

Michel Laroche, international judge for the 2006 Diners Club Awards, is acknowledged as the prime mover behind the Union of Grand Crus Chablis producers. He now owns vineyards in Chablis, the South of France, Chile and South Africa.

Christian Eedes interviewed him.



The annual Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Award is presented for the wine that the judging panel considers to be the best in a specified class, with Chardonnay being under scrutiny in 2006. So who better than to officiate as the international judge than Michel Laroche, the fifth generation of a family that has been making Chardonnay in the Chablis district of Burgundy since 1850?

The Domaine Laroche holdings in Chablis amount to 102ha, including three Grand Crus, namely Bougros (0.3ha in size), Les Blanchots (4.6ha) and Les Clos (1.1 ha). He also utilises vineyards that are tended in partnership as well as buying in grapes and total production amounts to 3 million bottles.

At the very top of the range is the Grand Cru Les Blanchots Réserve de l'Obédience, named after the 16th century monastery that houses the headquarters of the company. Expect a bottle of the current vintage to sell for around £50 (R700) a bottle.

Around 20 years ago, Laroche also began operating out of the South of France and has been a key figure in bringing about a winemaking resurgence in this part of the world. Activities are today centred at the Mas la Chevalière winery just outside the city of Beziers and production is currently around 4 million bottles of wine a year

In 2001, he became involved with winemaking in Chile and then acquired Stellenbosch farm L'Avenir in September last year. He refers to his southern hemisphere ventures as his "new babies" and sees joint production capped at 0.5 million bottles a year for the meanwhile.

In conversation, Laroche is courteous and affable but he also displays

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Michel Laroche on Pinotage.



Now that Michel Laroche has acquired L'Avenir, Chenin Blanc is set to be the signature white variety.

nonsense approach to winemaking. He is intent on developing Pinotage as the flagship red variety of L'Avenir despite the fact that it is so controversial, "Call me crazy if you want but I never go the same way as the mainstream. Everybody else is doing Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz."

What Laroche likes about Pinotage is just how much overt fruit it can deliver. He worries about the "banana character" it can sometimes display but is not unduly perturbed by the feeling in some quarters that wines from the variety tend to show bitterness. "Avoiding bitterness depends on optimal ripeness and low enough yields. When yields are too high then it's very difficult to get very good quality." Though L'Avenir has traditionally featured bush vines, Laroche advises that he will be switching over to trellising to facilitate a green harvest (the dropping of bunches prior to harvest to ensure maximum fruit quality).

It is put to Laroche that most of South Africa's top red wines remain those made in the Bordeaux style, but he admits to preferring the Bordeaux grapes as they express themselves in Chile. "It seems that it is possible to get more fruit, more intense aromas and flavours over there than in South Africa."

The appeal of Pinotage is not simply because it offers him a point of difference in an over-traded world market. He is adamant that it is possible to make great wine from the variety, and highlights a Lanzerac 1989 that he sampled recently as showing very well. "I was impressed with how well it had aged. It was drinking like a Pinot Noir"

The versatility of Pinotage is also appealing. "You can make easy-drinking to much more serious wines from it. There's lots of possibility. I think a sparkling rosé would be a good option, for instance:"

Laroche also reveals that despite its many detractors, Pinotage makes good commercial sense, historically being L'Avenir's best seller. "I'd be pleased if our Cabernet Sauvignon sold as well but that's not the case," he says.

With Pinotage set to be the signature red variety at L'Avenir, Chenin Blanc is the white destined to receive special attention. Laroche places this variety second only to Chardonnay in a hierarchy of the most noble white varieties, ahead of Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier in that order.

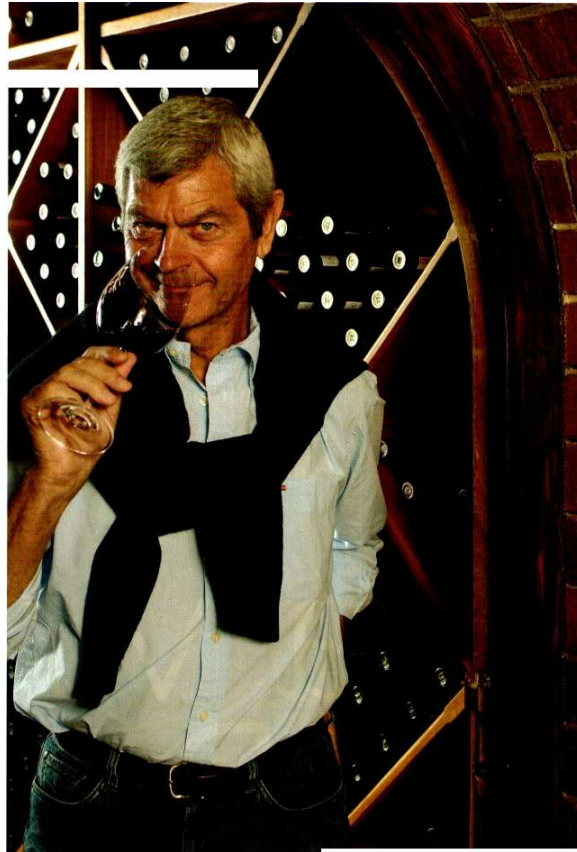
What of the current pre-occupation with Sauvignon Blanc around the world? "There are too many caricatures around;" he replies by which he means wines with exaggerated aromas and flavours but no real integrity.

