

LATOUR: CORNERSTONE TO TRADITION

Louis-Fabrice Latour, the reigning “king” of Maison Louis Latour

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rising stars. All of whom have their place in the balance of power. The great Domaines of Burgundy are families. They pave the way for artisan producers to walk. Without one there would be no road. Without the other, there would be no new travelers. Balance.

I recently sat down with Mr. Louis-Fabrice Latour, the reigning “king” of Maison Louis Latour. He is the seventh “Louis” in the family. This position as head of the family business has been passed down from father to first born son for over 200 years. It is not a shared position between siblings. Only one member of the family per generation sits at the helm. There are, of course, discussions and opinions offered for the family business, but it is not a democracy. The direction of the family business lies in the hands of one son at a time. Once the torch is passed, the preceding “monarch” is no longer in official capacity. As a business and a family, they are inspired by generations past, but remain steadfast in their commitment to the future. I believe the family of Latour and ultimately the brand of Louis Latour has a three-fold definition: master-craftsmen, visionaries, and loyalists.

As master craftsmen with over two centuries of history, Louis Latour has a dual responsibility: one, to themselves, and the second to their community. Both have significance for Burgundy on a global scale. As the largest importer of Burgundy wines to

BURGUNDY IS A LAND OF SACRED VINEYARDS. Royal land belongs to the farmers. Those who work the rows, whisper to the vines, and harvest the annual fruit – they are the ones who own the soul of Burgundy wines. Whether the grape is Pinot Noir or Chardonnay, the hallowed ground of Grand Cru vineyards like Montrachet, Corton-Charlemagne, and Chambertin demand respect, honor, and unconditional loyalty. It is a tradition in winemaking and grape growing like no other place on Earth. Burgundy is the Holy Grail for wine enthusiasts.

Who rules this hallowed land and its time-honored tradition? The throne is shared by the farmers,

or vigneron, and the winemaking families. They are not one and the same. They are two distinct groups. This is France. This is Burgundy. This is the tradition.

One of the great debates in the world of wine is “person or place?” Who or what has more influence on the final product? The winemaker or the land on which the grapes are grown? In Burgundy, the answer is “yes”. Ambiguous, yet completely accurate. This is not a monarchy of one ruler, and it is not a democracy of the people. It is a balance of power. It is tradition, and it is what defines Burgundy.

Among the players, there are nobles and there are

the US market, Latour wines must be a reflection of the entire region. From top to bottom, they produce the 'snapshot' for the American palate. If their wines are not quality, the entire region suffers in the eyes of all consumers. If their prices are not appropriate, the economic domino-effect for small Burgundy producers is catastrophic. The responsibility is enormous. And they take it very seriously.

The largest production wine for Maison Louis Latour imported to the United States retails around \$15.00. It is a white wine, made entirely of Chardonnay, from the Southern tier of Burgundy in an area called Cotes Chalonnaise. It comes under their umbrella of "Négociants". Négociant wines are

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produced entirely from purchased fruit. Domaine wines come from vineyards owned by the family. In the world of Louis Latour, 80% of the family's business is négociant. In this role, they embody the balance of power. Burgundy as a whole is two-thirds négociant trade.

On the other side of the coin, Maison Louis Latour offers up Grand Cru Domaine wines from their 17 hectares, primarily in the village of Corton, as well as Grand Cru wines from purchased or négociant sources. These wines do not reach most American tables because they are costly and are produced in extremely small lots. As masters of their craft and industry leaders, the responsibility to achieve the highest quality on every level, regardless of price, remains constant.

It is often said in conversation among wine enthusiasts that Burgundy is the benchmark for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. When asked if "it drinks like a Burgundy" is a compliment from his perspective, Mr. Latour's sentiment is an overwhelming yes, because it is an indication of quality. I happen to believe that as well. Mr. Latour, conversely, believes that there is not a "governing style" for Burgundy. There is a wide range of expression among producers. The continuity lies in quality, not style. "Quality is more important than overriding definition of style," according to Mr. Latour. Though every Domaine has a distinct house "style", it evolves over time with the influence of each generation. Mr. Latour's grandfather (the fifth Louis) had a saying, "Never age with your customers". Style is freshness and being "in tune with the next generation," according to Mr. Latour. Quality, however, is timeless.

In addition to quality and style, Burgundy wines must convey a sense of place. Mr. Latour spoke of the concept of *terroir*. (*Terrior* is the French term that embodies the essence of the vineyard site.) Without a certificate of origin stamped inherently in the wine, Burgundy is no longer a special wine or place. It's just a place and just a wine. Every wine must have a sense of place to be called Burgundy. It is paramount. Style, Quality, and Terroir are the trinity of Burgundy.

As Louis Latour, the company, embraces its future, choices must be made to stay current. As market leaders, it is certainly an overriding thought to Mr. Latour. His responsibility to family, all generations,

and to his native land is clear. When asked about expansion and the next "step", he is quick to keep the focus close to home.

Many other Burgundy producers have expanded their production sites to include other areas of France and the world. Latour will remain in Burgundy. "There is still so much to do at home," he comments. He believes Burgundy wines have much potential beyond what is currently being produced. There will never be an abundance of Grand Cru wines. But Burgundy is more than Grand Cru. It is a land rich with tradition of winemaking for over 800 years.

The loyalty shown by négociants and land holders to one another creates a special and symbiotic energy. It's a relationship to the land. A relationship to the past. A relationship to each other. Though there are many areas in the world capable of producing quality wines, this place we call Burgundy is more than land. Mr. Latour is loyal. He is not ready to look elsewhere as his family and his business moves into the next generation. He is of Burgundy. Period.

Following my conversation with Mr. Latour, I was privileged to sit for a tasting of twenty Grand Cru wines from Maison Louis Latour. A tasting of this magnitude happens once in a lifetime. It paled, however, in comparison to my conversation with this man. His charm is matched by his vision, his dedication, and his unrivaled and comprehensive knowledge of his world.

Visionary is a term used loosely and one that is not typically accurate to any company or individual. Yes, there are visionaries in every industry, but they are rare. Visionaries are exceptional, and their



products are legendary. There are great minds and talents throughout the world of wine, but a visionary sees beyond his lifetime, beyond the lifetime of his children and grandchildren, and makes plans. Plans that work.

A visionary's influence has a global effect. In the world of wine, that application is rare. And yet, I believe, it applies aptly to Maison Louis Latour, specifically to Mr. Louis-Fabrice Latour. He had no obligation to join the family business. No generation was ever pressured. Yet, it's as if the Latour men are born with a predetermined path and an inherent knowledge of their ancestors. Each generation builds on the previous and prepares the next. It is visionary. It is Maison Louis Latour in one word. *