

7th AWBR International Conference June 12-15, 2013**Storytelling and wine experience as a marketing strategy: the case of Château Lynch-Bages in Bordeaux.****Amie Sexton**

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*Abstract**◦ Purpose*

This paper focuses on Château Lynch-Bages, a family-owned grand cru producer in Bordeaux's Médoc region. The case study explores how the highly personal marketing strategy of owner Jean-Michel Cazes has contributed to the global reputation and success of Lynch-Bages.

◦ Design/methodology/approach

The paper is based on interviews and observations conducted at the château in April and May 2012 and other information gleaned from the media. An ethnographical methodology was employed in order to delve deeper into the questions and unearth stories of the château rather than to rely on the official website or press release version.

◦ Findings

Lynch-Bages under the Cazes family ownership has always been at the forefront of new wine markets and is an excellent example of how personal connection, stories and experience create brand authenticity thus heightening brand status and success.

◦ Practical implications

This case study indicates that wine producers, particularly in the old world, would benefit from telling consumers their story and creating an experience around their wine.

Key words: wine, marketing, storytelling, Bordeaux

1. INTRODUCTION

The name Jean-Michel Cazes is almost synonymous with Château Lynch-Bages. It is impossible to speak of the highly successful Bordeaux *grand cru* without speaking of the individual whose personal story has brought about its success. Château Lynch-Bages is situated on a hill overlooking the town of Pauillac, equidistant between the First Growths Château Mouton-Rothschild and Château Latour. While it is officially ranked a Fifth Growth in the 1855 classification, its reputation and price are those of a Second Growth wine. This reputation has been developed principally by Jean-Michel Cazes using an approach based on personal interaction, stories and the experience of wine.

This paper focuses on Château Lynch-Bages, a family-owned *grand cru* producer in Bordeaux's Médoc region. The case study explores how the highly personal marketing strategy of Jean-Michel Cazes has contributed to the global reputation and success of Lynch-Bages. The discussion is based on interviews and observations conducted at the château in April and May 2012 and other information gleaned from the media. An ethnographical methodology was employed in order to delve deeper into the questions and unearth stories of the château rather than to rely on only the official website or press release version. The data was collected as part of a larger project looking at the influence of wine producers on perceptions of wine.

It should not come as a surprise that a marketing approach based on personal interaction, stories and experience has been extremely successful. Research into wine drinking culture in France (Demossier, 2010) and more specifically into the social context of the Bordeaux wine world (Ulin, 1995) indicates that wine is a primarily social object and construct (Hinnewinkel, 2004). A social approach to the promotion of wine would then seem quite logical. Interestingly, however, as a marketing technique it has not been widely employed. This is perhaps due to difficulties in communicating authenticity, as Beverland's (2009) work on authenticity and marketing points out.

2. STORYTELLING & PERSONAL CONNECTION

One of the first stories one learns about Château Lynch-Bages as a visitor to the château itself or the website is the history of the Cazes family. The property was purchased by Jean-Charles Cazes in 1939. In the early 1960s management of the property was gradually transferred to his son André Cazes, and then to his son Jean-Michel Cazes in the 1970s, and then in 2006 to his son Jean-Charles Cazes. Their approach has always been one of storytelling and personal connections with their clients and consumers, and Jean-Michel has been extremely active in this regard. He is conscious of its importance, as he says:

“We try to have a friendly relationship with our clients. I often say the winemaker's job is to make friends.”

In the early years of his stewardship of Lynch-Bages he was very active in developing the American market. With his connections in the USA, made during his time at university in Texas, and as perhaps the only Bordeaux wine producer to speak English, the entrée of Lynch-Bages into the American market paved the way for other Bordeaux wines. The approach that he took was not one of traditional advertising and marketing, but rather of actually going there and meeting people face-to-face. This was precisely the introduction that the American market needed – to put a face to the large and baffling offering of mostly unpronounceable Bordeaux châteaux. His warm and generous nature no doubt made the task easier, as Malou Le Sommer, commercial director at Lynch-Bages from 1985 until 2010, recounts:

“I went to the New York Wine Experience with him – it felt like I was at the Cannes Film Festival following a star!”

By using his personal family story Jean-Michel positioned himself as the individual identity of the brand and to a certain extent his personal qualities have been superimposed on the wine itself.

