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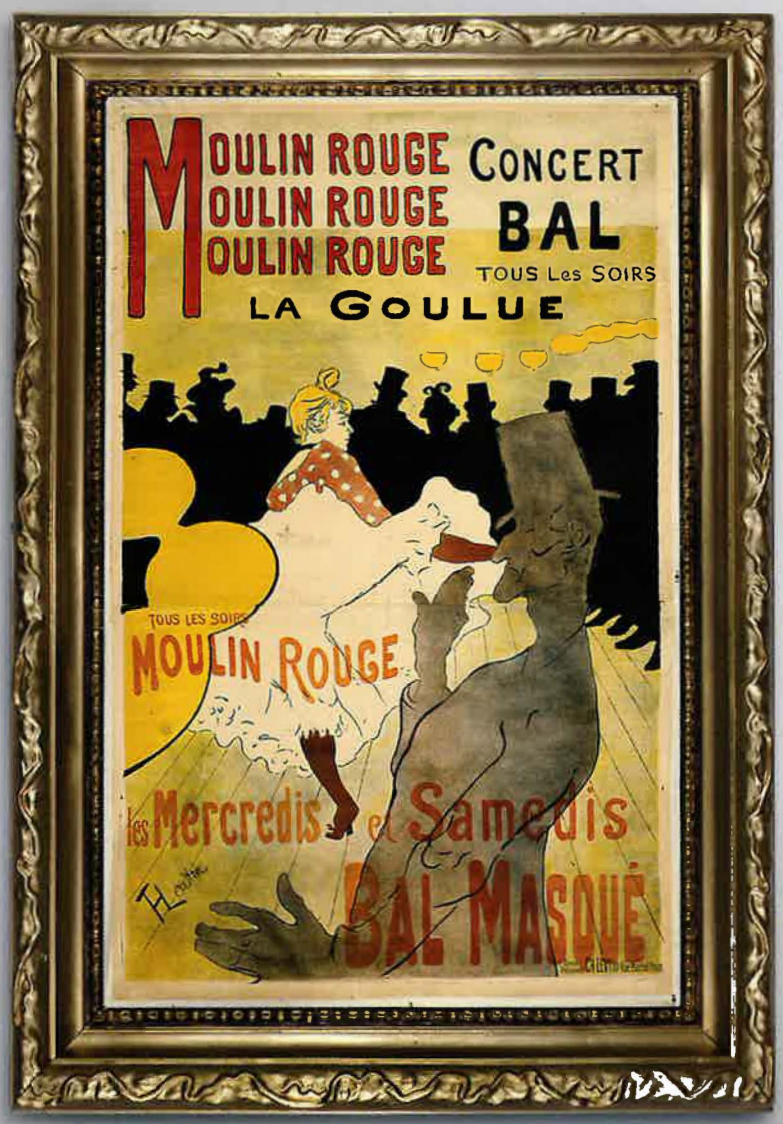

