



Jeni Port meets a Scot who plonked an Australian-built winery in the Loire Valley and ruffled a few French feathers.

Pitched battles

IN THE town of Bourre in the Loire Valley, I suspect the inhabitants, at least the winemaking ones, have a special place in their hearts for the Scottish-born London hotelier David Levin.

That this special place might also be reserved for tax collectors and wine inspectors shouldn't surprise anyone who has heard the Levin story, including the 60-something, bespectacled, erudite man at the centre of all of the action.

By his own account, he is a "black-and-white" kind of guy.

There is a right way, a wrong way and no shade of grey. Which helps explain why Levin plonked an entire Australian winery, complete with an Australian-trained French wine-maker, among his neighbours of Bourre in 2003.

Actually the town's winegrowers, members of the local co-operative winery, would have had an inkling something was afoot. There had been words, apparently quite a few, between them and Levin over the years since his purchase of a Bourre vineyard in 1985.

All Levin wanted to do was make good sauvignon blanc, one of the great whites of the Touraine region of the Loire Valley. All the co-op members wanted was to make it according to tradition. Later, when

he visited three local builders with his plans to construct a winery, they too wanted to do it their way.

"I wanted a pitched roof to collect water and re-use it. They wanted a flat roof," Levin says with the kind of pained expression peculiar to Brits trying to fathom the unfathomable contrariness of French provincials.

This was obviously no sunny Provence and Levin was no love-struck Peter Mayle (the writer of *A Year in Provence*) bowing to the quaint charms of French village life. Something had to give.

Levin may have bought a vineyard, but he wanted it to make good wine that he could sell. The plan was initially to sell it through his masterfully elegant boutique hotel in London, the Capital. The Capital, he points out is not your usual hotel. In the first place, he created it when hotels had 200 rooms, not 49, and it comes with a two-star Michelin restaurant. The early vintages of Levin sauvignon blanc made through the Bourre co-op simply weren't cutting it.

"I wasn't a bit depressed," he says breezily. "I got on a plane, as I have done for 36 years and came out to Australia to see some chums."

His chums included the late Len Evans and Petaluma's Brian Croser. Croser told him he had the winema-

ker for him, Frenchman Thierry Merlet, who had worked at Petaluma for a year. He was also put in touch with a winery-design firm that happily executed a plan according to Levin's stipulations.

Then came the question: "Where are you going to build it?"

"I think they thought it might be in McLaren Vale or the Adelaide Hills," Levin says.

They were wrong. The winery — including not only winemaking equipment such as temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks, but doors, hinges, hoses, "everything" — along with seven Aussie builders and a cook were to be transported to Bourre. "Everything was Australian except the cement slab," he says.

The total cost was close to \$1 million.

During the stinking hot 2003 vintage, the builders worked by day and the wine was processed under the stars.

If Levin wanted to make an impression among his neighbours, he succeeded.

A BBC film crew came to visit. Levin's tin shed was depicted as the little guy against the Touraine region's fabulous and powerful wine chateaux.



However, as you might suspect, the canny Scot did have the last word. The 2003 vintage was warmly greeted in the United Kingdom, satisfying lovers of Sancerre as well as New Zealand's Cloudy Bay.

Then came the 2004 (\$22), now available in Australia along with the 2005 and a 2004 rosé and 2004 gamay (both \$23.90).

The Levin sauvignon blanc style is probably a little more Sancerre than Cloudy Bay and that's got to be a good thing. For all his maverick ways, Levin still wants the wine to be recognisably French and in that, it is stubbornly, resolutely patriotic.

If there is a bow to New Zealand it is in Levin's decision to do three picks of the Levin vineyards every harvest, each pick at a different sugar level and undergoing a different crushing regime. The Kiwis used this innovative approach to soften their sauvignon's outrageous herbaceousness and give texture. Levin and Merlet use it as a tool to work in a little complexity and a lot of texture.

With Levin's background, his sauvignon blanc wasn't going to be anything other than a food wine. The aroma isn't particularly New World fruity but rather wild herbs and lifted spring flowers.

The '04 is charming with subtle honeysuckle flavours and a rich vein of minerality. It's easy to see why it was snapped up here by restaurants like Vue de monde, Libertine and L'Oustal.

But the 2005 is better, fresher, cleaner, with a stronger herbal resonance. The key, as with so many sauvignon blancs, is earlier rather than later drinking.

The same applies to the 2004 rosé (made from malbec), a stylish enough dry style, but a tad tired.

The 2004 gamay, a bouncy pepperminty wine, is simple, rustic.

Did I say these wines are proudly patriotic? Well, they are in taste. The label is another story, one that again involves Levin boxing a couple of rounds with French wine authorities.

He wanted to list the grape variety on the front labels, but that's a

no-no under French wine law if you also want to use the regional appellation (France's Appellation Controlee system is founded on the belief that geographical locations rather than grape varieties are responsible for a wine's unique flavour and character).

He went ahead with his plan and now his wines enjoy lowly vin de pays status. Levin's not particularly upset since it hasn't affected the price he gets for his wines.

I am sure this is something of a gaping, pustulant wound to some of his Bourre wine neighbours — Levin is happy to provide a little salt and a deep rub.

"They get 0.8 of a euro a litre for their wines," he says. "We get four to five times more than that."

Levin Wines are distributed by Fluid Movements, North Melbourne, phone 9328 5770. Available from: Armadale Cellars; Donburn Cellars; Fred Youngs of Kew; and Kooyong Cellars.



Levin's sauvignon blanc



The winery's pitched roof