Maison Leroy at 60 years

This is a slightly longer version of an article published by the Financial Times.

See my tasting notes in full.

I write this sitting in Beaune railway station on a sunny Sunday morning with, surely, more 1955 burgundy in my veins than blood. Last night Burgundy's most celebrated vigneronne was celebrating a career choosing and then making wine that spans 60 vintages. She served two dozen of us 22 burgundies from her debut vintage, selected when she was just 23, and did not sit down all evening.

So busy was she hopping from table to table, nodding approvingly at every drop poured by her devoted team, that it was not easy to lasso her into conversation. But I was intrigued by how she had managed to assemble so many great, obviously authentic burgundies in 1955, a time
when such a high proportion of them were notorious for containing much cheaper wine from further south in France and Algeria, then a French colony that accounted for two-thirds of international wine trade. 'I couldn't do anything else', she shrugged. 'I grew up knowing burgundy. As soon as I was born my father wet my lips with Le Musigny 1929.'

Born Marcelle Leroy but known for most of her life as Lalou, she still idolises her father Henri Leroy, third-generation son of vine-growers, wine merchants and then distillers, who considerably expanded the family business, into cognac production inter alia. But he is most famous for having acquired half of Burgundy's most famous domaine, the Domaine de la Romanée Conti, from the brother-in-law of co-owner Edmond Gaudin de Villaine during the second world war. According to Lalou's extremely slanted account of her family's wine business, 'Henri Leroy devoted himself entirely to Domaine Romanée-Conti for the following forty years. He gave the best of himself to this Domaine: his intelligence, professionalism, his heart, and made it what it is today.'

It was partly Henri's commitment to Romanée-Conti in Vosne-Romanée in the north of the Côte d'Or that created the job opportunity for his daughter, already clearly a talented taster, to choose the wines for Maison Leroy, the family négociant business that still operates from its traditional base in the southern Côte d'Or village of Auxey-Duresses. It must be increasingly difficult, however, to find wines of the quality of the 1955s we tasted that night, because so many more growers are producing wine under their own label and, as has been noted on these pages quite recently, the market for what is left has become hugely competitive.

Not that Lalou seems to worry one jot about high prices. Her wines, whether acquired by her from others for Maison Leroy or, especially, those grown on her own biodynamic Domaine Leroy in Vosne, just down the road from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, are always priced stratospherically, and they sell. I can vouch only for the Domaine Leroy wines which regularly constitute the greatest collection of burgundies I taste from barrel in November. This dazzling array of nine grands crus supplemented by 22 more wines that represent the apogee of their appellations has been assembled thanks to a cunning move in 1988. Lalou was able to buy the estate that formed the basis of Domaine Leroy by selling one-third of Maison Leroy to its Japanese importers, luxury storekeepers Takashimaya.

By 1992, after a spat over distribution rights, she had been shown the door at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti by her fellow board members and is today represented there, still co-owner with the de Villaine family, by her daughter Perrine. Only Romanée-Conti's wines rival Domaine Leroy's in terms of both price and quality.

On the bus that had been laid on to ferry us tasters from our hotels in Beaune to Domaine d'Auvenay, the atmospheric farmhouse that is Lalou's Burgundian home, I sat next to Martine Saunier, who has been Leroy's US importer since 1986 when Lalou and her cellarmaster Toto recognised a kindred spirit and talented taster. We both wondered whether Perrine would be in evidence that evening as there have been rumours of a rapprochement between the two generations of talented, single-minded women.

In fact Perrine was nowhere to be seen, other than in some of the photographs liberally scattered around the grand salons of the farmhouse (her late father Marcel Bize stars in most). The invitees for this very special tasting were a mixture of her old tasting mates such as Pierre Troisgros and Georges Duboeuf, with whom I shared a table, and newer media such as Neal Martin of The Wine Advocate, Antonio Galloni (ex Wine Advocate) of Vinous, Jeannie Cho Lee of forthcoming Le Pan magazine of Hong Kong, and Bruce Sanderson of Wine Spectator, who flew
over from New York especially for the tasting. French wine commentators included Michel Bettane and Thierry Desseauve and special guests were the American wine writer Matt Kramer and his wife Karen, who had first met Lalou in 1980 when they arrived at the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, on a bicycle, on the same day as President Richard Nixon's visit there. There was of course a Japanese presence, and representatives from Russia and Monaco, where Lalou is now based. (I had disgraced myself earlier by quizzing Martine about an attendee at a previous Lalou tasting who seemed to be called Albert Monaco.)

After sitting ourselves at flower-laden tables for four in the salon, leaving behind tables laden with the luxurious buffet supper that was to come, we were poured the 22 1955s in five flights by Lalou's team, including Gilles AC (sic), who is celebrating 30 years in charge of her vines, and Frédéric Roemer, who is, equally conveniently, celebrating 20 years as her right-hand man.

Three whole bottles of each wine had been opened for us 24 tasters - which meant that a heart-breaking volume of 1955 was poured away into the giant copper jugs that circulated only a little less frequently than Lalou's black poodle Inès and Sylvain, her super-affectionate spaniel.

Thinking they wanted to collect the empties before they actually did, I inadvertently blended my Nuits-St-Georges Porets, Vosne-Romanée Suchots and Grands Échezeaux in one glass and the result was completely delicious. Veteran three-star chef Pierre Troisgros (whose father apparently used to detest Nuits, perhaps because he encountered so many fakes) agreed with me, and claimed to want to keep a glass for dinner afterwards.

In the event we were able to help ourselves to the leftovers, which is how I, delightedly, ended up with a bottle of Clos St Jacques 1955 to wash down my terrine en croute after the tasting.

**STANDOUT LEROY 1955s**
Each of these was a peerless example of its appellation, and still going strong at 60 years old, like their guardian.

Volnay Santenots
Grands Échezeaux
Richebourg
Clos de Vougeot
Le Musigny
Gevrey-Chambertin, Clos St-Jacques
Gevrey-Chambertin, Cazetiers
Ruchottes-Chambertin
Le Chambertin