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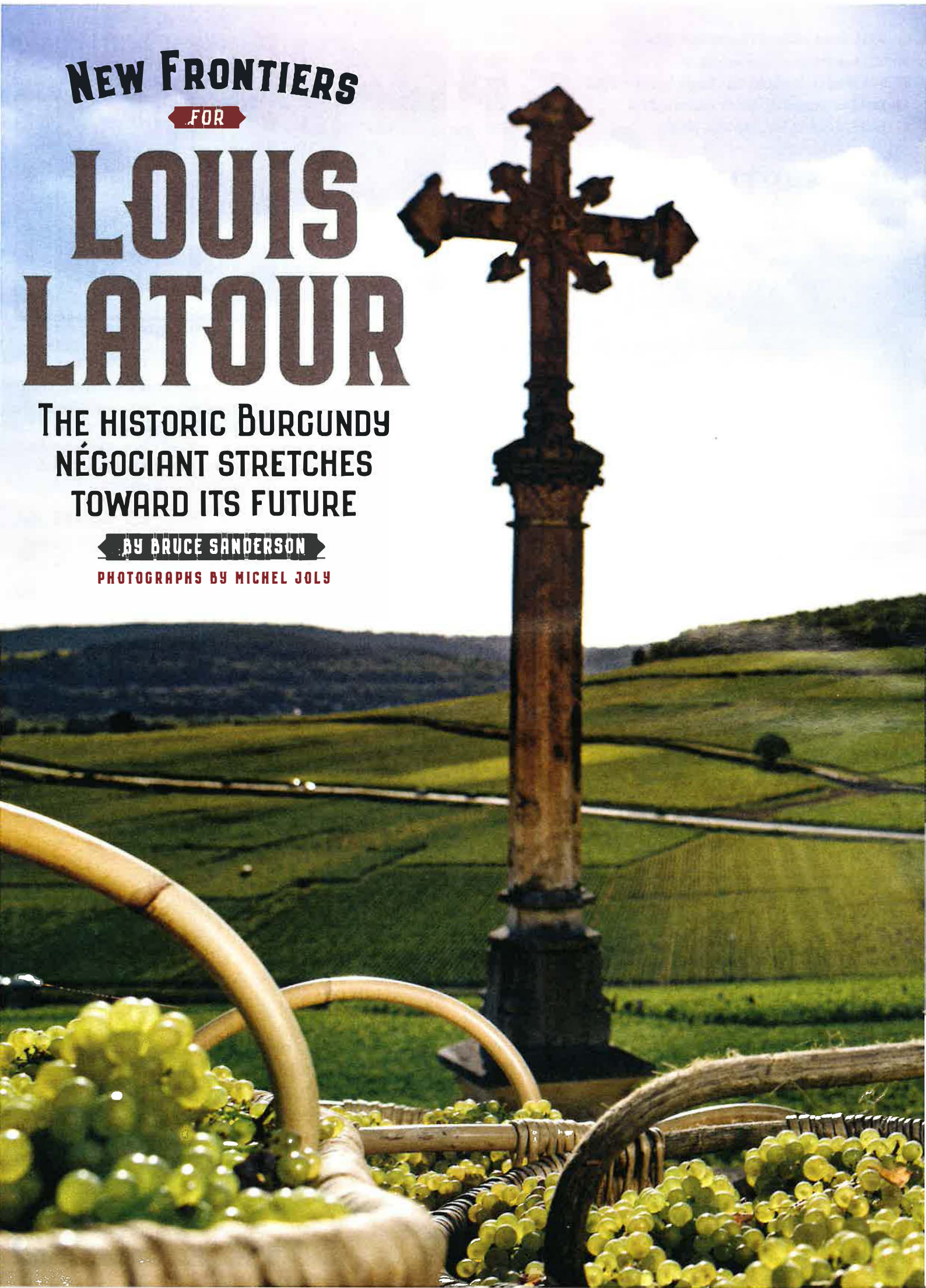
New Frontiers for Louis Latour

The historic Burgundy négociant stretches toward its future

By Bruce Sanderson

Photographs by Michel Joly



Louis-Fabrice Latour has led his 220-year-old family domaine from strength to strength in the 21st century.

Louis-Fabrice Latour hardly seems like a revolutionary. But the young president of Maison Louis Latour, a firm founded in 1797, has decided that the future growth of his family business lies outside the famous Côte d'Or. • Unlike other domaines and négociants in the region, Latour isn't interested in purchasing more vineyards in the prestigious heart of Burgundy. After all, the house already has a strong portfolio of vineyards there, 114 acres of mostly *premiers* and *grands crus* sites. So Louis-Fabrice has turned his attention to *terroirs* nearby that are still relatively overlooked and undervalued.

"My grandfather once said, 'Never invest in a place you can't [get to] before lunch," he says with a laugh. "It's so much fun to be in Semur-en-Auxois [in northern Burgundy] and southern Beaujolais."

With his tie askew and a sly grin, the baby-faced 53-year-old looks a little disheveled, more like the college buddy you hung out with than the leader of a major Burgundy house. Yet he is not afraid to think outside the box. In a conservative region like Burgundy, the fact that a powerful, historic house is making such real estate forays has stirred controversy. But taking on projects where vineyards and grape contracts are less expensive has been a pillar of Maison Latour's success over the past 40 years.

