



IN REVIEW:

Stereo Lafleur - **Review of two Fine Wine Experience Château Lafleur verticals**

11th August 2017: J'Aime, by Jean-Michel Lorain, Bangkok

18th August 2017: Si Ji Xuan, Four Seasons, Shanghai

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Introduction

This month The Fine Wine Experience hosted verticals of Château Lafleur in both Bangkok and Shanghai. It's a rare experience in any case to drink Lafleur. Only 9,000 to 13,000 bottles are produced each year – less than, say, La Tâche. But having just had the especially rare chance to taste vintages spanning four decades *twice* in the span of a week, I thought such a fine wine experience presented an opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

To understand Lafleur we must begin by knowing three essential things – the *terroir* of this 4.5ha estate, the mentality and approach of the people who have farmed it and made the wine, and the varietal composition of the vineyard.

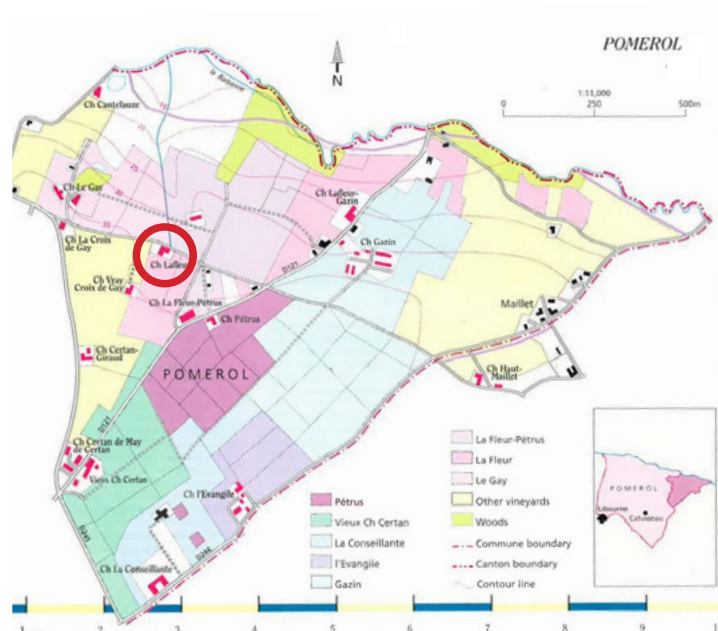
The last point is the simplest – the blend has always been approximately 50% Merlot and 50% Cabernet Franc. The high percentage of Cabernet Franc is unusual anywhere in Bordeaux, though its strength lies in the Right Bank (it is increasingly being replaced in the Médoc). A high proportion of Cabernet Franc is found at Lafleur's near neighbours – Vieux Château Certan (30% + 10% Cabernet Sauvignon), and Château Cheval Blanc (57%). Everything else aside, aromatically and flavour-wise, a family resemblance to these other two can be pinned to this unusual emphasis on Cabernet Franc, despite vineyard proximity.

The second point is key too. As you head east out of Libourne and climb gently to the Pomerol plateau you reach a small cluster of the finest properties at the top. Directly either side of the little D121 road lie Château Petrus and Château Lafleur. But while Petrus sits on a special deposit of iron-rich clay and is planted almost entirely to Merlot (the remaining portion of Cabernet

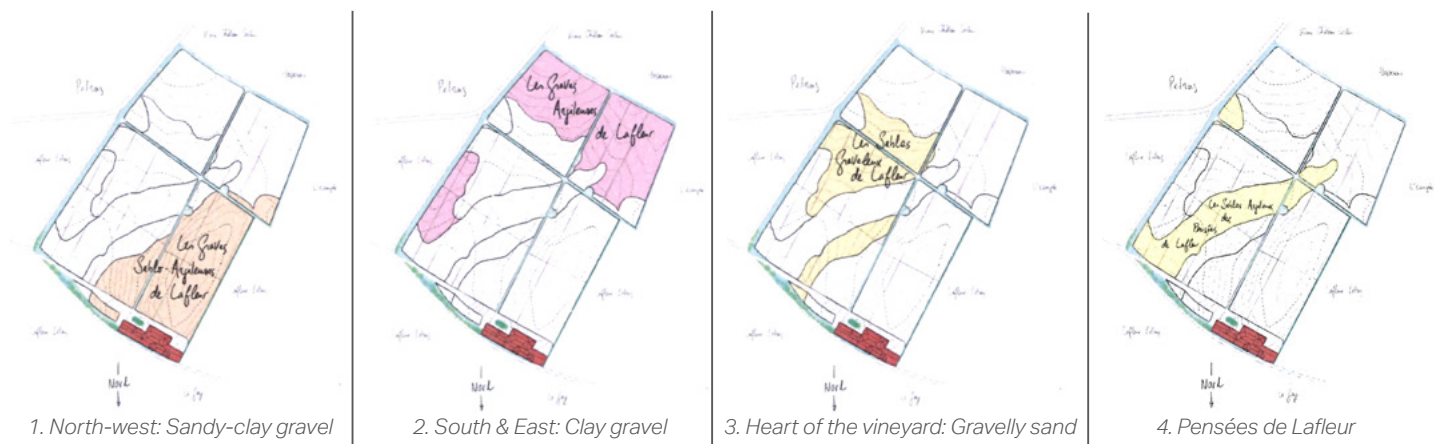
Franc now being replaced I hear), Château Lafleur slopes downhill slightly, northwest from the road, and has a very different terroir to Petrus.

