

stirring the lees with james molesworth

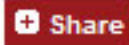
A Sit-Down with May-Eliane de Lencquesaing

The octagenarian former owner of Château Pichon-Longueville-Lalande moves full speed ahead on her new South African project

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Though she doesn't come to the U.S. as often as she did during her heyday running Pauillac's famed Château Pichon-Longueville-Lalande, May-Eliane de Lencquesaing still loves it when she does visit. It's a love born of a long time spent in Kansas, of all places, when her husband, a French military officer, was stationed at Fort Leavenworth for two stints, the first shortly after World War II and the second in the late 1960s and early '70s.

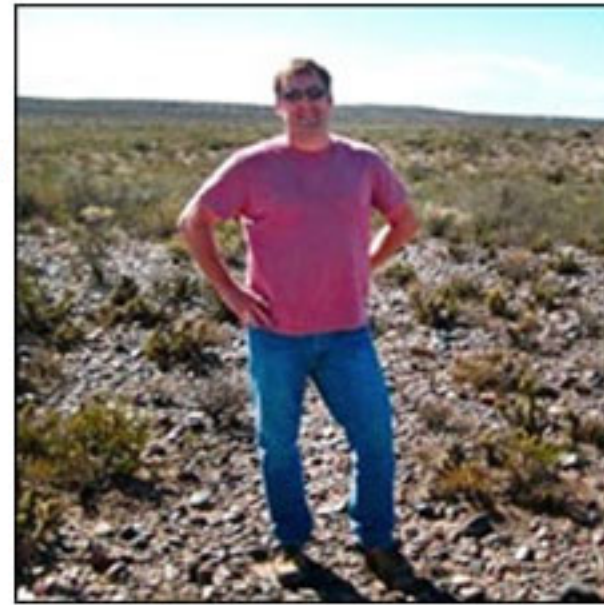
"We were in the middle of the country, but far from everything," said de Lencquesaing, who stopped by the *Wine Spectator* office today. "So we traveled when we could, often to Napa to visit wineries. Kansas was a dry state then, a disaster for us," she added, with an infectious chuckle. "There we befriended Al Brounstein, Gil Nickel, Warren Winiarski and so many others who were developing California wine back then."

That love of wine paid dividends, when de Lencquesaing was eventually asked by her family to return to France and run the Bordeaux property, starting in 1978. She loved the idea of making wine, though admittedly had some brushing up to do.

"When I started at Pichon in '78, everything I knew about winemaking was basically pre-war. So much had changed. So I went back to enology school," she said.

De Lencquesaing ran the estate for 30 years before eventually selling her stake and moving to a new project in South Africa. But, she confided, South Africa wasn't her initial foray into another wine venture. De Lencquesaing had actually gotten close, on two separate occasions, to starting a project in the U.S., eventually backing off of Long Island (for *terroir* reasons, she said) and Washington state (for business reasons).

"Of course, now it seems crazy for a 80-year-old to start something new like this, but I love it," she says.



James Molesworth

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Though she bought the Glenelly estate in 2004, de Lencquesaing had been familiar with South Africa for several years before that. Her first trip, with a cadre of fellow Bordelais, was back in 1988. She also helped create an international wine contest for red blends, which brought her into contact with more South African winemakers. And ultimately, a friendship with the late Anton Rupert was formed, whom she credits with being the person who convinced her to finally invest there.

"He kept telling me to come. That there was so much to do in South Africa and that outside help was needed. He was really a forward-looking man," she said.

In Glenelly, whose wines just recently debuted here in the U.S. market, de Lencquesaing feels she found the perfect starting point.

"I wanted a small estate and I wound up with a large one. I also saw great soils—granite, as well as beautiful morning sun, plenty of water reserves with four dams on the property, and no vines. It was important to be able to plant ourselves, rather than deal with an existing vineyard," she said, "as there were so many virus problems in the vineyards in South Africa."

De Lencquesaing also kept the viticulturist who had worked on the estate previously, when it was a fruit farm, and hired young winemaker Luke O'Cuinneagain from neighboring Rustenberg Estate (with Rustenberg owner Simon Barlow's blessing).

"It was important for me to work with South Africans and not just bring in a team from France. I came to South Africa to work with South Africans and make something South African. I didn't come here to make Bordeaux," she said firmly.

Though she has embraced the South African spirit, de Lencquesaing stills draws on her Bordeaux roots.

"I do think that South Africa should take some ideas from the Médoc," she said. "The idea of appellations, for example. And we also need to get stronger as a team, in how we develop our markets, especially the U.S."

With its own vineyards now on line, Glenelly has been producing wines entirely from estate fruit since the 2008 vintage (the first few vintages used purchased fruit). A new gravity-flow winery built into the hillside of the Simonsberg mountain houses the production facility.

"Now that it's finished, it doesn't seem like it was so difficult," she said, chuckling again as she flipped through photos of the ambitious construction.

De Lencquesaing is anxious to get more of Glenelly's production into the U.S., which after all these years, still holds a special place in her heart. So far, the wines are off to a solid start as de Lencquesaing and her team feel their way along with their young vineyards. She's enthusiastic about the Petit Verdot and Syrah plantings on the estate, in addition to blue-chip Cabernet Sauvignon. And she's letting her team try different things as they develop their portfolio of wines while letting the vineyards show what they can do.

"Of course, you still want freshness, balance, fine tannins—the things you get in the great wines of Bordeaux, for example. But of course, I want an expression of South Africa," she said.

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