

Les Wineries du Rhône

Lavau



PORTRAIT —

THE LAVAU BROTHERS

Frédéric and Benoit Lavau have gone from bulk négociants to being growers, winemakers, merchants, bulk brokers and bottlers. And all to show the rest of the world that négociants really can do it all, and do it as well as everyone else.

In the vanguard

When Jean-Guy and Anne-Marie Lavau left Tunisia to set up as winemakers in Vaucluse, everyone told them there was no future in it. That was 1965. At that time, it looked as if the warnings may be justified, what with cooperative cellars on the one hand and the proliferation of privately-owned wineries on the other. But the Lavaus had the courage of their convictions and despite the warnings, they began to buy in wines, blend them and sell them on as bulk. In 1994 the law authorised vinification by a third party; the Lavaus were the first in the Rhône Valley to take advantage of the new law, and still remain one of very few businesses across France to do this. “We always felt we were in the vanguard,” says Frédéric, who took over the business from his parents in January 2000 with his brother Benoit.

Serving others

The 1990s were all about keeping costs down. People wondered if there was any advantage to buying wine from a bulk

négociant rather than a grower/producer. So the brothers began to focus more on vinification and less on trading, finding there was demand from winegrowers for an alternative to the cooperative cellar/private winery model.

Frédéric and Benoit offered a range of services, for example providing harvest bins for their partner winegrowers, and transporting grapes from vineyard to winery. They now have 357 partners bringing grapes to Maison Lavau, from Montélimar to Lançon-de-Provence, from Apt to Béziers. Over the years they’ve built up a community, meeting every year for a meal to celebrate the harvests. “We want our growers to be comfortable with us,” explains Frédéric. We meet a few times a year, and they know they can call on us at any time for advice. We’ve got a good connection going.”

Putting a name to the label

The next step for Maison Lavau was to build a new vinification site, which they did in Violès after the high-yielding 1998 harvest almost overloaded their existing cellars. Two more major developments followed: the first in 2009 with the launch of the Lavau wine brand, extending the scope of the business to include bottling and sales, and the second **in 2010, when the brothers bridged the gap between the ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ sides of the business by purchasing a wine estate.** Seven years later, despite a very positive reception by the international press, Frédéric and Benoit still feel like newcomers. “We’ve started to make plot selections, age our wines and blend and bottle them. We’re trying to understand what customers might want from a new Rhône Valley Winery when there are already so many out there,” explains Frédéric. We’re trying to create something different, delivering quality at value-for-money prices.” What we’ve got isn’t perfect, but it gives us a base from which to grow.

Bénédicte Bonnet (left) and Frédéric Lavau (right), Managing Directors, and Benoit Lavau (centre), CEO



Established in 1965

Employees: 17

Sales: 115,132 hl

Turnover 2016: €18 million, including €7 million to export

Brands include: Château Maucoil, Lavau, Envyfol and Innocent 6



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Out with the old

Lavau sell over half of their production outside France, and the brothers travel a lot to places where the usual French wrangling about wine is meaningless. “We’re the only country in the world who thinks that to be popular with customers you have to have the word *Domaine* or *Château* in your name, and that the wine has to be *Domaine-* or *Château-*bottled. That’s so obsolete in the 21st century,” says Frédéric. He prefers to emphasise the two essential points all French wines share: firstly, the **relationship with terroir; an almost emotional bond which winemakers speak of with passion** and which explains the importance of protecting the appellations; and secondly – the French simply love what they do.”



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