



“Across the gravelly hillside five yolks of yellow oxen drag five chains. I sent them forth at daylight to pull up the deep-rooted vineyard. Today and tomorrow and every day throughout the winter they will pace up and down the ordered channels, with heavy breath and gritting iron, hauling out the damp tap roots.”

So wrote Robert Meacham Davis at Château Dauzac in 1921. Robert Davis was an American protestant minister, poet, artist and journalist, and was commissioner for the Red Cross in the Balkans during the First World War. Why was he at Dauzac? He had fallen in love – it was a coup de foudre – with Kathleen Johnston, daughter of the famous négociant family, at the time proprietors of this Margaux fifth growth as well as Château Durcu-Beaucaillou, 2nd growth in Saint-Julien. Seeking somewhere to live after their marriage, the couple decided on Monbrison, one kilometre or so inland in the village of Arsac.

HISTORY OF CHATEAU MONBRISON

It is tempting but unproductive to try and connect the history of Monbrison with the Marquis de Montalambert, owner of the combined Durfort-Lascombes estate in the mid 18th century. In 1768 the widow of the Marquis de Montalambert divided this estate between her nephews, the Viscomte de Vivens and a M. Montbrison (a T and a Z). In fact, what is now Château Monbrison was a métairie of the neighbouring Château d’Arsac, which belonged to the powerful Ségur family. In 1749, it was ceded as an independent estate to a M. De Copmartin, an advisor of the King in Bordeaux, and it remained in the hands of the Copmartin family until 1818. On the 26th February of this year Madame François-Pierre Copmartin, née Anne Faure, sold her Arsac Domaine, at this time relatively small as regards vineyard, to Paul George Conquère de Monbrison for 75000F. Was he a descendant of Montalambert’s nephew? We do not know.

It was Elizabeth Davis who bought out her sisters, rented back some of the land her mother had sold off after the war, and supervised the replantation of the derelict vineyard. Elizabeth Davis, bright, white-haired, the spitting image of Mrs Bun, the baker’s wife, passed away in 2017. Her second son, Jean-Luc, was responsible for the wine from 1976 until his tragic early death from leukaemia in 1992. Today it is the third son, Laurent along with his 4 children, who operate and manage the family business. Everyone is on a mission to improve and develop the reputation of the property and keep Monbrison amongst the greatest names in Margaux.



THE VINEYARD

From 1974 to 1983 six of the ten hectares of Monbrison were leased to Alexis Lichine of the Prieuré, and went into Prieuré-Lichine. Now re-instated, the domaine has been further increased by Elizabeth Davis' own farming arrangements nearby to a total of 13.2 ha. The vines are planted in a ratio of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc, 5% Petit Verdot, and lie more or less in one piece, on the edge of the plateau known as the Poujeaux, adjoining du Tertre and Angludet on one side, and Giscours on another, alongside the road which runs from Arzac to Macau. Today, Alix, the youngest sibling, is making sure that all aspects of sustainability is being implemented as we are slowly shifting towards an Organic Certification with biodynamic farming practices.

THE CHATEAU

Monbrison is an attractive farmhouse, a hotch-potch of architectural periods and styles, partly originating in the 17th century. Bits seem to have been added onto the sides at intervals, so that you are continually travelling up and down corridors from one side of the building to the other in order to gain access to the adjacent rooms. There is a small tower in the middle, a porch covered in wisteria, and a swimming pool under the pine trees at the back. And there are at least three friendly dogs.

Legend has it that there is a secret passage from the château d'Arzac to Monbrison, and from Monbrison onwards to the river. We haven't travelled it yet.

THE WINES

The wine is vinified in stainless steel vats at a maximum temperature of 30°C, given a long cuvaison, and aged, in the best years, in as much as 60% new French oak. There is, of course a vendange verte – Jean-Luc Vonderheyden was one of the first to adopt this crop-thinning technique – though not in 1988 or again in 1992 when hail reduced the harvest naturally. A new barrel cellar was constructed in 1978, and a new storage cellar and reception area in 1987. The wine of Monbrison has, since 1982 at least, not put a foot wrong. Partly this is because of what is now a respectable age of the vineyard. Principally though, it was the application of the considerable talents of Jean-Luc, now continued by the equally able Laurent Vonderheyden. The vineyards being replanted at the same time, has undergone a parallel process of refinement, becoming richer and more concentrated over the years, remaining sturdy for a Margaux, yet showing an inherent plummy velvetiness, or at least promising it for maturity, which is characteristic of the Margaux terroir.