

Report on the 12th Marathon des Châteaux du Médoc et des Graves

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While a “Fun Marathon” sounds like an oxymoron, the Marathon des châteaux du Médoc et des Graves held in the famous wine district of that name just north of Bordeaux must go close to living up to that title.

The marathon was initiated 12 years ago by a group of doctors who were keen on running - and on wine - and decided to combine their business with their pleasure and leisure.

This year was the 12th and largest, with nearly 8000 official entrants. The festive aspect is clear by the fact that running in fancy dress is strongly encouraged, with a pre-start presentation of the best costumes. Probably 30% of the runners wore fancy dress. These ranged from the witty and elaborate to the vulgar. The former included a mock-up tram, carried by a team of runners with the driver inside (I never established if the driver ran or was carried) and a winged Icarus, while the latter included numerous men dressed as large breasted females, as well as a few who chose to represent themselves as a giant condom covered penis! On balance, vulgarity was the clear winner!

The marathon itself is the centre piece of a three-day celebration. The Friday comprises a specially organised wine tasting at a number of top châteaux, the sale of wines and marathon related souvenirs, a display of handcrafts at Saint-Estèphe, a serious medical sporting congress, where experts deliver their most recent findings on sports medicine, particularly as it is related to long-distance running and wine drinking! In the evening there is a giant pasta party, with abundant local wine, followed by many musical performances on the quay of Pauillac.

The next day is the marathon itself, starting at 9.30 am. The course is hilly for the first 38km, and flat for the last 4km. There is almost no shade, and it tends to be very hot. Having arrived just 4 days before from wintry Melbourne, where my training had taken place on flat terrain, this was not going to be the ideal marathon for me! At 9.25 the wheel chair runners started. It was already hot, with the sun blazing down from a cloudless sky. I was perspiring as I approached the starting line, and was interested to note what appeared to be hundreds of competitors lining the bank of the Gironde river, which bordered the start. I wandered over to see what the attraction was, and found that the river bank was being turned into a giant pissoir. Indeed, this was a recurring theme throughout the marathon, with male runners simply stopping to relieve themselves with what appeared to be astonishing frequency. Indeed, an alien watching our progress from above would be excused for thinking that urination was an essential part of locomotion. The women were somewhat more discrete, and took themselves off the course, going between the rows of vines that lined the course.

Prior to the start, a young woman dressed (I think) as Joan of Arc gave an inspiring display of dancing, on an elevated platform above the crowd - the theme seemed to be higher, faster, stronger, and was rather more tasteful than anything we saw in Atlanta. This was accompanied by a wild guitarist, on an even higher platform. Both were warmly clapped and cheered by an enthusiastic and good humoured crowd of runners awaiting the start. We were sent on our way by a mock cannon, that did however fire copious quantities of real gunpowder. Our official entry numbers, to be pinned to our singlets, included our given names in large letters - of which more later.

The course is a single loop, going south 10km, then north about 20km, then back south again. It carefully detours through some of the greatest châteaux in France, including Mouton Rothschild, Gruaud-Larose, Cos d'Estournel and Latour, to name but a few. Wine tasting is an integral part of this event! However to make sure that you earn your wine, it is only available after the 18 km mark. Thereafter, at each château you pass a table where you can stop for a tasting. The thought of wine drinking during a marathon struck me as crazy, but then I remembered that in the 1896 Olympics in Athens that was the only drink served at the drink stops, and as I very quickly decided that I was only running for fun (when the first 5km passed in 26 min instead of the 23 I had planned, and I was already sweating profusely) I thought I'd try it too. Well, it didn't seem to have any effect, but

maybe I should have stopped more often to enjoy the full benefit! As well as the wine, there was also a tasting of the local oysters at the 37km mark. I thought that, in order to savour the total experience, I should try that too. They were definitely inferior to the Australian variety, though perhaps the tasting conditions were sub-optimal!

