

# Les Wineries du Rhône

**Tardieu Laurent**



PORTRAIT —

## SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED

An overwhelming passion for wine led Michel Tardieu to leave his career in the public sector at the age of 40 and start up his own négociant business. It was a good move: Maison Tardieu Laurent is now one of the leading micro-négociants in the Rhône Valley. At least, that's what Bettane and Desseauve say.

Michel Tardieu and Dominique Laurent set up their Rhône Valley négociant business in 1994, modelling it on those operating in Burgundy; the difference was that Burgundian négociants became involved in the winemaking/winegrowing process far earlier than local négociants did. They took an interest in the grapes well before they were harvested, oversaw vinification, delivered their barrels to the properties they worked with, and had endless discussions with the vignerons about potential improvements – the way wines were transferred to barrels, for instance, and how they were handled and aged. “We did it all out of our sheer passion for wine,” says Michel. “We were sure there was a niche out there for a more specialised kind of négociant. At the time, we were quite the trailblazers.”

### Taking control

Maison Tardieu Laurent distribute over 500 barrels a year to wine estates throughout the Rhône Valley. All wine is returned in

these barrels – none ever travels in a tanker. At the end of fermentation, when the wine is at its most fragile, it is transferred to the safety of the Maison's barrels, and from then on, is handled as little as possible. “The best way to age wine is not to age it,” says Michel. “We limit intervention as much as possible. We avoid unnecessary racking, and reduce sulphites to a bare minimum. We like to have complete control over the process. If we didn't start work until, say, January or February, when malolactic fermentation is over, we'd still have a wine made by the estate owner, but it wouldn't have our personal stamp on it.”

In 1994, Michel and Dominique made a modest 9,000 bottles of wine, from a dozen or so appellations. The following year, they doubled that. Wine Spectator voted theirs the best Rhône wine of 1995, and devoted three entire pages to their work. It was just the boost they needed to set them on the right track.

### Good connections

Since then, Michel has been joined by his son Bastien, a fully qualified oenologist. The pair spend their days in the cellars, while Michel's wife Michèle and their daughter Camille manage the business. The family have formed a number of new partnerships, including with the EPI Group, who own Charles Heidsieck and Piper Heidsieck Champagne. It has given the business fresh impetus. “Mind you, we're talking about 1,000 to 2,000 extra bottles per appellation, not 10,000,” says Michel. “And we've reduced our exports a little – they accounted for 60% of sales – to make more product available to the domestic market.”

### Cultivating taste

Appreciation of fine terroirs is a distinctive feature of Maison Tardieu-Laurent. 90% of their Saint Josephs are sourced from Chavanay, Sainte-Epine, Mauves, Tournon and Saint-Jean-de-Muzols; in

Camille, Michel and Bastien Tardieu



**Established 1996**  
8 employees  
2018 turnover: €3.4 million, 60% of which from export.



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Sainte-Epine, some of the vines are over 100 years old. “You learn about wine by drinking good wine, and especially by visiting wine estates. It's the best education you can get. You need to open a few bottles and talk to some good winemakers,” says Michel. “Because how can you be sure Hermitage is your favourite if you've never tasted La Chappelle?”

### Stronger, not bigger

Rhône wines are currently riding high, particularly those from the North. If they tripled their output they would still sell. But that doesn't tie in with Maison Tardieu Laurent's philosophy of careful, rigorous selection. “Our production facilities are small. We plan to extend the winery, but only to improve our products, although ultimately, we might make a little bit more. We produce very few bottles, but it keeps the business sustainable. We've never aspired to be market leaders; we just want to do our best. That's what Tardieu Laurent is all about.”



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