

Christian Seely, in front of Quinta da Romaneira, has an eye on ventures new

Bet you've heard the line "I wish I had your job" when you tell people you work in the wine trade. Meet Christian Seely, managing director of some of the world's most famous wine estates, and you'll soon develop job envy too. Shame he's only in his forties and doesn't look like putting his feet up any time soon. In fact, he's just done the Médoc marathon, runs around after two children under five (sorry, five-and-three-quarters, his son Theodore corrects me) and jet-sets around AXA's properties from Hungary in the east to Portugal in the west. Makes you tired just thinking about it.

Seely joined AXA Millésimes – the wine arm of the French insurance group – in 1993 as managing director of Port house Quinta do Noval AXA Millésimes. He was just 33, had no experience running a wine estate and spoke no Portuguese. If you were a betting man (as was his grandfather, a former racing correspondent for *The Times*) he wouldn't have been an odds-on favourite to succeed. But with a background in turning companies into profitable businesses, his appointment seems to be paying the French company and its shareholders back favourably.

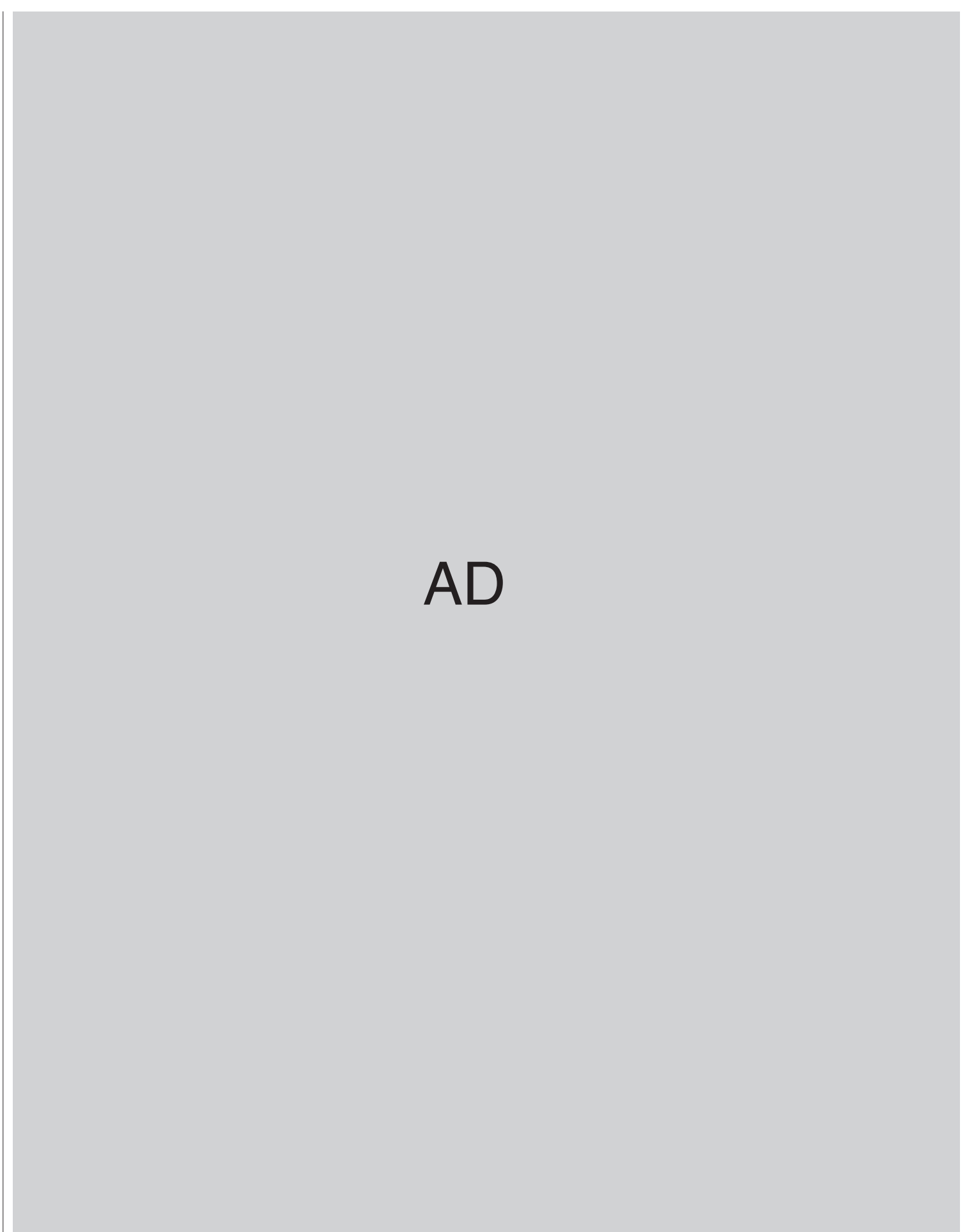
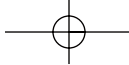
Noval was in a bit of a state when AXA bought it in 1993 and installed Seely at the helm in the Douro. Since then, 100ha have been replanted, mainly with Touriga Nacional, on its vertiginous schistous slopes. While rather pleased with the achievement, Seely is modest. "It was a wine-trade jewel that just needed polishing," he says.

