

When Philippe Baijot took over as chairman in 2006, Champagne Lanson was just a shell of its former self. This house had been sold in December 1990 to LVMH, which immediately stripped it of its 208ha (514 acres) of viticultural assets and, just four months later, sold off its premises and stock with the brand name to Marne et Champagne. LVMH cannot be blamed, as this is typical of the cyclical existence of Champagne and is precisely how Victor and Henri Lanson built up their own family estate in the 1930s.

Prior to Lanson's acquisition, Marne et Champagne had grown to become the second-largest producer in Champagne under its founder Gaston Burtin, whose company would tick over on sales spread over 200 relatively small and unheard of brands, while the bulk of its massive stocks were used by other Champagne houses as the industry's unofficial "life-support system" (aka *sur lattes*). This made it an extremely lucrative business.

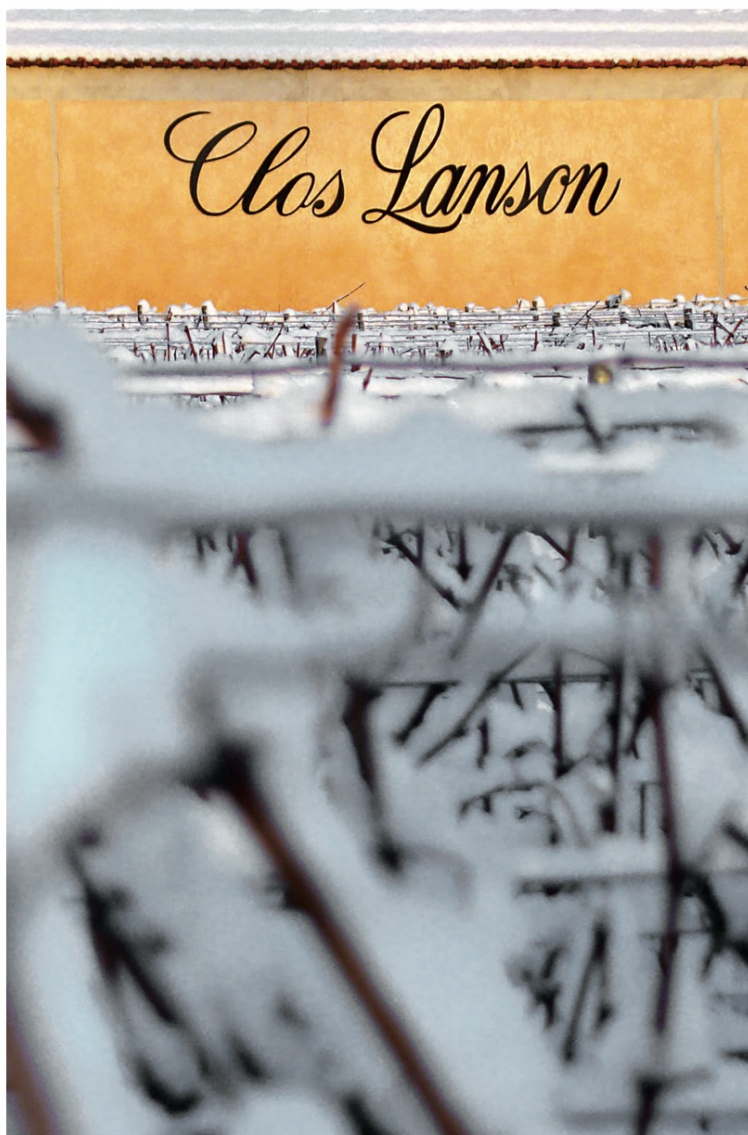
Burtin would never have dreamed of owning anything as high profile as a *grande marque* house, but by 1991 he had relinquished control of his business to his niece Marie-Laurence and her husband, François-Xavier Mora. They not only adopted the opposite strategy to Burtin but also purchased Lanson at the top of the market with the aid of a crippling bank loan. When the level of debt forced the couple to sell in 2006, they had to dispose not only of Lanson but Marne et Champagne as well. After paying off their debts M and Mme Mora were left with less than €60 million, despite having inherited a business conservatively estimated to be worth \$645 million in 1990.

