

A Cos for celebration

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THE VINE GUY

There are few seconds in this world that should actually come in first.

Maybe the 1996 Stanley Cup Finals when the Colorado Avalanche swept the Florida Panthers. The Panthers gave such a tremendous effort throughout the playoffs that a lot of people still thought of them as winners because they weren't supposed to get as far as they did. But when it comes to wine, the Second Growth Château Cos d'Estournel has been so good for so long, I have come to think of it as a First Growth.

The Château Cos d'Estournel (pronounced "cause es-tore-nell") is in the St. Estephe region of Bordeaux, France. The famed estate is known as much for its exotic Moorish architecture (read: Moroccan Temple meets classic 16th-century French chateau) as for its long tradition of producing some of the finest Bordeaux wines in the world.

Their "Second Growth" classification was issued in 1855 at the historical Exposition Universelle de Paris where Emperor Napoleon III insisted on developing a rating system for the best wines of Bordeaux. The result was the Bordeaux Wine Official Classification of 1855.

This part political/part merit-based classification system, which tiered the top Chateaux of the Medoc into five distinct "growths" (crus), has not been significantly modified since its inception over 150 years ago. However, so many Châteaux, regardless of Growth, are now producing such superb wines that it simply proves that the classification system is mostly a sentimental ideology. Updating the classification of the Châteaux is a favorite sport among Bordeaux and wine enthusiasts.

St. Estephe is one of the smaller wine-producing appellations in the Medoc, also known to wine geeks as "the left bank" since it lies to the west of the Gironde river (i.e. "left" of the river when looking at a map of the region) which bisects Bordeaux. It has around 3,000 acres of vineyards and plays home to a total of five Grand Cru Classés (Châteaux that have one of the five Growth classification designations).

Cos (as it is affectionately called) literally means "Hill of Pebbles." Its vineyards are blessed with deep layers of gravel that retain the days heat, which helps keep the vines warm at night, and contributes to the vineyard's efficient drainage.

The Château's affable director, Jean-Guillaume Prats, in town for the recent American Heart Association's "Heart's Delight" wine tasting and auction, hosted one of the 15 specialty fundraiser dinners at the Willard hotel where yours truly was the theoretical "special guest."

But it was most definitely the disarmingly gracious Monsieur Prats who was the distinctive guest of honor as he had in tow an assortment of wines from the Château's finest vintages in recent memory. The otherworldly cooking of Chef Michel Rostang of the Restaurant Michel Rostang, Paris, proved to be a marvelous companion for the wines.

Some of the following wines may be a little tough to find in our area.

Prices, particularly for the older vintages, are approximate fair market value. All of these wines would pair nicely with ei-

ther game or lamb.

The **Château Cos d'Estournel 2001 (\$75)** comes from a vintage that was overshadowed by the stellar 2000 vintage. However, in my book, that translates to a wine that is far more approachable than its predecessor.

This beautifully balanced gem provides plenty of upfront earthy spiciness followed by loads of berry/cherry fruit on the mid-palate. Hints of cinnamon and licorice sneak in on the big, well-rounded finish.

If you want a wine that you could put away for a few more years, the **Château Cos d'Estournel 2000 (\$110)** might be a good choice. It was pretty "closed down" when I tried it, although it had enough solid fruit undertones (blackber-

ries, cassis and vanilla) and tannic structure to lead me to believe that this is a wine worth investing in for the future. Or your children's future.

If wine could sing, the **Château Cos d'Estournel 1990 (\$175)** would be Bing Crosby. A smooth, polished wine that literally makes you swoon in its presence. Scents of sage, cassis and plums get your nose's full attention while the full-bodied opulence completely seduces your mouth. From the jammy black fruits that use your tongue as a dance floor to the smooth tannins that hold it close, this is a wine to fall in love with (or over).

