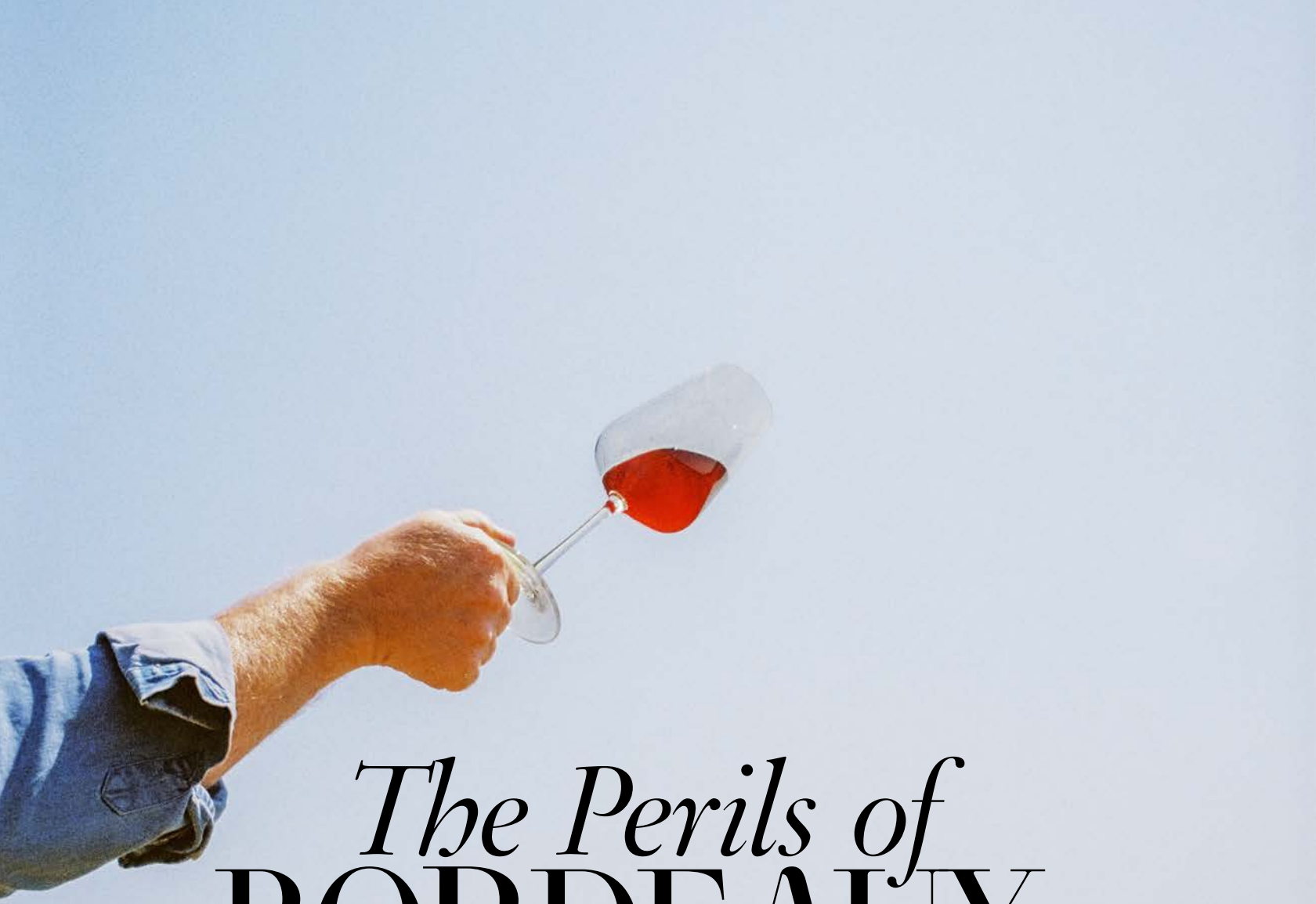


The Perils of BORDEAUX

He got pushed out of Long Island, outgrew Texas, and then landed in the most tradition-bound wine region on the planet as it faces an existential crisis. What on earth is wine provocateur Regan Meador thinking?

BY **TOM FOSTER** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MARCUS LLOYD**





Meador inside the limestone wine barn he spent a year renovating after buying his Bordeaux estate in 2023. Opposite: Southold sits on about 17 acres in Francs-Côtes de Bordeaux, one of the region's smallest and highest corners.

