



FIFTH ESTATE

After interviewing prison inmates and filming American women soldiers in Afghanistan, SASKIA DE ROTHSCHILD, a former journalist for The New York Times and still only 32, is now the head of arguably the greatest wine name on Earth, Château Lafite Rothschild. JACK SUCKLING went to Chile to meet her

Whatever I do, I get to the bottom of it," says Saskia de Rothschild. The aristocratic 32-year-old winemaker has been telling me what it's like to interview prison inmates for a month in the Ivory Coast, track down dictators in West Africa for *The New York Times* and film an investigative documentary on American women soldiers in Afghanistan. We haven't even touched on the subject of wine yet.

Of course, everyone who makes the transition into the wine world has a story to tell. Art historians become learned scholars of obscure Italian grape varieties, jaded rockers hang up their guitars to make funky Argentine Malbec. Yet this journalist-turned-winemaker happens to be taking over the reins of arguably the greatest wine estate on earth, Château Lafite Rothschild.

"Once people are aware you know what you're talking about, it's easy," she tells me, laughing, though she takes her job as the head of the famous first-growth Bordeaux and vast global wine company very seriously. "That's why I went back to education and got a Diploma in Viticulture and Oenology (Bordeaux). I needed to understand everything."

Rothschild is the youngest person currently heading a first growth. She's also the first female chairman of Domaines Barons de Rothschild (DBR), the parent company of Lafite and a host of other estates.

The famous Bordeaux Wine Official Classification of 1855 placed Lafite first out of all the region's Premier Crus, and it was among Thomas Jefferson's favourites. With origins dating back to medieval times, the chateau was purchased in 1868 by James de Rothschild. Some say it was his intention, as a member of the French side of the banking dynasty, to outdo his nephew, Nathaniel de Rothschild, who'd just bought neighbouring Mouton Rothschild, also in



FRANÇOIS POINCEY/DBR (LAFITE); MATT WILSON

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DOMAINES BARONS DE ROTHSCHILD'S LOS VASCOS ESTATE IN CHILE; SASKIA DE ROTHSCHILD; THE LAFITE WINE CELLARS IN BORDEAUX



ABOVE:
CHÂTEAU LAFITE
ROTHSCHILD
OPPOSITE:
HARVEST TIME AT
VIÑA LOS VASCOS

Bordeaux's Pauillac appellation. The two branches of the family maintain a healthy rivalry to this day.

However, we weren't meeting in the lavishly adorned drawing room that flanks the Lafite stone turret, decked out in the style of Napoleon III with red velvet chairs, wall hangings and embroidered curtains. We didn't even venture into the hallowed underground cellars, which, as Rothschild explained to me on my last visit, house what's perhaps the world's largest collection of fine Bordeaux.

No, my latest encounter with the Rothschilds unfolded against a much more low-key backdrop: Chile's Colchagua Valley. The family had invited a small group of close supporters and distributors for the 30th anniversary of their Los Vascos wine estate, which is located away from the Andes and towards the coast, some 200 kilometres southwest of Santiago. As far as I could make out, I was the only wine journalist.

Saskia and her father Eric, whom she's succeeding, seem to take a more relaxed approach in their South American hideaway, unfettered by the formalities and customs of Bordeaux. We all jump into the back of a pickup truck.

"I've never done this before," says Eric, with great excitement.

Eric, 78, is tall and slender with wispy tufts of white hair; Saskia, her grainy locks flowing, is petite but robust. She's donned a baggy beige blouse and straw hat for the soirée with designer maroon boots, exuding an air of a New York tomboy participating in a community garden in Gramercy Park, but ready to head out to a club after nightfall.

Meandering down the valley through tidy vineyards, as the sun casts long shadows against the rolling hills, we descend into what's known as a *quebrada* in Spanish, a natural ravine carved out by a stream over thousands of years. It's totally obscured from ground level. Any observer would have no idea a party and celebratory ceremony were about to begin.