Baijot had no intention of following their example—he was far too canny a businessman for that, not least because he had learned from the best. It is no coincidence that when I first met Baijot in March 1980, it was at Marne et Champagne, where he introduced me to his mentor, the wily old Gaston Burtin. And it is no coincidence that when I first met Baijot's future business partner Bruno Paillard, it was in the same room next to Burtin, as Paillard was Burtin's export consultant at the time. So, was it any coincidence that in 2006, when

Right: Clos Lanson sees snow in winter, but its high walls make it 1.5°C (2.7°F) warmer than the surrounding area.

Clos Lanson 2006–2014: Behind *clos* doors

After ten years in the making,
Tom Stevenson reveals Lanson's
gastronomic new single-vineyard blanc
de blancs prestige cuvée, "the perfect
expression of a uniformity of differences"



All photography courtesy of Lanson

the opportunity arose to purchase Marne et Champagne, which by then had been rather ostentatiously renamed Lanson International and was still saddled with \$400 million debt, it was Baijot and Paillard who stepped forward? I don't think so. I think it was personal.

Baijot and Paillard owned BCC, the fastest-growing group in Champagne. They were hard-nosed businessmen and would not make any decision without solid commercial reasoning, but they are also not without soul, and I think their shared history at Marne et Champagne played a part. Once they could justify the deal on pure business grounds, I think they were determined to pull the ailing business back from the brink as a mark of respect for their old mentor Burtin. There was also a bit of machismo involved. Many of their peers reckoned they had bitten off more than they could chew, but Baijot and Paillard were out to prove them wrong.

To do that, however, meant restoring Lanson to its former glory, and apart from a treasure trove of mature magnums stashed away in its cellars, Baijot had little very little with which to achieve this. In fact, he had just two assets going for him: Jean-Paul Gandon, Lanson's long-standing *chef de cave*; and the solitary vineyard that LVMH was unable to confiscate—a small plot of vines within the walled garden of Maison Lanson itself.

If the Moras had done anything right, it was keeping Gandon on, because he was the only physical link to the Lanson style and quality. It might seem a tall task to expect someone who once had 208ha at his disposal to replicate the same Champagne from 100 percent purchased grapes, but Gandon was uniquely placed to accomplish this. When he joined the

company in 1972, it was on the viticultural side. He was Lanson's vineyard manager long before he was appointed its *chef de cave* in 1986. Gandon came from an ancient vine-growing family in the Loire and just loved his additional duties under the Moras, who expected him to be in the vineyards much of the time. His task was to improve long-term relations with growers and to help them raise standards. He always claimed that although sourcing Lanson's entire production through grape purchases made the *assemblage* more complex, it also gave him greater options. In fact, there was little difference for the bulk of Lanson's production because Black Label, like most *grande marque* Non-Vintage cuvées, had always been constructed primarily from purchased grapes. The only Lanson cuvées that regularly depended almost exclusively on Lanson's own vineyards were its Vintage cuvées, and having followed all of those, I can honestly say that Gandon failed to achieve his goal in only one vintage. Lanson 1993 was not a failure per se; it was just not Lanson. Indeed, it was, and still is, quite a remarkable wine in an extraordinarily fruity sense; strangely after 23 years, the fruit is as impervious as ever. It is not a great classic or indeed a great anything, but it is always worth opening.

Baijot also kept Gandon on. Time, however, was catching up, and Gandon wanted to wind down, so they both agreed on his likely successor, Hervé Dantan, who took over in 2015, after two years working as Gandon's assistant. Gandon had served Lanson for a remarkable 43 years.

Ten years in the making

Rewind to 2006, when Baijot became chairman of Champagne Lanson. On

seeing the walled garden planted with Chardonnay, he asked Gandon what happened to the grapes and was told that they went into the Gold Label Vintage. Baijot wondered whether the *clos* would be worth vinifying on its own. *Perhaps... probably...* Gandon guessed. Baijot made an instant decision to vinify separately, Gandon decided to vinify in wood, and it was such a success that it has been repeated every year since. Ten years later, that first vintage is just about to be released, such is the lead time required for the development of a truly special deluxe Champagne.