If big wines are your speed, then the **Château Cos d'Estournel 1986 (\$150)** is your chariot of choice. This highly extracted wine throws off a bouquet of black plums, anise and cedar wood notes. The substantial tannins provide a sturdy chassis for the intense flavors of black plums, roasted coffee and licorice as they battle each other for first place in your mouth. Racy notes of cedar on the finish are reminiscent of a well-aged humidor. This is a wine that could certainly benefit from a little more time in the garage, uh, I mean, cellar.

The only word I can think of to sum up the **Château Cos d'Estournel 1985 (\$145)** is charming. This wine is at once demure and daring. The perfumed nose of black cherries gently entices your olfactory senses. But the luxuriant, jammy fruit (black plums and blackberries) provides loads of delightful entertainment for your mouth. The long finish, with notes of vanilla and cedar, keeps reminding you to take another sip. This wine is definitely at its peak, so buy it now and drink it over the next five years.

Concluding our voyage into decadence is the legendary **Château Cos d'Estournel 1982 (\$275)**. Scents of sweet cassis and mocha are simply spell-binding. Core flavors of blackberries, cassis and coffee are well-delineated and clean. The gorgeous, extraordinarily long finish, with notes of earthiness and roasted coffee, is sheer ecstasy. At 23 years young, this wine is still in adolescence.

There you have it. Monsieur Prats' wonderful wines and my good fortune. Now that is definitely a combination that comes in "first" in my book.

Gee, who knew giving to charity could be so rewarding?

Have a favorite Bordeaux wine? Share it with me at scott@vineguy.com.



Mixing vocal harmony, heavy music

SYSTEM, from Page A10

fall, is at times mournful, romantic, hysterical, and bizarre — and may be the best synopsis of System of a Down in the band's 10-year history.

"There was a time when they had to write songs very specifically to define who they were," says longtime producer Rick Rubin, who worked with the band on their latest album. "Now, we know who they are, so now they can write their best songs, and they don't have to fit in such narrow guidelines. It seems like people are more willing to go along the trip with them."

Not that they didn't have plenty on board for their first trip on the charts.

Since the group's self-titled debut CD in 1998, they've sold millions of albums with their amped-up metal sound anchored by bursts of melody and Tankian's voice, which ranges from soaring to screeching (the other band members are bassist Shavo Odadjian, and drummer John Dolmayan). The new album, like previous System of a Down efforts, is hard to classify or describe: Middle Eastern-musical influences mix with almost operatic melodies and guitars thrashing at breakneck speed.

"It's rare to hear such emotional vocal harmony going on over such heavy music. It's very unusual," says Rubin (the band is on his label, American Recordings, with Columbia Records).

"They're kind of a throwback to the time when heavy music could be interesting in the '60s and '70s. I think they're a true metal band but metal has changed and gone away from the days of Black Sabbath and become really cookie-cutter. Everyone is competing to be the hardest, but no one is really writing songs."

Unlike some other metal bands, System of a Down's lyrical content has always been as integral to the band as its musical component, dealing with serious subjects ranging from drug addiction to government domination. System of a Down has always been vocal about their social causes or concerns,



System of a Down poses at Irving Plaza in New York on May 9. From left are Daron Malakian, John Dolmayan, Serj Tankian and Shavo Odadjian.

whether it be Tankian playing benefits to draw awareness to the Armenian holocaust of years ago (he and Malakian are of Armenian descent) to Malakian's concerns about the war in Iraq (he has family there).

Malakian, the band's lead guitarist and songwriter (along with Tankian) says the band's tilt toward the political is only one part of what they stand for.

"It's funny, you'll write a few songs about politics and that's what people will focus on. All we're doing is expressing the world around us," he says. "Politics is a part of that. If we didn't sing about it then we'd be leaving something else out."

"I think they just don't like being pigeonholed. I think yes they sing a lot of political lyrics but they're not purely a political band," Rubin

says. "They don't like being made smaller than they are creatively."

Tankian says fans truly know the band know they are more than that, anyway.

"We're a multidimensional band artistically that embrace politics as much as embracing sexual innuendo or jokes," Tankian added.