The three key portions of the terroir are described by the château as follows –

1. Sandy-clay gravel in the north-west sector, producing 'berries [that] are small and naturally concentrated, allowing us to make very dense wines.'
2. Clay gravel in the south and east sectors, presenting 'a great medium for growing Cabernet Franc.'
3. Gravelly sand in the heart of the vineyard, 'naturally balanced' soils suitable for Merlot, contributing 'depth and fruitiness.'



© Page 337, Duijker, H., & Broadbent, M. (1997). *The Bordeaux atlas and encyclopaedia of châteaux*



© Château Lafleur (2017)

The descriptions given by the château are more complex and nuanced than the abridged notes above, but at the same time there is a reverse trend that I will come to when I discuss the people involved.

But for now there is one final point to make about the *terroir*, and that brings us to the second label – Pensées de Lafleur. This was created in 1987 as a traditional second wine – i.e. one into which the estate could declassify a second class of quality vines, fruit, or even vats should they wish. But since the 1999 vintage, Pensées de Lafleur has become a wine that comes from a specific 0.7ha sector of the vineyard. That sector runs through the middle of Lafleur from the southwest to the northeast, like a finger.

4. Pensées de Lafleur sector comprises sand and clay-gravel that is a bit richer and more humid than the other three sectors. It is picked a little later and makes wine that is more approachable younger. Production is around 2,500 to 3,000 bottles per year, and well worth seeking out if you can find some.

The third factor here is the people involved. The Robin sisters, who also owned and managed neighbouring Château Le Gay, ran this estate from the mid-1940s for four decades. In a description that now seems hardly relatable to Bordeaux's present day high end 'luxury product' image, Robert Parker wrote about visiting Château Lafleur in the late 1970s. The 'two elderly proprietors... [were] both utterly charming...' Parker would meet them 'in the tiny *chai*, where the barrels, as well as a bevy of ducks, chickens, and rabbits, were housed. It always amazed me how wines of such great extraction and utterly mind-blowing character could be produced in such filthy conditions.'



Tasting with Jacques Guinaudeau at Château Lafleur



Château Lafleur gravels.



Cabernet Franc before veraison, July 2017.



Anthony Hanson MW, our senior consultant, with Jacques Guinaudeau at Château Lafleur.

(To be clear, everything today is immaculate).

A key decision it seems was not to replant following the major 1956 frost that caused widespread damage in Bordeaux, no doubt reducing yields further still. Diseased vines seem also not to have been replaced. Winemaking was reported to have been quite rudimentary at that time, yet as the saying goes, great wine is made in the vineyard, and when today you taste wines from the Robin period they can be utterly compelling, even now.

The first of the sisters, Thérèse Robin, died in 1984. Management of the estate had at least in part been taken care of by Ets. Jean-Pierre Moueix, and Jean-Claude Berrouet of Château Petrus fame, made the 1982, 1983 and 1984 at Lafleur. That's the first transition period of note, because the 1982 Château Lafleur vies for honours as the greatest Bordeaux wine I have ever tasted, and the 1983 is my favourite Bordeaux from that vintage.

Jacques and Sylvie Guinaudeau arrived in 1985, and made that vintage (also my favourite 1985 of all!). They leased the vineyard from Marie Robin until her death in 2001, when they were able to purchase Château Lafleur.

