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Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

Repair Man

After Miraval, an American in Provence continues his renovation spree



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Tom Bove has foregone retirement to follow a passion for restoring old vineyard properties in Provence.

Letter from Europe

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Tom Bove can't help himself.

The 72-year-old American engineer and businessman-turned-wine producer continues to buy and restore neglected Provence wine estates.

"I love rebuilding things. I like not screwing things up," Bove says one cloudless harvest day on a vineyard hilltop of his **Château La Mascaronne**. "I only touch them if I see there's an underlying beauty to bring out."

Bove has a rare touch. In 1993, he convinced his family to buy Provence's historic **Château Miraval**, where he renovated miles of antique drystone terraces and the majestic 18th-century manor, replanted vineyards, converted to organic farming, and brought back winemaking. In 2012, he sold the 1,000-acre package for \$60 million to **Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie**.

A former Navy officer who has retained an athletic military bearing and a bright, boyish smile despite his years and thinning white hair, Bove isn't slowing down. He still helps run Rochem, the worldwide wastewater-treatment systems company he founded in 1972, while growing his wine business that he calls a "hobby" and a "sickness."

But Bove's main fixation is La Mascaronne, where he lives in a 19th-century farmhouse next to the winery. The estate's 200 hilly acres are divided between vines and oak forests. Here—midway between Miraval, about 20 miles northwest, and the coast of Saint-Tropez to the southeast, Bove makes a total of 10,000 cases a year of six wines, including his main line La Mascaronne red, white and rosé and a small-production Guy Da Nine line fermented in Bordeaux barrels.

Bove stands atop his prized Othello vineyard, named for his deceased mutt whose remains are buried here, and kicks at the fist-sized limestone that carpet his vineyards. "I bought here for the rock," he explains. "Mascaronne is all rock. To make wine on rock, you have to do an incredible amount of work, but if you do it, you can get fabulous results."

The vineyard is planted to 5 acres of Cinsault—a major component of his rosé (with estate-grown Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah from other vineyards)—and Bove pauses to sample some of the dark ripe fruit. "My grandfather would say, 'You have to taste the grapes!'" comments Bove, the grandson of Italian immigrants. As a youth in Marion, Ind., he helped make the family wine from purchased grapes.

Bove studied engineering at the United States Naval Academy, worked in the Navy's nuclear submarine program, and then travelled to Europe for a civilian job. After making his fortune with his own company, Bove and his wife, Jane, discovered Miraval, moved in and filled it with their five children.

Bove teamed with the noted Provence enologist Emmanuel Gaujal; keeping yields low, Miraval produced noteworthy whites and a rosé called Pink Floyd. (In the 1970s, the band had recorded some of the songs for *The Wall* at a studio on the property.)

Then in 1998, tragedy struck. Bove's wife died in a Swissair flight crash en route from New York. The workaholic Bove buried himself in work and, in 1999, bought the struggling La Mascaronne to add to his challenges.

"The whole place was a big ugly mess," Bove says of the estate.

At La Mascaronne, he confronted its daunting amount of rock. Before he replanted vineyards, teams excavated boulders, crushed stones and, in some cases, moved them to reshape hillsides for better exposures. "It was only five years ago that I was able to go organic—because of the stones," Bove says.

Miraval's cooler climate produced more delicate wines, particularly rosé, says Bove, who calls La Mascaronne rosé "more robust, with bigger flavors." *Wine Spectator* rated the past three vintages—2012 to 2014—of [La Mascaronne Quat'saisons](#) at 87 or 88 points.

La Mascaronne's wines are now made by Laurence Berlemont, who took over after Gaujal, his partner, retired in 2011. The reds are dominated by Syrah (blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache and Mourvèdre) and the whites by Rolle, the local name for Vermentino.

Bove has a vision of owning a varied portfolio of boutique Provence wines from estate grapes. In addition to La Mascaronne in the Côtes de Provence appellation, he kept a 300-acre former slice of Miraval with 20 acres of vineyards in the Coteaux Varois en Provence appellation; from it, he released 500 cases of 2014 rosé, under the name Château Mira Luna. In 2008, he purchased another small estate, Bomont de Corneil in northern Provence's Côteaux du Verdon, where he now makes about 1,200 cases of barrel-fermented red and white from Syrah and Viognier.

This year, Bove bought La Mascaronne's neighbor, Domaine La Bernarde, with 75 vineyard acres. He plans to make a distinct red there and use other grapes to increase production of his Mascaronne rosé. But his prime motive for the purchase was gaining control of the long, poorly maintained, rutted dirt access road leading across La Bernarde to his property.

"I'm a very tidy person, and that road is a disaster." Bove smiles, adding, "I didn't buy it *just* for the road. It has some *very good terroir*."

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