

sommelierjournal.com

sommelier JOURNAL

The essential guide for wine professionals

Hemel-en-Aarde
South Africa's Heaven and Earth

Washington Cabernet Franc
The First Generation of American Masters

August 31, 2013

Mathieu Lapierre

M. Lapierre, Villié-Morgon, France



M. LAPIERRE

Domaine des Chênes
69910 Villié-Morgon
France

+33-474-042389

www.marcel-lapierre.com

Importer: Kermit Lynch
Wine Merchant

www.kermitlynch.com

The wine and spirits editor of Travel + Leisure magazine, Bruce Schoenfeld is a former contributing editor of Wine Spectator who has also written for Gourmet, GQ, The New York Times Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, and many other publications. He has received two Emmy Awards for television writing, and his most recent book, The Match: Althea Gibson & Angela Buxton, was published by HarperCollins/Amistad. He lives in Colorado.

Winemaker Mathieu Lapierre is the 31-year-old son of the late Marcel Lapierre, unofficial leader of a group of producers—called the “Gang of Four” by importer Kermit Lynch—who restored the prestige of Beaujolais wines in recent years. With Guy Breton, Jean-Paul Thévenet, and Jean Foillard, the elder Lapierre stood at the forefront of two movements that became inexorably intertwined. First, he fought against the postwar diminishment of his region’s reputation—brought on by mass production, overfertilization, high yields, and the worldwide phenomenon of Beaujolais Nouveau, which rendered the far more modest production of traditional cru wines economically irrelevant. And second, several years after inheriting the winery from his own father in 1975, he began making wines by a more natural process. He stopped fertilizing his vineyards and initiating fermentation with commercial yeast, and he greatly reduced the amount of sulfur dioxide used to preserve the wine.

In October 2010, Marcel Lapierre died of melanoma at age 60. By then, Mathieu had been working alongside him for five years, establishing himself as a worthy successor. Since then, he has enthusiastically stepped into his father’s role as the standard bearer for world-class natural Beaujolais. Complex and engaging, he’s able to articulate his opinions about wine and the surrounding world as eloquently in English as in French, having worked as a chef in Chicago and on Vancouver Island before starting his winemaking career.

Over three sessions in the kitchen of his mother’s home and at the winery of a friend, Damien Coquelet, he talked with me about the movement toward less-manipulated production in Beaujolais and beyond.

BRUCE SCHOENFELD



What was it like working with your father before he died?

I'm lucky that I had enough time with him to learn the work. It's not something you can do in a few months—five years are about the minimum it would take. But Marcel was a very good teacher. I was not the first guy he taught; maybe 20 people are now making wine who learned it from him.

I imagine teaching your son would be different, though, for better or worse.

Yes. By the time he died, we'd reached the point where we almost didn't even have to speak. Just a few words had become enough for us to know what we needed to do. We thought about things in exactly the same way. When someone wanted an appointment with Marcel or with me, we would say, "It doesn't matter who you get. We think the same, we'll say the same thing,



Gamay vines at M. Lapierre in Morgon.

has passed that I can see it. And at the same time, I've just now reached the point where I really understand the reasons for all the decisions we used to make together. I'd been preaching the philosophy, but only now do I truly follow the reasoning behind it. Because when you do it alone, you have to make those decisions for yourself.

Did your father start the natural-wine movement in Beaujolais?

Marcel is called the first to practice natural winemaking, but he was never the only one. There were some producers who were not doing what their fathers had done, but rather had started looking back to their grandfathers. There was a generation after the war, starting in the '50s and into the '60s and '70s, that was lost in terms of winemaking. Imagine, even my father wouldn't drink wine at the bar; he'd drink whiskey. It was sinful to drink the wine because it was so bad, it was embarrassing. So they understood there was a problem.

In about 1975, there was a group of young guys working in Beaujolais who traveled around together a bit; they went to Africa and Asia. And then when they came back, they decided to make something serious. Mostly they did it to rebel against what their fathers were doing. Marcel was older than the rest and kind of became the leader.

