

Vintage

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This Month's Cover:

Drawing from the Museum in Beaune depicts highly raucous celebration of the Feast of the Harvest in Burgundy. Merry scene shows revellers surrounded by casks of the new wine, the reason for and cause of their varying degrees of inebriation.



Feast of the Season

Excerpts and recipes from Ruth Anne Beebe's recently published book of Elizabethan recipes, "Sallets, Humbles and Shrewsbury Cakes." To recapture the merriment of the Elizabethan Age, we also include her recipe for home brewed beer. Page 32.



Special Report: An Appeal for Table Wine Nomenclature and Imaginative Blending

An appeal from Norman S. Roby to the wine producers of California, particularly those in the jug wine market, to sever the Old World apron strings and demonstrate confidence in their wines by discontinuing the use of borrowed generic names. Page 40

AN EXTRAORDINARY LAFITE TASTING: WITH EMILE PEYNAUD AS YOUR GUIDE

Michael Buller's visit to Château Lafite Rothschild was no run-of-the-mill tour. It consisted of a rather unusual tasting and discussion with a group of Bordeaux wine experts. Page 24.

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CHATEAU CHEVAL BLANC

1829-1864



1^{er} Grand Cru Classé

HÉRITIERS FOURCAUD-LAUSSAC

PROPRIÉTAIRES

Mis en bouteille au Château

(FRANCE)

APPELLATION SAINT-ÉMILION 1^{er} GRAND CRU CLASSÉ CONTRÔLÉE

Imprimé en France

BERTHON - LIBOURNE

Bollinger, Brut, 1966
Dom Ruinart, Blanc de Blancs, 1966

Corton Charlemagne, Louis Latour,
Comte de Grancey, 1969 and 1970

Ch. Cheval Blanc,
Nine Vintages: 1929
1947
1949
1950
1952
1953
1955
1961
1964

Ch. de Rayne Vigneau, 1937

Terrine Maison

Coulubiach de Saumon

Carré d'Agneau,
Sauce Béarnaise

Legumes Variés

Plateau de Fromages

Salade d'Épinards,
avec Vinaigrette
de Moutarde

Tarte de
Mandarines, Joséphine

Jerry and Norma Draper
Paul and Maureen Draper
Larry and Jane Elsener
Robert Knudsen
Haskell and Rae Norman
Joel Peterson and Robin Buchanan
Denny and Josephine Zeitlin

464 Magnolia
Larkspur, California
Chef de Cuisine:
Michael Goldstein

December 5, 1976

35 Years Of Chateau Cheval Blanc

By Dennis J. Zeitlin, M.D.

The wines were trickling in, even though some of us were having to conquer that ultimate ambivalence of the wine collector facing his last bottle of a great wine. It seemed that this dinner was going to coalesce quite effortlessly in contrast to some previous collaborative tastings where the recruitment of the wines became incredibly complex. On occasion, members of a dinner extend tendrils of inquiry even out of state. The procedure evokes memories of grade school kids with shoeboxes of trading cards, and wines at previous dinners have often described convoluted paths on their way to the table.

I was hoping to taste a broad enough span of years to get a solid feel for the character, the essence of Cheval Blanc throughout its life cycle: How much shift in style occurred over the years? How were the individual wines holding? Were these wines true to the character of their vintages? How would they compare in terms of over-all quality? We planned to assemble no more than nine bottles and stick to the important years.

Shortly before the dinner we acquired the '29, a year generally considered along with '45 and '61 as the triumvirate for claret in the 20th century. Even though this bottle had been impeccably stored, and despite Cheval Blanc's excellent reputation in this year, I wondered if our discussion would end up focussing on how gorgeous it must have been ten years ago; this has been the fate of many recently opened bottles of '29 claret. I wish a '34 or '37 had materialized; Cheval Blanc was right at the top in both those vintages. We decided not to search out the '45; many of these bottles have been acetic, although I'm told that some of the English bottlings were superb. The '47 has been hailed by many as the "claret of the century" and was a must for the tasting. This was followed by the '49, a particularly great year in St. Emilion and Pomerol; the often underrated '50; '52, a great year in which the St. Emilions and Pomerols were not afflicted with the excessive tannin suffered by the Médocs; the '53, always a lush and accessible vintage, though perhaps better in the Médoc; and the '55, a very good but somewhat controversial and variable vintage. Then we leaped a few years. St. Emilion and Pomerol were hit with frost in '56, Cheval Blanc being among those most severely damaged. It was not until '61 that it regained its footing. We included this wine, anticipating it to be full of future and greatness. If it turned out to be accessible, it would suggest that the more austere Médocs of '61 might not be too many years away. We omitted the '62, a so-so year for claret outside the Médoc, and not an exciting Cheval Blanc, and decided to end the series with the '64. This wine has enjoyed an excellent reputation. The vineyard, composed of approximately 1/3 Merlot, 1/3 Cabernet Franc, and 1/3 Malbec, ripened and was picked before the rains arrived and severely damaged the later-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon grapes of the Médoc.