Sixty-year-old vines, knotted and thick-trunked, cling to the hillside on the oldest parcel of Regan Meador's Bordeaux estate, just behind the limestone wine barn he spent a year renovating. It's a misty spring morning, unseasonably cold and wet for this corner of one of the world's most storied wine regions. Meador points out where the soil shifts from limestone to clay as the slope falls away toward a crease in the land. Variability, he believes, is the mother of complexity, and the contrasts and scrappy surprises of this specific area, relative to the rest of Bordeaux, have a lot to do with why he's here—why one of the most surprising and closely watched young winemakers to emerge from the U.S. in the past couple of decades packed up his family, his dogs, and his restless ambition and started over in France.

Meador's winery, Southold, occupies a seven-hectare plot (about 17 acres) perched within Francs–Côtes de Bordeaux, one of the smallest, easternmost, and highest pockets of Bordeaux, just a few miles east of the medieval city of Saint-Emilion. Whereas the grand estates of the Médoc and the Graves sit on flatter, more famous ground, this area is hillier and cooler, and its grape-picking season comes a couple of weeks later—enough of a difference, Meador believes, to invite experimentation.

During Meador's first growing season on the property—2024, just a year after he announced his move—something caught his eye one day as he walked the old-vine parcel. He slowed down. The leaves didn't all look the same. Some were smaller, rounder—a sign of white grapes, not red. Somebody, Meador realized, had planted this block the old way, throwing everything together, mainly merlot, but with sémillon, sauvignon blanc, and other old Bordeaux varieties sprinkled throughout.

For Meador, who made his name pushing past the conventional wisdom about what two of the most promising young wine regions in the U.S.—the North Fork of Long Island and the Hill Country of Texas—could produce, it was like finding a time capsule with instructions for what to do next. Ever since a devastating freeze in the 1950s wiped out much of Bordeaux, and the government started encouraging planting the easier-to-cultivate merlot grape, mixed fields like this one have been rarities. Meador now intends to add more old Bordeaux varieties into the mix. Then he'll pick everything together at one moment and let the vintage tell its own story—a so-called field blend, the proportions of which will shift year to year as conditions play out differently across varieties. "It will never be the exact same," he says.

It's the kind of boundary-pushing idea that has defined Meador's career, equal parts provocation and common sense. On Long Island he went around telling anyone who would listen that the world didn't need any more merlot or chardonnay—a sentiment that did not endear him to his neighbors, several of whom made little else. He named his road in Texas after the 1980s hardcore band Minor Threat.

But the places he has provoked in the past were still figuring out who they were. Bordeaux, on the other hand, is perhaps the most codified wine region on earth, governed by a strict, multilayered hierarchy of 68 *appellations*—legally defined geographic zones ranging from the entire region down to a single village. Each zone comes with a rulebook dictating precisely where grapes can be grown, how wine must be made, and which specific varieties are allowed on a label, all locked in place by classifications that in some cases date back to 1855. A Bordeaux is a Bordeaux because the rules say so—just as a wine cannot claim a specific village title, like Margaux or Saint-Emilion, unless it checks every bureaucratic box required by exact boundaries. Which is why finding that old field blend felt, to Meador, like a permission slip to push those boundaries.

He can't help himself, says his wife Carey, who has been his indispensable partner and who said yes every time he has asked her to bet everything on a big new idea. "Regan is always looking for something to work on, or fix, or solve," she says. "He's never going to let himself be at peace."

The fact is, Regan Meador is just getting started in Bordeaux, and his presence there raises some questions. One is just who does this guy think he is? Another: What if Bordeaux, which is reeling from twin crises, of climate and culture, actually needs some of Meador's outsider energy right now?

He sets off down the one-lane road that bisects his estate to check on some vines he grafted last season, converting some of the merlot blocks to other varieties such as cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc—relatively conventional choices for the region. This year, he says, he will add some chenin blanc and savagnin, an ancient alpine white best known for the nutty, savory wines of France's Jura region. That, to the Bordelais, is another matter. Neither chenin blanc nor the supremely oddball savagnin is permitted under Bordeaux rules, meaning wines that include it can't be called Bordeaux at all.

Meador is fine with that. "Once we get into these other white varieties," he says with a slight twinkle, "there will be some, like, 'What is this guy doing?' "

What if Bordeaux, which is reeling from crises of climate and culture, needs outsider energy right now?

