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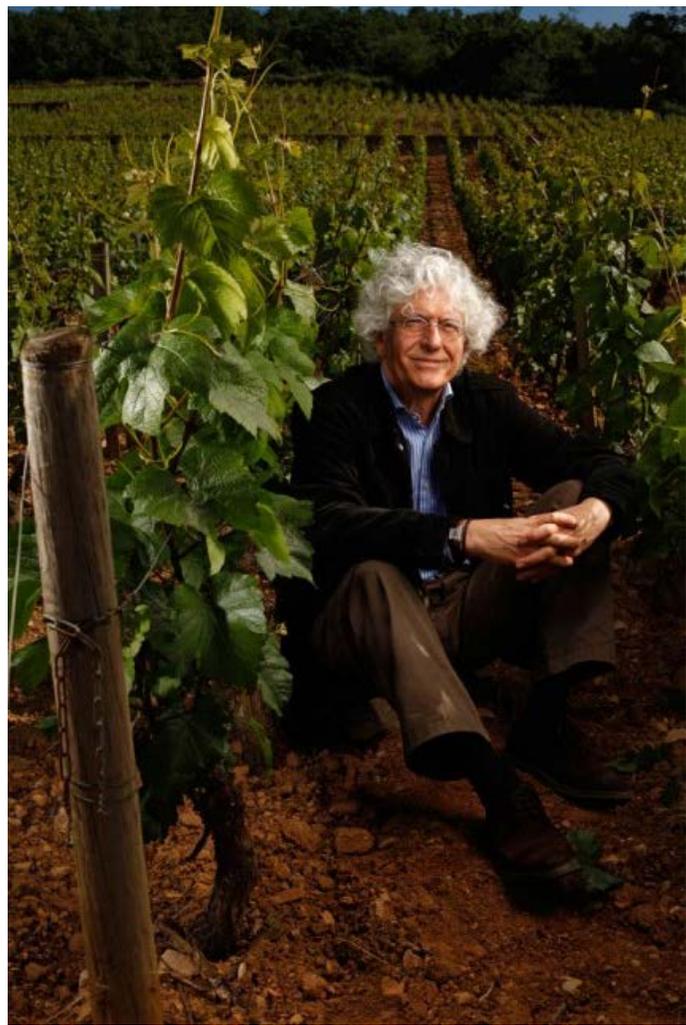
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Jacques Lardiere interview

Monday 2 August 2010 | by Stephen Brook | [Be the first to comment](#)

Jacques Lardière has made the wines at Louis Jadot for 40 years. A cherub in his sixties, he bounds into the room with a grin on his face. There's been tragedy in his life - the death of a son - yet he radiates energy and positivity.



Trained as a biologist rather than an oenologist, he was not an obvious choice to head up Jadot's production team in 1970. His first test came in 1971, when many Burgundy vineyards were devastated by hail. 'Nobody

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knew what to do. But I could see how badly bruised the surviving grapes were, so I gave the must a short maceration.' André Gagey, his boss at the time, was worried by the wines' pale colour. So was Lardière. 'But the wines turned out very well, and some are still drinking beautifully today. After that trial by fire, the Gageys had complete trust in me.'

Loquacious would be an understated description for Lardière in full flow. A question can lead anywhere. It's like a riff, or a pianist's cadenza: variations on themes. Whatever the subject, it's never less than interesting. He favours two kinds of tangents: scientific, with much talk of schema and interstices and mortification; and mystical. Lardière genuinely believes in the life-enhancing properties of wine and the way in which a great wine forges links between humans and the soil. From anybody else it would smack of New Age quackery, but Lardière means, and feels, every word.

It's the sort of approach you'd expect from someone working for a family-owned boutique outfit. And in 1970, Jadot was a fairly small company. Today it controls a large swathe of vineyards in the Côte d'Or, a property in Pouilly-Fuissé, and Château de Jacques in Beaujolais. The holdings include vineyards in eight grands crus, not including the grapes they buy to complete their portfolio. More than 100 appellations are made, from Musigny and Montrachet to basic Bourgogne Blanc.

Although the Gagey family has been associated with Jadot for decades, the actual owners are the American Kobrand corporation, which bought the business in 1985 but entrusts the Gageys with running the operation. Production figures are not disclosed but are often estimated to be at least five million bottles. I ask Lardière how difficult it is to control this empire of vines, as well as the vineyards from which Jadot buys regularly.

