



wine-dinners

Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande - 2003 back to 1926

Fine wine merchant Jan Paulson reports on a celebration of May-Elaine de Lencquesaing's 80th birthday at Taillevent in Paris.

Over the year I am fortunate enough to receive a large number of invitations to wine tastings and other wine-related events. As the year only has a limited number of days I am sadly forced to decline some of these invitations. The invitation to attend a lunch at Taillevent in Paris in honour of May-Elaine de Lencquesaing was however something I would not turn down, no matter what else may have been planned for this December day.

A small group of Who's Who in wine were present. Château Pichon Lalande was represented by May-Elaine de Lencquesaing, Gildas d'Ollone and their gifted winemaker Thomas Dô-Chi-Nam. From Britain came Hugh Johnson, Clive Coates MW, Serena Sutcliffe MW and David Peppercorn MW. There were a number of American collectors and French guests including that walking encyclopedia, Michel Bettane.

The whole event was organised by the Californian physicist Bipin Desai and the wines all came from the château cellars. Bipin Desai prefers to serve the wines with food rather than tasting them "naked". This is not a bad idea since that is the original purpose of wine after all. It will tend to round off some of the wines' rough edges thereby making them appear more attractive; it will also show off the "classic" qualities of a Bordeaux as the perfect wine for food. This is where the over-extracted, over-oaked, high-alcohol monster wines that seem to do so well in large tastings start to show their weaknesses.

After warming up with Taillevent's excellent house-champagne (Deutz) we entered a private room for a memorable lunch.

I had the honour of being seated next to the hostess and was able to learn many inside information about the wines we were drinking. As in 1978 the family were drawing lots from a cake tin with the names of their châteaux, Mm. de Lencquesaing drew Pichon Lalande and cried for three days as this was the one property she did not want to inherit. The general financial situation in Bordeaux was miserable at the time and Pichon was badly in need of change and investment. She soon got down to business, starting by going back to school. She and her husband, a retired general, visited oenology classes and started making plans for the future. With an iron will and determination they set about making the necessary changes and within a very short time Pichon Comtesse was to become one of the most-loved wines of all.

The vintages 1934, 1955, 1964, 1975, 1978, 1990 and 2001 were served with ravioli de champignons, bouillon de pot-au-feu truffé.

1934 and **1955** both showed a lovely sweetness, 1934 older with some volatility but still enjoyable. 1955 is a wonderful vintage – it was the last vintage before the crippling frost of 1956 and has a great structure and good fruit left. **1964** is for me the most underrated of all Bordeaux vintages – the charming Pichon is still drinking well though it won't improve by keeping. **1975** was not an easy vintage on the left bank, most wines were simply too tannic and have long since dried out. Pichon Lalande is an exception and probably the best wine from the Médoc next to Latour in this vintage. There are none of the hard tannins and it is very good to drink now and will be for some time to come. Incidentally the wine was made by May-Elaine de Lencquesaing's old school friend and neighbour, the late Michel Delon of Château Léoville Las Cases (as were the following two vintages). **1978** was Mme de Lencquesaing's first vintage – just about everything that could go wrong during the growing season did so and

the Bordelais were expecting a disaster when the weather changed and a glorious autumn brought some very good wines. The 1978 Pichon is still a stylish wine with some tobacco flavours but starting to show its age, so I would suggest that it needs drinking now. May-Elaine de Lencquesaing always felt rather disappointed with her **1990** in the context of the vintage. She could not give the harvest and the vinification the scrupulous attention she usually does, due to the illness of her husband. I also remember it as a bit of an under-achiever in this fine vintage, but the wine seems to have added some weight over the last years and was certainly very much better than I had expected. **2001** is a charmer, still young but will surely be a nice wine in the not too distant future.

The vintages 1926, 1953, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1995 and 1996 were served with Royale de foie gras de canard, cappuccino de châtaignes a dish which was alone worth the trip to Paris).

The **1926** was a very small harvest of top quality wines, the Pichon lovely and sweet, almost burgundian. Showing some age but still very good. **1953** is one of the loveliest and most "classic" of all Bordeaux vintages and Pichon Lalande made one of their best wines ever. Still quite dark in colour with perfect balance and class. **1985** is to me the "modern" version of the 1953 as a vintage. A beautiful vintage that lives on impeccable balance and charm rather than power. I more and more start to prefer 1985s to 1982s and 1986s on the whole. And similarly to the 1953s it will age better than most people are aware of, balance being much more important than alcohol, concentration and power. The **1986** is a very exciting wine, spicy, powerful and still quite tannic. This will become a wonderful wine to drink in 10 years or so. The **1989** Pichon Lalande is one of the many stars of the vintage, very exotic and a joy to drink now and for many decades to come, definitely superior to the 1990. The **1995** and **1996** are both still very youthful but quite different in style, the 1995 sweet and charming, but on the lighter side whereas the 1996 will turn out to become a classic for the future. Very stylish and for me the greater of the two wines.

The last flight was made up of the great vintages 1929, 1945, 1959, 1961, 1982, 2000 and 2003 and were served with Quasi de veau aux légumes d'automne.

The **1929** showed its typical sweetness of the vintage paired with some volatility keeping it fresh and attractive to drink still. **1945** was a year of great concentration of fruit with wonderful structure and backbone and the Pichon Lalande is no exception. Very clean and fresh. The pairing of 1959 and 1961 is always a fascinating one. Here the **1959** was a beautifully balanced wine with great class. Often the **1961**s show such overpowering concentration that one just has to surrender oneself, this is not quite so in this case, a very nice wine but not really up there among the top wines of the vintage. Michel Bettane is one who much prefers the 1959s to the 1961s and in this case I agree with him. Then came the **1982** which propelled Pichon Lalande to "Supersecond" status. This has always been a total charmer and a great success for the château. A very soft, attractive wine without the massive tannins present in some 1982s. It is a wine that seems to develop in varying ways. I have had bottles where I felt that the wine was fading and needed drinking up but also bottles which still have plenty of life in them. The bottles served in Paris were as lovely as ever and drinking this it is easy to understand why Pichon Lalande is such a popular wine. It was followed by the sweet and impressive **2000** and **2003**. Tasters more experienced than me in drinking young wines were very positive about these two wines commenting on them not being as overdone as some other wines in these vintages.

This was a marvellous opportunity to see how the wines of a property have developed over the years and to follow the ups and downs of the fortunes of the family who has been making the wines. What is apparent is the terroir and how it shines through over the years. Hugh Johnson formulated it perfectly when he said that the wines of Pichon Lalande are first and foremost always a great pleasure to drink. This is after all what wine is about and I for one wish that more winemakers would keep that in mind.

[Hear, hear! And thank you very much indeed for this delightful account, Jan. What did you have for dinner, I wonder? JR]