In contrast, he believes that Chenin Blanc can make "very classical" wines. Although many consider the Loire to be the natural home of the variety, Laroche points out that it has a difficult climate. "Loire wines end up being a little tight and aggressive when the right conditions do not apply." He describes South Africa as having much more "generous" climate for the production of Chenin Blanc across the

style spectrum.

Laroche, who is the consummate marketer for all his skills as a winemaker, expands on his decision to specialise in Pinotage and Chenin Blanc by saying that these varieties are "emblematic" of the country. "You visit Alsace, you drink Sylvaner or Riesling. You visit Bordeaux, you drink Cabernet Sauvignon. The customer wants to drink wines with a story that fits each region or country."

But discussion concerning the future of L'Avenir soon returns to the nitty-gritty of winemaking. Laroche argues that excessively hot or cold conditions make the achievement of great wine difficult and hence a maritime location is key, but just how far from the ocean is optimal? "Paarl is warmer than Stellenbosch, and Stellenbosch is warmer than Strand," he observes, before adding that he believes that L'Avenir's situation in Stellenbosch makes it well suited for Pinotage and Chenin Blanc. "If I'd specialised in Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, I would have looked for something a little closer to the coast [because they are more fragile varieties]."



L'Avenir is a 70ha property with 55ha under vineyard, which Laroche describes as "not too big or too small". Currently there are 3ha of Pinotage and 4ha of Chenin Blanc, and he hopes these two varieties combined will make up 50% of production "very soon". He avows that it is "nonsense and stupidity" to plant multiple varieties on the same property.

A new addition to the L'Avenir range subsequent to the property having been bought by Laroche is the Pinotage Grand Vin 2004, which carries a price ex cellar of R220 a bottle, making it a serious proposition on price alone. Production was limited to 400 cases and Laroche describes it as "the best barrels from the best plots" and comparable in quality to the wines that appeared on the Cape Winemakers Guild auction when Francois Naudé was incumbent as winemaker (Naudé has subsequently retired and has been replaced by Tinus Els). The intention is to position this wine at around £25 (around R365) a bottle in the all-important UK market.

Generally, Laroche expects to harvest a little earlier in future to retain freshness and says that ideally he would like to see his whites sitting between 10 and 11% alcohol by volume and his reds between 12 and 13%. He admits however that care must be taken not to veer from one stylistic extreme to another

Laroche says of himself that he is 'not a great friend of the coopers'. As to how he envisages L'Avenir's Chenin Blanc going forward, he says he wants to retain a "fresh, crisp character" and so 80% to 90% will be fermented in stainless steel tank with the small remaining portion in barrel sufficient to add an "added dimension". Not one to criticise the wine's of others unnecessarily, Laroche

nevertheless does comment that he finds the Chenin Blanc under Teddy Hall's highly-acclaimed Rud-era label "too big and over-ripe" before quipping that he wants to avoid making "Sumo wrestler" wine. Is there scope for a big-ticket Grand Vin Chenin? "Too early to say. I'm not sure the market is ready for this," is his reply.

The last word on Laroche's progressive nature is demonstrated by the zeal with which he advocates screwcap. In recent times, he has moved quickly to put all his

premium wines under this closure, including his flagship, the Reserve de l'Obedience as of the 2004 vintage. "I want you to taste the wine as I intended;" he comments. He has followed this thinking through at L'Avenir with all white wines immediately featuring this closure. "Screwcaps are opening new horizons for whites. You can keep the aromas and freshness of the wine much longer."

Laroche began his winemaking career working at the family company in Chablis in 1967. Nearly 40 years on, he brings just the right combination of idealism and realism to bear in South Africa.

