

Ties that bind

Etienne Hugel shares with Jenny Tan
what being part of a family means to him

Etienne Hugel can always be counted on for a good quote, especially when it concerns his family winery, Hugel & Fils, but things are a little different, just for today. “I hope you don’t mind, but I am here today as part of the PFV, and I’d like to speak more about this family as a whole,” Hugel explains briskly.

He was at the Raffles Hotel Singapore last month with the Primum Familiae Vini (PFV), a prestigious group made up of the world’s leading wine families. Set up in 1993 to promote and defend the moral values that are integral in family wine businesses, the PFV consists of Antinori (Italy), Château Mouton Rothschild (Bordeaux, France), Domaine Joseph Drouhin (Burgundy, France), Egon Müller (Germany), Hugel & Fils (Alsace, France), Pol Roger (Champagne), Perrin & Fils (Rhône Valley, France), Symington family (Portugal), Tenuta San Guido (Italy), Bodegas Torres (Spain) and Vega Sicilia (Spain). They take turns at holding presidency, and Hugel has just passed on the baton to Müller, who is holding the reins for the year. They hold an annual meeting at one of the members’ home, and it is an occasion at which the entire family is present.

But being a family is not without its challenges. What they had set out against — buyouts of family businesses — has afflicted them, with former members such as Cos d’Estournel and Mondavi being bought over by the Bernard Taillan business group and Constellation Brands respectively. Most recently, the Jaboulet family from Rhône was sold to the owners of Château La Lagune.

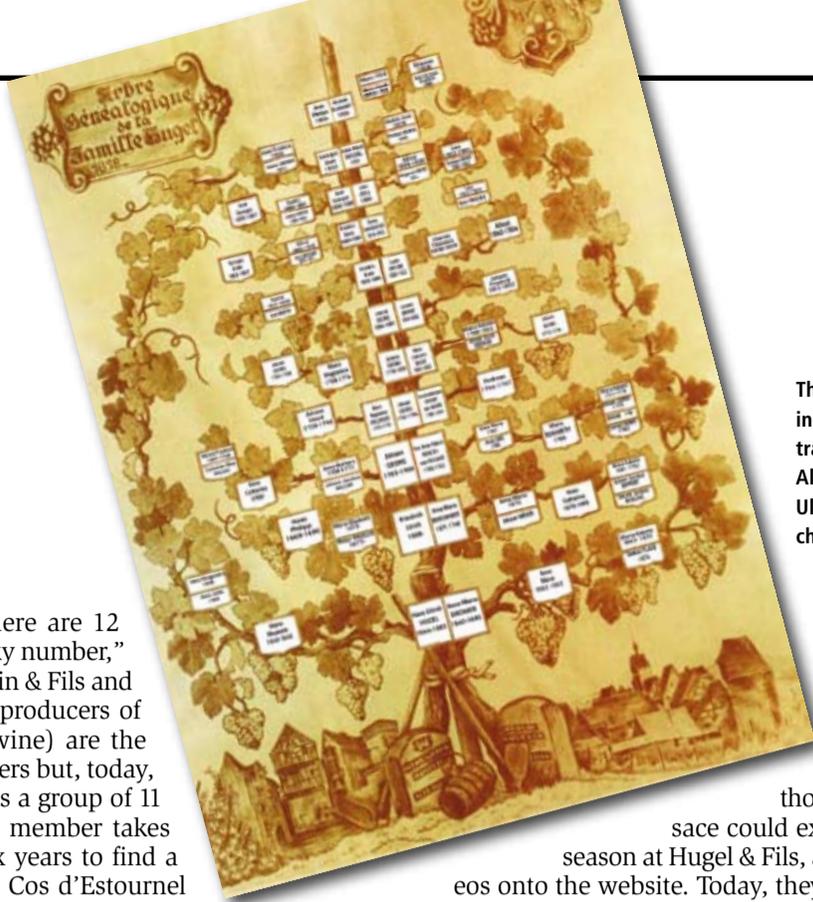
“We’ve always been a group of 12... a case of wine

has 12 bottles... there are 12 apostles... it’s a lucky number,” Hugel explains. Perrin & Fils and Tenuta San Guido (producers of the Sassicaia cult wine) are the newly added members but, today, the PFV still remains a group of 11 as finding the right member takes time. “It took us six years to find a new member when Cos d’Estournel was sold. The PFV is about tradition, and the winery has to produce traditional wine. It has to be a unanimous decision... If anyone is slightly unsure, then the candidate will not be considered at all,” he says.

