

Apstein's Winery of the Year for 2014: Maison Louis Latour



Maison Louis Latour, one of Burgundy's best négociants, is my choice for winery of 2014 because it excels with wines at all levels, especially the less prestigious ones, and even their "simple" Bourgogne Rouge. A case in point: About five years ago, I served, blind, a 1985 Latour Bourgogne Rouge to a wine savvy group in Boston, including a prominent and highly experienced sommelier and representatives from Maison Latour. The wine was a mature (but still-full-of-life) Burgundy that no one could identify accurately. All guessed its pedigree to be at least a premier cru, with one muttering that it could be Latour's Romanée St. Vivant. So here was a 25-year old Bourgogne Rouge masquerading as premier or grand cru. There are few négociants--or growers, for that matter--who could have managed that.

Of course, Latour's grand crus, Corton-Charlemagne, Château Corton-Grancey and Chambertin, are revered. Over the years, they've been served at Versailles and at the Elysée Palace (the French equivalent of the White House), at state dinners honoring Queen Elizabeth, Charles de Gaulle, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, and at the White House to honor President Ford during our Bicentennial celebration. But Latour's reasonably large production and reasonably affordable prices (by Burgundy standards for output and cost) give ordinary consumers a great opportunity to discover the charms and joys of the wines of that region.

Domaine or Maison

Founded in 1797, Maison Louis Latour is still family controlled with the 7th generation Latour, Louis-Fabrice, at the helm since taking over from his father in the late 1990s. While the white wines from Latour have long been the object of near-universal acclaim, the international wine press has been less enthusiastic about the reds--though wrongly, in my view. Most knowledgeable Burgundian experts today agree that, since Louis-Fabrice has taken charge, the reds have grown in stature, gaining more "oomph" when young without losing the delicacy that makes Pinots from Burgundy so inimitable.

Latour is the largest owner of grand cru vineyards in Burgundy, making it an important Domaine in addition to the company's role as a négociant. (The label of Latour's Domaine wines is almost identical to the négociant wines, with the exception that the neck medallion reads "Domaine" instead of "Maison"). Moreover, the house owns choice parcels within these vineyards, having had the pick of the litter, so to speak, when acquiring plots in the 18th century.

Corton is a Multi-Colored Star

Though Latour owns prized parcels in Le Chambertin and Romanée St. Vivant in the Côte de Nuits, their flagship wines, in my mind, are the grand crus from Corton: Corton-Charlemagne and Château Corton Grancey. With just about 25 acres, Latour is the largest producer of Corton-Charlemagne. And no one makes a better one. Latour's Corton-Charlemagne develops magnificently, befitting a grand cru, revealing its true stature while maintaining incredible vivacity and freshness after a decade or more of bottle age.

Latour's Château Corton Grancey is a bit of an anomaly. First, there's the name. Unlike Bordeaux, there are precious few châteaux in Burgundy. Indeed, Château Corton Grancey is a building, though not in the Bordeaux aristocratic style, but rather a winery Latour purchased in the early 1890s along with 37 acres of grand cru vineyards on the Corton hill.

Then there's the wine. Contrary to the usual Burgundian philosophy of keeping wine from each site separate, Latour's Château Corton Grancey is a blend of wines from four grand cru sites within the Corton appellation: Les Bressandes, Les Perrières, Les Grèves and Clos du Roi. The proportion of wine from each site varies depending on the vintage. Latour uses only the best grapes from those parcels--relegating less than perfect ones to other bottlings--and produces Château Corton Grancey only in the best years. Validating Latour's longstanding practice, the Domaine Romanée Conti, certainly the most famous and arguably the best domaine in Burgundy, has been doing the same thing--blending wine from different parcels--after recently acquiring vineyards on different parts of the Corton hill from the domaine of Prince de la Merode. The Latour Château Corton Grancey develops beautifully with bottle age, taking a couple of decades for its refinement and seamless combination of sweet fruit and savory, "mushroomy" subtlety to show.

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir Beyond Burgundy

After over 175 years of producing wines exclusively from Burgundy, Latour branched out to the Ardèche about 150 miles south of their home in Beaune and, still using a Burgundian grape, started to produce Chardonnay. And a very good well-priced one at that. Latour's 2012 Grand Ardèche Chardonnay (\$15) has restrained, pineapple-like fruitiness and the hallmark Latour spine of acidity that makes it a fresh and lively wine. This is a Chardonnay to buy by the case.

Seeing the success of their Ardèche project, in 1989 Latour took another Burgundian grape, Pinot Noir, further south to the Var near the Mediterranean, found a cool spot at 1500 feet above sea level, and established Domaine de Valmoissine to produce a wine from it. Though not a Burgundy, it is a good, well-priced (\$16) example of a French alternative that is lighter weight, less fruity, and more savory than a typical New World Pinot Noir.

Chablis and Beaujolais

Within the last two decades, after making no purchases of vineyards in Burgundy for 100 years, Maison Latour acquired domaines both north and south of their ancestral home in the Côte d'Or. To the north, in Chablis, Latour purchased the venerable house, Simonnet Febrve, in 2003, and made the wines even better. Indeed, Simonnet Febrve's Crémant de Bourgogne Rosé (\$18) is as good a sparkling wine for the price as you're likely to find. Their various Chablis wines combine flinty minerality with laser-like precision and verve, offering great value at every level from village to 1er cru to grand cru (\$24, \$35 and \$60, respectively).

Established in 1888, the 175-acre Domaine Henry Fessy, one of the largest in Beaujolais, was purchased by Latour 2008. The line-up of the Fessy Beaujolais, (priced around \$15), with their fruity easy-to-enjoy profile, should appeal to almost everyone.

Two Suggestions

If you win the lottery or if your bonus for 2014 was very substantial indeed, I'd urge you to buy as much of Latour's 2008, 2010 or 2012 Corton Charlemagne or their riveting Chevalier-Montrachet "Les Demoiselles" from the same years as you can afford. These are truly grand wines--among the best Burgundy has to offer. Savor them over the next 10 or even 15 years and you'll see the magic of mature white Burgundy. For the rest of us, I would suggest two of Latour's recently released 2012s that will stun you because of how they over deliver for the price. These two wines contradict the "conventional wisdom" that Burgundy is unaffordable. Neither of these two wines is from Latour's own domaine. Hence they are from Maison Latour (the négociant) side of the business. Both are real bargains and both reflect the talents of the Latour winemaking team.

Maison Louis Latour, 2012 Montagny 1er Cru "La Grande Roche" (\$25): Montagny is an often-overlooked village in the Côte Chalonnaise that is home to some excellent white Burgundies, such as this one. Latour has combined the ripeness of the vintage with a steely backbone that keeps it fresh and lively throughout a meal.

Maison Louis Latour, 2012 Marsannay (\$24): Marsannay, now practically a suburb of Dijon, is the northern most outpost of the Côte de Nuits. With no classified vineyards, but deserving of some, the village offers the best value for red wines from the Côte d'Or. Latour's 2012 is simply marvelous, delivering bright fruit flavors atop a woody savory base all enrobed in mild tannins.