But they didn't make an immediate impact, so Beaujolais continued to lose its way?

Yes. Easy money, lazy people. New enological techniques had arrived, and some people realized that if you used them in a certain way, you could make a lot more wine. Of course the quality went down, but nobody was thinking about that; it was so easy to make money. What happened to Beaujolais was normal—it's what happens when you stop working. Marcel just had the good idea to get back to work.

Now some of the techniques that he helped pioneer have become almost standard in the region.

It's very funny, because at the beginning everyone was laughing. They were watching Marcel and his group like they were ET. Then they became angry because they were trying to explain to people around the world what Beaujolais was, and the group was creating a whole different discussion. But now they're all doing what we've been doing. Even the cooperatives around Beaujolais now use minimal sulfur—they have to if they want to be competitive. Even the people who are using yeast and sulfur are trying to do better, to use less. So we're on the right path.

we see everything the same." Whether I was at the winery on Monday and he was at a tasting didn't matter—it would have been the same as if it were the other way around.

It must have been nice to have had that time together.

Yes, but we didn't see it that way. We already knew he was sick and that he could die. We'd known it for a long time, since I returned to the winery in 2004. We were speaking about my getting back to winemaking, and he said, "You know, I've got bad news." They'd seen something on his skin that turned out to be malignant. We didn't know how dangerous or how fast it could be, but we knew something was wrong. So it was a race against time. We didn't have the luxury of enjoying it.

But weren't there moments when you looked around and realized, "This is special"?

No, I'm just seeing that now. Enough time



Well, it's hard to drink the old Beaujolais after tasting wines like yours.

That's why I really believe that we are right. We're now in a time when there are a lot of young winemakers in Beaujolais making not just good but top-quality wine. Unfortunately, there aren't many who've been able to build their own wineries, because the land is too expensive. You know, this isn't a very logical country economically: the economy goes up, the economy goes down, but the prices never go down. A Frenchman prefers to die rather than to sell something for less than he paid for it.

In many places, the story of an area's revival has to do with sons using different techniques from their fathers. Here, you perceive it to be about a philosophical move toward natural winemaking.

Yes, but remember that natural wine is also a technique. It's just a way of doing things. Look, what do I need as a winemaker? I need a thermometer; I need a pump; I need some energy. When I was in Chile, before I trained with my father, I tried to make wine using just my own hands and a basket. And it worked. Natural wine is really just wine you make with your hands and a few tools.

As a natural winemaker, how do you reconcile vintage variation with the need to have a consistent style for the market?

I want consistency, but weather is not consistent; nature is not consistent; conditions are not consistent. It's an interesting question. What I learned from working with my father is that you can let all the differences in a vintage show, or you can restrain them by the use of wine-making techniques—how long you do this, how much you do that. There are a lot of ways to do it without adding products.

When might you intervene more, from a stylistic perspective?

The 2010 vintage was a bit light, following one that was big. Knowing that, I vinified with a little more extraction than I would have done in a light vintage after another light vintage, when I'd have respected the entity a little more. I have a lot of pressure from people's expectations. I have to give them a little of what they want. Not too much—I don't make wine for them. I make my wine, and then they choose it. But I do consider how people will react. Sometimes successive vintages are so contrasting that I'll try to make them more similar, so it's less jarring for the consumer.

One bad vintage is enough to put some wineries in peril. For example, how will the extremely low yields of 2012 affect the economics of the region?

The market will take care of itself. The best producers will survive, and those who are not so good may not. But there were producers who had just started to change their minds about their way of winemaking yet hadn't had time to implement the change. It takes time to do things differently, you know. You can't just change your way of working all at once. Many of those businesses will die because of 2012. I'm sad about that.

When people talk about wine as art, it rings hollow to me. On the other hand, it isn't just another commercial product.

No! That's why I prefer the word "artisan." Like a baker: the baker makes something every day, and if he's a real baker, what he makes on Monday and what he makes on Tuesday aren't exactly the same.

