

Louis-Fabrice Latour on the traditions of Burgundy

Maison Louis Latour has been producing excellent and unique wines in Burgundy since 1797, and the house has always made it a point of honor to remain family owned. Raj Gill talks to the current custodian, who is the 11th generation of the family to run the business — and the seventh to be named Louis Latour.



“The story of Maison Latour is quite simple, really. We are from Burgundy, we are 100 percent family owned, and we started the business during the French Revolution. This year we are celebrating our 220-year anniversary,” explains Louis-Fabrice Latour, scion of the respected négociant-éleveur dynasty.

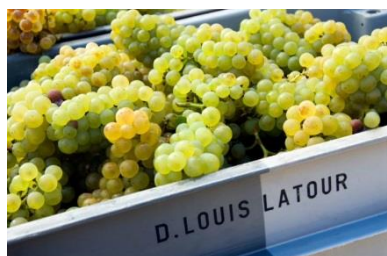
“Another milestone I had the opportunity to enjoy in my lifetime was in 1997, when we celebrated our bicentennial. In recognition of this the house was admitted into the Henokiens Association, an exclusive circle of companies who have remained in the founding family’s ownership for a minimum of 200 years and still bear the name of the founder.”

Louis-Fabrice grew up in the world of wine, watching and learning at the knee of his father, but when it came time to choose a subject to study at university he selected political science, and he had ambitions to become a journalist.

“There was absolutely no pressure on me from the family to follow in the footsteps of my ancestors and take the reins. Of course I knew it would make them ecstatically happy, but I made that decision independently and joined the business in 1989, and my father retired in 1999,” Louis-Fabrice says. “My ambition has always been the same: to make the best wine possible. To showcase the wine in the best places. It is not our ambition to be a big company. We want to be with the best retailers and in the best restaurants. My grandfather used to say, ‘Never invest in a place you cannot get to before lunch.’ Looking to purchase land for development overseas is not something I would currently consider.”

Louis-Fabrice’s great enthusiasm for wine is evident as he talks about the brand. Wine, and Maison Louis Lator, is his life and his legacy for his four children. “I hope that perhaps one of them will join the business, but I would never force them. It is essential that they have the passion. In my experience those who do not succeed are those who were forced against their will to join family companies. ‘You should maintain quality’ are the words of wisdom I will pass down to my four children.

“You will find Maison Latour has a strong presence on restaurant wine lists. We have very well-connected global distributors. We are a well-organized company, and we have a great team. We are not a big company, but we are mid-sized and efficient. We have an excellent combination and we do our best to promote the quality of the wine, the style of the wine and the name Maison Latour.



“We have a presence in 130 countries. There is huge potential for us to grow in Africa, and I feel we can do better in Asia. There are always new markets opening up. Our ambition is to be in every country where there are good restaurants and good retailers,” Louis-Fabrice says. “Maison Latour has been very successful with airlines — we are currently working with 20 to 25. Our biggest airline client is Emirates. For our brand it is great, as we are increasingly being recognized as an international brand, and their passengers want to drink a wine that they know and enjoy.”

For a brand that has been around for a couple of centuries, it is interesting to hear how modern technology is impacting the business. Louis-Fabrice claims that it has not had too much of an effect on the process, but they have certainly benefited from advances in viticulture.

Louis-Fabrice explains, “Modern technology has armed us with useful knowledge for the viticulture part of the winemaking process. The viticulture process includes monitoring and controlling pests and diseases and also the fertilization and irrigation of the grapes. It is important to monitor the grape development. Our findings tell us when it is the appropriate time to harvest and also the best times to prune the vines. The technology enables us to measure the rain and detect and deter disease early on. That’s where strides are being made and it becomes more interesting.”

Louis-Fabrice is very aware that some would say that Maison Latour’s image is too traditional and old-fashioned. “Ten, 15 years ago I was worried about having a too-traditional image, but not so much anymore,” he says. “It is not an issue. We are appealing to the new generations. There is a real passion for Burgundy within new generations. Burgundy has a great concept of brand, and we are well adapted to modern times.”



Louis-Fabrice insists that the wine world’s apparent snobbery and fussiness is something he keeps a safe distance from. He goes on to explain, “Every country is different, and every individual is different. We do not want to dictate to the customer how to drink the wine. The sommelier and the chef are better positioned than us when it comes to pairing. Our responsibility is to make the best quality wine. Therefore it is down to individual taste, it is up to the customer to choose.

“Trends come and go. Right now people are obsessed with having white wine with cheese. Five years ago in Paris this was unheard of. You should enjoy the wine; no hard and fast rules. It should be an adventure, not a complicated exercise about perceived correct pairings. A bottle of white wine with steak, or a bottle of red wine with fish — if that is what you like, then that is what you should have. At the end of the day it is about enjoyment.”

On his plans for the immediate future, Louis-Fabrice divulges, “Despite being in the business for 30 years I do not quite yet feel satisfied with what we have achieved. There is still a lot of work to be done. Especially now, as it is an interesting time in Burgundy. It has always been an interesting time in Burgundy, but now there is a higher demand for wines of the region.

“To accommodate this we are planning new vineyards. And we have many more projects in the pipeline. I would be very frustrated if I were to retire today, as I wish to pursue and complete these projects. I do not know yet what the highlight of my career is. Ask me again in 20 years.”



His daily routine in the business is far from the glamorous vision conveyed by his title, *président du directoire*, which translates as director of the board. Despite being the boss, Louis-Fabrice spends a great deal of time at the grassroots level with the farmers. “These days I spend approximately 110 days on the road, which is a great deal less than before. A typical day for me is spent at the vineyards discussing the grapes with the farmers. I enjoy all aspects. It is also good to travel, and I am always happy to meet the customers and see what they want from Burgundy these days.”

And what knowledge and advice can Louis-Fabrice share with someone who wishes to have a startup in the wine industry, particularly in Burgundy? “The land has become very expensive in Burgundy. It’s very difficult to be a startup here. There is not that much room for emerging winemakers. It is a region that has had wine since the Roman times, and it’s very traditional. And to be honest, the network is very closed, and I do not think an outsider would fare well.”

Louis-Fabrice plays his cards close to his chest when asked about his favorite Maison Louis Latour wine. “That is a bit like asking me to choose my favorite child. I love them all in abundance and equally.” And he confesses that he drinks wine on a daily basis as a perk of the job.

As for his legacy, he says, “When I do eventually retire I wish to create a museum dedicated to Maison Latour. We have a great deal of authentic ancient documents, and it would be interesting to do something with them. We are quite unique. The brand is 220 years old and still produced by the family of origin.”