

## A Class Act: Château Lagrange 1984-2011

Are you ordinary?

I apologise for such crude bluntness. But when you observe your fellow Man, how do you distinguish yourself from others? What makes you different? Do you have any distinctive physical features that momentarily fix the stares of passers-by? Do you have any eccentricities? Do you dress in bizarre fashion, a sartorial chameleon, Ziggy Stardust one day and Alvin Stardust the next (I have *never*fathomed the family connection)? Are you in possession of preternatural talent, the best in your field? Are you a pioneer or a game changer who has left an indelible mark upon your profession? Has your life been a succession of headline grabbing episodes, fodder for a best-selling biography and blockbuster film? Or perchance you covet a secret past: a picaresque childhood or teenage tearaway living life on the wrong side of the tracks. Have you seen the world, witnessed its most exotic nooks and crannies? Has your love life been a rollercoaster ride of unceasing emotional turmoil: stepping-stones of broken hearts that led to your one great lover *inamorata*, Anthony & Cleopatra, Bonnie & Clyde, Homer & Marge.

Have you lived your life to the absolute limit?

Or are you ordinary?

That is not intended as an insult. But do you sometimes read newspapers or watch a documentary and experienced the nagging feeling that life has been pleasant but blissfully uneventful. A career logically mapped out after a benign, sepia-tinged childhood. You worked your way through the ranks. You met the girl down the pub. You married and had 2.4 kids with side-helpings of mortgage (fixed rate), pension plan and vacations in North Devon every year. You mow the lawn every Sunday morning. You read the Daily Mail. You wear beige moccasins and synthetic cotton tank tops. Your musical taste is M.O.R., an acronym applicable to yourself, not that you particularly mind. That is what makes you content. You would not have it any other way, sitting on the fence vicariously watching life pass by.

Now, I am not going to describe Chateau Lagrange as ordinary...but neither would I describe it as extraordinary. And I bring this up after an exchange with Keiichi Shiina, Suntory's convivial "VEEP" at Lagrange, following a vertical tasting of Lagrange to celebrate three decades of ownership. He enquired how they could change the perception of this Saint Julien stalwart, essentially what might give Lagrange that elusive "bling"? Though no names were mentioned, I suspect *l'equipe* Lagrange looks over at glitzy Ducru-Beaucallou, with its Jade Jagger designed labels and eye-popping art installations, perhaps towards the charismatic winemakers of the appellation such as the cigarillo-chomping Jean-Hubert Delon, the debonair raconteur Anthony Barton or the *bon viveur*-cum-scallywag himself, Bruno Borie. These are properties whose personalities are defined and embellished by something more than just their wines. These are properties that have an aura about them, a human element at their epicentre that consumers latch on to, thus enhancing demand and increasing price.

Ah...price (again). That old chestnut.

When a Bordeaux château looks into its magic mirror to asks: "*Who is the fairest of them all*", beauty is not measured by the intrinsic quality of wine, but how much Live-Ex is currently quoting it for. Misguided? Of course, but that is how Bordeaux perceives itself, after all price is the measure of the success of a luxury brand.

Perhaps the team at Lagrange feel that there is disconnect between critics' positive reviews and the rather static price of their wine. I understand that. Lagrange represents good value. It is widely available and does not cost nearly as much as many of its peers. And it is reliable - a trustworthy cru that rarely lets you down, not unless you are seeking some 100-point masterwork of superlative-defying magnificence. Lagrange rarely appears in people's "*End of Year*" lists. Perhaps that is what Lagrange is striving for?

But surely there is some perversity that the virtue of offering consistently great quality to price ratio is seen is not so much *undesirable*, but simply *not enough*. There is something gravely wrong in that supposition, even if it is endemic across the region.

I cut to the chase with my reply. What exactly is wrong with a wine that represents fantastic quality to price, to wit, a wine such as Château Lagrange? For sure it is veiled in a sense of conservatism. Granted, I have never tasted a Lagrange that radically altered my opinion but...but...BUT...I have often ordered a Lagrange from a restaurant list and felt comforted that I had spent my money wisely.

Now *that* is something to cherish and preserve.

It is something that alas has become all too rare with respect to Bordeaux. The problem is that *Bordelais* at the top of the tree have convinced themselves that "good value" is a dirty word, a stain upon their luxury brand. Good value and luxury rarely go together - any marketer will tell you that. And the simple truth is that hoisting up prices to create that disorientating haze of luxury only really works with the top eight or nine chateaux and even then, the 2013 primeur campaign showed how brittle that link is. The worst nightmare for any luxury brand is to be "unsold", a lesson that the Bordelais will discover themselves over the next few years as stocks languishing in merchants' warehouses and trust funds begin surfacing at distressed prices, like mines breaking upon an ocean surface to sink H.M.S. Ambition.