The Clos Lanson vineyard is precisely 1ha (2.47 acres) in size, exclusively planted with Chardonnay, 50 ares in 1965 and 50 ares in 1980. On both of these occasions, the Chardonnay vinestock used was massal selection from Lanson's best vineyard in Avize. All vines are grafted onto 41B rootstock.

Walk through Clos Lanson, and you really do feel the "*clos* effect." In fact, the only *clos* with more "*clos* effect" I have ever come across in Champagne is Krug's Clos du Mesnil. I have no data to back that up, it's just the feeling I get, but it is not an unreasonable one, since both Clos du Mesnil and Clos Lanson are relatively compact and benefit from double insolation: the high, wide walls of each *clos* itself and the fact that they are both encompassed by the intrinsic warmth of a built-up area. At Clos Lanson, this results in a 2.7°F (1.5°C) increase in temperature over the immediate surrounding area.

Clos Lanson

The soil is extremely homogenous, with a top soil that is 10 inches (25cm) deep and very chalky, a pH of 8.4, total lime content of 20.4 percent, and an active lime content of 9.8 percent over a pure chalk subsoil. Part of the vineyard is shaded by trees on the left in the early morning and the right in the late afternoon, cumulatively delaying the ripening of two ares by up to one week. The little well in the center of the rows is for ventilation of the cellars, but also contains a genomic musical box, which supposedly helps combat wood diseases through the "sound protein" (conversion of amino acid sequencing into a musical sound).

One of the most fascinating aspects of Clos Lanson is the influence of

| Year | ABV | Acidity (H ₂ SO ₄) | Acidity (tartaric) | pH | Days |
|------|---------|---|--------------------|--------|------|
| 2015 | 11.06 | 6.10 | 9.38 | 3.19 | 7 |
| 2015 | 11.00 ▼ | 6.15 ▲ | 9.46 ▲ | 3.17 ▼ | |
| 2014 | 10.78 | 7.70 | 11.85 | 3.07 | 4 |
| 2014 | 11.00 ▲ | 7.60 ▼ | 11.69 ▼ | 3.08 ▲ | |
| 2013 | 10.83 | 8.20 | 12.62 | 3.00 | 6 |
| 2013 | 10.80 ▼ | 8.05 ▼ | 12.38 ▼ | 3.01 ▼ | |
| 2012 | 10.80 | 7.80 | 12.00 | 3.10 | 3 |
| 2012 | 10.70 ▼ | 7.95 ▲ | 12.23 ▲ | 3.08 ▼ | |

its mature trees, as illustrated in the photograph (*right*). If we look at a simple analysis of the grapes harvested at the *clos* over the past four years and compare the bulk of the harvest to the two *ares* that are harvested later, we can see how the shadowing not only delays the harvesting but also affects the ripening process (see *table, previous page*). There is no set pattern, such as higher acidity and lower pH for roughly the same potential alcohol. Sometimes that is how it works, but sometimes not. It all depends on the weather. The *clos* offers a significant degree of protection, but it is not completely closed to the elements. After the main harvest, some years can be hotter than others, thus the shaded vines require only three or four days to catch up, but even that is too simplistic. A rise in temperature is not linear. Nor does it occur in isolation from other meteorological influences. In fact, it is the very unpredictability of this annual variation that makes it part of the true expression of Clos Lanson.

Vinification

All the wines undergo first fermentation in approximately 40 barrels, half in Seguin Moreau BGC 225-liter barriques made from Allier oak, and half in Tonnellerie Artisanale 300-liter barriques made from Argonne oak from the north of Champagne.

Chef de cave

When Hervé Dantan took over as *chef de cave* after two years assisting Jean-Paul Gandon, he had a relatively easy time compared to his predecessor. Gandon had spent 43 years working for Lanson, and for a large chunk of that he was refining his grape supplies to meet the demands of a *grande marque* that had been robbed of its vineyards. By the time Dantan arrived, the new owners, BCC, had endowed Lanson with 55ha (136 acres) of the 120ha (300 acres) it owned. Although Gandon enjoyed greater options through buying far and wide, even he would admit to preferring his own vineyards. There is one very simple reason why Champagne producers prefer their own vineyards, above and beyond any consideration of quality, and that is increased profitability, though this aspect is seldom discussed. Grapes in Champagne are artificially high in price, due to the old fixed-price contract system



that was dismantled in the early 1990s. It would be impossible to drop grape prices at this late stage. In fact, prices continue to creep up, although they have temporarily stabilized over the past two harvests (2014 and 2015). The crucial point is that if you grow your own, they cost a fraction of the current selling price, so the more vineyards you have, the less you pay for raw materials and the greater your profit margin. For Dantan, 55ha is a drop in the ocean compared to the 500ha (1,235 acres) he needs in total every year, but it does make it easier for him to operate profitably than it had been for Gandon between 1990 and 2006.