The humor element is certainly evident on the new record — "Cigar" features unprintable lyrics about male genitalia, while "Old School Hollywood," which Malakian wrote after feeling a little left out at a celebrity softball game, features lines like: "Tony Danza cuts in line / Old school Hollywood, washed up Hollywood / Standing in the sun I'm wasting my time / Old school Hollywood washed up Hollywood."

"Even in our most serious songs there's like absolutely hilarious an-

tics going on and that comes from us just thinking, 'Hey, we can't take ourselves seriously otherwise we miss the point, and no one should either,'" Tankian jokes.

While Malakian as always written most of the band's music, this time around, he wrote more of the lyrics and shares more in the vocal duties, trading rants with Tankian.

Malakian's singing "changes our sound and that's really important," Tankian says. "I don't think any of us ever want to recreate the same record again."

That was part of the goal of "Mezmerize," the band's first since 2002's "Steal This Album."

"You want to push yourself and not recreate the same song over again," Malakian says. "That by itself brings out new things. When you try to do new things, you find that you start failing at it."

Common surprises by singing on new album

COMMON, from Page A10

AP: Creatively speaking, what was the lowest point of your career?

Common: Creatively, it's between two albums, "Can I Borrow a Dollar" and "Electric Circus."

AP: Perhaps your fans didn't believe that the album essentially came from within you, rather more from your then-girlfriend Erykah Badu.

Common: (Laughs.) The album was all me at that time. I go

through changes. If you look at my career, I started off holding 40-ounce [of beer] on my first cover. I grow and I go through changes. I think that there was a period in my life that I was trying to find myself, maybe trying to find myself in that relationship too. That was one of my transitional periods and that isn't always going to fly with the masses.

AP: What do you say to critics who thought you got soft and impressionable during the making of your last album?

Common: Where I'm from and how I was raised, I never got to prove that I'm hard. My music never comes from anyone else.

AP: When you started recording "Be," where you already broken up?

Common: We had been broken up for a little while, and it was a time where I was really grounded. It came to me at a hard time in life where I was really hungry.

AP: What are you trying to convey artistically on "Be"?

Common: That first of all, I'm a human, I'm a person. I experience

different emotions like love, sexuality, creativity. I just want to show the sides of who I am as a being. I tried to not think about my sales, what I've done in the past. I was in the moment when making this album.

AP: After all these years, how do you keep on reinventing yourself and not get bored like most artists?

Common: I try to find new challenges, new things that excite me. On my last album it was about breaking boundaries and convention in hip-hop. Part of the challenge this time was that people where kind of doubting me, so that got me hungry.

AP: One of the things you tried that was, well, atrocious on your last album was attempting to sing! Are you subjecting us to that again on "Be"?

Common: (Laughs.) Yeah, I sing on the chorus on this album. Yo, why you playing! One time this magazine had an official opera singer who didn't know who we were listen to me, Andre 3000, Pharrell Williams and 50 Cent I think. He only gave my singing some love.

AP: I thought you sounded like Scooby-Doo on "Jimi Was a Rock Star."

Common: (Laughs.) Someone else told me that too. Sooner or later people will appreciate my sound. I think that "Electric Circus" is going to be one of those albums that people go back to and say, "That record was aight."

AP: Would you ever consider having another public relationship like you did with Erykah Badu?

Common: I don't think I would. I wouldn't hide behind a relationship either but one thing I do think is that sometimes you open up so much that you allow other energies to come in. And if it's vulnerable at that time, then, you know, it can get messed up.

AP: Is that what happened between you and Erykah?

Common: No, it wasn't a specific situation that [led to the breakup]. It was just a gradual thing where we both felt like it was time to move on. We were so engulfed in each other we stopped taking care of ourselves as individuals. Like, for example, if something was going wrong with my business, I would just go down to Dallas and chill with the family. You can't run from things, you have to also be focused on your work. But that relationship was meant to be for that time period. It has something to do with me evolving, for better and for worse.



Nick Shwaery/The Examiner

Common performs at an in-store appearance Thursday at the Borders on L Street NW.