Louis Latour III (seated, right) and Louis IV (standing, right) at Château Corton Grancey in 1899. The father and son represented the sixth and seventh generations in the business.

Louis-Fabrice's father, Louis, who died last year, looked to the Ardèche region in southern France, then to the Var in Provence, to expand the company's business. Now, Louis-Fabrice is excited about the house's new projects in Côteaux de l'Auxois, which lies between Dijon and Chablis, and Pierres Dorées, an area in southern Beaujolais whose limestone and clay soils are similar to those of the Côte d'Or.

"My father always believed our market should be around France," Louis-Fabrice explains. "Me, I'm a great believer from a strategical point of view. Only 1 percent of [the regions of] Franche-Comté and Burgundy is occupied by vineyards. There is a ton to do in the southern Beaujolais; there is l'Auxois, where we are planting every year. Why not Jura? Why not Haute-Saône? So it's true our new frontier is our backdoor, our backyard."

Since taking control of Maison Louis Latour in 1999, Louis-Fabrice has expanded the business, always pushing the boundaries. Maison Louis Latour now produces an average of 750,000 cases of wine each year. It is one of the two largest négociants in Burgundy (the other being Louis Jadot).

This path of dynamic growth began under the leadership of Louis-Fabrice's father. "When my father started, back in 1958, we were doing 3 to 4 million euros, 25,000 to 30,000 cases, and 90 percent domaine," says Louis-Fabrice.

"When I joined, in 1988, so almost 30 years ago, we were ranked No. 15 in Burgundy among houses. Jaboulet-Vercherre, Moillard, Bouchard Aîné, Drouhin, Bichot, Labouré-Roi, Antonin Rodet were all bigger than us."

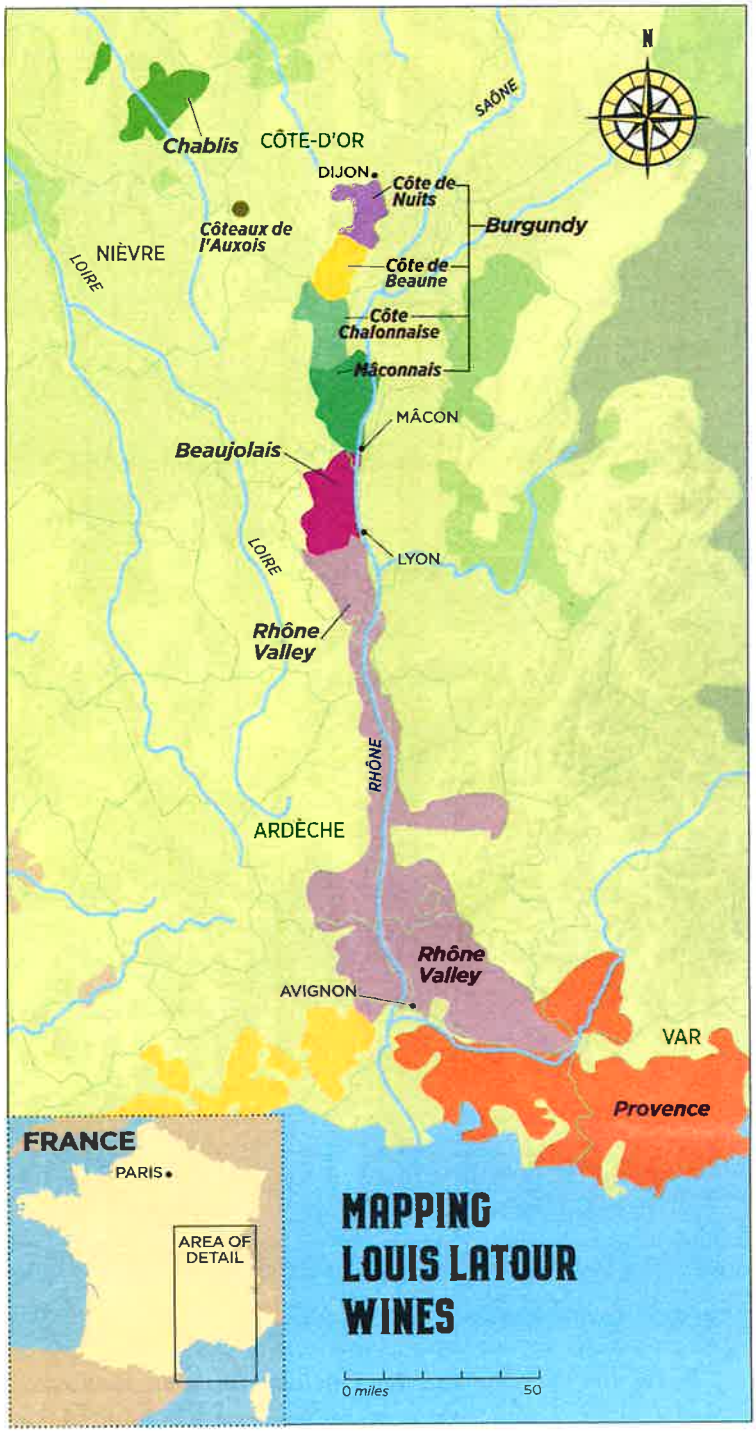
In 2003, Louis-Fabrice acquired the Chablis house Simonnet-Febvre, and in 2008, bought Henry Fessy in Beaujolais. Between the domaine and négociant activities, Latour controls 15 percent of Burgundy's *grands crus* whites and is very strong on the *villages* level.