This tasting of Château Lagrange held during en primeur week was a pertinent reminder of how much I like this property for the values it holds dear: value, reliability, *typicité* and availability. You know, the biggest argument I ever had when I was a Bordeaux buyer was not over Lafite or Pétrus. No, it concerned over a cache of Château Lagrange that had become available on the secondary market. A distributor was desperately seeking a couple of hundred cases for the prosaic reason that his clientele love to drink it. He *had* to have it. I can understand that in Bordeaux these days everybody yearns to be a star, grab headlines and be millionaires' darlings. However, they are not necessary genuine wine-lovers, the ones whose passion is only limited by the shortness of their purse strings, those disenfranchised by much of what Bordeaux stands for today. This tasting of Château Lagrange reaffirmed how the importance of a venerable Grand Cru Classé offering great Bordeaux to wide and appreciative audience that are not looking to make a 10% margin, but share this wine with their friends.

So Suntory should not worry themselves unnecessarily about the showmanship elsewhere. It doesn't make wine taste better. This vertical testified the vast improvements in the wine since Suntory acquired the 157-hectares estate back in December 1983, when just 56-hectares were actually in production. The most recent vintages post-2000 surpassed those from before, including great vintages such as 1990 or 1996. Although at first look Lagrange does not appear to be one of the radical or forward-thinking estates in Bordeaux - looks can be deceiving. In fact, over the years they have been one of the forerunners in implementing ideas such as sustainability and inoculation during alcoholic fermentation *inter alia*. Perhaps with the opening of their guest complex, more people will notice that Lagrange did not get to where it is by producing mediocre wine.

Perhaps what Lagrange is seeking is more respect for everything that its Far Eastern guardian has done over the years, which is immense and deserves more credit. As much as I lament the dwindling familial proprietorship in Bordeaux, there is no question that Suntory virtually saved Lagrange. It has come a long way. In which

case success should not be measured in terms of price, but rather the vinous pleasure it has offered so many.

Lagrange will never be a pop star. But it is a class act.

## **Tasting Notes**

### **1984 Château Lagrange 80**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1984 Lagrange has a respectable bouquet considering the growing season and age: light summer fruit, soy and a touch of tomato vine. It remains fresh although it is just beginning to fray at the edges. The palate is medium-bodied with grainy tannins. It is quite dry and very attenuated towards the finish, although it offers a modicum of pleasure. Past its best. Tasted March 2014.

### **1985 Château Lagrange 84**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1985 Lagrange, a blend of 57% Cabernet Sauvignon and 43% Merlot, has a charming yet farmyard-y, bretty bouquet that has plush smudged fruit that seem a little faecal. The palate is medium-bodied with a saline entry. It is loose-knit, almost Graves-like, with a slightly coarse finish that feels a little attenuated. Drink now. Tasted March 2014.

### **1986 Château Lagrange 87**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1986 Lagrange is a blend of 57% Cabernet Sauvignon and 43% Merlot picked between 30 September and 17 October. The aromatics are more cohesive and vigorous than the more flaccid 1985 with degraded red fruit, scorched earth and leather. The palate is medium-bodied with slightly grainy tannins. There is a touch of dryness creeping in during the second half, hints of soy and cedar. The finish is not complex but demonstrates more vigour than the previous vintage. Fine. Drink now. Tasted March 2014.

### **1988 Château Lagrange 90**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1988 Lagrange is a blend of 59% Cabernet Sauvignon and 41% Merlot picked between 3 and 19 October. The aromatics are far more harmonious and vigorous than either the 1985 and 1986 with brambly black fruit, tea leaf, undergrowth and lovely tobacco scents. It is very classic in style. The palate is medium-bodied with a nicely balanced entry. This feels soft and supple in the mouth, the tannins attaining more finesse and the meaty finish feeling smooth in the mouth. This is probably reaching the end of its drinking plateau, but it has had a good run. Drink now-2016. Tasted March 2014.

### **1989 Château Lagrange 90**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1989 is a blend of 55% Cabernet Sauvignon and 45% Merlot that was picked between 6 and 28 September. It has a lively bouquet that is surprisingly conservative considering the vintage, with degraded red fruit, bay leaf, clove and undergrowth scents, though I prefer the focus of the 1988. The palate is medium-bodied with grainy tannins: black plum and mulberry fruit interlaced with white pepper and dried herbs. It feels a little foursquare

towards the finish although it shows no sign of reaching the end of its plateau. Drink now-2017+ Tasted March 2014.

### **1990 Château Lagrange 89**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1990 Lagrange is a blend of 44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 44% Merlot and 12% Petit Verdot picked between 22 September and 10 October, cropped at 69hl/ha. Apparently the harvest conditions were so hot that some pickers elected to harvest in their bathing suits. The nose is a rather strange one, quite medicinal with potent liquorice and menthol scents that are rather distracting, an odd note of bandages. The palate is medium-bodied with a core of sweet, meaty red fruit that is moving rapidly towards secondary notes of dried blood and cedar. Many people like this wine, but here I still prefer both the 1988 and 1989 vintages from Lagrange. Drink now-2018. Tasted March 2014.