"I never imagined I'd be working in the wine industry," admits Saskia as she looks out wistfully across the valley; as far as the eye can see, it's all hers – literally thousands of hectares. "I grew up mainly in Paris but would go to Bordeaux on weekends. I'd help at the winery – for example, around harvest time – but my main interest was journalism. Then, when I was working as a reporter in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, I planned a trip to come back to help with the blending. It was at that time I decided I needed to spend more time in Pauillac. I needed to understand the pruning and everything else. I wanted to go deeper into it."

Between sentences, she snaps a few photos with her Leica.

We've reached the *quebrada*. For the occasion, two long tables with candles have been drawn up in the deepest part of the depression. I've lugged my suit around South America for one month for this day, but hardly anyone's wearing a jacket or tie. It's not long before we're on our feet for the main act: a performance of Easter Island dancing. DBR CEO Jean-Guillaume Prats, formerly the chief of LVMH's wine division and now a trusted pair of hands to advise Rothschild, takes centre stage. He shakes his hips to the energetic Polynesian rhythm as vigorously as possible, vying for first place in the dancing competition. Afterwards, the lights are turned off and we watch the stars in pure darkness. The estate manager takes us through each constellation in as much detail as he would a vineyard parcel. It's all slightly surreal.

The next day takes a more official format, with Rothschild guiding us through the tasting of Los Vascos' top bottling: Le Dix. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon with Shiraz and Chile's signature Carmenere variety, the wine has been steadily improving over the years. "We can make exceptional wines at Los Vascos," she explains. "But we can always do better. We want every one of our estates from France to China to have its own identity. In Chile, we're trialling hillside vines and different rootstocks to add complexity to the wines."

The sprawling property, with around 700 hectares under vine, has had its share of ups and downs over the years. Its

buildings were heavily damaged and huge amounts of wine lost in the 2010 earthquake, while fires swept through in 2017 ravaging vineyards and woodlands alike. But the Rothschilds rebuilt and came back stronger. They introduced drip irrigation and installed detailed sensors up and down the valley for more precise water management and vine growing. Tasting through a selection of Le Dix really gives you a sense of the leap in quality from about the 2012 vintage onwards. The previously slightly herbal character dissipates and the tannins become more integrated.

Rothschild's biggest challenge, though, may be closer to home. Bordeaux's number-one market is China, where Lafite is the most revered premium wine in the land, and her company also makes table wines in the Shandong Peninsula. However, winemaking there is difficult due to humid conditions and a lack of wine culture. Moreover, less than a decade ago prices plummeted, with bottles of Lafite losing almost half their value. Macroeconomic concerns persist and the brand, long a symbol of wealth, has fallen out of favour with some younger, more cautious Chinese consumers. The rampant counterfeit market for Lafite doesn't help the situation either.

"I think the image of Bordeaux is very dusty," admits Rothschild. "We have to make it shine in a different way. While we've been out of the picture, Burgundy has got a lot of fame.

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Now we need to show that Bordeaux is about winemaking."

There's been a push at Lafite over the last few years to spray only organic fertilisers, and a number of hectares are farmed using biodynamic principles. Biodynamics, more stringent than organic methods, is an alternative philosophy that seeks to treat agriculture holistically, in tune with nature and the surroundings.

"We've got to protect the people who make our wines and the people who drink them. We don't want to leave any chemical residue whatsoever in our wines. Although we're experimenting with biodynamic and organic viticulture, you have to be careful. I think there are places globally where it works well, but in Bordeaux you need to have ways to

manage your wines in certain years. What drives me every day is finding our own path and really understanding all these different farming approaches."

As a journalist, Rothschild told many stories through her assignments to faraway places. She left no stone unturned in her pursuit of truth and knowledge. Her personal story on wine is just beginning, but it's already exciting and profound, considering she's sparing no effort to leave her mark on this most legendary of wine estates. **P**

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FRANÇOIS POINCET, DBR (LAFITE)