Today, the domaine and the merchant house are two separate companies, with a combined annual revenue of 70 million euros. Both have the same 80 shareholders, yet they own different portions of shares in each company.

"Even though Maison Latour has been around for a long time, and we were one of the biggest at the end of the 19th century, it's a cycle," notes Louis-Fabrice. Far from becoming a dusty, tired brand, Maison Louis Latour is a dynamic company marketing its wines to millennials around the world.

Throughout its long history, the business has seen expansions and contractions. The Latour family purchased vineyards in the Côte d'Or as early as 1731, but it was in 1797 that Domaine Louis Latour was founded by third generation winegrower Jean Latour, in Aloxe-Corton.

In 1867, the third Louis, representing the sixth generation to head the family company, purchased the négociant firm Lamarosse Père & Fils, expanding the business into the merchant side and establishing headquarters at 13 rue des Tonneliers in Beaune, where it remains today.



SELECTED WINES OF LOUIS LATOUR

The chart below and map at left illustrate the regional breadth of the Latour portfolio, with whites and reds sourced from historic vineyards and emerging regions.

Domaine Louis Latour

(20,000 cases produced)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	CASES MADE
WHITE			
Corton-Charlemagne 2014	95	$175	3,100
Chevalier-Montrachet Les Demoiselles 2014	94	$480	230
RED			
Chambertin Cuvée Héritiers Latour 2014	93	$50	130
Corton Château Corton Grancey 2014	93	$170	2,400
Romanée St.-Vivant Les Quatre Journaux 2014	93	$580	290

Maison Louis Latour

(480,000 cases produced, including Ardèche and Var)

WHITE			
Montrachet 2014	95	$630	190
Puligny-Montrachet Sous le Puits 2014	94	$95	300
Meursault 2014	90	$80	1,800
Chardonnay Ardèche Grand 2014	87	$17	40,000
RED			
Gevrey-Chambertin 2014	90	$80	1,360
Marsannay 2014	88	$26	2,600
Pinot Noir Var Domaine de Valmoissine 2014	84	$15	35,000

Simonnet-Febvre / Chablis & Coteaux de l'Auxois

(70,000 cases produced, mainly négociant)

Chablis Les Clos 2014	92	$80	300
Chablis Mont de Milieu 2014	91	$40	560
Chablis 2014	89	$25	27,700
Chardonnay Côteaux de l'Auxois Quintessence de Lyre 2014	87	$20	558
Auxerrois Côteaux de l'Auxois Esprit de Lyre 2014	86	$17	900

Henry Fessy

(150,000 cases produced, including Beaujolais Nouveau, Beaujolais, Beaujolais-Villages and *crus* Beaujolais

Moulin-à-Vent Domaine de la Pierre 2015	91	$22	1,500
Morgon 2015	89	$19	1,000

The final decade of the 19th century solidified the core of Domaine Latour, with the acquisition of Château Corton Grancey in 1891, including 81.5 acres of vineyards, of which 37 acres were *grands crus* Corton. After phylloxera destroyed the Aligoté vines there, Louis Latour III replanted Corton-Charlemagne with Chardonnay. Romanée-St.-Vivant and Chambertin were added in 1899.

