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Q&A: Louis-Fabrice Latour, Burgundy Legend



Louis-Fabrice Latour talks to **Adam Lechmere** about the joys of working close to home.

You're the seventh Louis Latour – presumably it was pre-ordained that you would join the family firm?

Not at all. I studied political science in Paris and I hesitated between going into politics and into the wine trade. They have many things in common.

Do you regret not going into politics?

When you study political science you always think about it, but I don't regret that I'm not in politics. Especially in France. I made up my mind when I was 20 or 21. You either go into politics or run a company. You can't do both.

What did you do after university?

My father told me the one thing you won't learn at Maison Louis Latour is the financial dimension of the business, so he encouraged me to go into banking. I did military service for a year and then two years in the merchant bank, and joined the company when I was 24. Now it's almost 30 years. Even though I'm not that old, I've been around for some time. It's good to start young in the trade – you make good friends.

Was there a tremendous weight of expectation when you joined?

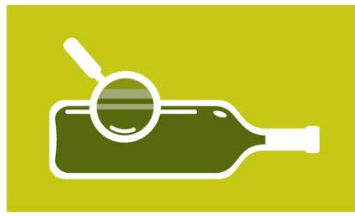
Not really. Maison Louis Latour was much smaller then. We had been around for 200 years, but when I was a young kid in the 1960s there were 10 to 15 negociants that were bigger than us. We were prestigious, but not a big business.

You said once that Maison Louis Latour is a traditional company with innovation at the roots. You're a pioneering company – what is there left to discover?

My new frontier is Burgundy. Modern companies love to say they're going to the New World but there are lots of things to be done here. Pierres Dorées is a revolution in Burgundy, and there's Auxois [where Louis Latour makes wines under its Chablis label Simonnet-Febvre] as well. You might say we're lacking in vision to be expanding only in our own backyard – but there's a lot to be done, especially in Beaujolais. I really believe in the Pinot Noir in the southern part of the region.

Do you think Pierres Dorées is going to start a revival of the Beaujolais?

We've been criticized for planting Pinot Noir. It's supposed to be a Gamay region, so it's controversial, and we're from the north... But the potential of Beaujolais terroir is huge. There are thousands of hectares of limestone in the south; we're trying to revive the Beaujolais, show its diversity. We are trying new ideas to realize the potential.



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The fresh and light Beaujolais style is what everyone wants - why isn't it doing better?

There's a reluctance when it comes to the name Beaujolais. There are lots of reasons. Beaujolais Nouveau has weakened it, and there's a lack of serious operators. It's a challenging category.

Beaujolais Nouveau has a lot to answer for.

It makes money. We do 50,000 cases. There are people who say Nouveau should be abolished but it's a third of the region - you would kill thousands of growers who make a living from it. It's going down every year. In a generation, it will have gone.

I recently wrote that wine merchants on both sides of the Atlantic consider Maison Louis Latour reliable but old-fashioned - do you recognize your company in that description?

I was surprised to read that we are thought old-fashioned. I think the wine trade is obsessed by acidity and minerality. The trade always prefers 2010 because of the minerality, the tension, the complexity. But customers prefer 2009 because it's bigger and richer - people tell me they wish they could find Meursault like their father had, with some fat and some shoulders. We have had a shift in style: our whites used to be much bigger and now we've moved towards minerality, but I don't want to get to the stage where you're harvesting at 11.8 per cent alcohol and Puligny tastes like Chablis. So I wouldn't call what we are doing old-fashioned. Fashions change all the time.

What about the style of (the just released) 2015? That was quite a hot vintage.

2015 is a good example of finding a balance between the riper and the leaner style. Because it was hot we decided to harvest earlier to keep the acidity, so the wines have nerviosity. You can compare the weather to another hot summer like 2006: if the 2015 had been made 10 years ago, it would have been like the '06, big and fat.

You're committed to sustainable viticulture but make no secret of using herbicides in Beaujolais. How soon before you go fully organic?

There is a big difference between Beaujolais and the Côte d'Or. The Côte d'Or is prosperous and we sell wine at a high price. It's a purely economic thing. Beaujolais is suffering. If we were to do in Beaujolais what we do on the hill of Corton, we'd lose money on every hectoliter we make. We should be more organic and we're working on it, but it will take a long time.

Do you think you'll ever be tempted to make wine in the other great Pinot Noir regions of the world?

I know Oregon is a prime area for Pinot but it doesn't excite me. I like the fact that I can get in my car and be in the Auxois in one hour, and in the south in two hours. I am very French. I like the historical dimension, the rediscovery, that you can find in France. There is a cycle - things go on, things change. Imagine, there used to be 4000ha in Auxois, all those small villages, this is the kind of thing you find in Europe.

There's a saying that every man eventually turns into his father. Do you think that's true?

Well, a few years ago, if you'd asked about going to new regions I would have said: "Yes! Let's go to Oregon or New Zealand", because I would have been worried about not being open-minded. Now I say I want to remain in Burgundy. I'm telling you the truth, which is what my father would have done.