This personal contact has then created the foundations on which Lynch-Bages believes its consumer can always depend. In Jean-Michel's words:

“I think that, in a certain way, for many of our clients, there's that same image [of friendship], that Lynch-Bages is an old, loyal friend, whose philosophy has remained the same for fifty years. It's reliable.”

This story has been repeated in China with equal success and is just beginning in Brazil.

The act of going to the location of new markets and meeting the clients and consumers has the added advantage of market research. As Beverland (2009) states that “*actively living in the life-world of the consumer – one effectively absorbs ideas rather than asks consumers directly for new insights (that often they can't give).*”

3. BAGES AS A DESTINATION

The personal storytelling is enhanced by the physical setting of Lynch-Bages. The château sits on the top of a small hill, surrounded by the vineyard. The centre of the adjoining Village of Bages is owned by the château and has been renovated in the last ten years to create a charming and attractive old-world village. The château wall creates one side of the village square while the rest consists of a café-restaurant, bakery-deli, home wares/book shop, wine school, cooking school, and butcher shop. Just down the road is the hotel and two-star Michelin restaurant Cordeillan-Bages. All of these businesses except the butcher are owned by the château and are housed in gracious stone buildings that have been carefully restored. They all have an air of quality, without extending to luxury, and thus accessibility.

“I wanted to do something properly, with a good restaurant where we could receive people, which would attract visitors, again with the idea that they were potential clients.”

This is physical storytelling: the visual aspect tells a story of history and tradition, and respect for the past; the activity within the village tells a story of care, quality and hospitality. Jean-Michel and Jean-Charles both live at Bages with their respective families and it is quite common to see them around the village.

The atmosphere at Bages blends the old world with living and breathing activity, and quality with openness, mirroring the image of the wines of Lynch-Bages as high quality but accessible. The Village of Bages has made Château Lynch-Bages a destination in itself as it is the only place of its kind in the Médoc. One winemaker from further up the Médoc lamented that they don't get many visitors because the tourists don't travel any further than Bages. Contrary to the other châteaux, at Lynch-Bages it is not a case of visiting simply for the wine; a whole experience is presented: one can visit the château to see its operations and the museum, eat at the café, attend the wine or cooking school, buy a baguette or a steak to take home, or a gift for a friend. Although the renovation of the village was very much a personal project for Jean-Michel who grew up there (he is very clear that he did not want to create a tourist village), it was also part of the marketing strategy:

“Yes, I think we have succeeded in creating something which plays its role. That's to say, it's a destination for many people who come to the region, and that's very important.”

4. THE LYNCH-BAGES EXPERIENCE

Lynch-Bages is one of the rare châteaux to be open seven days a week, and to accept all visitors, not just wine industry professionals. From the moment one steps inside the door, there is a sense of hospitality and openness. Laetitia Dubos, visitor guide at Lynch-Bages, says:

“We welcome everyone with a smile and we take just as much time with someone in a baseball cap, thongs and shorts as someone in a suit.”

The château receives around 20 000 visitors each year, general public and professionals. Once inside, the storytelling begins in earnest. The tour begins in the museum, which houses the old vats and gravity fed system that was used until the 1970s. Here stories are told of history, family and tradition, and visitors are encouraged to touch the old wood and imagine the process. Further along, stories are told of the wine – of vintage, aging, cooperage, blending, and the people involved. These stories become very powerful in the context of the dimly lit and pungent cellar. After tasting the wines, visitors exit into the centre of the restored village.

The tour guides are trained and very knowledgeable about Lynch-Bages, but they change every few years because, as Jean-Michel took care to explain, it is difficult to maintain enthusiasm when repeating the same thing several times a day. This demonstrates that while storytelling may be a natural part of his personality, he is very conscious of what it takes to create a meaningful and special experience for visitors. It is a successful approach as the guides are indeed enthusiastic and obviously interested in their work.

The tours regularly meet Jean-Michel in passing, which reinforces the personal connection to the brand. As Laetitia explains, Jean-Michel always takes the time to stop and meet visitors and share some stories:

“We always say that when Mr Cazes stops to chat with the visitors, it will make us late, that the tour will take two or three times longer than normal – in the sense that he talks so much.”

This demonstrates the importance Jean-Michel places on connecting with the people who visit the château. My first encounter with this charismatic man was as he was serving wine at Lynch-Bages’ Easter Monday celebrations, very much involved at a grass roots level.