Louis Latour IV became chairman of the Côte d'Or Association of Wine Merchants. In 1913, he and Louis Jadot jointly purchased a parcel of Puligny-Montrachet Les Caillerets, adjoining Chevalier-Montrachet. They named it Les Demoiselles and successfully appealed to have it appended to the Chevalier-Montrachet *grand cru*.

But the house's fortunes were about to change. Of its four major markets, Maison Latour lost Germany and Russia after World War I, and then saw its U.S. markets languish during Prohibition. Only Great Britain remained. The focus of the business contracted to the domaine holdings.

Maison Latour signed with U.S. importer Colonel Wildman in 1946, just after World War II. But there was little wine to sell. "The only wine we were selling was domaine, [plus] Beaujolais and a little bit of Mâcon and Pouilly-Fuissé," recounts Louis-Fabrice. "Wildman was always complaining that we didn't have enough wine."

Louis-Fabrice's father, also called Louis, joined the firm in 1958. Then, in the 1960s, some of the family members left the business, shrinking the vineyard holdings by one-third. During 1974 and 1975, Latour didn't ship a single case to Wildman.

"We were only doing domaine, [mainly] *premiers* and *grands crus*," Louis-Fabrice recalls. "And we had just made some big investments. My father decided we were too much domaine." Louis believed that the fortunes of the house depended on growing its négociant arm.

The opportunity to expand the négociant activities presented itself with the disastrous 1977 vintage for white Burgundy, after which many négociants dropped their contracts with growers. The following year, Louis-Fabrice's father approached the growers in Meursault, Puligny and Chassagne. Along with André Gagey of

Left: Winemaker Jean-Charles Thomas (on ladder) has been with Latour since 1995. Above: Technical director Boris Champy, who formerly made wine at Napa Valley's Dominus, was hired in 2012. Both have helped adapt Latour's techniques to warmer vintages in Burgundy.

Louis Jadot, he convinced the growers to press the grapes, but rather than make the wine themselves, to sell their must to the two merchant houses. "We and Jadot still have a very strong position [with growers] today," says Latour. "Most of our relationships in Meursault, Puligny and Chassagne, which is the heart of Maison Latour, started back in the late 1970s."

It was the beginning of another period of expansion, with Maison Louis Latour becoming one of the major players in the Côte de Beaune and, a year later, making Chardonnay from the Ardèche. Expansion into the Var and Beaujolais followed. In 1986, Louis Latour created a U.S. subsidiary, taking control of its own importation. The company's sales have doubled in value since its bicentennial in 1997.

"In days of recession and harder times, we needed to have a larger portfolio, so [we developed] Ardèche [and] Pouilly-Fuissé," notes Latour. "It helped us in the big recession of 1991, which wiped out most of the négociants. If you don't have the entry-level wines to go through the recession, you are out."

Louis-Fabrice Latour, the 11th generation to run the firm, and the seventh Louis, was born Feb. 29, 1964. Following in his father's footsteps, he studied at Sciences Po (Paris Institute of Political Studies), an elite school whose many prominent graduates include former president Jacques Chirac. Louis-Fabrice worked in finance in Paris for two years before joining Maison Latour at the age of 24.

Today, he and his wife, Patricia, live in Beaune with their four children: Eléonore, 19; Louis, 16; Victor, 13; and Gaspard, 7. Louis-Fabrice also has three siblings: a sister, Virginie, 54, and two brothers, Alexis, 50, and Florent, 46. As the eldest son, Louis-Fabrice was tapped to run the business starting in 1999.