Seely moved to Bordeaux in 2001 when he was appointed managing director of the whole AXA wine portfolio, but Port had seeped into his blood stream during his seven-year residency at Noval: in 2004 he bought 76ha of bramble-ravaged vines two miles upstream. "I'd had my eye on it since I got here but AXA wasn't interested so I got a group of 11 investors – including my mum – to buy it." Quinta da Romaneira is a 400ha property with 76ha under vine. Seely explains he had to replant the property "pretty damn quick before they took away our planting rights".

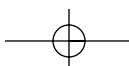
Being no expert on Portuguese planting laws I must look slightly perplexed by his last comment, so Seely offers to explain the system to me. Apparently the powers that be can annul the right to plant vines on a piece of land if it is abandoned or left to brambles, as much →

THE HEAD OF THE ESTATE

He's the man who manages mega-insurance company AXA's wine portfolio, responsible for Pichon-Longueville Baron, Quinto do Noval and Disznókő, the Tokaji property. Christian Seely certainly has the pick of some the world's top properties – but he still wants more. Interview by *Rebecca Gibb*



AD



Interview



of Romaneira was. Planting rights can also be acquired by buying a vineyard elsewhere, pulling up its vines and using its rights to plant. However, he adds: "It's rather difficult to check up on an area the size of the Douro and I'm sure there is plenty of illegal planting."

As part of the EU wine reform, Mariann Fischer-Boel, the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development has proposed to liberalise planting rights. Seely says: "That would be a dream but I don't expect it to happen. It's predictably come up against a lot of opposition, which is rather frustrating."

He believes there are at least 200ha of untapped Grade-A vineyards that have remained abandoned since phylloxera swept through the region in the nineteenth century.

His Romaneira project concentrates on Douro table wines rather than Port, which he sees as the key to Portugal's success beyond its borders. "Douro reds are very exciting and beginning to take off," he says. "Consumers have a vague notion that Port is a good wine and the Douro has the best chance of raising the profile of Portuguese wines."

Striking out on his own

But raising the profile of Portuguese wines is proving rather difficult. It keeps being touted as the next big thing yet never quite delivering. The Port Wine Institute (IVDP) is responsible for promoting both table and fortified wines in the Douro; but Seely says generic bodies do have a tough challenge.

"Campaigns by individual producers, with sufficient weight, are probably going to be more interesting than generic campaigns. It is difficult to make a generic campaign work. It needs a large number of people to agree what you're going to say, and more often than not the message ends up being rather banal so as not to offend anyone."

