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 hugely fragmented wine market which is blissfully 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 unexpected resonance. Such resonance that Carruades de Lafite, the Bordeaux first growth's second wine and often a thin little thing, can command a higher price than super-second Ch Cos d'Estournel. And the owners of Lafite's range of basic Bordeaux generic wines called Légende sell for quite extraordinary 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 tucked snugly under the Lafite Rothschilds' famous five arrows symbol, listed at 950 RMB (about £70) a bottle on the wine list at the super-trendy 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 lot, was just 350 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 resolved 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 in 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 reclame. 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, Jeannie 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 felt 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 with pronunciation but wasn't sure – even though he has been buying, serving and selling fine wine in China for many years. He did point out to me that Lafite had been awfully clever at capitalising on their fame in China and that the Légende range of overpriced (my word, not his) generics is known colloquially as 'Little Lafite'. Genius! They should have called it that in the first place.

In China the market is dominated by three main distributors, at each others' throats. The biggest and best established is ASC, run by a father and son team, both of whom are called Zen Si Pierre. I sat next to Zen Sr at a charity dinner and pursued him relentlessly for his explanation as to why his great rivals Summergate's Lafite was so much more popular than his own Bordeaux first growths Château Latour, Margaux and Haut-Brion – which was rather impolite. 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 Ian Ford, the American head of Summergate of Shanghai, the blessed importers of a few hundred cases of Château Lafite, an impressive lake of Carruades and an ocean of Little 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 disarmingly. "It's a branding exercise but I certainly don't take the credit for it. It's not because of the taste."

I would certainly agree with this. I almost certainly love the taste of Lafite more than the average Chinese. Its very dry, almost austere, racy, elegant style must be particularly difficult for newcomers to wine, and torture 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, truffle and foie gras-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 president Christophe Salin's first trip here was in 1992. The word Lafite translates phonetically especially well," [so there's one thing that he agrees with arch rivals ASC on] "and the Lafite Rothschilds 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.