Your father was influenced by the Situationist movement of the late '60s, which actually had a deep antipathy to mass production and consumption.

It's incredible how many people in France were influenced by that way of thinking. Marcel met [founding movement member] Guy Debord in Paris when they were young. They would go drinking together. Do you know that Debord wrote in one of his books, "No pain resists a Morgon of Marcel?" That's how he felt about my father. When I was 15, Marcel took me to Paris to see Debord. I'd heard about him, but all I remember was seeing a bunch of old guys sitting in a back room drinking wine.

How did Debord feel about Marcel making a livelihood selling his wine?

He didn't see anything wrong with making a product and selling it. But as soon as the idea of selling it became the main reason that you were making it, you lost everything genuine about what you were doing. Marcel didn't make wine to make money, and I don't make wine to make money. I'm lucky: I sell what I make, and I make enough to live pretty well. But that's not why I do it.

So how does your generation of Beaujolais producers differ from your father's?

We don't have a new mission the way his did. His generation has





done that work for us. My sister Camille was working in Biarritz as a sommelier, and one day a wealthy lady arrived and asked for a wine without sulfites. My sister said, “Of course, but what kind of wine do you want? Do you like fruity wines? More restrained wine?” She didn’t care. “I want wine without sulfites.” That’s how it is in France now: people buy natural wines because they feel they have to. That makes our work different than Marcel’s. I need to explain to the journalists and to wine drinkers that reducing sulfites was the way to start the conversation,

but the real goal is to make wines of terroir and vintage. If I don’t put sulfites in my wines and I make vinegar, you won’t feel the terroir. If I add too much, you also won’t feel the terroir.

Some natural winemakers are against using sulfites at all.

It depends on the situation. You have to make a decision. What’s important is for the wine to be alive and taste good when the consumer drinks it. Of course, if you add sulfites, the wine may be a little less interesting, but sometimes you have to make sacrifices for a good reason. I prefer using sulfites to making vinegar. The real philosophy is not to be against things; it’s to be for the vintage, for the terroir. The natural way isn’t the only way—it’s just one way.

I know people who won’t drink a certain wine because the winemaker used equipment or a technique that they object to, such as spinning cones or reverse osmosis.

That’s stupid. Some of the natural winemakers in France want to be “more royal than the king”—that’s the phrase in French. Nobody should pretend to have the ultimate knowledge. Thanks to the generation before us, we have some tools to use. But we have to increase the number of those tools. I want to understand

more than Marcel ever understood, because we still have some vintages when things happen and we don’t really know why. That’s the goal of my generation in Beaujolais: to understand more and more, to master more of what we do.

You’re working with your sister, who has returned home after living in South America, Biarritz, and other places. Now you’re the teacher.

I hope that I have the opportunity to teach her everything she needs to know. I’m only 31, but you can never know the future. Accidents happen. I’m very worried that the knowledge I learned from my father will disappear with me.

You’ve said that only the son or daughter of a winemaker can be a truly great winemaker.

Well, that’s something I say to get people to react, but I do feel that there’s truth to it. Take Julien Sunier—he started in Beaujolais by himself; his parents are not in the wine business. He built everything with his own hands. So if he passes that on, his children will start higher than he started, the same way I was able to learn from Marcel. Assuming those children have the same motivation, they will finish higher, too. I know one winemaker who told his son to stop making wine because he wasn’t good at it, but it’s also true that the best way to get to the highest point is to start at the highest point.

Would you like your daughter Margot to go into winemaking with you? I know that’s premature, since she’s only 2 years old.

I would love that. But she would have to come to me; I wouldn’t pressure her to do it. It’s a hard life, for sure, a difficult life to share. At 31, I’m already divorced. It’s like being a cook, which I was before I was a winemaker. A cook sacrifices his life to be great. He rarely sees his wife, hardly knows his children. I saw so many families broken because of the passion of the cook—but those were also the best restaurants. A winemaker, if he wants to do things honestly, is the same way. You have to give everything all the time. I learned that from watching my parents and all the other winemakers who were doing it well.

