

Business Day, 15 April 2016

The past few weeks have seen the death of two major figures in the world of wine: Paul Pontallier, who directed and managed Chateau Margaux since 1983 and Louis Latour, erstwhile president and tenth generation head of the eponymous French winery. I knew both of them for many years, the former as a friend and colleague, the latter as the head of the Burgundy landowning and negociant business I have dealt with since 1980.

Louis Latour hosted me to lunch on the occasion of my first visit to their cellars. The wines he served that day were simply extraordinary: a 1959 Corton Charlemagne (which began for me a lifelong and ruinous love affair with the appellation) and a 1923 Chateau Corton Grancey, assembled from the family's Grand Cru domaines on the hill of Corton. Our interaction then, and on all subsequent occasions, was conducted in French of the most formal kind. While he always chatted politely about the market, or about South Africa, he seemed a somewhat inaccessible figure. Only after he retired in 1998 and published a monumental and scholarly history of Burgundy spanning two thousand years did I realise that his interests had been far wider than the day-to-day management of the business and its extensive vineyard holdings.

This wasn't the only surprising revelation: the other was a late discovery that he spoke perfect English. At a dinner to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of the family business, his clearly inebriated (UK-born) Hong Kong importer made an informal and ill-considered speech in the midst of proceedings. Louis responded graciously and, to my astonishment, in immaculate English. He wrapped up his remarks with a finely judged killer shot. He thanked his guest for having come from Hong Kong just ahead of the Union Jack being lowered for there the last time and wished him a safe trip back for "what you English like to call 'ze hand-over."

Paul Pontallier was my contemporary, and our relationship was altogether less formal. We met 25 years ago as guest speakers at a symposium organised by Stellenbosch Farmers Winery and the Cape Wine Academy and we immediately became friends. He had been appointed *Directeur* of Chateau Margaux eight years before, at the age of 27, only a few years after the Mentzelopoulos family had acquired the legendary (but grievously run-down) estate. He directed its renewal with energy and focus, so that in very little time it was restored to its rightful place at the top of the Bordeaux hierarchy.

He was a modernist with great respect for the traditional - providing the past could be justified on grounds of functionality. He was constantly assessing every element in the long value chain which goes into producing a First Growth. Each vineyard block, the varieties planted on it, the optimum vine age for that block, the choice of yeast, how best to concentrate the must (if required), the shape of the vat in which the wine is fermented, the number of rackings, even the closure: nothing was sacred until it had been scrutinised and systematically tested. Under his direction the wines retained their purity of expression: "Ponty" never betrayed the terroir for a higher Robert Parker score.

Paul had been the consultant at Plaisir de Merle in Paarl when the estate was re-launched in the early 1990s. I was instrumental in bringing him back to South Africa a couple of times since then. He was supposed to have been one of our international judges at this year's Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show in early May. He had made the commitment a year ago, in anticipation of a less pressured work load as he approached 60. He never even reached that milestone. He once said to me over a bottle of the legendary 1959 Chateau Margaux that he hoped that he would leave behind wines which would offer drinkers the same kind of pleasure at the same kind of age. His greatest vintages are already a monument to this objective.

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