

# Matthieu's Farm

GERRIE LIM learns about the joys of creating an acclaimed Bordeaux legend

MATTHIEU BORDES, WINEMAKER at Château Lagrange, tells me he remembers our very first meeting, a few years ago at Vinexpo in Hong Kong when we were introduced by Héroïse Aubert, a mutual friend and no ordinary fellow Bordelais winemaker – she was (and still is) married to his best friend. Many cordial exchanges have since ensued, since Bordes frequently visits Asia; his travels are abetted by his estate's current owner, Suntory Holdings, the Japanese beverage behemoth and co-proprietor of his Saint-Julien-appellation neighbour Château Beychevelle.

Bordes has only effusive praise for Suntory, not least for how it invested serious money to revamp the third-growth, left-bank estate in 1983, leaving it in the good hands of three Bordeaux legends: its then-winemaker Marcel Ducasse and his two eminent consultants, Eric Boissenot and the late Émile Peynaud. The present output comprises three reds – the flagship grand vin Château Lagrange; a

second wine, Les Fiefs de Lagrange and, lately, a third wine, Le Haut-Médoc de Lagrange, whose current release is the debut 2012 vintage made mainly, though not exclusively, for the Chinese and Japanese markets. Accompanying these – and unusually for a Médoc estate – is a white wine, the lesser-known yet very good Les Arums de Lagrange.

Of his own grand vin, Bordes says his personal favourites are the 1990, 2000 and 2009. A confessed workaholic ("For several weeks during the harvest," he once quipped, "I disappear into the vat room and people look for me in my office and ask if I still work here"), he was previously the winemaker at Château de Rouillac in Pessac-Léognan, Château de l'Hospital in Graves, and two Cru Bourgeois estates, Château Loudenne in Saint-Yzans-de-Médoc (now owned by Moutai from China) and Château Coutelin-Merville in Saint-Estèphe. Thus a grand cru craftsman he's become, and journeyman no more.

CHÂTEAU LAGRANGE IN SAINT-JULIEN, MÉDOC



though I sense him still enthralled by the journey.

**I UNDERSTAND THERE'S AN INTERESTING CONNECTION WITH YOUR FAMILY NAME AND YOUR CHATEAU, AS IF IT WERE PRE-DESTINED FOR YOU?**

Yes, Bordes means "farm" in the old French language and "La Grange" means "the farm". I arrived at the Château the end of 2006 but only became general manager and winemaker in September 2013, just before the harvest, when I replaced Bruno Eynard. I was the assistant manager when Marcel Ducasse retired, after which Bruno Eynard became general manager and I became his assistant. I took over because he was fired that July – there are lawyers involved, so I still can't tell you anything more – but anyway, I am now 42, so I was 10 years old when Suntory bought the estate in 1983. How did I know then that this was meant to be?

**I'VE ENJOYED YOUR 2009 GRAND VIN, WHICH I FOUND CONSISTENTLY GREAT ON THREE SEPARATE OCCASIONS. DID YOU KNOW GOING IN THAT IT WOULD BE THAT GOOD?**

Let me tell you, I will never forget the 2009 – I was so nervous that I started smoking again! I had quit smoking for five years and when it came to the 2009, I really didn't want to blow it. I had this feeling when we started the winemaking, I couldn't believe how good it was possibly going to be so I started smoking again. But when the grapes were undergoing fermentation, I started to relax because I knew for sure that it was going to be what we call a "rocking-chair vintage" – the wine would just make itself, and it was going to be a beautiful vintage.



*"We should be 30 to 50 percent more expensive, if you consider the quality"*

**HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF COMPARED WITH YOUR OTHER FAMOUS NEIGHBOURS IN SAINT-JULIEN, LIKE CHATEAUX GRUAUD-LAROSE AND TALBOT?**

Most of the time, I prefer Lagrange to both and only in 2004, I would say, did Gruaud-Larose make a better wine than us. In a blind tasting, when you drink the wines *en primeur*, Lagrange tends to do better than our neighbours because of the level of acidity – there is always a pH close to 3.6 or 3.65, whereas most of them are usually 0.1 higher, meaning less acidic, and for me it's always a bit more crisp. If you taste the wines 10 years later, Lagrange is regularly one of the best, in the top five of the appellation, usually, among the 11 classified growths in Saint-Julien. The wine really needs to age longer before drinking, a minimum of five to six years.

**YOU'VE OFTEN CITED ANOTHER OF YOUR NEIGHBOURS, LÉOVILLE LAS CASES, AS A FAVOURITE. HOW DO YOU COMPARE?**

For me, Léoville Las Cases has one of the best terroirs in Bordeaux, certainly the best terroir in Saint-Julien. Léoville Las Cases is more powerful and deeper than us, as a wine, but with regard to fruit and the level of acidity and potential for ageing, we are very close – especially when you compare the weaker vintages, because Lagrange is well known for being consistent.

**YES, CRITICAL CONSENSUS IS THAT YOU'RE GOOD EVEN IN THE DIFFICULT YEARS, LIKE 2004, 2007 AND 2008.**

That's true. For example, I remember that 2007 was a very challenging vintage and Las Cases was better during blind tasting, but Lagrange was just a few paces behind. The thing is, you can be the best winemaker in the world but you can't change your soils. You can compare the value, though, since one bottle of Las Cases is five or six times the price of Lagrange, so it's about what you hope to get for the money.

**ON THAT NOTE, I'VE ALWAYS WONDERED WHY YOUR FLAGSHIP WINE RETAILS HERE FOR ONLY HK\$600-PLUS. SURELY YOUR WINE OVERDELIVERS FOR THE PRICE?**

I think so. That's about right, about \$600, a relatively friendly price, which I can't increase very high because we're the largest among the classified estates in the Médoc. We farm 118 hectares on a single piece of land, of which 67 percent is Cabernet Sauvignon, 27 percent Merlot and 6 percent Petit Verdot. When Suntory came in, we had 56 hectares in 1983 and Marcel Ducasse then planted another 60 or so more hectares. We produce about 25,000 cases of Lagrange each year for the grand vin, and



for the second label Les Fiefs de Lagrange it's close to 35,000 cases. This means you can't set the price like a Mouton Rothschild or a Pétrus, that's impossible. We should be 30 to 50 percent more expensive, if you consider the quality, but the market now isn't only about a question of quality. It's also about the name of the brand.

**AND THE BRANDING OF SAINT-JULIEN IS ABOUT THE FINE BALANCE BETWEEN ELEGANCE, FINESSE AND POWER – WOULD YOU AGREE?**

Yes, exactly. With the appellation next to us, Pauillac, you are talking about wines that are more masculine, with stronger power, like with Lynch-Bages, whereas with, say, Margaux sometimes you can expect something more delicate. Saint-Julien is somewhere in the middle but also a blend of the two styles – much

more powerful than Margaux and sometimes less so than Pauillac but much more elegant. When we do blind tastings against other Bordeaux wines, we always find that Lagrange is very good value for money because we're never at the bottom of the classification. I like to joke that Lagrange is the cheapest grand cru you can drink! **P**

ABOVE: WINEMAKER MATTHIEU BORDES. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RACKING WINE, FILLING A BARREL, FERMENTATION TANKS