### **1994 Château Lagrange 85**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1994 is a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 31% Merlot and 9% Petit Verdot picked between 19 and 30 September. It has a conservative, straight-laced bouquet with earthy, cedar-infused black fruit that are classic through and through. The palate is medium-bodied with an understated and quite refined entry: dusky red berry fruit laced with tobacco and *sous-bois*, although it seems to flag mid-palate and finishes without much conviction. Drink now-2016. Tasted March 2014.

### **1995 Château Lagrange 89**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1995 Lagrange, a blend of 44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 43% Merlot and 13% Petit Verdot picked between 21 September and 10 October, has a perfumed and quite floral bouquet with fine definition. It does not possess a great deal of vigour, but it is demure and pretty. The palate is medium-bodied with a caressing, smooth texture on the entry. There is not a great depth and the Cabernet seems to be running on two cylinders, although the finish is nicely composed with bay leaf and sandalwood on the light finish. Fine. Drink now-2020. Tasted March 2014.

### **1996 Château Lagrange 91**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1996 Lagrange is a blend of 57% Cabernet Sauvignon, 36% Merlot and 7% Petit Verdot picked between 26 September and 11 October. It has a touch of menthol in the nose, not dissimilar to the 1990 Lagrange, but here there is more focus and refinement. The tobacco element is not as pronounced as on previous bottles. The palate is medium-bodied with a fine bead of acidity, a well-balanced and very classic 1996 with fine structure towards the saline finish, although there is not the complexity of more recent vintages. Drink now-2022. Tasted March 2014.

### **1997 Château Lagrange 90**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1997 Lagrange is a blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot and 17% Petit Verdot. This is the most mature bouquet to show vestiges of primary fruit, which is surprising considering the vintage. But there are some attractive blackberry mixed in with the scents of sandalwood, Havana cigar and leather. The palate is medium-bodied with fine and supple tannins, well-judged acidity and a pleasing, understated finish that offers more vigour than

you might presuppose. This is drinking beautifully now and should be considered a great success for the estate, a wine that seems to improve every time we meet. Drink now-2022. Tasted March 2014.

### **1998 Château Lagrange 91**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 1998 Lagrange is a blend of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 28% Merlot and 7% Petit Verdot. It has a fragrant bouquet with raspberry, crushed strawberry and leather scents all well defined with impressive focus. It unfurls gently in the glass. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins, a touch of spiciness on the entry, fine structure with plenty of tobacco and cedar towards the finish. It is again, very classic in style with a touch of sage lingering on the aftertaste. Drink now-2025. Tasted March 2014.

### **2000 Château Lagrange 92**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The millennial Lagrange is a blend of 76% Cabernet Sauvignon and 24% Merlot, one of the highest proportions of Cabernet to date. Picked between 28 September and 11 October. The bouquet is a little aloof at first, but it soon begins to unfurl with scents of earthy red berry fruit, cedar and mint that are well defined and retain excellent vigour. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins, perhaps lighter than expected, more feminine with a generous dash of white pepper towards the focused finish. Perhaps the tannins have softened in recent years, but I appreciate the tension in this Lagrange, its contained energy. Drink now-2025+ Tasted March 2014.

### **2001 Château Lagrange 92**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2001 Lagrange is a blend of 62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 27% Merlot and 11% Petit Verdot picked between 3 and 11 October. Comparing side by side, the 2001 shows more vigour and density than the 2000, offering earthy black fruit, leather and cedar, perhaps a little more precision than the preceding vintage. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins, a touch of soy and leather on the entry with a touch of citrus fruit on the finish. It would benefit from more persistency, but this is a lovely Lagrange drinking perfectly now. Drink now-2024+ Tasted March 2014.

### **2002 Château Lagrange 89**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2002 Lagrange is a blend of 54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot and 13% Petit Verdot picked between 1 and 14 October. It has an open, airy and transparent bouquet with blackberry and mint augmented by sous-bois and tobacco. It is quite Pauillac in style. The palate is medium-bodied with an upfront, quite high-toned sweet entry, good extraction here although it is missing some finesse and tension towards the finish, as if it is trying to over-compensate for the limitations of the vintage. Still, this is a commendable effort. Drink now-2025+ Tasted March 2014.

### **2003 Château Lagrange 87**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2003 Lagrange is a blend of 57% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot and 10% Petit Verdot picked between 11 and 25 September. The nose is typical of a 2003 with vivacious kirsch and raspberry fruit,

white pepper and Provençal herbs, but it does not possess the delineation to really pull it off. The palate is medium-bodied with soft tannins. This feels rounded in the mouth, however it is missing tension and precision on the finish and as a consequence it feels a little flat. Overall, this is not a bad wine for the vintage, but not the best Lagrange. Drink now-2018. Tasted March 2014.

