

FOOD & DRINK / SPIRITS

The Robb Reader: Didier Le Calvez

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BY JILL NEWMAN ON MAY 1, 2015



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Photo by Bruce Morser

A conversation with the hotelier, vintner, and truffle farmer.

Didier Le Calvez's storied hospitality career has taken him from the Plaza and Pierre hotels in Manhattan to the Shangri-La in Hong Kong and the Four Seasons Hotel George V in Paris. Most recently he guided the restoration of the legendary Le Bristol Paris for the Oetker Collection, for which he now serves as senior vice president of operations, sales, and marketing. Le Calvez and his wife, Olivia, also own a thriving vineyard in Bordeaux, a nearby truffle farm, and two boutique hotels on Île de Ré, where he grew up. The multifaceted Frenchman took a break from his active schedule—which includes raising three young children—to discuss his passion for the French countryside and a few of his favorite city hotels.

What motivated you to acquire Château Clarisse?

It was a lifelong project and a challenge that I wanted to take in my life. I've experienced the vineyard environment since childhood, as my grandmother had a house near Château Bouscaut, close to Bordeaux. The desire to acquire my own estate grew even further when I worked in California in the early 1980s. I was fascinated by the Californian wine producers' enthusiasm, such as Robert Mondavi, Warren Winiarski, Mike Grgich, and more recently Ann Colgin. My wife and I acquired the Château Clarisse vineyard in 2009. Today, our vineyard covers 14.5 hectares and is planted with 80 percent Merlot and 20 percent Cabernet Franc. We produce about 50,000 bottles annually, including our Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux wine.

What do you enjoy about the winemaking process?

What really interests me is creating a certain style of wine, indeed crafting a product—wine—that emanates from and reflects the terroir. Vineyards are constantly evolving and improving over time. That's what I love about vine growing and winemaking. It is a permanent challenge that requires us to be in constant touch with nature.

How did you get involved with truffle farming?

My family always owned little parcels of land with truffle oak trees. Truffle farming is a lifestyle, an art form in which my family has always been involved in a dilettante sort of way. I wanted to create something in keeping with a way of life that I cherish and create a business out of it.

What attracts you most to the French countryside?

Certainly, one of my greatest joys occurs when I'm in the countryside, where there is a keen sense of peace and serenity. For me, it's a time of true intellectual relaxation. Those privileged, peaceful moments last only a few hours or maybe a few days, but they afford me a total disconnect with the world of the hospitality industry. The time I spend in the countryside puts me in touch with our core values, with what really matters.

Tell us about your boutique hotels on Île de Ré.

Purchasing the Hôtel de Toiras and Villa Clarisse was, in a way, a contribution to our regional tourism because they are ideally located between Bordeaux, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the beautiful châteaux of the Loire Valley and Brittany. Saint Martin de Ré, where Villa Clarisse is located, is one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and it's always been very close to my heart since it is my mother's hometown, of which she was once the mayor.

What are your favorite hotels outside of the Oetker Collection?

One of my favorite hotels is the Mandarin Oriental in Bangkok, which has a consistency over time with a record of more than 50 years of great service. The Raffles is also one of my preferred hotels and is undeniably emblematic of Singapore. In the United States, I particularly enjoy the NoMad Hotel in New York and the Peninsula in Los Angeles.

How do you spend your free time?

All my off time is dedicated to my family, playing sports with them and sharing a nice meal around the family dinner table. It is very important to me to enjoy those privileged moments with my children.