

SOPHIE'S CHOICE



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ALTHOUGH VIRGINIE, COMTESSE DE LALANDE, IS THE MOST FAMOUS OF THE WOMEN TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH CHÂTEAU PICHON-LALANDE, HER ELDER SISTER SOPHIE DE PICHON-LONGUEVILLE IS THE MOST ENIGMATIC. FINE LOOKS AT THE LIFE AND WORK OF THIS TALENTED BUT MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

The long story of Château Pichon-Lalande often has a strong feminine presence. Directly or by marriage, the same family governed it from 1685 to 1925. For most of the eighteenth century, women oversaw the Pichon-Longueville estate, a tradition that culminated in the distinguished May-Eliane de Lencquesaing working at Pichon-Lalande for 30 years until January 2007.

Two sisters founded what eventually became Pichon-Lalande: the beautiful Virginie de Pichon-Longueville (1798–1882), who became Comtesse de Lalande after marrying Henri, comte Raymond de Lalande in 1818; and the enigmatic Sophie (1785–1858), a painter, poet and nun.

The sisters are commemorated today in the grand vin's full name of Château Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande and in the estate's limitrophe vineyards, which – uniquely among the Médoc's crus classés – sprawl across two appellations. The Pauillac vineyards include the “Sophie” parcel of Cabernet Sauvignon that lies to the southwest of Pichon-Lalande's château, cheek by jowl with Latour's vines.

FIVE INTO TWO

Pichon-Lalande traces its origins back to Pierre Rauzan (c.1620–1692), one-time owner of Châteaux Margaux and Latour. Land surrounding Latour was turned into an estate that became known as L'Enclos Rauzan and which formed the basis of Pichon-Longueville.

As if in a Balzac novel – albeit one with a relatively happy ending – the Baron Joseph de Pichon-Longueville (1760–1849), great-grandson of Pierre Rauzan, decided to share the domain between his five children.

It took Baron Joseph 70 years, during which he saw France undergo three revolutions, five kings, two republics and one empire, to create Pichon-Longueville. To divide the estate into two separate entities took only six years.

Raoul gained the part destined for the two sons (the younger son Louis had died in 1835), which became Pichon-Baron; the rest went to the three daughters Virginie, Gabrielle and Sophie.



TERROR AND TERROIR

Only 14 surviving paintings have been attributed to Sophie and hardly anything is known of her life. But two things are thought to have influenced both her art and her life: the Revolution of 1798 and a love affair that apparently ended with sadness.

Sophie was only seven when her family was forced to leave Bordeaux for the Médoc in spring 1792. Eighteen months later, *la terreur* began. Baron Joseph and his wife Marguerite de Narbonne Pelet d'Anglade were arrested and imprisoned. They were not released until June 1794.

When the Bourbon family, in the form of Louis XVIII, was restored to power in 1814 after the abdication of Napoleon Bonaparte, Sophie became a passionate Bourbonniste. Talleyrand, the "Prince of Diplomats" and a former owner of Château Haut-Brion, supported the new king. Doubtless the de Pichon-Longueville family knew Talleyrand as a fellow winemaker and Bourbonniste.

After the death of Marguerite in 1822, Sophie privately published 16 of her poems in a volume called *Poésies Fugitives*, printed on vellum and dedicated "to my mother, who always asked me for a collection of my verses." The copy at Pichon-Lalande, which contains handwritten notes by Sophie herself, was found serendipitously by Madame de Lencquesaing's son in Paris several years ago.

Several poems refer to the events of 1814 and to the birth in September 1820 of Henri Charles

Ferdinand Marie Dieudonné d'Artois, duc de Bordeaux, comte de Chambord, in 1820.

Louis XVIII did not have children so the throne passed to his younger brother Charles X, whose son, the duc d'Angoulême, had also so far failed to produce an heir. Charles' younger son, the duc de Berry, was assassinated in February 1820, putting the Bourbon dynasty in serious jeopardy. But Berry's widow Princess Caroline of Naples and Sicily gave birth to the "Dieudonné" ("God-given") duc de Bordeaux in September 1820, enabling the Bourbon line to continue. Baron Joseph was charged with representing Bordeaux to the king at the christening of the duc.

Some of the other poems in *Poésies Fugitives* are more frivolous. "Voyages" is about the vulgarity of the nouveaux riches at a ball held in Lesparre-Médoc, a small town 20 kilometres northwest of Pauillac, and has whimsical observations on a one-eyed, one-legged coach driver.

LES FEMMES SAVANTES

The most famous female artist of the late eighteenth century was Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Le Brun, the favourite painter of Marie-Antoinette and a member of the Academies of Rome, Parma, Bologna, Saint Petersburg and Berlin.

Her husband was Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun, a painter and art dealer, whose great uncle was Charles Le Brun, the first Director of the Académie



Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. In 1663, Le Brun introduced the first female to the Académie, Catherine Duchemin, wife of the sculptor François Girardon.

Although Vigée-Le Brun was highly successful, there were few female painters in the early nineteenth century. Academic art training placed much emphasis on nude studies, which was considered inappropriate for women.

An unknown master in Bordeaux taught Sophie to paint. She went to Paris in about 1812 to study in the studio of François Gérard, the most fashionable portraitist of the Empire and the Restoration. Gérard had studied under Jacques-Louis David, the pre-eminent Neo-Classical painter of the era.

