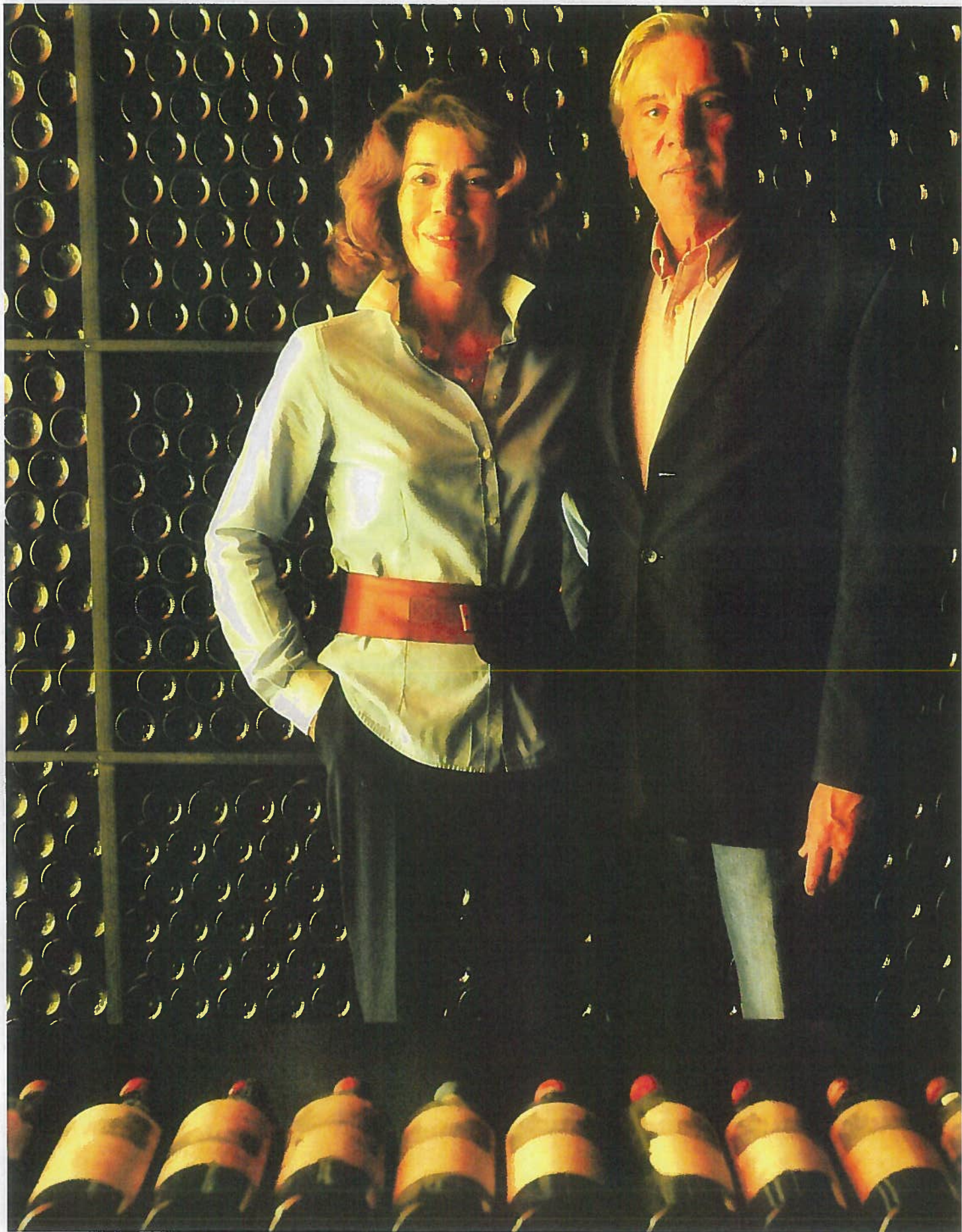


CHÂTEAUX



THE POWER COUPLE OF PESSAC-LÉOGNAN

I was barely fifteen; he was three or four years older than me, so we truly grew up together," remarks Florence Cathiard of her husband Daniel with an air of nostalgia for the mid-1960s—when the two met. They had both landed coveted spots on the French national ski team. Daniel was hard in training for the Olympics. "He was on the A-team," she adds, "I went to the Olympics but only as a replacement. The B-team, if you will." Now Florence is taking a hurried break between checking in on their 2013s still mellowing in barrel in both the large cave below Château Smith Haut Lafitte and further down the road, in their newly minted *chai furtif* (literally, 'stealth cellar')—a sustainably designed cellar built into an adjacent forest that uses solar power, rainwater purification and an innovation that converts the CO₂ from fermentation into sodium bicarbonate, or common baking soda. I can't help but picture their fortuitous first encounter on the Alpine slopes and wonder whether the young couple would have believed it if

CHATEAU
SMITH HAUT LAFITTE
GRAND CRU CLASSÉ



someone told them they would go on to run one of the most prestigious crus classés in Bordeaux.

The Cathiards quit the team when Daniel's father fell ill. They had to wrap up their studies in preparation to take over his family business—a supermarket and food distribution group called Genty-Cathiard. They left France for a stint in the U.S. and

Canada during their final years of school, working and learning everything they could about logistics and distribution, with the necessary side-trip to Woodstock. Then in 1970, a year before his father's passing, Daniel found himself at the head of a large enterprise. "It wasn't easy at first," says Florence. "There were people who didn't care for the fact that the company was being taken over by a professional skier. Luckily, we remained solid and undivided and weren't afraid of anything." They were also very lucky in their timing. It was the beginning of the 1970s, right in the heart of what they call in France the *trentes glorieuses*—a business boom that lasted thirty glorious years. Genty-

FLASH BACK



"In those days, the girls didn't train on the same slopes as the boys. The coaches were very strict."