As well as the wine and the oysters, this event has a strong musical focus, and there were 45 different bands/ensembles spread around the course. These ranged from belly dancers to Beethoven, passing through hard rock, Latin American, brass bands, drum groups and almost any musical genre you can imagine. These were a most welcome distraction during the course of the race, and particularly towards the end. Many spectators lined the route, though for some inexplicable reason they seemed to cluster at the châteaux. Towards the end they were very encouraging, greeting you by name, which they read off your number, and shouting “allez Tony”, whereas after 25km Tony was struggling to maintain 6 min kms, and hoping that someone would shout instead “arrêtez Tony.”

Speaking as a runner who hates the heat at any time, and particularly when combined with several excess kilos and numerous hills, I was incredibly impressed by the organisation. From the first rest stop at 3km, they became increasingly frequent, until towards the end they were at about 1.5km intervals. At all rest stops there were sponges handed out, 300ml bottles of Vichy water (much easier to drink from than cups), cups of some sports drink, orange wedges, banana pieces, and I saw, but didn't try, local cakes, dried fruits, sugar cubes and various other unlikely marathon consumables. There were also several very well-staffed first aid centres, plus en-route massage tables.

The difficulty of the course can perhaps be gauged by the fact that the course record is 2:24 - though perhaps this is because the first prize is your weight in Grand Cru wines - which is unlikely to be wildly attractive to world class runners. This year was hotter than usual, and the winning time was 2:28. Despite running my slowest marathon for 15 years (3h 57min) I came 1505th out of nearly 8000 runners. There is a 6 hour cut-off, but this didn't seem to bother too many people.

The medical aspects include the collection of a brief medical history from all runners (used for statistical purposes, and entirely voluntary), and the option of a pre-run and post-run ECG (which resulted in the discovery and diagnosis of three people with heart conditions last year.)

After you pass through the finish chute and have your details recorded, you go through the prize tent. First a young woman puts a medal around your neck - in the shape of a tipsy runner - then you are given a nice sports bag, a bottle of local wine ('92 cru Bourgeois) in a pine box, a wooden rectangle the size of the end piece of a traditional wooden case of Bordeaux wine, engraved with the same tipsy runner, and the logo "Le Marathon le plus long du Monde" (the longest marathon in the world) showing a tipsy runner weaving from side to side in alcohol soaked bliss! (I'm sure this would be banned in politically correct America, and I'm not even sure it would be accepted in Australia). Then a large bottle of Vittel mineral water, a bag of recovery food - apple, cake, raisins etc, lots of literature, including details of all the runners. With your number a T-shirt is also given out, so altogether this is an extremely generous package for a 250 francs (about A\$62) entry fee. And last, but by no means least, as you emerge from the presentation tent a young woman sponges you down on both cheeks, embraces and kisses you, and congratulates you!

After the marathon there is a free meal (which I was in no condition to enjoy, so I cannot tell you about it) and a spectacular cabaret (same comment applies). The next day is a "Recuperative stroll through Margaux" - the region some 10km south of the marathon, and again home to some of the great châteaux. This is a 9.5km walk through 9 of the châteaux, including the great château Margaux. At 4 or 5 of these you can enjoy the wine in your personal "tastevin" or traditional tasting cup that you purchase (A\$2.50) at the beginning of the walk. This is followed by a lunch at Château Rauzan-Segla. (There is an alternative recuperative Mountain-bike circuit around St. Estèphe).

Throughout the 3-day period, good humour, good wine, good food, good music - and oh yes, good running were to be had in abundance. This was the most festive marathon I have ever run. Laurence and our friend Mireille cycled to the 13km mark to encourage me, Susette saw me off at the 2km mark and enjoyed the numerous activities that were available in Pauillac while watching the runners finish. I felt (and apparently looked) totally drained at the end, but quickly recovered after a long bath and a bottle of Mumm Cordon Rouge. I felt then that another marathon in maybe another 8 years might be about right! The next day and I thought maybe another one next year! We will see.