What *is* this guy doing? The answer starts more than a century ago and halfway around the world, on a 5,400-acre expanse of rocky West Texas scrubland outside a town called Eldorado that the Meador family has worked and held intact for six generations. Regan's great-great-grandfather C.L. Meador arrived there in 1903, looked at a stretch of ground nobody had figured out yet, and built something that has outlasted almost everything around it. Now known as the X Bar Ranch, the Meador spread is one of a tiny group of large Texas ranches that have never been sold or splintered into pieces since they were first established.

Born on the ranch, Regan grew up in suburban Dallas after his dad migrated there during the 1980s oil bust. On the surface few places could have been more different from the ranch than that status-obsessed city at that moment in time. But the Dallas elite also shared some of the same opportunism that animated the West Texas wildcatter types. Regan tried to fit in, even taking a finance consulting job in Dallas after college, but he was miserable from the start. After three-hour lunch breaks spent flipping through LPs at local record stores earned him a layoff, he blew his severance money on the thing that restless twentysomethings blow their money on: a Eurail pass and three months in Europe. ➳→



Carey Meador has been Regan's partner through three iterations of Southold and two family moves, from New York to Texas to France.



Meador is adding wildcards such as savagnin and chenin blanc to the predominantly merlot grapes in the vineyards.



One of Meador's first moves was to cut a 12-foot-tall window in the barn's front wall. The table overlooking the vineyard is his tasting room and, during harvest, his dining table.



The winery is deliberately small in scale, allowing Meador to experiment with varieties and blends. Sometimes the work is a family affair.



Prioritizing soil health and climate resilience, Meador has eschewed meticulously groomed rows for a wilder vineyard.

Then he did the other thing restless twentysomethings do: He decamped to New York, where a job at a music management company dropped him into the heart of the city's early-2000s indie rock scene. Eventually he drifted into advertising, landing at a boutique agency and later at Grey, a blue chip firm with some of the world's most famous brands in its client roster. He was good at it and found himself working on Super Bowl commercials—"but I'm looking at my bosses, all getting divorced, lives falling apart," he says now. All the creative directors he knew harbored a true passion for music or photography or some other discipline they tried to squeeze in around the agency work. "It was just the means to an end."

That's not how things worked in Texas. You wanted something, you went for it. One day, in the middle of an interview for what Meador now calls "some fancy metric ad consultancy," he glanced outside and saw the young woman from HR he had started dating, a native New Yorker from the North Fork of Long Island, and somewhere inside him a switch got flipped. His heart wasn't interested in this professional opportunity or, really, in the ad industry at all. He excused himself from the interview. He wanted something to be passionate about, wanted to fall in love—not just with Carey but with something that gave him purpose.

Carey had grown up in the bucolic seaside town of Cutchogue, one of the hamlets that make up the township of Southold, the oldest English settlement in New York. Long a working-class hub of fishermen and potato farmers, the area had begun to attract attention for its wine—a nascent scene that was starting to draw weekenders from New York City. As in many young wine regions, the North Fork's vintners were looking elsewhere to find their bearings. Their model, given the similar maritime climate and cool growing season, was a region just inland on the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean: Bordeaux.

It was 2010, and Meador found a listing online for an assistant winemaking position at Osprey's Dominion, a Long Island vineyard. It was looking, the ad said, for someone with little or no experience. Regan had been increasingly interested in wine as a consumer, and Carey had joked about one day opening a winery and moving back to the island, but starting a new career seemed like a lark—until Regan arrived there and found himself going all in. The operation was small, just him and the winemaker, and one harvest was enough for him to decide he was ready to go out on his own.

In 2012 he and Carey bought a condemned mid-1800s saltbox

farmhouse on Old North Road in Southold, just down the road from where Carey had grown up, and gutted it to the studs. They planted a vineyard in the spring of 2013 and moved into the renovated house in June; their daughter Coralai was born at the end of that month. "All of that happened at once, within like six months, and people were like, 'What is happening?' " Carey remembers.

The wines Meador started making from that first vintage were nothing like what the North Fork was producing. He planted northern Italian and Austrian grapes with names like teroldego, lagrein, and blaufränkisch and gave the bottles names like Trust the Pain and Damn the Torpedoes. He was also buying fruit from Rex Farr, a Vietnam veteran who had spent decades farming veggies on a 60-acre biodynamic North Fork property and had begun adding some grapes to the mix. The first time Meador brought Carey, then pregnant, to meet Farr and negotiate a fruit contract, they walked into a house full of rescued cats while Farr opened a couple of Budweisers and rolled a joint. "You'll never take me over to that house ever again," Carey told him afterward, but the grapes from that farm eventually found their way into Southold wines that received 93 points from *Wine Enthusiast*. It was the highest score the publication had ever given a Long Island wine. That wine's name, Illegitimi Non Carborundum, is a mock Latin phrase that translates roughly to "Don't let the bastards grind you down."

