

NAME DROPPER:

“*Château Mouton
Rothschild*”

CALL IT A FIRST GROWTH, UN PREMIER CRUS, SIMPLY BORDEAUX OR EVEN CLARET – CHÂTEAU MOUTON ROTHSCHILD IS ONE OF THE WORLD’S MOST NAME DROPPED WINES. BUT WHY WOULD ANYONE SPEND UPWARDS OF \$800 A BOTTLE FOR THE STUFF? CHRIS BARNES SPARES NO EXPENSE EXPLAINING MOUTON ROTHSCHILD’S ‘JE NE SAIS QUOI’.

Words **Chris Barnes**

Imagine a football world where the league ladder was set for all time in stone. Imagine if the ruling powers of AFL or NRL said Collingwood or the Rabbitohs were to be forever at the top of the ladder. Or even worse, what if they were to be forever excluded from the big league and consigned to the country! Well that’s what happened to the great red wines of Bordeaux in 1855. With one famous exception; Château Mouton Rothschild in the Pauillac district of Bordeaux.

In Bordeaux, the home of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in South West France, in 1855, the famous ‘Classification Conference’ took place. This was a massive tasting and talk fest over some months that decided the existing vineyards of the region could all be classified in a hierarchy of quality. The obvious reason for this was to fix forever, not only quality and price, but the most valuable asset of all, prestige.

The classification was split into five levels, or ‘Crus’ (or ‘Growths’ in English), and within each of these were listed individual vineyards identified by their owner’s property name, or ‘Château’. So almost overnight there was a very complex list of well over 50 Chateaux from across Bordeaux, with each producer knowing that for evermore he would be considered at a specific level, from Premier through to Cinquieme Cru, or in English, First through to Fifth Growth.

This created a very comfortable market for the Negotiants of that port city in their

trade with England and the rest of the world. The fact that wars came and went and vineyards, winemakers and seasons changed was of no importance. The Classification was the Classification and that was that! Until in 1922 a young man from a famous family became agitated.

In that year the 20 year old son of the famous business and banking family Rothschild took control of the Château Mouton Rothschild. The property had been in the family’s hands since 1853, just two years before it had been consigned to Second Growth status forever, or so they thought. The young Phillippe Rothschild was different from most of the Château owners of the day; he took an interest in the wine! Of course his compatriots needed no interest in, or knowledge of, wines or vineyards, after all the price was set and had been for generations.

By 1924 Phillippe had introduced bottling at the Château itself, rather than by the Negotiants at the port, to protect quality. Then two years later he built a huge underground ‘Chais’ or cellar to ensure the wines in barrel could mature in cool conditions. The Baron also turned his attention to blending and the vineyard. He began to understand the basis of quality in the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot vines that formed the backbone of this increasingly regarded wine.

As the world descended into the darkness of the late 1930s and war, Château Mouton Rothschild was considered to be almost as

good as many of its First Growth cousins, but of course could never be as valuable, it was still a ‘Second’. In fact, one of the critics of the time, Englishman, P Morton Shand, in *A Book of Wine* said of the wine;

“A monument to perfection to the life long labours of the ‘Napoleon of the Vine’”, while at the same time lamenting the overproduction of some of the First Growth Châteaux. No wonder Baron Phillippe became a Provocateur for change! But before that WWII intervened and a result that was to forever seal the fame of this label.

In 1945 the Nazis were defeated and France liberated, so the Gods celebrated with one of the great vintages of all time in Bordeaux. The Baron decided that these two events should be commemorated on the label and the tradition of Mouton Rothschild’s Artist labels was born. The first one bore a golden V for victory in a strip of painting above the label. Since 1945 the list of artists who have featured on the labels is a who’s who of modern art. Miro, Chagall, Warhol, Braque, Picasso and others have graced subsequent vintages, often at times when their names were unknown outside the avant-garde.

Now it was time to make the impossible happen; that Mouton should be a First Growth. The Baron devoted his formidable energy to this task of elevation, and finally after decades of work he succeeded in 1973 to have Château Mouton Rothschild recognised as a Premier Cru of Bordeaux.

During those years and in the 1980s the wines of Mouton and the Baron himself had an influence on the whole world of wine. The patriarch of the Californian wine industry, Robert Mondavi was influenced by the Baron in his pursuit of great Cabernet Sauvignon and in patronage of the arts. In Australia the inspiration took hold in places as far apart as Margaret River and the Yarra Valley.

In both regions the 1970s and 80s saw Cabernet Sauvignon and its blending partners Merlot, Malbec, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot planted with the idea of

making “Bordeaux Style”. These wines are usually dominated by about 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, with the other varieties making up the rest, although Merlot is usually the second most important in the blend. The exact percentages will depend on what’s planted in the vineyards or what’s available in terms of quality and quantity from vintage to vintage.

On top of the varietal mix there is another essential in the making of wines in the Bordeaux style of Mouton Rothschild – French oak. The use of new, small barrels of oak from the forests of France only began



Since 1945 the list of artists who have featured on the labels is a who’s who of modern art. Miro, Chagall, Warhol, Braque, Picasso and others have graced subsequent vintages, often at times when their names were unknown outside the avant-garde.

in Australia in the late 1950s and wasn’t in common use till the 1980s. Now the use of all new oak or a proportion of new and old oak in the maturation of these Bordeaux style wines is essential to soften tannins and add another dimension of flavour.

It’s not surprising that the most Bordeaux like of Australia’s Cabernets come from Margaret River. After all, the region was specifically identified in the late 1960s as the most akin to Bordeaux in this country in terms of climate and soil type. This led to labels such as Cullen, Vasse Felix, Moss Wood and Leeuwin making Cabernet blends that are now considered some of the

best in the world.

The Cullen’s Dianna Madeleine Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 is perhaps Cullen’s best-known wine; this blend was recently included in the prestigious Langton Classification of Australian Wines. The vines planted in 1971 are 30 years old. On average the yields are around two tonnes per acre, or 26 hectolitres per hectare, giving great concentration to the wine. The wine is typically a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc. The varieties are vinified separately and matured in French oak for 18 months. The result is a deeply coloured wine with great depth of flavour, fine grain tannins and outstanding cellaring potential.

The most obvious homage to Château Mouton Rothschild is Leeuwin Estate, one of the founding wineries of Margaret River. Not only does Denis Horgan make an outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon that has real Bordeaux characters of cigar box and complex tannins when aged, but the labels of Leeuwin Cabernet Sauvignon are

all in their “Art Series”. They feature and foster modern Australian artists in a strip at the top of the label, in the same way the Baron began to feature art in 1945. What’s more, the winery hosts concerts and art exhibitions that further celebrate the link between all things creative.

Thankfully for us the wines of Margaret River, or any other Australian wine region, have never had to contend with a “League Ladder” of wine that’s fixed in stone. Instead, they have been able to concentrate on the important matter of wine; improving quality and giving us wines that are of world standing. ■