Reproductions of Gérard's portraits were in great demand – he was a noted society figure, known as “the king of painters and painter of kings”. As part of his students’ training they would make copies of his works. Sophie’s partial copy of Gérard’s 1802 work *Ossian évoque les fantômes au son de la harpe*, signed and dated 1814, shows her leaning more towards the exuberant colours of Romanticism than the sombre chiaroscuro of Neo-Classicism.

Though Gérard paid Sophie for the copies she made of his paintings, there is no record of her selling any of her own canvases.

SAVOIE FAIRE

Despite the upheaval caused by the fall of Napoleon’s French Empire in 1814, Sophie continued to lead a privileged life. Probably she was able to attend some of Gérard’s high society salons. She refers in her poetry to a visit to Vichy in 1814 and is known to have met the duchesse d’Angoulême around this time.

In about 1815, she travelled to the Alps, the landscapes of which appear in several of her paintings. She was probably in Paris between 1816 and 1819 before returning to Bordeaux in 1820 or 1821, when she painted a portrait of her brother-in-law Comte Henri Raymond de Lalande, husband of Virginie.

There is a portrait by Sophie at Pichon-Lalande of a good-looking, bespectacled young man known as “Sophie’s fiancé”. A similar figure appears in two of Sophie’s mountain scenes, *Lucerne* (1820) and *Le Pont du Diable au Mont Saint Gothard* (1821).

Nothing at all is known about this man. David Haziot, author of *Château Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande: A Passion for Wine*, suggests that he was Savoyard or Italian, though Pichon-Lalande’s Communications Director Fabienne Durou believes that he might be Pierre Lacour fils, son of the painter of the same name who founded the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux. It is possible that Lacour père was the unknown Bordeaux master who tutored Sophie.

In the Musée there are three portraits of Lacour fils by Lacour père, one of which is a copy by his



daughter Madeleine Aimée Lacour. Certainly there is a remarkable resemblance between “Sophie’s fiancé” and the portraits of Lacour fils.

STILL WATERS

The figure in Sophie’s portrait wears a Tricolour flag in his buttonhole. Perhaps the Bourboniste Sophie was in love with a Republican, though there is no suggestion in her writings of any betrayal by a lover, so it is possible that Sophie was forced by the political zeitgeist to break off their relationship. A poem in *Poésies Fugitives* suggests that Sophie had been unable to marry because of her mother’s illness.

Lucerne shows a woman sketching beside a bespectacled man, who looks up at her adoringly. His red military jacket lies on the ground next to them. She wears white and the river flows by calmly.

The emotions of *Le Pont du Diable au Mont Saint Gothard* are the antithesis of those of Lucerne. The landscape has been identified as the Teufelsbrücke (Devil’s Bridge) in the Schöllenen Gorge in Switzerland. A black-clad female sits with her back turned to a bespectacled man, who now wears his red jacket and prepares to mount his horse. The water rushes past with much more urgency than in Lucerne, its haste conveyed by the busy, forceful brushstrokes.

There are two later and undated Swiss landscapes, *Vu d’un lac de montagne en Suisse* and *Le Songe d’Ossian*, in which the water is again calm.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN?

Madame de Lencquesaing acquired an undated portrait, that once hung at Pichon-Baron and was sold after the château was acquired by AXA, which is thought to be a self-portrait by Sophie.

The melancholy female figure wears no makeup. The pink ribbon adds a touch of brightness to an otherwise sombre and unflattering painting, in which the unsmiling lady wears a black velvet dress that was typical of the habit worn by the spinster residents of the Order of Saint Anne.

In 1823, Sophie retired to a convent. The Order of Saint Anne in Würzburg was attached to a sister convent in Munich, where Sophie became a lady of honour. She used her full title “Comtesse Sophie de Pichon Longueville, Ordre des Demoiselles de Sainte Anne à Munich” to sign her 1838 painting *au bord du lac*, the largest of the Sophie canvases at Pichon-Lalande.

After entering the convent Sophie wrote no more poems but continued to paint, though the portraits and Alpine scenes were now replaced by religious themes. In the church of Saint-Martin de Pauillac hangs the life-size painting of *Christ en croix*, its dark colours and orange hues recognisably the work of Sophie. Saint-Martin was designed by the architect Armand Corcelles, who also built the château at Labégorce-Zédé.



MYSTIC WILLS

In her “testament mystique” – her will, dated 25 August 1858 – Sophie requested that 400 prayers be said for her soul. Some of her estate went to her brother Raoul and other sister Gabrielle but most of it, including her share of Pichon, was left to Virginie, “ma chère soeur”.

Virginie inherited Sophie’s half-share of the Hôtel Montméjean, the de Pichon-Longueville’s Bordeaux home. She sold the hotel share to her surviving sister Gabrielle and used the funds to buy equipment and to build a winery and cellar. In the year of Sophie’s death, Virginie had her portrait painted by Perrignon. The image of her in a black shawl, still mourning for her sister, now adorns the label of Pichon-Lalande’s second wine Réserve de la Comtesse.

Virginie and Sophie first jointly made wine separate to Raoul’s in 1856 – their 20-hectare holding was the beginning of what became Pichon-Lalande. Gabrielle, who had retained a ten-hectare share of Pichon-Longueville, continued to use Raoul’s facilities until her death in 1875. Like Sophie, she left her estate to Virginie, making that estate the larger of the two Pichons.

Despite the 1855 classification, which saw Pichon-Lalande created as a Deuxième Cru, the 1850s was a challenging decade for Bordeaux, a period in which in its vineyards were devastated by powdery mildew. But thanks in part to Sophie de Pichon-Longueville, Pichon-Lalande’s immediate future was assured. ♣

