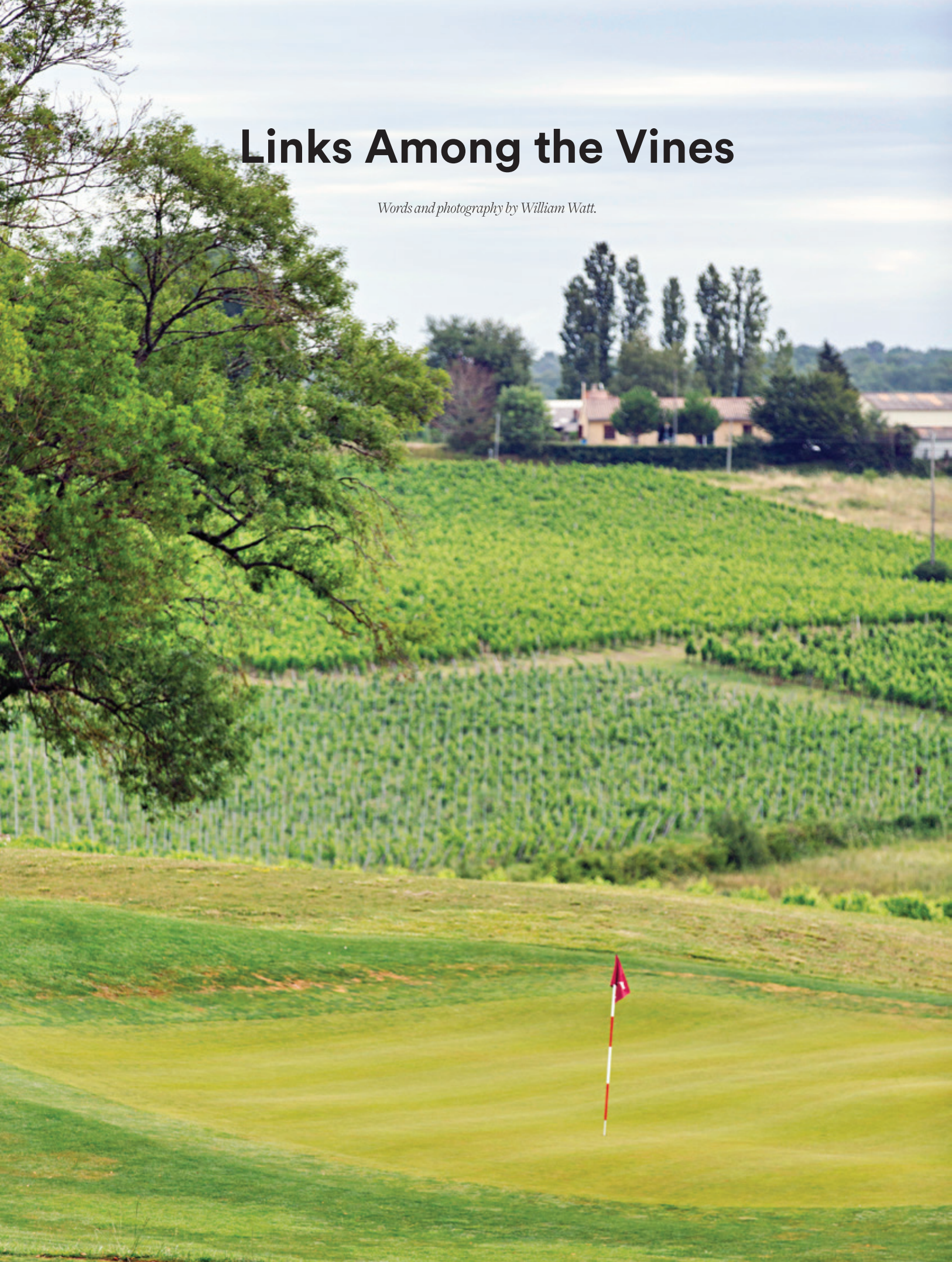


# Links Among the Vines

*Words and photography by William Watt.*



Golf isn't the first thing that comes to mind when travelling to the Bordeaux region. Far from a links paradise, this is the world's epicentre of wine, and the locals certainly aren't afraid to claim that title. But it wasn't really wine nor golf that brought me here on my honeymoon with my newly married wife, Rosie; more a sense of exploration and curiosity at what this up-and-coming yet historic city has to offer. After some last minute research into attractions in the area, I had learnt of a recently opened Tom Doak course nestled among some of the oldest and most famous vineyards in the world. Suddenly our three day schedule looked quite busy as I began to line up a round, with hopefully minimal disruption to the honeymoon and my very understanding wife.

Setting out of Bordeaux the next day in predawn light, the classic, immaculate forms of the châteaux (large, historic country houses with vineyards) showed

that wine is, as it has been for a long time, the big show here. Even the vines themselves, perfectly manicured year-round, exuded a sense of significance and confidence. As we meandered through back roads dotted with these estates, staff were already arriving to roadside camps to tend the vines, and uniquely skinny tractors, no wider than the Frenchmen driving them, proved an amusing obstacle.