However, he admits Noval is too small to take on a large marketing campaign or change consumer perceptions about the category, unlike Symingtons or Taylors, which is part of the Fladgate Partnership.

Still, he's rather complimentary about the IVDP's decision to focus on promoting aged tawnies in the UK in an attempt to make Port a year-round drink, rather than

just a glass of Ruby at Christmas. "We've marketed Port as if England is perpetually stuck in winter: it's an old Dickensian image that you need a glass of warming Ruby. Ten-year old tawny is accessibly priced and, despite the weather this year, England does have summers!"

Other horizons

But enough about the Douro: AXA also owns properties in Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Languedoc and Hungary. Seely now lives in Bordeaux and works from Pichon-Longueville Baron, a Pauillac deuxième cru classé. He certainly knows where to find offices with a decent view.

The subject of rising prices inevitably crops up – was the 2006 en-primeur campaign a rip off? "I don't think they

"It's difficult to make a generic campaign work"

were silly prices. People in the UK are nostalgic for when they could drink the greatest wines in the world at very cheap prices. Those times have gone with increasing demand from the international market."

He is also keen to point out that the château has reduced yields, producing half the quantity it did twelve years ago – around 200,000 bottles each year – and price rises are inevitable as a result.

AXA, has its fingers in other pies, too, owning the Bordeaux négociant Compagnie Médocaine. Perhaps I'm being a bit slow on the uptake here, but I've never quite got the point of the négociant system, particularly when a château could sell all its wine on-line. I ask him if all these middlemen are surplus to requirements: "I posed the same question to myself when I arrived in 2000," Seely replies. "It doesn't seem logical but it seems to work."

Having a middleman sell your wine means the château doesn't have a clear idea who is buying. Seely admits this is one drawback of the system, but he does believe the benefits outweigh the downsides.

"In one afternoon my entire crop can be sold. If a château had to take on a sales force it'd cost a lot more than the 10% margin they take," he says. "They also play an important part in logistics, which producers probably wouldn't be very good at."

Quality from the south

The company's latest venture is making reds in the Languedoc, with the 2005 vintage about to hit the UK market for the first time this autumn. AXA is targeting the export market first, as Seely says the French still belittle the region. "The problem with people in France is that they have an image of the Languedoc making cheap, 100-hectolitre reds for the Parisian market, so we'll install the idea of quality Languedoc wine abroad first."

The wines are a blend of Syrah, Grenache and Carignan. There's no white wine being made, although the property does have some Chardonnay planted – apparently it's not very interesting, being on *vin de pays* land and not "proper terroir".

So, what's next for Seely and AXA? Is it time to strike out into the New World? He tells me he's always on the look out but rejects almost everything very quickly. He's just been to a London tasting and been particularly impressed by some Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir and a trip to Australia might be on the cards.

More likely there's a move to New Zealand. He tells me that New Zealand Trade and Enterprise are looking for suitable existing properties to buy in central Otago. "I think New Zealand is where we should go next. There's really fantastic potential for Pinot Noir and this might tip the balance whether we go or not."

On his track record, you sense the Kiwis could be making a smart move.

CV

2000 Becomes managing director of AXA Millésimes

1993 Appointed managing director, Quinta do Noval

1988 Managing director, GMDC with roving brief specialising in corporate turnaround

1987 Attained MBA at INSEAD

1987 Brand manager, L'Oreal

1982 Studied English, Trinity College, Cambridge

1960 Born Nottingham

Christian Seely manages the AXA Millésimes group of vineyards, with a head office at Château Pichon-Longueville in Pauillac.

He is responsible for Château Pibran, Château Petit-Village and Chateau Suduiraut,

Château Belles-Eaux in Languedoc Roussillon,

Burgundy's Domaine de l'Arlet, Disznókő in Hungary

and Quinta do Noval in Portugal. He is also president

of the Bordeaux négociant

Compagnie Médocaine.