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The queen of Burgundy



By Jancis Robinson

Lalou Bize-Leroy is famous for her elfin looks, her control freakery and the speed at which she tastes...



Lalou Bize-Leroy

Any idea what "onentaion" is? Apparently the 2010s of Domaine Leroy have more of it than the 2009s. And Leroy's Clos Vougeot 2010 in particular is "vy conn ad ar". These puzzling typos resulted from perhaps the fastest wine tasting I have ever undertaken, and the sad part is that the 44 wines tasted in under two hours were some of the most exciting, and expensive, burgundies ever likely to

come my way.

It is not easy to get a tasting appointment with Lalou Bize-Leroy, owner of Domaine Leroy (and shareholder in Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, also in the small village of Vosne-Romanée). In fact, her UK importer, Hew Blair of Justerini & Brooks, describes it as "probably the single most difficult thing in Burgundy". I try every year when I go to taste the latest vintage and all but twice Madame has been absent. She did however make an exception when we were there filming our BBC series in the mid-1990s (when she sniffed, about the bottle of Oregon Pinot I had opened an hour before to surprise her with, that it was oxidised). She also agreed to go rock climbing expressly for the film crew when she must have been in her mid sixties.

She is famous for her athleticism, her elfin looks, her designer wardrobe, her tasting skills, her control freakery and the speed at which she tastes. For her, the tasting experience is simply a rapid confirmation of what she knows is in the glass. Blair says that he rarely has a chance to write as much as a sentence about any of her wines, of which she makes well over two dozen every year at Domaine Leroy (including no fewer than eight Grands Crus when most domaines are

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proud to have one), several more at Domaine d'Auvenay, her farm up in the hills above Auxey-Duresses, and a wide range of negociant wines for what is now called Collection Leroy.

An early adopter, she has now firmly established biodynamic viticulture in the vineyards she acquired from the old Domaine Charles Noëllat as the basis for Domaine Leroy in 1988 and has

continued to supplement since. The different climats, or vineyards, assert their own character more and more each year, with healthier and healthier vines that ripen earlier and earlier. All she has to do, she asserts, is put the bunches in a vat and wait for nature to do its work – all this after the grapes have been minutely checked for the faintest trace of rot or damage. She told me last December she had 34 people on sorting duty for the problematic 2010 grape harvest – as many as she had picking the grapes in the vineyard. Her final average yield was a pitiful 10 hectolitres per hectare. Her annual average is only 16 – whereas the regional norm is closer to 40 – and in 1993 mildew claimed virtually all the crop.

Lalou Bize-Leroy



Lalou's Climats

- Pommard, Trois Follots & Vignots
- Nuits-St-Georges, Lavières & Aux Allots & Bas de Combe
- Vosne-Romanée, Genaivrières
- Chambolle-Musigny, Fremières
- ...

I say “her” because Domaine Leroy is very much a one-woman band. She pulled off the coup of hiring André Porcheret from the Hospices de Beaune in the early years but since 1993 no one else has been in charge of the immaculate cellar. Her long-suffering right-hand man, Frédéric Roemer, is given the title sales director, surely a superfluous function since these are wines that are strictly allocated, alongside the negociant wines, without any possibility of negotiation.

When I tasted her 2010s from barrel, as far as I could tell in the time available, they were a little drier and tarter than the ethereal 2009s which had no hint of the oak, extreme concentration and slight brutality of the earliest vintages of Domaine Leroy – and they all really did taste sublimely different. The wines are bottled slightly earlier than they used to be, accentuating their particularly precise fruit.

After the breakneck tasting, the three of us, plus her small black poodle, hurtled along the back roads to the Domaine d'Auvenay whose atmospheric setting high in the woods is pure *Grands Meaulnes*. The handsome farmhouse is kept as a shrine to her beloved husband and lifelong calming influence, Marcel Bize, who died at the age of 80 in 2004. Here the pace slowed at last and we sipped a venerable Latricières Chambertin in the winter sunshine with a four-course lunch prepared by the couple who keep the house for her.

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Premiers Crus

- Volnay, Santenots
- Savigny-lès-Beaune, Narbantons
- Nuits-St-Georges, Vignes Rondes & Boudots
- Vosne-Romanée, Brulées & Beaux Monts
- Chambolle-Musigny, Charmes
- Gevrey-Chambertin, Combottes

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Grands Crus

- Corton, Renardes
- Romanée-St-Vivant
- Richebourg
- Clos Vougeot
- Musigny
- Clos de la Roche
- Latricières-Chambertin
- Le Chambertin

A Domaine Leroy wine, even from a village such as Savigny-lès-Beaune, is worth hundreds of pounds.

I had visited once before in the 1980s when, thanks to Marcel, the place was a fully working farm and the house much more obviously lived in. There were flowers everywhere, and a buffet lavish enough to impress the Troisgros chef she had invited. This was her famous evening tasting to which she would ask the great and the good of the French wine world and subject them to a complex guessing game. This involved handing in our guesses of her wines torn from a little booklet so that she had a permanent record of our humiliation. “Oh, so that’s what you think it is, is it?” I remember her remarking over the shoulder of Michel Bettane, France’s best-known wine writer.

Today there is frequent speculation as to the succession plans for the highly valuable property that is Domaine Leroy. Her Japanese importers have long funded her ambitious expansion plans and she has many reasons to be grateful to them, however difficult she finds Takashimaya to pronounce. According to the Côte d’Or rumour mill, the little slice of Bâtard-Montrachet she acquired recently set a new record at the equivalent of €25m per hectare, so she is certainly not in retrenchment mode.

Recently her daughter Perrine Fenal, mother of two daughters, has been making the trip to Vosne from her home in Switzerland much more frequently – and not just for meetings of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti board on which she represents Lalou’s interests (Lalou having been dismissed many years ago over a disagreement about the way in which DRC wines were distributed, perhaps exacerbated by the fact

that Domaine Leroy was seen as a rival). Perrine may not have established a strong wine persona but it would be strange if she had not inherited her mother’s acute nose. According to Sylvain Pitiot of Clos du Tart, she is another strong character who is also a fine writer.

Before I left, Lalou had one complaint: that so few British wine writers visit her.

Tasting notes on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](#)

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