As with anything as old and influential as wine from Bordeaux, politics has played a major role in the distinct classifications of these châteaux. The Bordeaux Wine Official Classification of 1855, a system requested by Napoleon III, is still in play and has barely changed since its inception. Deciphering why the various levels of Crus (or growths), from Premier Crus to Cinquièmes Crus (fifth growths), have been awarded is almost impossible today – despite changes in land ownership, head winemakers, and

everything else involved in the wine business, the same list from 1855 prevails. Each subregion in the area also has its own classification system, resulting in many court challenges and disputes, such is the value ascribed to each level of classification.

But all of this melted away like a hangover after a strong coffee and several pain au chocolat, as I maneuvered the car through the flat, almost marshy looking land east of Bordeaux, first through the Entre-Deux-Mers region ('between two tides', owing to its position between two tidal rivers) and then into the Libournais, where the rolling hills really kick in. The first grapes were planted here by the Romans as early as the 2nd Century, and there are châteaux that date back to the 1200s still producing wine today: a palpable history that lingers around every corner of the undulating, vine-covered countryside.





**The Grand Saint-Emilionnais Golf Club**

One town in the heart of the vineyards north of the Dordogne river, Saint-Émilion, has been the international face of this region for centuries, having been the first Bordeaux appellation to export its wines to other countries. Today, the entire town is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, owing to beautiful cobblestone streets and a series of religious sites built over the centuries. One of the oldest is a limestone church in the centre of the village, established by the town's founder, a Benedictine Monk who was known as Emilian. Emilian lived in the area until his death around 767AD, spending his years evangelising the local population who later named the town in his honour. It's not clear whether he drank wine or not – but either way, that seems to be his main legacy, with most of the town now given over to wine merchants, restaurants and tour companies promising an insider's view of the notoriously hard-to-access vineyards.

Another fifteen minutes' drive through the never ending vines, we arrived at a plot of land that has remained strangely vineyard-free over the centuries, and was claimed by the prominent Mourgue d'Algue family in the early 2000s. The pioneering elder statesmen of the family, Gaëtan, has dedicated his life to the development of golf in France, and could be compared to a sort of French Arnold Palmer. During the '60s, Gaëtan purchased a struggling French golf and tennis magazine and rebadged it Europa Golf, running it for many years as the primary golf publication in France. He later convinced his friend, chairman of Lancôme Pierre Menet, to establish the Trophée Lancôme – a tournament that attracted some of the biggest names in

golf at the time including Gary Player, Lee Trevino, Seve Ballesteros, and Arnold Palmer himself (who won its second staging in 1971). The beautiful advertising posters created for these tournaments now adorn the clubhouse at the Grand Saint-Emilionnais Golf Club, the latest in five courses that Gaëtan has created over his lifetime in the game. The entire d'Algue family has helped to bring the club to life, including Gaëtan's son André who helped unearth the site and was instrumental in attracting Tom Doak to bring his design genius to the project. André's wife Philippine looks after marketing for the club, and his sister Kristel, a former US College player and European Tour winner, lends her communication skills and considerable golf talent to the operation. Not to be outdone, their mother Cécilia holds an incredible 45 amateur French Championship titles, continues to win senior tournaments and is a charismatic presence around the club.

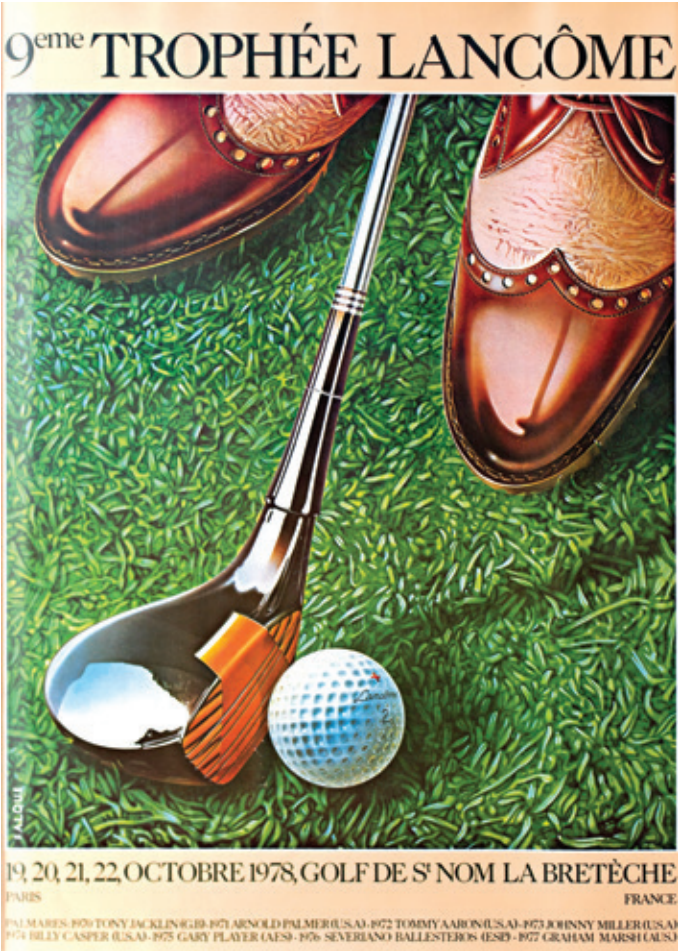
The vision for the course was to bring together the philosophy and skills of these multiple generations to create an experience that embraced the French l'art de vivre - the art of living. This included creating a course with a light touch on the land, an immersive and challenging playing experience, and a welcoming and relaxed clubhouse environment.

