

Inside Louis Latour



Maison Louis Latour is everything a wine company should be. It makes delicious and interesting wines for every level, from the collector to the after-work drinker. It is family-run – the current chairman, Louis-Fabrice Latour, is the seventh Louis in the post – and although it turns over €68m (\$72.3m) and makes 5m bottles a year, it has the intimacy and friendliness of a far smaller company. It employs winemakers and technical experts of international renown, and it has a pioneering attitude, opening up new regions, reviving forgotten varieties, and experimenting with terroir.

Deep roots

Louis Latour must be an exciting company to work for. Here, for example, is Laurent Chevalier, the energetic oenologist at Henry Fessy, the Beaujolais producer that Louis Latour bought in 2008. He's particularly excited this autumn morning at the tail-end of harvest. He's showing the first release of the first Pinot Noir to be commercially produced in Beaujolais. Pierre Dorées comes from 25 ha of Pinot Noir – some of it planted by Louis Latour, some of it from old parcels of vines that have survived from the 1970s – in the Pierres Dorées region in the far south of Beaujolais. Chevalier is delighted with the wine. It's fresh and ripe, is unmistakably Pinot Noir, with the lightness and lifted fruit of Beaujolais but with a certain richness, or fatness, that bespeaks a wine from further north. "It's M Latour's baby, this wine," Chevalier says. Latour told Meininger's he considers it "a visionary project, with multiple issues...I was very attentive to the development of this new vineyard, from planting to harvesting, winemaking style and packaging."

Louis-Fabrice Latour has been in charge of Maison Louis Latour for over 15 years, succeeding his father (Louis) in 1999 to the chairmanship of one of the most renowned – and one of the oldest – négociant-éleveurs of Burgundy. The Latours have been in Beaune since the early 18th century. They prospered as growers and coopers, buying the great vineyards on and around the hill of Corton – Aloxe-Corton 'Les Chaillots', Corton 'Grèves' and Corton 'Bressandes' – in 1768. Maison Louis Latour was founded in 1797, Louis Latour himself making his mark early as a pioneer. The cuverie he bought behind the handsome 18th-century manor house on the hill of Corton was revolutionary. It was entirely gravity-fed, the grapes emptied into the vats by an ingenious network of hoppers running on narrow-gauge rails that are still in use today.

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Vineyard acquisition continued throughout the 19th century; today there are 33 ha in Aloxe-Corton, including Corton-Charlemagne, and a further 17 ha in the Côte de Beaune and Côte de Nuits – Chassagne-Montrachet, Bâtard-Montrachet, Meursault, Pommard, Épernay, Nuits-Saint-Georges, Romanée-Saint-Vivant, Vosne-Romanée, Clos de Vougeot, Gevrey-Chambertin. Chablis and Beaujolais are represented by two major acquisitions, Simonnet-Febvre in 2003 and Henry Fessy in 2008, both producing comprehensive ranges, from basic village wines to the finest crus. Finally, there's the cooperage, which turns out 3,500 barrels a year, of which 1,500 are sold around the world, adding about €1m to the balance sheet.

Louis Latour remains the largest holder of Grand Cru plots in Burgundy. It owns two hectares of Corton and Corton-Charlemagne; most of the 180 owners of the 165-ha vineyard have title to a fraction of that. These are magnificent holdings, but the sixth Louis Latour (who died in April 2016) continued the pioneering tradition of his forebears by exploring beyond Burgundy. He opened up Chardonnay and Pinot Noir territory in the Ardèche and the Var, and now has a new operation in the Coteaux de l'Auxois, producing unusual, aromatic whites using the almost-forgotten local grape Auxerrois. And then there's Les Pierre Dorées, the Pinot Noir, which is just being launched. Louis-Fabrice Latour makes clear how he sees the house expanding: "Should there be any other project to come in the future, it will be along the same lines. That's to say with the grape varieties in which we have real expertise, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. We are only interested in opportunities in greater Burgundy or at the limit of it, but in any case not too far away from Burgundy."

A worldly view

When it comes to markets, Louis Latour has always looked beyond France. Export director Bruno Pepin says that in the 1980s, only 5% of output went into the domestic market. Now it's about 20%, with 20% going to the US and the other two-thirds sold to "over 100 countries". A further international facet is the UK subsidiary, Louis Latour Agencies, which was set up in 1990 and now represents 11 producers worldwide, from Margaret River's McHenry Hohnen to Morgenhof in Stellenbosch and New Zealand's Seresin Estate. Latour says he "always has the last word" when it comes to choosing agencies. "I want to maintain our values. Are they family owned? What is their positioning, and their strategic vision?"

