

Kings of Chablis

The Laroche dynasty
- A fine blend of rich tradition and
modern innovation



Wine has held a special place throughout history, being an indispensable part of social gatherings, be it formal or informal. As times have changed, so too have the perceptions of wine shifted to reflect contemporary thought. Long regarded as the domain of connoisseurs and the elite, French wines have seen difficulties in presenting a more accessible image to wine drinkers. Laroche, one of the premier winemakers of France and renowned as the 'Kings of Chablis', are one of the few that have achieved success in this area. PASSIONS met with Benjamin Laroche, who represents the fifth generation in this family business, to share his views on Laroche's history, wines and ambitions.

Origins of the Chablis region

The origins of winemaking in the Chablis region can be traced back to the 9th Century when a group of monks arrived in the then-unpopulated region and proceeded to build a monastery, the Obediencerie. Like many other orders in the France, they began to produce wine and the rest, as they say, is history. Chablis' renown in the world of winemaking seems even more amazing when one considers the relatively small size of the Chablis region, with a mere 6,000 hectares of vineyards. In comparison, the famous Bordeaux area boasts 150,000 hectares of vineyards.

The Laroche family tradition in winemaking began when Jean Victor Laroche planted his first vines on what would later be classified as the Premier Cru Les Fourchaumes. However, it was not until 1950 that Henri Laroche decided to concentrate the family business



Gwee Sze Kiat (centre), Managing Director of Muihua Sdn Bhd with other employees of the company.

purely on winemaking and began the expansion of the business in this direction. Laroche holdings grew from its original 6 hectares to the over 110 hectares it owns today. Laroche has also expanded to other areas besides Chablis, with vineyards in the south of France, Chile and, most recently, South Africa.

The Laroche emphasis on history and tradition is perhaps best exemplified by its headquarters, which is based in the Obediencerie; the very same monastery where Chablis winemaking originated. "We own the most historic building in Chablis, as well as the oldest cellar, also from the 9th Century, and the oldest working wine press, which is from the 13th Century," said Benjamin. "At the same time we are also the most modern and ahead of time, being the first to invest in other regions like Chile and South Africa." Benjamin

Benjamin Laroche utilises the three senses represented by the Laroche logo - the eye, nose and mouth - while performing winetasting.

maintains that one of main beliefs of the Laroche philosophy is to be wherever great wines can be produced.

Unchanging philosophy

Elegant, classy, always trendy and, most importantly, fun - these are the distinctions of Laroche. According to Benjamin, Laroche's secret to maintaining their stringent standards are a combination of the highest quality grapes, strict winemaking process and the use of the best equipment available. "We believe that wines should be fruity in flavour, and that they are, most importantly, an expression of the place of origin," said Benjamin. The Laroche logo is a commitment to their reputation of producing wines of the highest calibre, with the 'O' containing a representation of an eye, nose, and mouth - representing the three senses used for the appreciation of fine wine.

Always at the forefront, Laroche's specific marketing strategy is geared towards broadening its appeal to wine drinkers from all-walks of life, for every occasion. Benjamin insists that wine is predominantly for pleasure, and should not be overly complicated and taken too seriously. "The winemaking process is very strict and serious to maintain high quality standards, but wine drinking should be friendly and pleasurable, for friends relations and colleagues," emphasises Benjamin. "It is not necessary to be a connoisseur to enjoy drinking wine; French wine in particular has to change its image."

To reflect this, Laroche bottles are labelled very distinctly. The place of origin, be it Chablis, the south of France, Chile or South Africa, is clearly shown on the label with the vineyard and vintage. The Laroche label is also standardised for all bottles, to maintain a consistency of image throughout the world. To further simplify the enjoyment of its wines, tasting notes are included with each bottle, describing the particular vintage and the colour, smell and taste of the wine.

Evolving with the times

Predominantly known for its whites, Laroche hopes to become a well-known producer of reds as well in the next decade. "Chablis is the hardest region in which to produce wines, so if we are capable of achieving this we are definitely able to become a producer of great red wines," says Benjamin. As lofty as this aspiration seems, by far the most important focus of Laroche's future plans will definitely be continuing in its efforts to change the public's perceptions of wine and educate them to its philosophy: that wine drinking is first and foremost a pursuit of pleasure.

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