Tom Doak was commissioned to design the course after André sent a contour map to him in 2011. According to André, "Tom got back to me right way and said he was interested. A few months later he came and spent two weeks in the St Émilion area and decided to go ahead". I asked if Tom was encouraged to take on the project with the help of the incredible array of local wines. André smiled. "Perhaps one or two glasses." Once the

project was underway, Doak devised the routing in a matter of three or four days. The team were immediately impressed with his approach. "He didn't follow the obvious path. Previously there had been some trees cleared on the property that had created several sightlines we thought he might follow. But he completely went against that – it wasn't even in his thinking. And then, magically, the site opened up and created this scenario whereby playing the course is a journey of discovery. There are surprises at every turn. It was really a special thing for us to watch his genius shape the site during that time." Over the following four years, Doak and his team from Renaissance Golf made minor changes before settling on the final routing. Doak had plenty to work with – the site, a former forest and hunting area, has quite dramatic elevation changes throughout, with this Northern bank of the Dordogne River known for having a more interesting topography than the flatter Southern bank.

**The Course**

The opening tee shot, within putting distance from the clubhouse, is downhill to a generous landing area, however only one half of the fairway offers a good line into a relatively sedate, bunkerless green. The 2nd is a tight and tricky short par-4, with the first sighting of a creek that runs throughout the property to be avoided. In fact holes 3 and 4 both cross the creek, before the uphill par-5 5th takes us up to the highest point on the course and fantastic views of what is to come on the back 9. Holes 6 through 9 feature native gorse and wildflower areas, quite distinct from the rest of the course which has more of a parkland character, with old growth oak trees and pines lining most fairways. Just when you think you have seen the whole property and are ready





for the stretch home, the 15th takes you in another direction, falling down towards a neighbouring creek to another secluded corner of the course. It's a cracking hole, with vineyards behind the tee, a generous landing area for your drive and then a strategic second shot required to get a look past some dramatic green side contours.

The 16th – formerly the most difficult hole on the course as a long par-4 that played into the prevailing wind – has been slightly lengthened to a two-shot par 5, presenting a late birdie opportunity and creating the unusual finishing sequence of par-5, par-5, par-4, par-4. A nice feature here is the view of a 16th Century church up on the hill, deliberately carved out through clever tree removal, creating a distinct memory of the hole as well as a target for the approach shot.

The bunkerless 17th is one of the best

on course, with a gentle dogleg left rewarding those who take the long way round – cut the corner too much and you're left with a much smaller target than from just 15 yards to the right side of the fairway, which opens up the green beautifully.

The 18th brings you home with a fairway-splitting bunker requiring a deft (or lucky) tee shot, before an uphill approach towards another excellent green complex – views across the valley's vineyards beyond the driving range are a bonus.

With just 35 bunkers on the course, the design work is beautifully understated, and each hazard is in play and of strategic importance. As with any course Doak puts his name to, this will become a destination for many travelling golfers, but it's been built with members in mind and there is a great sense of a small but passionate community here. With plans

for an extensive clubhouse renovation on an imposing Edwardian to complete the playing experience, the Saint-Emillionais GC will sit comfortably and proudly among the endless manicured vines.

Returning to Bordeaux that afternoon after my round, Rosie had compiled a rather frightening list of restaurants for us to try before our scheduled train to Paris the next day. Even the most discerning foodie will never be bored here: the service, menus and overall quality is as good as anywhere in the world, and the wine lists are mind-boggling. Where Lyon had been full of incredible produce and authentic dining experiences, Bordeaux added a layer of polish (and Euros) across the board. But in the end, the best meal we had was a simple picnic in the city's Jardin Public comprising mainly of wine and cheese, as we watched the locals embrace l'art de vivre. 🍷



#### CADDIE NOTES BORDEAUX

With a newly completed fast train running to Paris in just 2.5 hours, the bustling city of Bordeaux is a chic city base from which to explore all the area has to offer. Densely populated but exceedingly pretty, Bordeaux is filled with sunshine-soaked millennials sipping Aperol Spritz under striped umbrellas and well-dressed couples walking across cobblestoned streets arm in arm.

The violent currents of the Dordogne River running through the city reflect a little of the energy of this place – this is not a city resting on its history. Recent additions of a well-designed lightrail network make it functional to get around, although they would be well served to better embrace the cycling revolution with a proper bike lane network to help ease congestion on the crowded, winding streets.