Meador had been borrowing space up to that point for his actual winemaking, and when he applied to build a small production facility on his own property, the town balked—worried, essentially, that another winery would tip the scales on the number of limousines and tour buses snaking through the area. Meador insisted he was doing something categorically different from the tasting-room-tourism operations down the road—and he was right, but his apparent contempt for the local wine establishment hadn't won him many friends. The town said no. Appeals went nowhere. "It's been heartbreaking, really," he told the *New York Times*'s Eric Asimov, a wine world luminary who called his wines "some of the most interesting, creative and exciting" in the region.

In 2016 the Meadors sold the house they had lovingly restored, bade Carey's family farewell, and moved to Texas. To the New York wine world, the move was as baffling as Meador's overnight materialization as a consequential winemaker had been. To Meador, though, it all made perfect sense.

Texas wine country was, in its own way, where the North Fork had been a decade earlier—a promising region still finding its identity, its producers largely mimicking California styles or importing California grapes outright. Most of the serious Texas-grown fruit came not from the Hill Country, with its rocky slopes and unpredictable weather, but from the High Plains, five hours to the northwest, where the altitude and the flat terrain made industrial-scale farming possible. Meador wasn't interested in any of that. He found a 62-acre property perched on a ridge near the booming tourist town of Fredericksburg, with views that seemed to run to the edge of the earth, and set about making wines that reflected what the Hill Country actually was. The *Times* came back out. Asimov rode along in Meador's white pickup truck past wildflower patches and limestone cliffs, and wrote that these new wines were "fresh and light, almost the antithesis of the powerful, opulent wines that have been more typical in Texas." One day Meador got an email from the White House telling him the president had served his wine at a state dinner.

Then came the restaurant. It had started simply enough: a tasting room on top of that hill, with a porch swing and big windows looking out over the Hill Country. But when Covid hit and Texas said businesses could reopen if they served food, Meador got right to work and built a place for that. Before he quite understood how it happened, the wine was almost beside the point. "I let the tasting room side of the business get so big that it was starting to dictate the terms of the style of wines that we needed to make," he says. The heat and drought were brutal too, the rocky slopes punishing to cultivate. And Carey had never really found her footing in Texas. Out on that ridge, with the nearest neighbor miles away, she was lonely in a way the views couldn't fix. She would take the kids to birthday parties and come home having barely spoken to anyone. "We were New Yorkers," says Regan, the native Texan.

Rex Farr called in 2022. He was selling the Long Island farm—did Regan want to buy it? Meador found he couldn't bring himself to go back. But facing that hard fact forced him to also face the reality that Texas wasn't working. In the fall of that year he walked into their makeshift garage gym and asked Carey what she thought about selling everything. Her answer was quick and clear: "All right." In January 2023 they started the process. By August it was all sold. The Southold wine club got an email: "It is our intention to move the family to France, more precisely Bordeaux."

> "I'm not going to save Bordeaux," Meador says. But he can ask the questions that locals haven't been able to.

Meador's email called the move "a dream come true… To be a (very small) new voice in such a prestigious and historic region is exciting and overwhelming." But being a small producer in Bordeaux, especially now, has turned out to be even more challenging than anything he tried in the past.

For one thing, alcohol consumption is plummeting across the developed world—even in France—driven by a generational shift. In the years after World War II the average French adult drank 135 liters of wine per year, about half a bottle a day. Today the number is 41 liters. And what people do drink is changing. The natural wine movement has made the grand, oaky, critic-driven style that defined Bordeaux in the 1980s and '90s feel deeply unfashionable. Climate change has compounded the problem. Merlot, the grape that blankets most of Bordeaux, is ill suited to the increasingly hot, dry summers that have become the norm; it accumulates sugar too fast while ripening, producing wines that are heavy and out of balance in difficult years.

This July, a wildfire fueled by drought-parched woodlands in the western part of Bordeaux burned some 42,000 hectares (about 160 square miles) and forced the largest peacetime evacuation in French history, nearly a quarter of a million people. Though the flames ultimately stopped short of destroying any vineyards, the fire came within 10 miles of Bordeaux city and made the gravity of ➳





Regan reverse-commutes to the wine estate from the family's home in Bordeaux city, about an hour away.

the region's climate problem unmistakable.