What I found interesting on a visit to the property in July 2017 was that a certain conservative (conservationist?) respect for Lafleur remains despite the transition from lessee to owner. For example, while detailed soil analysis has taken place, and parcels vinified separately, when I asked Jacques Guinaudeau if he has replanted Merlot and Cabernet Franc according to best *terroir* suitability, he said that largely vines are replaced with what was there historically. His concern? That by shifting the varietal mix location within the vineyard might lead to some loss of Lafleur's overall DNA or signature. (Sometimes



Section of diseased vines pulled out about 5 years ago and left fallow.

the 'wrong' variety on a soil type – i.e. planting against current conventional wisdom (e.g. Merlot on clay, Cabernet on gravel) yields *something* you don't want to lose, even if you are not sure what it is. To borrow the idiom, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.')

I pointed to a section of vineyard that was pulled out a few years ago because it was diseased, and for now lies fallow. I asked "will you plant it as it was planted before?" Guinaudeau, looking closely at the grass covered plot replied "we haven't decided yet."

That's not to say there isn't innovation and renewal at Lafleur. The Guinaudeaus are clearly intellectually curious. At their separate wine estate in Fronsac they make another 50/50 Merlot/Franc wine called 'Acte'. Here they try out new ideas. It's their draft canvas, and I sense that only if they feel fully satisfied with something new that might they bring it over to Lafleur.

In the Guinaudeau's third vintage – 1987 – they were sufficiently dissatisfied with quality to create the Pensées de Lafleur label into which they declassified the entire crop. A bold move, but one in line with their sense for protecting the Château Lafleur name.

Much has been done to improve drainage in the vineyard. On my visit an extension to the winery was under construction – carefully designed to look like it has always been there.

Some of the lined cement fermentation tanks have been replaced with modern floating top stainless steel vats, and the proportion of new barrels for the grand vin has increased to 50%.

That's right, 50%. One thing that strikes me about the character of Lafleur is its spiciness, extraordinary fruit concentration, thickness and tannin. That is not amazing in itself – many wines – increasingly since an American-preferred Parker-led taste for richness (rewarded by high scores and associated high prices) incentivised many to aim for it – are made in a style we could describe as rich, highly extracted and powerful. Many wines of that ilk, to my palate, are hard, somewhat soulless and unbalanced – showing sullen overripe fruit flavours, a late-picked burn of alcohol exacerbating the texture of over-extracted grape and new oak wood tannins on the finish. They can feel grand-scaled yet somehow hollow.

Not Lafleur. Here, truly, the sense of concentration comes from the vineyard. Yields are naturally low, the wine naturally intense. Perhaps *because* the winemaking and élevage is done with a conservatively

gentle touch, the expression of the vineyard is all the more clear. That's my impression anyway. It simply cannot be emulated on from a less exalted site.

What further can be said about the character and style of Château Lafleur? Here I am going to borrow from what I wrote on that subject two years ago after we hosted a 15-vintage vertical of the wine in Hong Kong:

Perhaps more than any other Bordeaux tasting I've hosted in Hong Kong, these wines showed such dynamism in the glass, as if different windows into the wines were being opened and closed on each visit back to the glass. I think this is one of the fascinations with Lafleur. It is not usually a wine of easy charm, but its natural power, depth and complexity make it such a compelling choice, if you are patient by personality.

I think that view stands true for me today too. In both Bangkok and Shanghai at least one guest offered the comment that Lafleur seems to change a lot in the glass – “like a colour changing dragon” (chameleon), one remarked. I think it's a characteristic that adds a little mystique, a little intrigue to Lafleur. It's a characteristic I like.

I think now I would make two further points:

1. The through line from the conservative Robins to the conservationist Guinaudeaus has served to ensure Lafleur has never been made to emulate anything glossy or grandiose in style. The power is quiet – it is all coming from the vineyard.
2. Two Lafleur dinners a week apart has given me the chance to see bottle variation a little more closely. I tasted 15 different vintages of Lafleur, and 10 of them I tasted twice. Generally I found the wines



(From the left) Linden, Jacques Guinaudeau and his son Baptiste Guinaudeau who joined in 2001.

to be quite consistent – just the normal variance. Both bottles of 1995 were disappointing – but that's a wine I have liked a lot in the past – it was great in Hong Kong in 2015. There was a little variation in both good bottles of 1985, and for me the Shanghai bottle of 1990 was way behind the Bangkok bottle.

So, rather than generalize, below you will find my tasting notes (brief in some cases as I was hosting) on all the wines served at *both* dinners. At the end of each dinner I asked participants – who all tasted from the same bottle – for their two (non-weighted) votes for top wines of the night. I've noted the votes below too.

[You can also read my 2015 vertical tasting report for comparison, click here.](#)

2006 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

94

Bright, lifted, raspberry-like nose; open, fine and approachable, a touch of leaf, fine fruit and a telltale hint of chocolate and richness on the intense finish. This is a fine, accessible finely-tailored feeling Lafleur. Moderately long cellaring potential.