"My father told me, You have to have a style and you have to have a vision," says Louis-Fabrice. "Like [he did with] the Ardèche. You have to do something new. Every generation at Latour should bring something. And it has been good to give a younger image to Latour, to be innovative. Otherwise, you are the Old World, in an old region."

He took his father's advice to heart. In 2003, Louis-Fabrice acquired Maison Simonnet-Febvre in Chablis. It owned 10 acres, with contracts to buy additional grapes in Chablis and the surrounding Yonne region.

In 1991, Simonnet-Febvre bought 37 acres of Chardonnay, Auxerrois, Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir in the Auxois, and it continues to plant vineyards there. Located between Dijon and Montbard, the Auxois centers on the village of Semur-en-Auxois. It once boasted more than 2,500 acres of vineyards, according to Latour, but production almost disappeared after the phylloxera blight of the late-19th century. With warmer vintages in the past few decades, Latour sees this as an area with potential.

In the mid 1990s, Maison Louis Latour expanded into Beaujolais, purchasing Henry Fessy, with 165 acres of vineyards. "Beaujolais and Mâconnais wines, they are more flexible," Latour explains. "When it comes to Maison Latour, I don't want to become

too spread out, too much volume. We've lost some volume and we're back to where we were 20 years ago."

Latour can barely contain his excitement about the new project in the south of Beaujolais, Pierres Dorées. Located about 10 miles north of Lyon, there are currently 62 acres of Pinot Noir planted.

"Unlike my father, I have always dreamed of making Pinot Noir outside the Côte d'Or," he says. "I've never liked Mâcon reds; I don't like rusticity in reds. But I have been thinking about this for years and years: Why not plant Pinot Noir in the limestone and clays of southern Beaujolais?

"Why go south, with global warming, [when] you should go north?" he adds. "But I said, no, no, we are going to do it, but we are going to climb in the Mont de Beaujolais. We're not going to do it at 250 meters [825 feet], we are going to do it at 280 to 320 meters [925 to 1,055 feet] to keep the freshness, the acidity, and to avoid overripeness. I want to make balanced wine."

"FOR ME, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO HAVE A STYLE OF WINE THAT WE AND THE CUSTOMERS RECOGNIZE. ... I LIKE TO HAVE AN IDENTIFIABLE STYLE, FROM CUVÉE LATOUR TO ROMANÉE-ST.-VIVANT." -LOUIS-FABRICE LATOUR

The Latour family makes their home in Beaune. Above: Louis-Fabrice with (from left) son Victor, daughter Eléonore, son Gaspard, wife Patricia and son Louis VIII at the *grand cru* Corton-Charlemagne, planted to Chardonnay by a forebear in the late 19th century.

The Maison began buying land in 2012 and also has contracts with local growers. The first release in the U.S. will be this fall, under the appellation Côteaux Bourguignons. "I don't want to upset growers from Côte d'Or, from Burgundy," states Latour. "They wish to keep exclusively the word Bourgogne. I don't mind being Côteaux Bourguignons; I want to make a great wine. I'm not going to pretend that we'll make Chambolle-Musigny, but I want to show that we can make Pinot Noir there.

"I want to have a geographical identity," he continues. "We are not in the middle of nowhere—we are almost in Lyon. If we don't plant vineyards there, in 10 years' time it's going to be houses, swimming pools and so on. Like I said to all the growers, it's either ourselves or it's done; you will never see vineyards there again. If we are successful, I think many others will follow us."

The Latour style was created by Louis-Fabrice's great-grandfather in the 1920s. The reds aimed for finesse and elegance, while the whites embodied richness, wrapped in toasty oak.

But during the past 15 to 20 years, Latour has made some adjustments, seeking greater concentration in the reds without sacrificing purity, and more elegant whites.

"I don't want to be the last one to harvest the hill of Corton," says Latour. "I don't want to make wine at 14.5 to 15 [percent] alcohol. I think what I have done over the years—it's a small evolution, and I've done it with [technical director] Boris [Champy]—I think we have made more balanced wines."