We all approached this dinner with considerable excitement. With the exception of the '29, most of us had tasted each of the wines individually over the years, but never together. In fact, none of us could recall hearing of a vertical Cheval Blanc dinner. Despite the legendary '21, which brought the Château to prominence in this century, and the pre-eminence of the '47, Cheval Blanc regularly takes a back seat in prestige and price to other first growths, i.e., Lafite, Mouton, Petrus. Yet one rarely finds someone who does not love the wine. Cheval Blanc transcends the dullness I find in many St. Emilions, while retaining a special elegance only hinted at by the best of them. Its lush, rich, full, gracious character owes much to Pomerol, which lies just across the road.

The excellent restaurant in Larkspur, 464 Magnolia, seemed a perfect setting for the dinner. I made arrangements with Chef-Proprietor Michael Goldstein for a

special menu and use of the cozy back room. Finally, one Sunday at 5:30 P.M. our group began to assemble: Jerry and Norma Draper, Paul and Maureen Draper, Larry and Jane Elsener, Robert T.A. Knudsen, Haskell and Rae Norman, Joel Peterson and Robin Buchanan, my wife Josephine and myself. All of us have been passionately involved with wine for many years, and some are in the business: Jerry heads Draper and Esquin Wine Merchants and the Vintner's Club, Paul is winemaker at Ridge Vineyards, Robert lectures on wine, and Joel writes about and makes wine.

Michael brought in his complex and flavorful 'Terrine Maison' to accompany a pair of champagnes. The first, Bollinger, Brut, '66, was still fresh and quite fruity, with an integrated fullness imparted by pinot noir and that special flavor from Bollinger's unique wood aging. The Dom Ruinart, '66, which followed was lighter, more elegant, more austere, and a bit more to my liking, although both were excellent and the group was split as to preference. A pair of Corton Charlemagnes followed from Louis Latour (Comtes de Grancey). The '69 was medium gold, with a marvelous, complex, full Chardonnay nose laced with smoked-bacon, butter-cream, and a touch of clove. It was full in the mouth, with crisp acidity, broad range of intense and fascinating flavors, and long finish with the special earthy taste that characterizes fine Corton Charlemagnes. The '70 was light gold, smaller, woodier, more austere in the nose, but with an off-scent that refused to clear and was the subject of controversy. Quite full in the mouth, it was softer and brighter than the '69, quite fruity, intense, and straightforward, and overall less impressive. As the empty plates were being cleared from a delicious 'Coulubiack de Saumon,' we got down to the serious business.

One of the great joys of wine-tasting is watching a great claret open like the petals of a gorgeous flower. Accordingly, we did not decant the wines in advance, except for the '61, which we knew would need more than an hour to emerge. The bottles had good levels of fill and seemed in good shape. All the corks were original, sound, and were easily removed, with the exception of the '29 which was soft, crumbly, and required an "Ah-So" corkpuller. Siphoning proceeded without a hitch (good to the last drop!) and soon everyone was sitting with a semi-circle of nine clarets.

Though the wines were not tasted blind, and the huge span of years made the task difficult, the group agreed to rank the wines in terms of overall quality: And that quality was high indeed! All wines were in the outstanding category, amazingly true to the vintage, true to the Château, and more youthful than we had anticipated. Here are my comments and rankings along with those of the group.



PHOTO BY: Rae Norman

Several vintages of Château Cheval Blanc with assorted culinary delights served at the dinner.

My Comments

Year

1929 Siphoned off a petrified forest of sediment. Light amber-orange with marked yellow rim. Marvelous aged nose of great and kaleidoscopic complexity. Still has fruit and charm, hints of creosote and spice, a not unpleasant touch of volatile acidity, and a lovely promise of sweetness. Quite full in the mouth, with good acidity, flavors paralleling the nose, round, slightly hot, concentrated, and a long spicy, fruity finish with still a touch of tannin. A great wine gracefully descending its peak.