The international reach of Louis Latour has made it one of Burgundy's most-recognised brands, especially in the US. "You see Louis Latour everywhere," says Tom McKnew, wine manager at the major Washington, DC, retailer Calvert Woodley. "We carry the range from top to bottom. The sweet spot is whites from \$15.00 to \$30.00 – Montagny, Marsannay, Mâcon-Lugny, and also the Ardèche wines, and the Simonnet-Febvre Chablis." At the upper end of the whites, Corton-Charlemagne still sells – "It has a very good reputation."

McKnew suggests it's Louis Latour's ubiquity and reputation for good value that defines it. Calvert Woodley sells "a bit of Corton rouge, as it has a good reputation," but the main action is at the affordable end. "Petit Chablis and Chablis, rather than Premier or Grand Cru; basic Burgundy. It's not seen as a collector's wine – it's not unique. People draw the line at the higher levels." Clients who spend hundreds of dollars on Grand Cru Burgundy "tend to do their homework – they're looking for smaller, more unique domaines." In the end, McKnew repeats the time-honoured phrase – "Louis Latour is reliable."

For one London merchant, only the Corton-Charlemagne ("It's very good value.") sells in any quantity. The reds are "negligible" compared to other producers, says Bud Cuchet of Fine+Rare, which carries a huge range of Louis Latour wines. "The wines are dependable and reliable – they have amazing holdings, but I think they could have more potential."

Burgundy expert Jasper Morris MW of Berry Bros. & Rudd (which carries no Louis Latour) also wonders about that potential. In his magisterial 2010 book, *Inside Burgundy*, he suggests, "There have been few significant changes [since Louis-Fabrice took over in 1999], although there is an air of something about to happen." Six years later, has anything changed? "The reds have clearly got better," he tells Meininger's, "but the whites now look old-fashioned. They are in the richer style whereas now people are looking for fresher, more mineral whites."

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The question of style, Pepin says, "is a discussion we have had many times." Although styles in white wines across the world have changed radically over the last 20 years, he says, "We are not going to change just to keep up with fashion. We want to preserve a level of fruitiness in the whites. More and more growers are looking for acidity, and I think that sometimes they pick too early and the wines are too acidic."

Changes are being made, but Pepin makes clear "this is evolution, not revolution". The reds continue to be flash-pasteurised, a practice that gives them their characteristic lightness of colour. Winemaker Jean-Charles Thomas has extended the maceration time, because, Pepin says, "We want to produce wine with colour, elegance and balance, but fruit-driven and accessible." He defends the pasteurisation, which is the subject of some controversy. "It's really not as important as the wine industry thinks." Still, it all contributes to the perception of Louis Latour as an old-fashioned business.

Latour has made some key appointments, notably with the hiring of technical director Boris Champy in 2008. Champy – who came from Napa's Dominus – is working with domaines such as Dujac, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Bouchard and de Vogüé on a secret massal selection programme to select vines with the best colour, concentration and optimum yield. Pepin – who also joined in 2008, from Bouchard Père et fils – says that an important innovation was to make more 'parcellaire' wines from their large Corton holdings. "Wines like Corton-Perrières, Corton-Bressandes and Corton-Clos du Roi have been introduced since 2008. These are things we weren't doing at all five years ago." But, he concedes, "Maybe we're not communicating that as well as we should be." The emphasis is naturally on "the new babies in the family", the Coteaux de l'Auxois wines and Les Pierre Dorées, which they are now launching into export markets. There has always been a clear divide, he says, between the commercial and the premium sides of the business.

"The premium segments may need a bit of fine-tuning but we are not going to change our style because the market is asking us to. And with commercial wines it's not a bad thing to be dependable, and visible in the market. Louis Latour has always set out to make wines that everybody could buy, never to just concentrate on their own domaine. To be commercially successful you have to look further than this small part of the Côte d'Or."

Looking ahead

Visiting Jean-Philippe Archambaud of Simonnet-Febvre in the new vineyards in the Coteaux de l'Auxois is like making an excursion into the uncharted outposts of an empire. This hilly IGP to the west of Dijon had 5,000 ha of vines before phylloxera, but is now cattle pasture, with a handful of hardy wine producers farming about 35 ha on a loose cooperative system. Latour has recognised how good the aromatic Auxerrois, Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay, as well as Pinot Noir and the red grape César can be up here, and is aiming to have 50 ha when the current round of planting is finished. "Three years ago, when we came up here, people thought we were mad," Archambaud says. "This is the way Louis-Fabrice works. He saw the opportunity, then he gave us the freedom to develop it." It might seem quixotic to be planting in this wild country, but as with Pinot Noir in Beaujolais, it makes commercial sense. Land is cheap, and the wines produced are fresh, aromatic. With the Louis Latour marketing machine behind them, they will sell. You can rely on it.

By Adam Lechmere