Dantan also benefits from a brand new €14-million winery, equipped with both stainless steel and oak, and he is less dogmatic in his winemaking philosophy than Gandon. The oak is a combination of *fûts* and *foudres*, and the oak-aged reserves he is accumulating will help him

reverse-engineer some creaminess in his stainless-steel fermented, non-malolactic Champagnes. Dantan has also spoken intelligently about the use of malolactic for the Black Label (but not any of the Vintage cuvées). Until his arrival, this was a big no-no, but he believes that in some years as much as 20–25 percent of future Non-Vintage blends might undergo malolactic. I was relieved to hear, however, that this would just be for Black Label, not vintaged Lanson or deluxe cuvées. Malolactic is the great leveler of Vintage cuvées, typically bringing the total acidity in Champagne down to just 4.3g/l expressed as sulfuric or 6.6g/l expressed as tartaric. Most producers use malolactic either fully or partially, and they can produce some stunning Champagnes, but the differences between the spikes of their vintages are smaller than when the malolactic has been blocked. Stocks of Lanson Gold Label thus comprise one of the few libraries where it is possible to assess each and every vintage in its naked form.

Above: The shade effect of trees, which delays the ripening of the affected vines by up to one week.

A NEW GASTRONOMIC CUVÉE

I have been following Clos Lanson for a number of years, but a couple of years ago I had tasted only the first vintage (2006), and even that on only a few occasions. It was not until 2014 that I tasted a full vertical of Clos Lanson, and I repeated the experience in February of this year.

2015 vins clairs

So dominated by the first fermentation that it still has a distinct banana-bubblegum and oak aroma. The amylic aroma will soon dissipate and the oak melt away in Clos Lanson as it ages, so this is as expected for a wine that has not even had the benefit of a second fermentation. It has extraordinary concentration of fruit on the mid-palate and is so pure, so long, and so piercing, yet creamy on the finish. Great acids for 2015. Too unready to score sensibly.

2014 sur pointe

The cordon on this was the best of all the vintages, but that is a common phenomenon of a very young, unready Champagne. Extremely floral with fine, biting acidity. Oak again noticeable, especially as the wine warms in the glass. This was so impressive as a *vin clair*, when it was elegant and supremely well knit together with beautifully integrated acidity and a very pure, long, tapering finish. Too unready to score sensibly.

2013 sur pointe

Extremely floral on the nose, with lovely fresh, vital fruit on the palate—and surprisingly long, considering how short this finished in 2014, when it had very little aftertaste. Zesty and flinty. Shows why it can be wrong to judge too early.

2012 sur pointe

Sulfidic aromas coming to the fore on the nose but holding back on entry and early middle palate, before it all comes tumbling out, yet with the clear impression there is a lot more to come. This great vintage also showed exceptionally well in 2014, when there was an impressive concentration and a sweetness, with stone fruits and some citrus. The vitality and energy come through now, just as they did in 2014. No problem making a judgment call on this, which will be one of the very greatest Clos Lanson vintages.

2011 sur pointe

Not as precise as other Clos Lanson vintages, with a slightly exotic touch to the fruit, which has a graphite aftertaste. Not classic, chunky, with an almost chemical aftertaste. In 2014, it was also chunky, albeit rich and chunky, with minerality at the edges, and it came out a bit more in the glass as the CO₂ dissipated, revealing complex silex flavors. I've seen worse turn into great Champagnes, so I will give the 2011 the benefit of the doubt for now and wait to see how it turns out.

