Grape grape grandchildren

20 Oct 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT

Our picture shows Jacques Lurton and his lovely wife Françoise in happier times at their home La Martinette in the Entre Deux Mers. It was here that on Thursday Françoise finally succumbed to the long illness she, and Jacques, bore with such fortitude.

The name Lurton is synonymous with wine. So ubiquitous are the Lurtons in Bordeaux, and so fed up with being asked to produce a family tree, that they have now established a website, www.lurton.com on which one can read, jaw agape, about the fourth and fifth generations of wine-producing Lurtons, four siblings with 24 children and no fewer than 30 Bordeaux châteaux between them, plus one family member, Dominique Lurton's son Pierre, who is in charge of both first growth Château Cheval Blanc and Château d'Yquem, the most famous sweet-wine property in the world.

What is remarkable about this family tree, with every member's wine interests carefully listed, is how relatively unadventurous such a large family has been. With only two exceptions, they remain bounded by of the particularly rigid confines of Bordeaux. But the two exceptions are notable. Both sons of the autocratic head of the family André Lurton (nine châteaux, including Château Bonnet, the biggest in Bordeaux), François and Jacques Lurton (pictured), have strayed from Bordeaux in the most spectacular and unusual fashion.

Their story is notable, not least because it continues to take new twists and turns in true family-saga fashion. François is the elder and arguably the chip off the old paternal block. A military man, he entered a team in this year's Dakar rally in South America and continued as lead driver even after breaking a vertebra, coming in respectably mid field. After seeing how the London wine trade worked (as a driver, already, for McKinley Vintners) he acted as salesman for his father's many wines but could not help noticing how well his younger brother was doing outside Bordeaux.

While François's early wine apprenticeship was in the UK, Jacques' was in Australia, not least with the late Len Evans, and this seems to have imbued him with an unusually international outlook for a Bordelais. He resigned from his father's wine business as early as 1988, which caused all sorts of ructions, and by the 1990s had become one of the more prominent and widely travelled of the world's flying winemakers. I remember flying in to Santiago de Chile with Jacques in 1995 and marvelling at quite how many currencies he routinely kept in his wallet.

By the end of the last century, Jacques et François Lurton, a company owned and run by both brothers, had become a very considerable international wine producer with enterprises in Chile, Argentina, Portugal, Spain (where another Lurton ventured briefly to co-found Belondrade y Lurton in Rueda) and throughout France. But the fresh, clean, typographical logo J&FL that was to be found on millions of bottles around the world is now being systematically changed to FL, the brother most interested in owning vineyards and wineries. Partly because he wanted to concentrate on consultancy and a few projects dearest to him (including studying for the Master of Wine exams and co-organising a stunningly successful symposium for the MWs in Bordeaux last June), and partly to be able to spend more time with his wife Françoise, Jacques left the company the brothers worked so hard to establish at the end of 2006 - after two years of preparation and a certain amount of reshuffling of equity in the family business.

Jacques' current consultancies include two of the best wine co-ops in France, Lugny in the Mâconnais and St-Désirat in the northern Rhône, as well as his cousin Gonzague's Margaux property Château Durfort Vivens and clients as far apart as Finland and the Crimea. But he now spends a good three-quarters of his time at home on a property that has been in his family for 170 years and where he is establishing a red Bordeaux based on old Merlot vines nearby.

He also has a wine property on the gourmet paradise that is Kangaroo Island off the coast of South Australia that was established in 2000. Jacques' enthusiasm for Australia is not shared by François, which the latter evinces as one of the

reasons they split up, along with his more enthusiastic espousal of organic techniques. Jacques has started to make a couple of Loire Sauvignon Blancs under his own name.

Sauvignon Blanc is a leitmotif for the careers of both brothers, which is perhaps not surprising since it is the defining grape variety of their father André, both at Château Bonnet and at his classed growth Pessac-Léognan. He once dared me to guess the grape varieties in a particularly rich, golden, mature vintage of Château Couhins-Lurton and was thrilled to be able to reveal that it was 100% Sauvignon Blanc, despite tasting so like Sémillon.

In the early 1990s Jacques famously freshened up the Sauvignons of the massive San Pedro operation in Chile, and managed to coax some pretty refreshing Sauvignon from the vineyards of the Languedoc too. Today, the single biggest brand in what is now the François Lurton portfolio is a Sauvignon called Fumées Blanches. François, who has done time on many a French wine committee, is a big fan of the elastic new appellation Vin de France. 'It will give us flexibility. No single region produces enough wine for my brand at the right quality level', he told me this summer during a tasting of about 50 of his wines. This very dry, very grassy wine, retailing at around £8, contains grapes from an estate he owns and a co-op in Gascony, two properties in the Languedoc, another just north of Toulouse, a bit of Bordeaux and some Cognac grapes. He must be selling oceans of it.

François Lurton currently produces Sauvignon Blancs in Chile and Gascony, and I found them all a little similar - bone dry but bit metallic, like their screwcaps. Much more interesting among his whites to my mind is his use of indigenous Verdejo in Rueda, north-west Spain, and his espousal of the under-appreciated Friulano grape in Argentina (see my wine of the week). He plans to introduce the Spanish Albariño grape to Chile this year. Some of his reds are very impressive - although many seem overpriced to me.

But when back home in Bordeaux, François doesn't even bother to show his friends and family there any wine made outside Bordeaux. He freely admits it would be a waste of time.

The oldest of the sixth generation of Lurtons are just coming up to winemaking age, which must be quite daunting for them - and for Jacques, who has volunteered to keep that family tree up to date.

FAVOURITE FRANÇOIS LURTON WINES

WHITES

See yesterday's **wine of the week** and *my tasting notes on Jacques and François Lurton's respective current wines.*

Hermanos Lurton, Cuesta De Oro 2008 Rueda, Spain
£16.95 Revelstoke

REDS

Château des Erles 2004 Fitou, France
£28.95 Revelstoke

Mas Janeil 2008 Côtes du Roussillon-Villages, France
£12.95 Harrods

Piedra Negra Malbec 2006 Mendoza, Argentina
£21.23 Robersons, £24.95 Harrods, £25.70 Tanners and Gaucho Grill

Clos de Lolol 2008 Lolol Valley, Chile
£17.95 Revelstoke, £18.50 Harrods