



Newsletter, Summer 2009

Chateau Musar

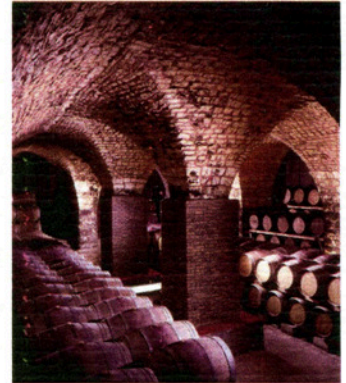
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- 7 YEARS IN THE MAKING: Chateau Musar Red 2002
- 50 years as The Maker: Serge Hochar's London masterclasses
- Ancient; ungrafted: Lebanon's priceless white vineyards
- Ronald Hochar: celebrating Musar's 'éminence grise'

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Chateau Musar Red 2002 – now ready after 7 years' careful cellaring

You can't accuse Musar of rushing things. Every vintage of 'Chateau' Red benefits from 7 years' tender care (including 1 year in Nevers oak) at the Hochar family's deep 18th century cellars in Ghazir overlooking the Mediterranean. Seven years is 'l'âge de raison', when the wine's personality begins to emerge. In 2002, a "year of pleasant surprises", mild weather lengthened the growing season, promoting thorough grape ripeness, a long fermentation and rich, full-bodied wines. Tasters at the London Wine Fair were impressed, as was Simon Hoggart in April's 'Spectator': *"Approximately a third each of Cabernet, Cinsault and Carignan this latest release shows dark winter fruits, raisin, prune and vanilla spice aromas. The palate has immense power dominated by dark plum, damson, liquorice and a toasty, spicy finish. One of the best vintages of recent years. Thoroughly enjoyable now it'll develop for a further 10 years."*



Serge Hochar's 50th Anniversary masterclasses at the London Wine Fair

It's not every year that a winemaker can claim half a century at the helm. With so much material to draw from, Serge Hochar's hugely over-subscribed masterclasses at the London Wine Fair were packed with revelations and anecdotes about his winemaking philosophy. He explained how, after 18 years of research, he had arrived at his ideal Chateau Musar Red 'imprint' in 1977, a benchmark vintage expressing the Bekaa Valley terroir and his classical training in Bordeaux. Describing blending as "cooking for someone who will be dining in 10 years' time", he related how he determines the right moment to blend the Chateau Red. His view that this wine improves radically after 15 years in bottle was demonstrated over a tasting of 6 vintages. The 1959, his first ever wine, silky-textured and cedary, still showing magnificently despite having been made without sulphur; the 1969, vibrant and enticingly aromatic after 40 years; the 1977 ("a wine for education"); the 1981 ("is it not Cheval Blanc?" a friend had once asked); the Cinsault-dominated 1993, reminiscent of a fine, mature Burgundy; and the remarkably approachable 2002, ripe and plummy. Two Chateau Musar Whites were served at the end of the tasting: the new 2003 and the luscious 1989 by way of contrast. Those present will be quoting from Serge's comments for many years hence.

Chateau Musar White 2003 – latest release of this unique wine from ancient, ungrafted vines

The 2003 White (mature by most standards, youthful by ours), is only just embarking on a journey of development sure to last decades: we still offer vintages going back to 1954. This is very much a 'wine with altitude'. One and a half kilometres up, the vineyards are amid ski resorts, and the vines are still on their own roots. Thousands of years old and unique to Lebanon, the Biblical-sounding varieties Obaideh ('oh-buy-dey'), and Merwah are reputedly the ancestors of Chardonnay and Semillon. Barrel-fermented, and aged a year in Nevers oak, this intense wine is like a dry Sauternes, perfect with foie gras and other pâtés, rich seafood dishes or *tarte tatin*. We would recommend decanting it and allowing it to breathe for several hours before serving 'cellar cool'. *"Bottled in September 2004 it was stored at the vast Musar cellars for 5 years before release. Beautiful straw gold in appearance, it displays aromas of orange peel, sweet spice and stewed pears. The palate is rich and generous with almond and citrus fruit flavours."* – Simon Hoggart, 'The Spectator', April 2009.



Ronald Hochar – celebrating Musar's 'éminence grise'

"My brother looks after the liquid, I look after the liquidity." In Serge's 50th, it's only right to recognise the behind-the-scenes efforts of his brother, Ronald. Musar founder Gaston Hochar never sheltered his youngest son from financial realities: one of Ronald's earliest memories is his father showing him a bundle of promissory notes, all that was left to show for the Hochar fortunes, lent to the Ottoman government before its fall. Happily, this default turned Gaston towards winemaking, (proving good can come of a credit crunch) and both his sons grew up washing bottles at the winery before pursuing their separate paths within the business. Ronald would work 7am-5pm in Ghazir then work in the evenings at the Musar shop in Beirut. *"We were paid 5 Lebanese pounds a day"* says Ronald *"I learned everything about selling from my father."* His good-humoured contributions on the financial and logistical fronts (against huge odds he kept Musar's trucks running during the war) remain vital to the business.