Jean-Charles Thomas, who joined the team in 1995, became winemaker in 2005. After former director Denis Fetzman retired in 2012, Latour hired Boris Champy, who previously made wine at Dominus in Napa Valley. With Champy tweaking the vineyards, and Thomas in the cellar, Latour has adapted to the recent warmer vintages in Burgundy.

The reds see a bit more extraction than they did 15 to 20 years ago and a longer *cuvaison* of 16 to 18 days, more new oak and less racking (moving the wine from barrel to barrel), with lower alcohol and higher acidity. "We have been of the school of finesse—my father, my grandfather were like that—but I feel we have sometimes been too light, the color was not dark enough, we didn't have the techniques, and the '70s was the worst decade for Burgundy."

One thing that hasn't changed is the flash-pasteurization of the reds just before bottling. This kills bacteria and spoilage yeasts, and as a result, the reds are not fined, only lightly filtered. Critics claim this was the cause of the pale-colored reds of a generation ago and that the wines don't age well. However, a tasting of Corton Château Corton Grancey 1959 and 1990 in February 2016, as well as other samplings of Latour *grands crus* from older vintages over the years, dispels this notion. Since the wines don't seem to suffer from the practice, Latour sees no reason to change it.

The whites have changed less, aiming in the direction of elegance, finesse and more expression of mineral primarily by harvesting slightly earlier to preserve the acidity and by keeping yields lower than the maximums allowed. Thomas revealed last January that Latour was purchasing more fruit and doing its own vinifications. This allows him to keep more lees in the young wine to protect against oxidation. Buying juice or wine from growers, there is less control.

"My big fight with the growers is, when you give me the must, give me the lees with it," states Latour. "I think the lees give good

Three generations, in 2002—Louis-Fabrice, his son Louis VIII and the boy's grandfather, Louis VI, in Aloxe-Corton, the village where Domaine Latour was founded in 1797.

protection against premox [premature oxidation], but it's not always easy to get the lees."

Like many others in the region, Latour practices sustainable farming and performs a strict selection of grapes at harvest in order to vinify healthier fruit. "People say Burgundy is back, they improved quality; yes, but we are also spoiled. Global warming has been a good thing. So it's easier to do a longer *cuvaison*. Now, when we extract, we don't extract rot or anything bad; everything is healthy," he explains.

"For me, the most important thing is to have a style of wine that [we] and the customers recognize and identify with," he concludes. "So I don't want to make a red of 15 [percent] alcohol, overextracted, and another wine which is lighter in style, with finesse, and another only with fruit—I don't like that. I like in a given vintage to have an identifiable style, from Cuvée Latour to Romanée-St.-Vivant. Customers criticize us when it's not Maison Latour wine."

In addition to running his family's wine business, Louis-Fabrice represents various Burgundy and French interests through participation in different associations. Currently, he sits as president of the Bureau Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bourgogne (BIVB), a two-year term.

His role gives him broad perspective on the business of Burgundy, and he is concerned. First, about an ongoing crisis of production. Old vines, disease pressure and difficult vintages have led to small yields, especially for Pinot Noir. He points out that in the past decade, production of white wines went up 203 percent; red-wine production went down 20 percent.

"It's a crisis for the region," he says. "This is why I don't want to go too far into bio [organic]; we need to produce some decent-sized crops. Otherwise, the economic system will vanish overnight."

The other problem is prices—of both vineyards and wines.

"We are becoming so expensive, we are losing the restaurant business," he argues. "So we are only going to private cellars, people who don't always drink the wines. I said to the BIVB, we're going to lose the bulk of our business, which is the restaurant. And when a recession comes, once we have done that, we are done.

"To have a diversified market worldwide in terms of countries, prices expensive or not so expensive, to survive we have to spread out the risks."

Louis-Fabrice, like his father, has been successful in spreading the risks for Maison Louis Latour. The Auxois wines, like the Ardèche wines before them, are finding a new generation of *branchés* ("hipster") wine-drinkers in France. If he can achieve similar results from Pierres Dorées, the future of the house looks even brighter. A traditional domaine allied with an innovative négociant business has given Latour a winning combination. □