As well as the standard tours, Lynch-Bages hosts a range of events throughout the year: Easter Monday, the Sainte Antoine village festival, and several art exhibitions. One of the key events in the development of the Lynch-Bages experience was the Fête de la Fleur in 1989, which is clearly etched in the collective Lynch-Bages memory. Each year one of the grands crus châteaux hosts a dinner to celebrate the flowering of the vines. Lynch-Bages took the opportunity to differentiate itself from the rest by putting on a magical and interactive spectacle inspired by Jules Verne. Malou gave an animated description:

“There were comedians with numerous themes and mini-scenes; there was music commissioned especially for the event; we hosted artists... The Fête was in June, so from the start of May we were all in a joyous bazaar of people singing, rehearsing, making costumes – it was a lot of fun, really a fabulous moment. So it was very funny and for me it was because it was a different style. We presented Lynch-Bages as different from the rest.”

This event showed Bordeaux that Lynch-Bages had a different perspective, challenging the previous standard and creating a new ideal. The other châteaux followed suit in subsequent years, marking a turning point in the image of Lynch-Bages and the *grands crus* in general.

The spectacle and novelty of La Fête de la Fleur was an experience that also created stories. For Lynch-Bages it is story that adds to the history of the château as an example that illustrates its innovative character. For those who attended it is story of an experience that is likely remembered when drinking Lynch-Bages wine or speaking about the Médoc. The smaller events also create their stories, adding “ever-deepening layers to the brand’s richness” (Beverland, 2009). As they are

attended by visitors and locals, it is not only an exchange between the visitor (also a potential client) and Lynch-Bages, but with the wider community, giving a sense of connection to a place in the true sense of the word *terroir*. Laetitia describes Bages as:

“a positive image where people come and discover a place.”

Having a physical place that people can visit also allows them to create their own stories associated with Lynch-Bages. A quick search online brings up photos at Bages from holiday snaps to wedding photos to the recreation of a scene from the Japanese manga *Les Gouttes de Dieu (The Drops of God)*. This use of storytelling by Lynch-Bages and allowing consumers a chance to create their own stories, make the château “a powerful transmitter of authenticity, constructed naturally, and a constant presence on the wider landscape” (Beverland, 2009). The personal connection and experience of Lynch-Bages are something that people take away with them, and that is precisely what Jean-Michel aims to do:

“We would like every tourist, every visitor who comes here, to become an ambassador [of Lynch-Bages].”

It is a very successful marketing strategy and owes much to Jean-Michel staying true to his ideals and convictions. For him, wine is a subjective taste to be savoured and enjoyed, not as a means to get drunk or to be objectively compared in a competition. Lynch-Bages activities reflect this and always include a story:

“If I organise a dinner, there will be, depending on the situation, three wines, maybe five different wines, but with a story to tell.”

The stories of the people and the stories of the wines have a tendency to merge, as Malou explains :

“The charming and supple characteristics of the Lynch-Bages wine allow it to be tasted young or old. It is always ready to drink. There’s also that aspect of generosity that one can attribute to the Cazes family.”

5. CONCLUSION

The use of storytelling and experience in the promotion of Lynch-Bages wines has been very successful in creating a global reputation. The key to this success is that it is authentic – an enhancement of what exists rather than an invention of a marketing strategy. The château has taken full advantage of its history and stories, and the charisma of its owner, Jean-Michel Cazes, who has made personal connections with people from all over the world and created an experience at Bages that is unique among the grands crus of Bordeaux. Lynch-Bages, under the Cazes family ownership, has always been at the forefront of new wine markets and is an excellent example of how personal connection, stories and experience create brand authenticity, thus heightening brand status and success. In the words of Jean-Charles Cazes, it is all based on a simple philosophy:

“The opening of the château to visitors, the opening of Bages village, our wine tourism business and the quality that we strive for in our wines are all part of the same philosophy; that wine should be shared and enjoyed.”

This case study indicates that wine producers, particularly in the old world, would benefit from telling consumers their story and creating an experience around their wine. However, in doing so, the notion of authenticity and its importance to the consumer is paramount. A contrived story will be quickly identified by consumers and have negative repercussions. A genuine story that is carefully crafted can resonate deeply with the consumer, in this case responding to desires for nostalgia, tradition and quality, which in turn creates an overall image of the château that adds considerable value to the brand.

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