



BROADBENT

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RIP Serge Hochar

Bad news travels horribly fast. Thanks to a call from an audibly shaken Michael Broadbent, I was given to understand that Serge Hochar of Chateau Musar suffered a fatal accident while swimming on a New Year's holiday in Acapulco, Mexico to celebrate his 75th birthday last November. By the time of the call about an hour ago Twitter was already populated with tributes to this quite remarkable man.

Serge was so much more than a wine-maker and the driving force behind Lebanon's best-known winery. He had a strong spiritual character, but was very far from ascetic – positively impish in fact. Always great fun, he gave the impression of having a deep understanding of human nature and of understanding much more than superficialities. I always enjoyed his company enormously on the many occasions our paths crossed and we talked about very much more than wine matters.

I spent the most concentrated time with him way back in September 1980 when he – some would say recklessly – invited me and the late Tony Lord, then editor of Decanter magazine, to visit his family's winery in Lebanon. We had to pass through many an armed checkpoint to reach it in a suburb of Beirut. The city's walls then were already pockmarked by the scars of war but the Lebanese spirit was alive and well. On the first night he

took us to a glamorous outdoor restaurant overlooking the city. No-one even blinked when we heard sinister booms in the distance and the lights went out for a few minutes. I remember Serge insisting I try the local speciality of raw liver – a mistake that I certainly don't hold against him.

If I remember correctly, Serge was running the Leonidas chocolates concession in a smart boutique on the ground floor of the apartment block where he lived, but in terms of wine he was most famous for continuing to truck grapes from the Bekaa Valley where they were all then grown to his winery in Beirut throughout the civil war of 1975 to 1990. As a direct result, in 1984 publisher Colin Parnell made Serge Decanter's first-ever Man of the Year, and he continued to play a part in the elevation and celebrations of his successors. We will miss him horribly.

Chateau Musar was created by Serge's father Gaston who planted his first vines in 1930 and was particularly inspired by Ronald Barton of Chateau Léoville Barton who was stationed in Lebanon during the second world war. Gaston's oldest son originally studied engineering (as did both Serge's sons Gaston and Marc) but soon became determined to study at the feet of Emile Peynaud in Bordeaux. He somehow persuaded his father to move aside so that by 1959 he was officially Chateau Musar's winemaker, declaring, 'I want to make the wine my way, and I want it to be known worldwide.'

He achieved both these aims and by 1977 he claims to have developed the recipe for Musar reds. Musar's are some of the world's most distinctive wines – you love them or are bemused by them. They seem proud to have escaped the winds of modern winemaking fashion. Wines of all colours (and they tend to brown relatively early) are designed to age much longer than most – they are still selling wines from the 1950s according to their website www.chateaumusar.com - and they seem to delight in their defiantly unmanipulated character. The red is a blend of fruit from old Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan and Cinsault bushvines and the even more unusual deep gold wines are oak-fermented blends of the local Obaideh and Merwah varieties.

The links between the Hochar and Broadbent families have been particularly strong ever since Michael B declared Chateau Musar 1967 red 'the find of the fair' after the seminal Bristol wine trade fair in 1979. Michael served Musar at his 75th birthday dinner in London's Vintners' Hall and his son Bartholomew who has represented Musar wines in the US for decades has been lamenting the loss of 'my second father' on social media.

Serge's son Gaston now manages the day-to-day running of the Chateau Musar winery, his brother Marc its commercial aspects, taking over from Serge's brother Ronald. I wish them the very, very best.

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By Jancis Robinson, jancisrobinson.com; January 1, 2015