2005 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 6 votes for wine of the night

98

Deep; fresh and very detailed and nuanced aromas; palate-enveloping concentration but great flow, very finely structured, exceptionally seamless texture that is both almost fathomlessly deep, but also extraordinarily supple. Perfect equilibrium.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 1 vote for wine of the night

98+

Still so deep and fresh in appearance; follows on with a youthful fruity nose – gorgeous fresh fruit, graphite, spice, dark chocolate; concentrated on the palate but with great flow and natural expression, spicy dark fruit and chocolate, lots of details. Today this feels like the foundation to a building made to stand immortal. It is so well balanced and assuring. Yet there is nothing dull about this either. It is lively. To reach its peak it needs 20 years more cellaring, and is easily a 50+ year wine.

2004 Château Lafleur

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

95

A deep but open appearance, garnet rim; an open, fresh, perfumed aroma with a hint of spice; medicinal spice notes lace the open and fragrant palate fruit expression. There is rich tannin and plenty of grip and concentration, but it is already expressive and therefore at the early end of its drinking window. Revisiting this glass over the course of the evening I became more and more impressed, noting the fine fresh acidity – a hallmark of the year – that makes this so lively and appealing, and also noted the melting texture and impressive (in the context of the year) concentration. A 'serious Lafleur' year, I concluded.

2003 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

94

This stands out for its open, aromatically spicy and more exuberant nose and glycerin-laden palate. Tannins are there but so soft and so well buffered by the extract. A more hedonistic Lafleur, drinking well now, but no rush.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

93

Already open, but deep; sweet, spicy and exotic nose. This is quite heady really, but the palate delivers sufficient freshness and vitality that the sumptuous richness flows well. Unlike the Bangkok bottle this one finishes a little tighter. Indeed there is a slight pinch in the tannins suggesting there might be just a hint of phenolic under-ripeness (the paradox of hot years) in some of the skins. Nonetheless, delicious.



Château Lafleur



A new extension of Château Lafleur being worked on.

2000 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 6 votes for wine of the night

95

Mid depth and the rim showing a little development; a rich biscuit nose, notes of tobacco and tea; sweet, delicious Lafleur that gained volume as the air got to it. This bottle not 100% pristine, yet by the end of the night I still noted 'fabulous'. It tied with the 2005 for wine of the night at our table, so perhaps I was being picky!

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 2 votes for wine of the night

97

A fine deep garnet; lifted sweet nose like a powder sugar-coated fresh sponge cake with confit of cherried, cocoa and vanilla pod, but for all that headiness it also somehow comes across as quite airy, and nothing that suggests 'oak' – not even the vanilla. In any case, this is fully integrated. An immensely aromatic bottle of the 2000 tonight; concentrated, potent, sweet, aromatic, with a mineral iron-like base grip underpinning it, then very fine spice/herb complexity on the finish. The Cabernet Franc component is extraordinary in this. A wonderful, medicinally-laden 2000 Lafleur, and a favourite of mine tonight.

1999 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

94

Super charming, red cherry extract, glycerin, soft with bright fruit and good concentration. Still youthful – which makes it positively Peter Pan for a '99. Lovely wine.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 2 votes for wine of the night

94

Deep garnet still; a reserved nose initially, with hints of dark chocolate and red cherry, but this comes across as quite discrete; sweet, very fresh with vibrant red cherry fruit and very fine dark chocolate, some grip here but it is yielding. Concentrated and youthful for a '99. It opened up lush and sweet, yet it is deep, with plenty of grip. It's quality in the context of a so-so vintage and relative price has led me to call this 'the secret Lafleur'. Smart money choice.

1998 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

91

Great concentration, rich fruit and tea overtones. Very good despite rather clipped-textured tannins.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

91

Deep garnet; a dusty sort of nose, sweet cocoa and tea notes; Merlot fleshiness and sweetness, though initially it came across rather lackluster. It recovered quite well in the glass. There is some bitterness in the tannin – it is not fully balanced. Very good nonetheless, though disappointing in the context of the greatness of the 1998 Pomerol vintage, and what close neighbours were able to produce.

1995 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

N/R

Showing excessive oxidation, though still drinkable, I felt it too poor to show this bottle and I opened the 1986 vintage as a back up.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

85*

Dull. There is a fair amount of oxidation. This bottle is quite drinkable and still somewhat pleasurable, but compared to some really great bottles experienced – including one in Hong Kong noted in the link above, from 2015 – this is really disappointing.