Then there are the structural challenges. Most Bordeaux wineries sell primarily through *négociants*, middlemen who buy from dozens of small châteaux, bundle all the wines under the generic category of Bordeaux, and move the bottles through distributors into foreign markets, where they end up on a shelf of obscure labels competing on little more than price. It is, at best, a race to the bottom. What keeps wineries tethered to the *négociant* system is that it pays reliably and promptly, typically within 30 days, which is enough to keep the lights on and, in a good year, fund a little cautious experimentation. Breaking free of the *négociants* means building your own distribution relationships, your own customer base, your own story. It's slow, uncertain work, and it requires a kind of market fluency most family-run small wineries don't have.

The human cost has been severe. On New Year's Eve 2025, a winemaker named Guillaume Petregne—who had left his career to take over the family estate in the Médoc area of Bordeaux, only to be hit by a cascade of crises—took his own life. It was the third such death recorded in just over a year. Three months earlier a 37-year-old winemaker named Jonathan Mayer, head of a small estate in the Entre-Deux-Mers area, had done the same. His death, announced by the regional chamber of agriculture, was described as a reflection of "the suffering experienced by the entire profession." The government has created an anonymous hotline specifically for despairing farmers.

The official response to what *Wine Spectator* has called "the existential crisis of Bordeaux's small grapegrowers" has been a combination of triage and tentative adaptation. The French government launched a program offering about $1,850 per acre to winemakers willing to permanently uproot their vines—not to replant, but simply to exit. For those who stay, the appellation rules have been loosened, just a bit. Several new grape varieties better suited to a warming climate are now permitted, but only in cheaper blends and only if they don't exceed 10 percent of any wine and are not named on the label. Meanwhile, at a Sotheby's auction in New York this past April, a single magnum of 1870 Château Lafite Rothschild sold for $200,000. In fact, most of Bordeaux's grand classified estates—Château Latour, Château Margaux, and so on—have enough currency with collectors, independent of trends, to weather the crisis just fine. They also have the resources to fund sophisticated climate adaptation programs and equipment that smaller producers can only read about.

It is in the middle of this storm that Meador has planted himself, in his Carhartt vest and X Bar Ranch baseball cap. He can make whatever wine he wants, and the worst anyone will do is call him a crazy American. He has thought carefully about what he is and isn't doing here, though, and he has grown enough to know what he can and can't say. "I'm not going to save Bordeaux," he says. "I will barely make an impact on this little appellation." What he can do, he believes, is ask questions the system has prevented locals from asking—about which grapes actually belong here, about what this specific corner of the region was before the French establishment locked it into a narrow mold.

One of the first things Meador did when he set about renovating the barn that would become his headquarters was punch a giant hole in the front wall. Today a simple wooden table and chairs sit in front of a 12-foot-high window that looks out over the vineyards. It's where Meador pours tastings for visitors and where he eats when he stays in the sleeping loft on the other side of the structure during harvest. (The rest of the time he lives with Carey and the [CONTINUED ON PAGE 114]



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[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 101] kids in a townhouse in Bordeaux city.) If his earlier days were like a punk rock middle finger to the man, what he's after now is something more monastic, even if the underlying message is more contrarian than ever.

The first two wines from the estate, released in October 2025, are both made from the old-vine merlot that was already planted when he arrived, the same grape he is in the process of grafting over to other varieties. One, called Rouge Clair, is close to a clairet, an old Bordeaux style—light-bodied and pale red—that was historically the dominant export to England, where it became known as claret before the style fell out of fashion and the word came to describe the region's deeper, heavier reds. The other, Le P'tit Rouge, is something else entirely. Harvested young, it has a slightly tart fruit profile with a tingly mineral finish and none of the heavy tannins of a traditional Bordeaux red. Neither carries the word Bordeaux on the label, nor the word merlot. He's sidestepping the entire classification and *négociant* system. The wines carry the most basic French designation, Vin de France, usually an indication of a bargain bin bottle—but in Meador's mind it's a key to unlocking a world of possibility.