But your own parents were married almost 30 years, from 1982 until the day your father died.

The winemakers I know who are very passionate have wonderful spouses like my mother, who understand what it means to live and die with your work and to take pride in doing something important. I used to complain, when I was 10 or 11, that I didn’t see my parents enough. At

that age, you want them for yourself. But I came to understand that's the way you have to do it if you're truly passionate; that's what is necessary to succeed. It's the most important thing my father taught me: there are no tricks. You have to do things again and again and again to get better, just like learning a piece on the piano. You have to be there every day. When you're a winemaker, you can't just leave when you want to. And believe me, all the accidents happen when you go just for a quick tasting somewhere.

But how do you reconcile that with the modern industry, in which you have to travel to sell your wines? Now [February] is actually a good time for you to be away.

But not good for the wine! All this week I was in London. Before that I was in the Loire. They want to taste the latest vintage, but this is absolutely not a good time; the 2011s are not ready. So I bring older wines. The job that I'm trying to do, I can't adapt to what they want.

Which is one reason you don't make Beaujolais Nouveau at Lapierre.

Yes. I can't make a natural wine on a deadline—not even if my customers ask me to. Well, I *can* do it, but it won't be the wine I want.

Rather than expand your winemaking operation over the next few years, you've said that you'd like to open a restaurant. That makes sense since you were trained as a cook.

Yes, I once worked in a French restaurant, La Sardine, that was right in front of Oprah Winfrey's studio in Chicago. She used to come in all the time. I didn't have the papers to work legally in the U.S., so I ended up going to Canada and cooking there.

But I've noticed that you're not the biggest fan of sommeliers. Is that from your restaurant experience or from your experience as a producer?

Both. I think sommeliers are the main barrier between the wine drinker and the bottle. It started when we'd go to restaurants with my parents and grandparents. I'd see the sommeliers using a lot of theater, putting on a show about the wine. They didn't actually explain the wine to people; they just made it seem more mysterious and important. That way it could be more expensive. It was all a big lie. To be a sommelier, in the end, you have to lie.

But that's a previous generation. You rarely see

those kinds of sommeliers now.

But they're unnecessary. Servers don't just carry plates; they should know about the wines the same way they know about the lamb or anything else on the menu. A good restaurant should open bottles every day so the whole staff knows what it's selling. You don't need a special person to do that. We're just talking about selling wine—it isn't so hard.

Still, isn't it important to have someone there with not just working knowledge but expertise? People are paying a lot of money for a dinner and for some of these wines.

Expertise is only one approach. It's like if you go to a museum and you follow around a group that happens to be talking about Dalí—the political ideas he had, the fact that he was a little bit crazy, the influence that had on his paintings. But you can also not know anything about his life and still appreciate the paintings because of the emotion they bring you. That's the barrier that the sommelier brings between the wine and the customers. They listen to the sommelier and think that if they don't know all those things about the wine, they can't appreciate it. And that's wrong; they can.

Have you encountered sommeliers you respect?

My sister was a sommelier, so obviously I have. The best way to judge them is to live out here in the country. Some come back every year to taste the wines, to see how they are, to learn what's going on, to discover something new. Even some from the U.S. and Canada come often. You have to respect that.

These days, a lot of sommeliers and journalists describe wines by the various flavors they're finding in the glass. Does that interest you?

No. As a winemaker, there's no use to hear that. Because even if you can describe it in a way that I recognize, I'll never be able to make that exact wine again. I like to work with cooks during vinification, because they trust themselves. When you make them smell a vat and say, "Good or not?" they'll tell you. Eighty percent of the people I ask cannot answer that question. They think they have to answer a complicated question about what "good" means in the context of wine. That's because of sommeliers. It's actually very simple: does the vat smell good or not? Does the wine taste good or not? That's all. Trust your own senses. That's what's important in appreciating wine. That's what's important in life. 🍷