** I rated 96 points for the same wine tasted during the Lafleur vertical event in 2015*

1990 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 2 votes for wine of the night

98

A truly exceptional bottle – tea-infused opulence on the nose, sweet; jellied fruit and a melting texture on the palate, all natural, easily-expressed concentration, a highly exotic flavor, including Indian spices, sour plum, and Oolong tea. This is phenomenally good.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 4 votes for wine of the night

87

Well received by our guests, but compared to the exceptional bottle last week in Bangkok this seemed rather poor to me. A mature colour with an olive rim; wood spice and orange rind on the nose – there is some oxidation here; attenuated on the palate which is drying out. The wine opened up more positively over the evening, become distinctly minty in tone. Some of the amazing aromatics did creep through, but overall the impression was of a great wine emasculated.

1989 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

97

Still a deep healthy colour; earth, chocolate and sweet berry nose, 'hot tiles', this really has a sunny expression; superior tonight to the usually amazing 1985, and by some margin. This has that layered feeling, tea and spice, open and expressive but with years left in it. After another hour I noted – fantastic! – this is so thick, rich, glycerin-laden and melting in texture. An intense flavor with a saline edge that gives the rich fruit an umami morishness.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 0 votes for wine of the night

95

Fine mature garnet, deep clear and bright appearance, mature rim; sweet fruit, dusty 'hot tile' note, coffee bean; on the palate concentrated, lush, sweet and fruity, mineral notes, concentrated, real melting grip – amazing glycerin and extract. Better than usual, I noted, but consistent, if a notch behind the Bangkok bottle.

1986 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 3 votes for wine of the night

94

Along with the 1999, my other 'secret' Lafleur. It was a relatively poor year in the Right Bank overall, but it feels like the Cabernet Franc flourished here. Lots of aromatic tea leaves, sweet and savoury, tannic, rich and deeply satisfying Lafleur.

1985 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 2 votes for wine of the night

96

This bottle took a little time to get going in the glass. Initially it seemed marred by a chlorine-like note, but this blew off entirely (and may have been the glass itself). Elegant weight, but not light like some '85s. Nice freshness in the fruit expression, some spices and chocolate notes too. There is sufficient opulence to have the stamp of a great Lafleur. As the air worked the wine during the evening the wine thickened up and became impressive rich, while remaining fresh and well composed.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 6 votes for wine of the night

98

Great colour, garnet of some depth, with a broad bricked rim – healthy appearance at 32; sweet fresh and spocy on the nose, this feels positively zingy in expression; simply ecstasy on the palate, exceptionally balanced and expressive, bringing uncommon depth and grip for the year. This is a killer bottle of '85 Lafleur. If I couldn't have an '82 I would pick this.

1979 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 3 votes for wine of the night

96

Mature bright appearance; a candied orange rind and milk chocolate nose, then spices and Oolon tea; impressive concentration, flavor depth and complexity for 1979. Mature, evolved flavours, but with great fruit and thickness of texture, all expressed in an effortlessly natural way. Finishes lively and long. This is really very impressive.



Changing signatures on the label.

1976 Château Lafleur

Bangkok, 11th Aug. 2017 – 5 votes for wine of the night

97

Fully evolved open appearance, bright and clear; the heady aromas reach you long before you get the glass near your nose – it is so exuberant and spicy. Aromas are led by candied orange, red cherry and milk chocolate – it is similar to the '79, but much more 'scorched' and spicy (drought year). This is exotic and exuberant, and for the only time in the line up seemed to remind me more of Petrus in its heady seductive fruit. Drinking brilliantly well and no end in sight.

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 1 vote for wine of the night

97

An open mature colour; Chung pi (dried mandarin peel) and chocolate – this is open and exciting to smell and taste. Candied level of sweetness, melting and seductive texture, real layering, then grip right at the end, but then continuing to a long, hedonistic candied orange and chocolate finish. A wow wine.

1975 Château Lafleur

Shanghai, 18th Aug. 2017 – 7 votes for wine of the night

93

This is a very impressive Lafleur. After the buoyant and heady '76, this has its feet more firmly in the soil. It is deeply concentrated, iron-like in its immense structure, very complex, still sufficiently stuff with extract and complex layers of flavours, but if anything detracts from the picture – and for me now it does – it is that there is a sense the wine is beginning to dry out. As the night wore on I felt the tannins surpassed the fruit for attention. Nonetheless, this has been one of the very greatest '75s for many years, but for me, like some of the other leading candidates, in imbalance in the structure is beginning to show. Perhaps I am being picky because in Shanghai this got the top vote for wine of the night.



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