostens-Picant

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So they decided on Hostens-Picant, in tribute to Hostens, Yves's grandmother. Since then, they even took the name of their château. After being signed off by the French State Council, it's official—they now go by the names of Yves and Nadine Hostens-Picant.

The first three years were spent doing major work on the estate. They built a vat room and a cellar, and conducted numerous winemaking trials, all the while purchasing adjacent parcels until they reached 42 hectares of vines, the current surface area of their vineyard. Proof of their determination to see their wine flourish here, they also got in touch with an up-and-coming winemaker who went by the name of Michel Rolland. "He had already gained worldwide renown and, luckily for us, he showed an interest in our project," says Yves Picant. And in 1990, three years after their discreet arrival, they released their first Hostens-Picant vintage, available as a red—a Merlot and Cabernet Franc blend—and as a white—a Sauvignon, Semillon, and Muscadelle blend. Michel Rolland advised them for 14 years, playing a leading role in getting the estate off the ground. "He gave us invaluable advice, such as harvesting at optimum ripeness," highlights Yves. "This meant we could make wines where the quality shone through from the very first vintages."

"No one was expecting us, no one had heard about the château, the wines, or the appellation"

NADINE HOSTENS-PICANT

While the wheels were already set in motion in terms of the vineyard, on the commercial side, however, the entire distribution system needed to be created. Particularly the case given that in the early 1990s the Sainte-Foy Bordeaux appellation, which was based on a 1937 decree, was operating under the radar and had practically disappeared into obscurity. It was also a long way off the Grands Crus of Saint-Émilion, Pomerol, and the Médoc. "No one was expecting us, no one had heard about the château, the wines, or the appellation," explains Nadine. But she didn't give up. Quite the opposite. She was pragmatic, taking her samples and presenting them to restaurants in the French capital. "Only the winemakers from Corrèze were doing direct sales at the time. I canvassed all the restaurants in Paris. I met with 10 clients a day for 10 years. When you arrive with Hostens-Picant in Sainte-Foy Bordeaux, you have to go there. But I always expressed my appreciation to the Parisian sommeliers, they thought the wine was very good. They believed in us." And it wasn't long before Hostens-Picant found itself on wine lists at the most highly sought-after restaurants and garnered the respect of starred chefs. "We were selected at the Ritz and for Rostang, Guy Savoy, Yannick Alléno, and Joël Robuchon." And the list kept growing, with Cyril Lignac, Alain Llorca, La Mère Brazier, and L'hostellerie de Plaisance following suit. While Nadine developed the Parisian and French networks, Yves Picant tackled the export market and traveled to Asia to showcase Hostens-Picant. "I realized in 1992 that I had to dedicate myself to this estate full-time if I wanted to develop it to its full potential," he says. Nadine made the same move soon afterwards, leaving the Rothschild Group after 16 years of service. The success of Hostens-Picant now requires total commitment.

In this atypical trajectory, 2004 marked another turning point. It was in this year that Yves tasted a 1997 Chateau Pavie Macquin, the first classified Grand Cru from Saint-Émilion. A revelation. And yet, behind this wine emerged the figure of another winemaker whose name was starting to make waves: Stéphane Derenoncourt. "I was very impressed by the quality of this particular wine," says Yves. "It was exactly what I liked and what I was looking for in my own wines." Without giving it a second thought, Nadine contacted Stéphane Derenoncourt. "He came to the property," continues Yves. "We started working together straight after his visit." With the Rolland chapter over, it was time to start a new one. Yves Picant wanted to go one step further in formulating his wines: "In the first few months, we started a major restructuring of the vineyard, going from 3,300 vines per hectare to 6,600. We replaced parcels and carried out soil analyses, among other things. This has allowed us to reveal the richness of our terroirs on a yearly basis."

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18 years later, Stéphane Derenoncourt is still at the helm. Over the years the range has been expanded with the arrival of a premium cuvée, Lucullus, under Yves's impetus. Produced only when the vintage is of sufficient quality, this wine is soon set to benefit from a dedicated wine cellar equipped with small concrete tanks.

In 2013 Valentine and Charlotte, Yves and Nadine's two daughters, joined them on the estate. This is despite both women having previously taken completely different career paths. *"Russian is my passion,"* explains Valentine. *"I studied French Law and Russian at Nanterre, and I lived in Moscow."* But as soon as she graduated from law school, she decided she preferred Hostens-Picant to the courtroom. *"I wanted to return to the estate,"* she admits. So she accompanied her father on his tours of Asia, met clients, learned about winemaking, and gradually took over the reins of the commercial side. As for Charlotte, she initially studied at the Vatel Institute where she specialized in hotel management before leaving for the United States. Today she is responsible for Hostens-Picant's marketing and communications. Meanwhile, Yves's son Edouard has carved out a career in international law.

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NADINE HOSTENS-PICANT

“Neither myself nor my husband have inherited anything. We’ve built our own roots here, which is important,” comments Nadine. And these roots continue to grow. With the arrival of her daughters, the estate underwent another transformation: to organic wine. After a three-year conversion process, Hostens-Picant wines will be certified organic in 2023. But Valentine is setting her sights on even bigger things. Alongside Stéphane Derenoncourt's team, she is planning an even more ambitious and experimental project: agroforestry. *"We're going to pull up a parcel of vines and replant new ones, planting fruit trees alongside them, too. The idea is to see how the vine reacts in that kind of environment and to create genuine biodiversity."* Taking a leap into the unknown: a Hostens-Picant family specialty ■



IDENTITY CARD

The Château Hostens-Picant estate spans over 42 hectares. It produces some 200,000 bottles each year, both white and red. Hostens-Picant is on the wine list at a number of prestigious restaurants—Le Bec au Cauchois, Guy Savoy, and La Mère Brazier—but is also available in several wine cellars—La Cave de la Grande Epicerie, La Cave de Joël Robuchon, Les Repaires de Bacchus, and La Cave du petit Ballon. —50% of production is exported to America, Canada, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and China, etc. The company has also developed its wine tourism, opening a gîte and offering picnics alongside its direct sales on the estate.

“TERRE DE VINS LIKES”

HOSTENS-PICANT, WHITE, 2019
This cuvée des Demoiselles is an invitation to sit down for dinner. This Hostens-Picant white, cloaked in a golden yellow robe and carried by the Sauvignon, Semillon, and Muscadelle triptych, is characterized by citrus and white fruit notes with a hint of exotic fruits. The palate is rich and full-bodied; the substance is bold. The overall offering is a very round wine. Pair with coquilles Saint-Jacques. 21€



Yves et Charlotte Hostens-Picant