"At Woodstock, we snuck in as 'journalists' in order to get as close to the concerts as possible!"

Cathiard saw huge growth. The success of the family business gave them the firm ground they needed to launch Go Sport, their own chain of sporting goods stores that was "closer to what we knew and loved," she says. They continued to work together on both projects until Daniel took the business public and sold his 20 percent.

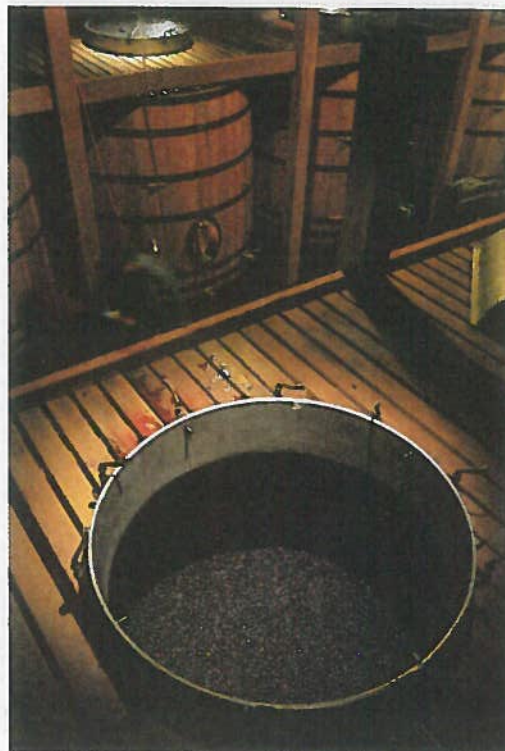
But when Daniel took his shares to the bank, Florence was just getting started. She founded an advertising and PR firm called SP3, and when business got too big for her three small offices, she joined forces with the American agency McCann and quickly rose to their vice president of Europe.

"Daniel took a sabbatical year and then wanted us to change fields entirely," says Florence. "He realized all of his childhood dreams: he ran the New York marathon; he skied in the Rockies; he crossed the Atlantic in a sailboat; and I was having a great career. We weren't very happy, though," she says, adding, "It was our first physical separation."

That chapter three of their lives together would land them in Pessac-Léognan reviving a property that had fallen from favor may seem incongruent, but for two very active former athletes with business savvy, they were armed with the skillset they needed to transform Smith into the quality-driven, environmentally-conscious estate that it is today. In 1990, they put everything they had into buying the Château.

"When we started looking, we knew it had to be Bordeaux," Florence remembers. "Bordeaux was the only thing we would drink when we were on the French ski team — you know, in order to get some sleep before waking up and braving the downhill. Then, when we got married, we only asked for bottles of red Bordeaux for our registry. And I remember the first bottle that got my attention. I said, 'Daniel, pass me that bottle again; it's really good.' It was a Léoville Las Cases 1961."

The couple fell in love with the property at Smith —



a contiguous vineyard on great terroir, surrounded by fairytale woods. Although Daniel's grandfather had been a small wine merchant in Grenoble, the learning curve for churning their Garonne gravel parcels into top-notch juice was significant. "We must have read two hundred books," says Florence. "Daniel read the really technical ones, and I read the ones that were more generous in their descriptions of the tasting process and the ecological harmony of the vineyards..." They were also one of the last estates to benefit from the know-

how of the renowned father of modern oenology, Emile Peynaud. And then they completely reimaged Smith.

"We broke the old tanks," says Florence, "and we sold off the harvesting equipment." They moved in to hand-picking all of their fruit, using organic composts in the vineyards and slow, natural fermentations. "We wanted to make quality wine, and we knew we'd never come close with the huge yields they had been bringing in," she adds. They continue to pave the way for their particular form of organics, which they call 'bio-precision', and the new stealth cellar is an impressive step into the future of winemaking.

When I ask if she sees any similarities between her current career and her former one — skiing — Florence's true competitive side shows through. "Well, yes," she says, laughing. "Just like in skiing you have racing coaches with their stopwatches that judge you at the end of each week; in the wine world in Bordeaux, every year two thousand people come to taste, spit and critique your wine — the journalists and the négociants. It's almost worse than high fashion!" But she also finds solace in her connection to nature: "I have a real feeling of harmony and balance here at least four times a day when I make the trip from my chartreuse to the château on my bike. This vineyard: it's a beautiful landscape, sculpted by man, and it changes every single day."

Carson Demmond



CHÂTEAU SMITH HAUT LAFITTE AT A GLANCE

- Appellation: Pessac-Léognan
 - Growth: Grand Cru Classé de Graves
 - Owners : Daniel and Florence Cathiard
 - Technical Director: Fabien Teitgen
 - Production: 120,000 bottles (Red); 30,000 bottles (White)
 - Varieties Planted: - 60% cabernet sauvignon, 30% merlot, 9% cabernet franc, 1% petit verdot (Red); - 90% sauvignon blanc, 5% sémillon, 5% sauvignon gris (White)
 - Vineyard area: 78 hectares
 - Average vine age: 38 years (Red); 40 years (White)
- www.smith-haut-lafitte.com