



CHAMPAGNE J. LASSALLE

— PROPRIÉTAIRE DE VIGNOBLES —

ANGÉLINE TEMPLIER-LASSALLE'S FEMALE-RUN CHAMPAGNE HOUSE IN CHIGNY-LES-ROSES

By Adam Thomson

French winemaker on the importance of tradition and how three generations of women left a legacy in a male-dominated industry.

When she returned to her childhood home in Chigny-les-Roses, France, eight years ago to run the champagne house founded by her grandfather in 1942, Angéline Templier-Lassalle made a few changes. One of them was to order new fermentation tanks designed for women: their doors are positioned lower than normal and the locking mechanism requires less force to operate than those used on standard tanks.

“Most of the year, there are just four of us here so I have to do quite a lot of the work myself,” says Templier-Lassalle, 36.

Another innovation was to build a modern tasting room – complete with black leather sofas – on the top floor of the winery, built in a wing of the family house that used to be stables.

In Chigny-les-Roses, there are just 500 inhabitants but over 30 wine producers. Templier-Lassalle's house is located on the fringes of the village, a cluster of mainly whitewashed houses with red-tiled roofs and narrow, winding roads set among gently rolling hills planted with vineyards.

Apart from these adaptations, things have changed little at J Lassalle, a small but distinguished champagne house that has been run for over three decades by women – first by Chantal, Templier-Lassalle's mother, and now by Templier-Lassalle herself. Olga, her 94-year-old grandmother and the wife of founder Jules Lassalle, has also played an active role in the business since her husband died. And with Grace, Templier-Lassalle's two-year-old daughter, growing up on site, there is now the possibility of a fourth-generation female owner.



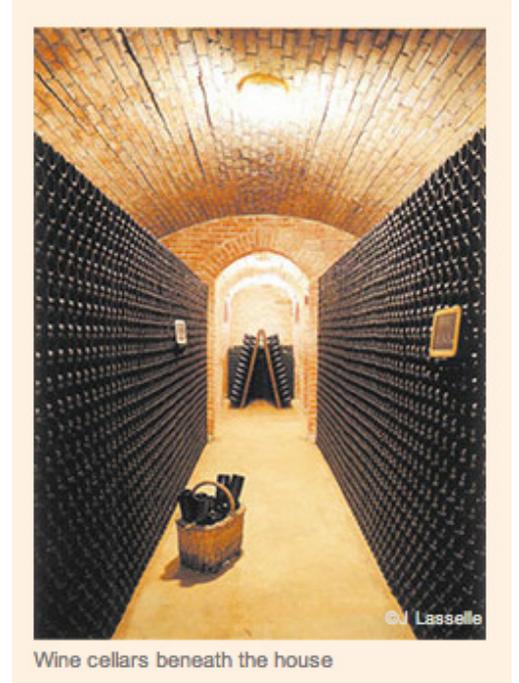
Angéline Templier-Lassalle, whose grandfather founded J. Lassalle in 1942

The house still makes the same five cuvées – three of them vintage and one named “Angéline” – that Lassalle created before his death in 1982. It also makes them in much the same way. J Lassalle, for example, is the biggest wine producer in Chigny-les-Roses but still handpicks its grapes and has been using the same 4,000kg-capacity grape press since 1956.

In addition, J Lassalle never buys grapes or juice from any other producer. The 100,000 or so bottles it makes every year come exclusively from its 11.5 hectares of premier cru land – all within a 10km radius of the family house and winery. And unlike the more common co-operative style of production – in which growers pool their grapes and make their champagne at a shared facility – J Lassalle produces its own champagne on site.



Living room with fireplace



Wine cellars beneath the house

Then there is the ageing. French law requires producers to keep champagne for 15 months before selling it. Templier-Lassalle keeps it for four years. Vintage champagne has to be kept for a minimum of four years before selling. Templier-Lassalle keeps her vintage cuvées for between six and 10 years. “We want to sell the wine when it is ready, not when we are allowed to,” she says.

