

The legend of Lafite

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Those of us who read articles about wine probably believe that wine sells on the basis of its quality. A few wine lovers believe that price is at least as important. (I strongly reject any direct correlation between price and quality myself, believing there is an army of overpriced expensive wines and a noble cohort of underpriced gems.)

But my trip to China last March reminded me just how significant branding can be, even in the highly fragmented wine market which is blistfully unlike, say, that for beer, spirits or sodas, dominated as they are by a handful of big names and huge marketing budgets.

In China the name Lafite has the most extraordinary and unexplained resonance. Such resonance that Cuvée de Lafite, the Bordeaux first growth's second wine and often a 5th-6th line thing, can command a higher price than equivalent Cu. Cuv. d'Orchard. And the names of Lafite's range of basic Bordeaux grappes called Légendes sell for quite astronomical prices in China simply because they have the magic word Lafite on the label. I saw their basic AC Bordeaux 2005, with the word Lafite locked snugly under the Lafite Rothschild (minus the ennes symbol, based at 800 RMB (about £70) a bottle on the wine list at the superbly made in China restaurant in the Grand Hyatt, Beijing. It's worth pointing out that on exactly the same wine list the counterpart from the other Rothschild clan, the Mouton-Rothschild, the Mouton lot, was just 200 RMB. What explains the disparity between these wines that were put together from near-identical ingredients bought on Bordeaux's bulk wine market?

While in China I needed to get to the bottom of this conundrum. Why should one first growth tower over the others, Mouton-Rothschild, Margaux, the highly performing Latour and Haut-Brion, in this particular market?

I suppose we have got to begin by acknowledging that China is an intensely image-conscious market. And for the Chinese, wine purchases, in restaurants or for gifts, are all about status and 'face' on the part of the purchaser. So China is presumably perfectly placed as a target for any sophisticated branding operation. If you go to China and tell the Chinese that your product is the best effectively enough, those 1.3 billion potential consumers are presumably yours.

Except that my enquiries did not manage to elicit anything so cold-blooded. I went to China via Hong Kong so began by enquiring there why Lafite enjoyed this exalted status. Those I asked were all a bit vague. The best explanation I could get was from the first Asian to pass the notoriously difficult Master of Wine exams, Anwaris Cho Lee, herself Korean born and American educated. Her best explanation was that Lafite is somehow easier to pronounce in Mandarin than the names of the other first growths. But since she is not a native Mandarin speaker, I let her testimony was not rock solid.

Once I got to China I asked everyone I could think of. Marcus Ford, the inventive manager of Shanghai's pioneering M on the Bund restaurant, also thought it might have something to do with pronunciation but wasn't sure - even though he has been buying, serving and selling the wine in China for many years. He did point out to me that Lafite had been awfully clever at capitalising on that fame in China and that the Légende range of overpriced (my word, not his) grappes is known colloquially as 'Lafite Lafite'. Genius! They should have called it that in the first place.

In China the market is dominated by three main distributors, as each other's rivals. The biggest and best established is ASC, run by a father and son team, both of whom are called Dan Si Pierre. I can read to Dan Si at a charity dinner and pursued him relentlessly for his explanation as to why his great noble Summervale's Lafite was so much more popular than his own Bordeaux first growths Château Latour, Margaux and Haut-Brion - which was rather inguile, I now realise. He raised his shoulders and eyebrows, clasped his hands and admitted he hadn't a clue. Though as a westerner selling wine to the Chinese for possibly longer than anyone else, he did point out how helpful the 1855 classification was to the Chinese. Not being fluent English speakers, few of them have yet got to grips with the tyranny of scores and ratings, but there is great respect (an important quality in China) for the longevity of the 1855 classification of Bordeaux. With its mere five divisions it is easy to understand, and since Château Lafite was historically the very first of the first growths to appear on the list, much of that glamour, he admitted somewhat reluctantly, seems to have stuck.

I then tracked down Ben Ford, the American head of Summervale of Shanghai, the blessed importer of a few hundred cases of Château Lafite, an impressive like of Camille and an ocean of Lafite Lafite every year. So how come, I asked, does Lafite stand head and shoulders above its peers in the biggest potential wine market in the world?

"I don't know," he said dismally. "It's a branding exercise but I certainly don't take the credit for it. It's not because of the label."

I would certainly agree with this. I almost certainly love the taste of Lafite more than the average Chinese. Its very dry, almost austere, very elegant style must be particularly difficult for newcomers to wine, and tasters to drink with most of the food served in China - whether it be the sweet, sour, spicy foods of the various Chinese provinces, or the rich, ruffe and fat greasy laden cuisine of the fancy hotels and restaurants at which most bottles of Lafite must be opened by China's mushrooming millionaire class.

"But," he continued. "They were in at the beginning. Lafite's president Christophe Salvi's first trip here was in 1982. The word Lafite translates phonetically especially well." (So there's one thing that he agrees with with ASC viz) "and the Lafite Rothschild have been very attentive to the Chinese market. Baron Eric de Rothschild's son is studying Mandarin. They also have a very good Chinese website."

So, there you have it folks. To develop a new market, get there first, have an easy name - and don't forget the website.