My Rank: 3 Group Rank: 3

1947 Medium red, moderate density, moderately tawny rim. Initially closed in and dusty nose that began to open after 20 minutes and kept coming on with packed jams and berries and lush richness into a huge, intense, elixir-like and surprisingly youthful bouquet. Very full in the mouth, "hot" with alcohol, extremely concentrated, almost port-like, with a natural sweet essence (not residual sugar, as Paul Draper has verified in his lab) that is the hallmark of this particular wine, and a glorious and endless finish with considerable tannin. Hard to believe rumors of this going "over," properly stored bottles should still *improve*.

My Rank: 2 Group Rank: 1

1949 Medium red, not as dense as the '47, moderate tawny rim. Immediately accessible full, rich, elegant and integrated nose of berries and flowers. Haunting, lovely, perfection itself. Full in mouth, impeccable balance, flavors parallel the nose, intense, smooth, not as huge or alcoholic as the '47, but with more finesse. A year or so ago this wine was "asleep"—sound but innocuous. It is now absolutely at its peak and represents everything Cheval Blanc strives to be.

My Rank: 1 Group Rank: 2

1950 Slightly more youthful looking than the 1949; a controversial wine. I found the nose rather thin and distant with hints of spice and vanilla butter which became a bit more fruity with time. Medium body, good balance, lighter, more accessible and drinkable, but has lost the gracious fruitiness it had a couple of years ago which makes the tannin too prominent now.

My Rank: 8 Group Rank: 5

1952 Similar to the '50 in appearance. Initially seemed closed in, with hints of real size and packed fruit. However it never really opened, and resembled a very muted '49. Quite full in the mouth, with good acidity. The core has a residue of concentrated fruit and the echo of its past elegance, but it is on the way to becoming a tannin shell—at last succumbing to the fate of the '52 Médocs. Not everyone agreed.

My Rank: 9 Group Rank: 7

1953 Lighter red than the '52, and with a more marked tawny rim. Very much a '53 with soft, lush scents of fruit and flowers. Lovely. Medium full in mouth with quite good acidity, very soft and round, supple, velvety, complex, fully mature yet not in decline.

My Rank: 5 Group Rank: 4

1955 Many have found this Berry & Rudd English bottling to be superior to that of the Château. Similar in appearance to the 1953. Nose muted and elegant, with hints of berries and coffee. Medium body. Very similar in style to the '53, with soft, elegant and fine flavors, but even better acidity and longer finish (surprising for a '55). Most people preferred the '53.

My Rank: 4 Group Rank: 9

1961 Medium deep red, quite dense, only slight tawny rim. Decanted one hour in advance, it still took at least another hour to really start opening. Sleeping giant in all respects. Nose promises great concentration of fruit, and a special spicy eucalyptus scent that recalls Heitz Martha's Vineyard cabernets. Huge wine, fine acidity, very, very hard and undeveloped, loaded with tannin. Great future years away.

My Rank: 7 Group Rank: 6

1964 Medium red, not as dense as '61, only slight tawny rim. Very appealing, gracious, berry-rich, sweet, almost chocolate nose. So elegant. Full body, excellent acid, lovely soft center, with intense fruit shimmering all around. Quite developed and ready. Has always been and continues to be a real charmer.

My Rank: 6 Group Rank: 8

As you can see from the point scores the '47 and '49 were significantly off by themselves as the preferred wines, followed by the '29, and then a clustering of the rest. In a way it does violence to wines as beautiful as these to even attempt to rate them.

It's hard to improve on lamb as the accompaniment to fine claret, and Michael's 'Carré d'Agneau sauce Bearnaise' was beautifully rare and flavorful. Assorted triple crèmes and goat cheeses followed (brie, camembert, and most blues overpower fine clarets and burgundies) as the final salute to Cheval Blanc.

After a 'Salade d'Epinards avec Vinaigrette de Moutarde' and a 7th inning stretch, an exquisite amber bottle of Ch. de Rayne Vigneau '37, was poured. The nose was complex, lush, fully integrated, with myriad spices. On the palate it was full, perfectly balanced, rich, velvety, unctuous, sweet but not cloying, still loaded with fruit and not drying out. Nearly on a par with the great '37 Climens. My wife Josephine provided the perfect complement: an incredibly luscious Kinnow Mandarin Orange Filbert Cream cheese Tart. Then as coffee was being poured, a surprise from Paul Draper: his Ridge Zinfandel Essence, '68. What a way to finish! A port, with its high alcohol, might have blown us all away. This wine made from ultra-ripe grapes fermented to 5-10 per cent residual sugar and 14.5 per cent alcohol, provided intense zinfandel sweetness with graceful softness that allowed for the possibility that we would all be able to find our way home after eight hours at table. On the way out there was talk about repeating this tasting in a few years. Why not? It'll give me a chance to track down the '34 and '47.