Bordeaux city, set on the Garonne River an hour inland from the Atlantic, feels like a more manageable version of Paris, with the same elegant historic buildings, sidewalk cafés, and cobbled lanes lined with pastry, cheese, and fashion boutiques—but without that Parisian froideur. Down a narrow road from Place Gambetta, the limestone townhouse the Meador family has colonized has tall ceilings and the kind of airy kitchen where dinner guests inevitably congregate. The two kids, who have settled into French schools, navigate the city freely, skateboarding or going thrifting with friends—which beats looking out for rattlesnakes in the brush back in Texas.

Carey has taken to walking everywhere, usually with the family's two enormous Bernedoodles, Wally and Pearl. She says she has also seen a gradual transformation in Regan as they have settled into French living. "I think part of the exercise of even going here was to go slower and be more nuanced and balanced about things," she says one night while preparing a meal of roast chicken and two salads. "In New York it was like push, push, push, stand out, what could we change? Texas was more like we intended to help establish a region, and then got caught up with the growth. I'm really proud of Regan, because slowing down is not his natural way to work."

Meador sometimes frames the move as a return to first principles. He's working roughly the same amount of land he had on the North Fork, "which allows me to know my parcels really well and do small fermentations, small lots of wine. I want to get back to what we originally set out to do when we were in New York."

Looking back now, Meador owns his part in how the Long Island chapter ended. "I was leaning way too far into the 'I'm doing something different' thing without really getting the nuance of why that made sense," he says. "What registered was, 'Y'all are idiots and your wine's not good.' " When things got political with the zoning board, he found himself out of his depth. "I just didn't know how small town politics worked." He arrived in Texas with the chip still on his shoulder and didn't slow down until he didn't recognize what he'd created.

Carey puts it more gently. "Maybe if he had taken a different tone with some of the stuff in New York, who knows?" she says. "Ultimately, we're happy here, so if that was the way we got here, okay. But it was certainly a period of a lot of heartache. To have not felt like we were being kicked out would have been nice." There's no trace of bitterness when she says this, only clear-eyed hindsight.

A few weeks after that dinner, Meador was out at the estate alone, bottling two of the wines from his second vintage—a chardonnay, grown in a block already on the property that he originally planned to graft over but decided to give another chance, and the new Rouge Clair. A third wine, the next Le P'tit Rouge, would wait until closer to harvest. He moved the wine himself, with a forklift rather than pumps. "It's a lot of cleaning," he says of the physical reality of small-scale winemaking. "You make a huge mess, and you have to clean it up every single time." On harvest days a picking crew might start in the morning and finish by 11 a.m. and go home. He won't finish up until 10 p.m.

The first Southold vintage from Bordeaux was available only online or at a handful of stores and wine-focused restaurants in Texas, but the new wines were on their way to New York and California by the end of May. Because he retained his Texas liquor licenses, Meador can import his own wine directly into the United States, an advantage most French producers don't have. He has been patient about distribution, working his own relationships rather than rushing to sign with just anyone.

The chardonnay, crisp and almost delicate, comes from a single barrel from the estate's earliest pick of the year—enough to send just a few hundred bottles out into the world. The Rouge Clair of this vintage folds in some of the later-harvested chardonnay for an additional "bass note"—something he didn't add the first time around. It sits in the space between red and white, but "with more to say than a rosé," in his words.

None of this is yet what Meador ultimately plans to make here. The chardonnay—a Burgundian variety with no real claim to Bordeaux—has surprised him enough that he has decided to keep making it for now, as well as start holding some back for an eventual sparkling wine. It is not lost on him that the two varieties he most loudly disparaged on Long Island—merlot and chardonnay—are a majority of the grapes he has worked with so far in France.

As those first bottles from the new vintage made their way toward the states, a historic heat wave swept across France. Temperatures in Bordeaux topped 96 degrees Fahrenheit in late May, an all-time high. The heat waves kept coming through the summer. "Texas hot," Meador called it. "But it could be worse." Then came the fire. The Meadors escaped to the Alps for a week, but by early August, with yet another spell of triple-digit temperatures in the forecast, the chardonnay was ready for harvest. He was pleased to see that the grapes had weathered the heat well in the famous Bordeaux soil. But he was really looking forward to 2027, when he'll release at least six different wines. "We'll finally be a real winery."

Among those bottles next year will be that field blend he discovered shortly after arriving at the estate, which he has decided to call Melée. He's been offering tastes out of the barrel to a few visitors, including some local industry people, Meador says. "They'll try the Rouge Clair and be like, 'Oh, this is good.' And 'Le P'tit Rouge, got it.' And then they taste the Melée and they're like, 'What?!' " Which is exactly how he likes it. T&C