This can only mean more pool sessions are in store. “We hold the PFV Pool Meetings, and that’s where most of the work gets done! And, of course, there are always lovely wines. Egon Müller served his Kabinett wines yesterday, which is a perfect pool wine, and he very generously treated us to JJ Prüm ’93 Auslese!” Hugel says, excited at the memory. No wonder he calls them his “second family”.

Keeping tradition alive

Although Hugel & Fils is a family-run company with a long history, it is anything but old-fashioned. In fact, Hugel is the antithesis of that. This avid traveller is also one of the most tech-savvy wine producers I have met. His latest joy is his blog, a new feature he has added to the company website (www.hugel.com).



The Hugel family tree showing its roots, which can be traced back to 15th century Alsace, when founder Hans Ulrich Hugel settled in the charming town of Riquewihr

“The Internet will revolutionise the wine business. It will help us keep in touch with consumers,” he says.

Indeed, years before, those who could not visit Al-

sace could experience the harvesting

season at Hugel & Fils, as he uploaded daily videos onto the website. Today, they can see for themselves what life at Hugel & Fils is like, through another newly introduced video-blog, or “vlog”. Visitors can view videos of the Hugel business — from messages by the family, the vinification and harvest processes to the terroir.

Doubtless, he has already started a trend. “When I sent the website to Yann Beyer of Leon Beyer, he sent me a picture of himself, with his eyes wide open, and said ‘I want the same...!’” he adds with a laugh.

But, then again, Hugel & Fils has always been a pioneer in its field. The family has roots tracing back to the 15th century in Alsace, when founder Hans Ulrich Hugel settled in the charming town of Riquewihr. In 1912, Frederic Emile Hugel decided to revive the wine glories of Alsace that had been ravaged by the Thirty Years War. The focus was on the noble varieties (Alsace wines are all labelled by their grape varieties, a move that’s very different from the rest of their French counterparts, such as Bordeaux and Burgundy), and his three sons Georges, Jean and André subsequently made famous the Vendange Tardive and Sélection de Grains Nobles wines.

Today, the philosophy — that the wine is in the grape itself — has remained. The cellars are still below the well-preserved 15th century buildings, and tourists who have gone on the cellar tours love the St Catherine cask, which holds up to 8,800 litres of wine and was built in 1715.

The current generation — which consists of Etienne and his brothers Jean-Philippe and Marc — has kept the family tradition alive with their acute business sense and savvy strategies. Where other French wine companies were content with their domestic markets, the brothers were already travelling to educate the Asian market 15 years ago. In 2003, when SARS struck Asia, Hugel insisted on travelling to Singapore for the World Gourmet Summit, when other winemakers and chefs hastily cancelled their trips. In January this year, Hugel spent seven weeks in Asia, visiting markets such as China, Taiwan and Vietnam, besides his regular markets such as Singapore. “We recognise that [Asia] is our future,” he says. To make sure they are fully equipped to face the challenges, they always work with the best three importers in the country. In Japan, they recently joined forces with Perrin & Fils and Laurent Perrier, and took a stake in Jeroboam, to set up the first fine-wine only distribution in Japan.

Other than just emphasising its wines, the Hugel family is also a firm believer in how well Alsace wines, with their finesse and lively acidity, pair with food. In fact, Etienne, who insists on dim sum for breakfast when in Hong Kong and Singapore, also whips up Asian dishes at home. “When I cook at home, which is what my wife terms ‘glamour cooking’, I use a wok. Two months ago, I brought back a box of banana leaves and spices to experiment with. My signature dish is duck with red curry and pineapple or fruits.” Today, Hugel & Fils is the brand player for Alsace wines in almost every Asian market.

What drives him is no doubt the fact that this is a family-run business. He says, “When I enjoy a bottle of wine, it’s what the label means to me. The corporate way of thinking is to look at earnings, and that is short term. Wines, however, are long-term businesses. Vineyards take 20 to 30 years to ripen and reach their peak, so it’s something that doesn’t always make economical sense. If you are brought up in a family, and you know your family had sacrificed so much to pass this business to you, you know there’s no way you will ever want to give it up.”



Hugel (right) with his brothers outside their family cellar in Riquewihr

Jenny Tan is an independent food and wine writer with an incurable passion for the vinous tippie