#### **2004 Château Lagrange 92**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2004 Lagrange is a blend of 54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 36% Merlot and 10% Petit Verdot picked between 4 and 19 October. This has a lovely, engaging bouquet that is fresh and delineated, offering scents of red berry fruit, dried rose petals, sandalwood and cloves. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins. It is not a concentrated Lagrange, not by a long chalk, but it is extremely well balanced with precision and class, the persistency longer than previous vintages, leaving a spicy residue in the mouth. Excellent. Drink now-2028. Tasted March 2014.

#### **2005 Château Lagrange 94**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2005 Lagrange is a blend of 46% Cabernet Sauvignon, 45% Merlot and 9% Petit Verdot picked between 21 September and 10 October. It has a lifted, much more concentrated bouquet with blackberry, cedar, mint and cigar box, leaning slightly to Pauillac in style. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins, intense red berry fruit laced with cedar and tobacco, building nicely to a structured, extremely well balanced finish that frankly puts previous vintages in the shade. There is a lovely spicy tingle on the aftertaste with that faint coffee tinge. This is the first vintage you could drink now, but I would prefer to cellar for 3 or 4 more years. Drink 2016-2030+ Tasted March 2014.

#### **2006 Château Lagrange 91**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2006 Lagrange is a blend of 59% Cabernet Sauvignon and 41% Merlot picked between 18 September and 5 October. The aromatics are cut from a similar cloth to the 2005, albeit with less intensity. But there are still lovely cedar-infused black fruit to savour and its precision should be applauded. The palate is medium-bodied with quite a sharp, spicy entry. The tannins feel a little furry and there is a distinct Oriental note entering the ring towards the slightly attenuated finish. Still, this is a fine example of the vintage. Drink now-2028. Tasted March 2014.

#### **2007 Château Lagrange 90**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2007 Lagrange is a blend of 68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot and 7% Petit Verdot picked between 20 September and 13 October. The nose is a little closed at first, opening gradually with black cherries, boysenberry and iodine, though without the precision of the 2006. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins, quite supple in the mouth and certainly very well balanced. There is a fine build in the mouth and it finishes with impressive tension. This is drinking beautifully now but it will continue to age over the following decade. Drink now-2028+ Tasted March 2014.

#### **2008 Château Lagrange 93**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The Lagrange 2008 was one of the latest ever recorded harvests, picked between 6 and 22 October. A blend of 72%

Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Merlot and 2% Petit Verdot, it has a floral, Margaux-inspired bouquet that is very well defined but still quite primal, revealing iodine and violet scents with continued aeration. The palate is medium-bodied with fine supple tannins. This is very harmonious and shows superb precision (perhaps due to it being the first year when smaller tanks were used.). This is a natural and refined Lagrange that is feminine and very pure. Gorgeous! Drink now-2030. Tasted March 2014.

### **2009 Château Lagrange 94**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2009 Lagrange is a blend of 73% Cabernet Sauvignon and 27% Merlot, the Petit Verdot blended into the second wine. It was the first year when an optical sorting machine was used (another to keep it company two years later.) It has a very perfumed and complex bouquet with marmalade-tinged red fruit, cedar and touches of tobacco. It is very controlled, perhaps deceptively so. The palate is medium-bodied with supple, ripe and succulent tannins on the entry, counterbalanced by well-judged acidity and a gorgeous, irresistible, sensual finish that washes serenely across the mouth. Is it the best Lagrange to date? Quite possibly. Drink 2016-2035. Tasted March 2014.

### **2010 Château Lagrange 92**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2010 Lagrange is a blend of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% Merlot picked between 29 September and 20 October. The nose is more reserved than the 2009, but compelling, with broody black fruit, cedar and bay leaf. With continued aeration there is a touch of the sea. The palate is medium-bodied with fine tannins, good tension, and razor-sharp precision. There is plenty of freshness here, although I prefer the extravagance demonstrated by the previous vintage. Drink 2017-2035+ Tasted March 2014.

### **2011 Château Lagrange 91**

Tasted at the château for a 30-year vertical tasting. The 2011 is a blend of 62% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot and 6% Petit Verdot picked between 15 September and 5 October. It has a refined and understated nose at first, before unfolding in the glass to offer brambly black fruit, mint and cedar - one of those Lagrange wines mimicking Pauillac. The palate is medium-bodied with attractive supple tannins. It is very smooth and silky thanks to the vanillary new oak that needs to be subsumed with time. But it is a subtle, precise Lagrange that should give pleasure over the next 20 years. Drink 2015-2035. Tasted March 2014.