2010 sur pointe

Not a favorite vintage, but that was due more to rot in the Pinot, and some excellent Chardonnay Champagnes were made, so I did not approach this with any undue prejudice and was initially impressed by its rich, vanilla-infused fruit, albeit a bit chunky at first. The chunkiness evaporated as it warmed in the glass, when it also picked up some black-fruit aromas. In 2014, it was much more impressive, with lovely, fresh autolytic vanilla, sweet-ripe fruit, white fruit, white peach, and fine minerality on the finish, none of which came to the fore when tasted in 2016. Too unready to score sensibly.

2009 sur pointe

This is gorgeous. No other word for it. I loved it in 2014, and I love it even more now. It tastes almost sweet. Lovely, seductive, great finesse and great

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length. This is precisely the type of Champagne that develops a beautifully long, tapering finish, with delicate notes of coffee on the aftertaste. It was crying out to be disgorged in 2014, when it was so creamy, rich, and ready, and it is still crying out to disgorge now. Hervé, Philippe: Please disgorge a case for me now so that I can buy it with a case when it is commercially disgorged! There can be no doubt, this is one of the very greatest Clos Lanson vintages.

2008 sur pointe

It is very interesting how this has developed. In 2014 it was a classic 2008, with firm, young, almost Mesnil-like potential complexity, promising creamy walnuts and awesome minerality. In 2016 the nose took a dive initially before coming out in the glass, with the palate getting richer and more impressive by the minute. This is already a Champagne of great depth, great length, and great minerality, yet unlike the 2009 it is many years away from being ready for disgorgement. Another of the very greatest Clos Lanson vintages!

2007 sur pointe

In 2014 this was chock-a-block full of autolysis, simply bursting with floral acacia on the nose and in the fruit, which also had a certain soft

gumminess to it, whereas in 2016 a minerality was developing. Not great minerality, but certainly noticeable compared to how it was. And thank goodness for Lanson's non-malolactic philosophy, because without its boost to the acidity, the fruit would have been too soft and discreet. These are more points of development and comparison than of intrinsic quality, which should turn out to be at least as high as for the 2006.

2006 sur pointe

In the *sur pointe* form, this wine shows a creamy, gum arabic fruitiness that is very fresh, crisp, and long, with relatively low acids that make it ripe for disgorgement. In 2014 it was still bursting with autolytic aromas, very rich, with low acids, making it almost fat on the palate, with plump, yellow fruits dominating. It appeared to be ready for disgorgement, but neither of the two trial disgorgements I tasted (both disgorged in September 2013, both dosaged with 3g of residual sugar, one with a 2008-based *liqueur*, the other with a 2009-based *liqueur*) were anywhere near ready for launching, requiring significant post-disgorgement aging prior to shipment.

Clos Lanson 2006 (disgorged December 2014, 3g/l dosage)

Straight from a chilled bottle; the nose could be more vivacious, but it comes out in the glass, as does the palate, which is gentle, rich, and luscious, with creamy-walnutty bottle aromas just beginning to build their complexity. The only problem is that by the time this has evolved in the glass, the wine is not only too warm, it has lost its mousse. Ideally, the 2006 needs another year of perfect cellaring (goodness knows how long the 2008 and 2012 will need!), but I found a good work-around for any bottles you want to open before you have laid them down: Pour a small amount (just 15–20 percent of the total you intended to pour in each glass) 10 minutes in advance, then top up with thoroughly chilled wine immediately before serving. This both drops the overall temperature and coaxes out the aromatics, while retaining the mousse. This is a great Champagne but only a good Clos Lanson! | 91

Conclusion

From the genesis of Baijot's idea, and thanks to the efforts of two *chefs de caves* and the 10 years it has had in the making, the result in the glass is most definitely a gastronomic cuvée. It is a very slow-developing Champagne that not only needs time on lees to express its origin but also evolves at a glacial pace after disgorgement, which must be good news for both collectors and restaurants, since they can cellar it without worry.

That the first two vintages are not generally the best in the region should actually work in Clos Lanson's favor, because it illustrates the single-vineyard phenomenon. For any Champagne made by one producer from one grape variety grown in one vineyard, we should expect different vintages to make their mark, as indeed they have. As this vertical has demonstrated, Clos Lanson is the perfect expression of a uniformity of differences.