'Not at all,' he says with a shrug. 'I have a great team in all our outposts. We talk all the time, but I let them make the decisions about viticulture and the harvest. Occasionally I will intervene if I am unhappy about the proposed date of the vintage - as in 2003. I don't panic if we have to pick a day earlier or a day later, as everything is sorted at the winery.' Inevitably, Lardière is on the road non-stop at vintage time, driving down to Beaujolais at 5am to taste the new wines, and returning the same day to Beaune. 'Those first tastings tell me everything I need to know. I taste the juice and know instinctively how we should handle the vinification. Chemical analyses can help a bit, but tasting is far more important.'

Many of the Jadot estate vineyards are now farmed biodynamically. But what about the many growers the firm buys from? 'We don't force them to follow our lead, as biodynamic farming requires great commitment and vigilance and not everyone can meet those demands. Certainly I'd like to see more growers moving in that direction, but it's more important that the vineyards are farmed well than that they rigorously follow organic or biodynamic principles. It's wonderful to stand in the vineyard in July and sense how the biodynamically farmed vines are full of life and vigour. You can really sense it. But if it rains in August, as in some recent vintages, it's hard to avoid losing lots of fruit. What I find astonishing is that although biodynamic vines are often susceptible to rot, the infection doesn't taste of rot. Perhaps it's because the skins throw up resistance or inhibitors.'

By Burgundy standards, Jadot wines have a reputation for being fairly extracted. When young, the reds can have pronounced tannins. Lardière is unrepentant. 'Perhaps, but we still end up with elegant wines. I like long macerations and high temperatures because for me the role of vinification is to liberate all the molecules within the grapes and to fix them, and to do this without losing any of the typicity of the variety. You can have short fermentations and stable wines, but you may not have a sense of place. The molecules need to digest everything present in the wine to liberate that energy. But following these principles can be risky, and we have to be

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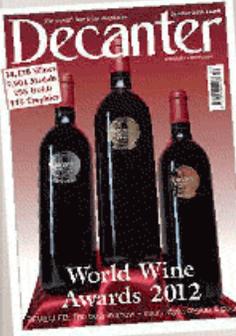
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vigilant. I find it worthwhile, because when I compare the wines we vinify against those we buy, the differences can be significant.

'Anyway, I'm not after technical perfection. I don't have much time for the Australian approach, where the ideal wine is the most neutral. It's easy to clean up a wine, but by removing faults, unless they're truly detrimental, you also remove its life. I understand the impulse oenologists have for the cleanest wines possible, but I refuse to go along with it. A wine's magic doesn't derive from its technical perfection, and I want to preserve the magic, even though not everyone who tastes the wine will perceive it. Good Burgundies are dynamic wines that make you think and reflect as you drink them. For me that's all positive.'

Nowhere is the concept of terroir stronger than in Burgundy. How does Lardière express that precious sense of place in the wines? 'For me, Chambolle or Volnay is not a terroir. Burgundy is the terroir, and the individual villages are different expressions of it. You can't simply analyse the soil of a great site and think you have explained its greatness. But there is something remarkable about the way a great vineyard releases the energy of the soil. Remember that great crus exist because long ago somebody noticed that the parcel was different in its expression, and they gave it a name. A vineyard like Musigny is supreme because the energy of the soil liberates all its elements, which are very ancient, and thus transmits the memory of the soil. These vineyards have been cultivated for hundreds, even thousands of years, building up their minerality over time.'

Like many Burgundians, Lardière allies technical sophistication with a mystical sense of the quality of the region's soils. But those nuances often don't emerge in the wines until many years of cellaring. At the same time, fewer consumers are willing to give the wines the patience they deserve. Does it concern Lardière that the wines are drunk too young?

'We have a choice: we can indeed give up our style and tradition and replace it with something more accessible. But then I taste a wine from the 1930s or 1950s and realise how precisely it reflects its origin. Without structure, tannin and extract, we can't replicate those wines. Of course I accept that not all wine drinkers drink well, but we must conserve the interest of those who like to see how a wine evolves over time. We must serve the consumer, but we must also serve the terroir that has been given us. We have to preserve the memory of the wines.' He grows ever more thoughtful. 'When we die, all that is left of us is what is mineral and material - our skin, veins and tissues, all that decays. Wine gives us a sense of life, of what persists. That's why people spend a lot of money on a great bottle.'

Lardière will retire at the end of 2012 (he will be replaced by Frédéric Barnier of Château de Chassagne-Montrachet). There is talk of him continuing in an advisory capacity. Let's hope so. A visit to Jadot wouldn't be the same without a glimpse of that mop of white hair bounding about the room, communicating his unquenchable enthusiasm for his wines.

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