Put all this together and the result is a marriage of fine methods and attention to detail guided at every stage by a respect for tradition. It is, as Templier-Lassalle describes the business today, much the same as her grandfather did things. “I want to maintain the traditional way of making champagne,” she says. “Our reputation is based on the quality of the product and I don’t want to do anything to change that.”

Tradition is also on display in the family living room, a space separated by a modest set of French doors from the whitewashed courtyard of the early 20th-century house that Templier-Lassalle grew up in. The house dominates her childhood memories, which centre on family gatherings in the living room, drives through the vineyard with her grandfather, and helping her mother to cook the dinner. Education was very important, she says, and her mother raised her with a clear understanding of the need to work hard and to obey the house rules. There was a lot of discipline and not much television.

A three-piece sofa set made of heavy wood and upholstered in a dark paisley-style cloth is arranged on a spotless floor of small, matchbox-sized beige tiles. The white walls are finished in textured plaster, while rustic wooden beams, ornamental not load-bearing, run across a low ceiling.

The decoration is charmingly unsophisticated. An embroidered scene on one wall shows a peasant girl knitting while a mischievous kitten stretches out a paw to play with the wool. There is a brass bed-warming pan propped in the corner – the sort you would expect to see on the wall of an English country pub. Another corner is home to a vase with an arrangement of red and yellow plastic tulips.

Beyond a modest-sized, flatscreen television and accompanying video player, everything is probably just as it was when her grandfather was still alive. It is a reminder that at J Lassalle hard work and meticulous care take priority over keeping up with the latest trends in interior design.



Vats for one of J Lassalle's cuvées

Joining the family business was not automatic for Templier-Lassalle. Women have played an important role in the history of champagne, and there are multiple examples of women – many of them widows, such as Madame Clicquot at Veuve Clicquot – who have successfully run entire businesses. But Templier-Lassalle saw how hard her mother had to work to consolidate J Lassalle in what was then still a highly male-dominated industry.

“Now women are respected and more women are working in the industry, but it was not easy for my mother,” says Templier-Lassalle. “I wasn’t sure if I had the same passion that she needed to succeed.”

Today, after attending business school in Paris for five years and gaining work experience in the distribution side of the industry, she has ambitions to take J Lassalle to a new level. Thanks to a longstanding relationship with Kermit Lynch, the California-based wine importer, J Lassalle sells 34 per cent of its production in the US. Russia accounts for another 20 per cent. In France sales are only about 15 per cent of the total – something Templier-Lassalle wants to change. As she puts it, “I want to be more famous in France”.

A first step towards achieving that goal came last year when the family bought an additional four hectares of premier cru land to increase its total to 15.5 hectares – a little under half Pinot Meunier and the rest a split of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

The increased production will allow Templier-Lassalle to sell more of her product domestically, a market that she says has long been dominated by large producers but where she also detects a younger clientele more willing to explore boutique champagne.

Beyond the expanded production and a bigger marketing push, the chances are that, if he were alive today, Jules Lassalle would find the business he founded 72 years ago remarkably familiar. “Most of the things we have here were installed by my grandfather,” says Templier-Lassalle. “That won’t change much in the coming years.”

Adam Thomson is the FT’s Paris correspondent



Templier-Lassalle’s favourite thing in the family room is also its centrepiece: the fireplace. “It reminds me of my family and of being together,” she says.

As she recalls happy childhood memories of the house and vineyard, her mother walks over to the hearth and throws another log on to the fire, and her grandmother walks in to join the conversation and reminisce.

The fireplace is finished in thin brown bricks and raised from the ground. Above it is a rustic-style wooden mantelpiece that displays several trinkets. They include a couple of carved wooden figures standing about 9in tall. One of them is of a potbellied peasant wearing clogs and carrying a basket on his back filled with grapes. Next to it is a pewter tankard and a large candle decorated with grape motifs.

Templier-Lassalle says that, with the exception of the hot summer months, the fire is lit most of the year, and a bottle of champagne, to be enjoyed with family and friends, is usually never

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