



BROADBENT

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THE POUR

## From Strife-Marked Vineyards



SERGE HOCHAR WITH HIS CHÂTEAU MUSAR AT THE SPOTTED PIG.

By ERIC ASIMOV  
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IN his 72 years, Serge Hochar has produced 53 vintages of Château Musar, a wine that has enthralled several generations only partly because of its unusual provenance, the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

On a whirlwind visit to New York last week, he conducted a late-night tasting at the Blue Ribbon wine bar, poured wines at a dinner at the Spotted Pig and led a lunchtime serving of older vintages at the John Dory, all in less than 48 hours. At the Spotted Pig, Mr. Hochar shared some of his hard-earned wisdom with a predomi-

nantly young crowd that seemed to hang on every word.

“I know nothing about wine,” he said. “I know how to make wine, but I know nothing about wine, and each day I discover that I know less.”



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It was an unusual message in a world that seems so wedded to technical facts and certainty. Far more often wine discussions center on easily discernible questions of pH and acidity, the source of wood for barrels, fermentation temperatures and viticultural techniques. But Mr. Hochar, slender and natty in a gray suit and red tie, was having none of that.

Instead, he spoke in gnomic phrases, which perhaps did little to further an understanding of precisely how Musar is made, but did much to explain why his audience, and I, find his wines compelling.

“He’s like a philosopher in a way,” said Christy Frank, who discovered Musar as a business school student and now runs a wine shop, Frankly Wines, in TriBeCa, which is adorned with an image of Musar in stained glass. “I love that he never answers the question he’s asked but always takes it to another level and makes it about life rather than about wine.”

The wines themselves are remarkable. The red, a blend of cabernet sauvignon with cinsault and carignan, is like an otherworldly Bordeaux — rich, ripe, lightly spicy with its own peculiar funk that people tend to love or hate. The white is even more unusual, made of obaideh and merwah, ancient indigenous grapes. Both are complex and worthy of long aging.

But just as significant was the Musar story. Through the decades of strife that engulfed Lebanon, Mr. Hochar continued making his family’s wines. Aside from the general astonishment that wines so good could come from so unheralded a viticultural source, Château Musar became an emblem of perseverance and human achievement in the wake of dehumanizing conflict.

Now, as Lebanon has quieted down, a new generation has fallen in love with the wines of Musar. The wines themselves

exert their charms, of course, but much of the allure comes from Mr. Hochar’s way of doing business, of making his own rules and persuading his audience through the power of his charisma.

At the Spotted Pig dinner, for example, he insisted on reversing the usual order of food and wine service. After beginning with appetizers and Musar’s Jeune Rosé and Jeune Blanc, which Mr. Hochar described as modern wines made at the behest of Musar’s winemaker, the next course was char-grilled lamb with Swiss chard, zaatar yogurt and a compote of black olives and tomatoes, served with three vintages of Musar red. This was followed by quail marinated in cinnamon and saffron, served with three vintages of Musar white.

“Once you taste the wines, you’ll understand why my white is my biggest red,” he explained.

It’s the sort of wisdom that endears him to fans, like Carla Rzeszewski, the wine director at the Spotted Pig, who, with the chef, April Bloomfield, spent four days putting together the brilliant menu to go with the wines.

“I think I fell in love with these wines before I knew Serge,” Ms. Rzeszewski said. “But I think the wine follows the winemaker, if the wine is honest and true and raw.”

Of the three reds, all delicious with the lamb, the 2001 was lovely, pure and very young, all elbows and knees. The 2000 had a touch of characteristic funk to it, yet seemed even more disjointed than the ’01. By contrast the 1993 was mellow and fully integrated, with a core of fruit augmented by subtle earthy, almost animal aromas and an attractive funkiness that seemed to stem primarily from volatile acidity, or V.A., a quality that when too pronounced can be a flaw. But Mr.

Hochar sees it differently.

“Wine is such a complex thing, and V.A. is part of wine,” Mr. Hochar said. “If you have none, it’s a flaw. It’s part of fermentation. It’s a question of balance. Life is harmony.”

After the reds came the quail and the white wines. Indeed, as Mr. Hochar suggested, they were bigger than the reds — not more alcoholic, but richer. At room temperature, their texture and opaque complexity reminded me of good white Bordeaux or the white Riojas of López de Heredia. The ’04 had a slightly honeyed quality yet was stone dry. The ’03 offered more mineral flavors, while the ’01 seemed to lack a bit of harmony. Best of all was an older white served with the cheese, a gorgeous 1975 that had the same sweet-yet-dry quality as the ’04.

“As they grow older, they grow younger,” Mr. Hochar said.

The one consistent thing about the wines is how inconsistent they are, as Mr. Hochar might say. Each vintage is profoundly individual, partly, no doubt, because wine from Lebanon, one of the oldest wine regions in the world, is so unusual, and partly because Mr. Hochar makes so little use of modern winemaking techniques, which might serve to file away Musar’s distinctive edges.

“The dimension of taste in Lebanon is different than anywhere else,” he said. “Not better, but different. Better has no meaning.”

In a world full of wines trying to be the best, many people find it refreshing to see a wine simply trying to be itself.

“Everybody is hungry for something that’s just honest,” Ms. Rzeszewski said, “that’s forthcoming about where it comes from, instead of just being polished.”



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**Diner's Journal**

Notes on Eating, Drinking and Cooking

DINING & WINE

## Traveling the World, Bottles Full of Miracles

By ERIC ASIMOV

April 2, 2012

Serge Hochar, the guiding spirit of Château Musar, is 72 years old. It only seems as if he's been spreading the gospel of Musar for that long. In fact, Musar, made in Beirut from grapes grown in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, is a singular wine that is almost as remarkable as Mr. Hochar himself.

My column this week is about Musar and Mr. Hochar, who passed quickly through New York last week. In his wake he left a trail of awe-inspired Musar fans, many of whom are wine professionals, drawn in not only by the wines but by Mr. Hochar's flights of philosophical fancy.

"He speaks the god's honest truth about wine, but then leads you down a path that not even a serpent can navigate," Paul Grieco writes on his wine list at Hearth, which includes a nice selection of older Musars. "He crafts heavenly grape juice that is sometimes not appropriate for human consumption."

Mr. Hochar's contradictions, and Musar's, are essential to their appeal.

Whether he always makes rational sense or not, he and Musar are proof that wine is more than a collection of aromas and flavors. They stand for the idea that what's in a glass is more than the methodology of the winemaker and the equipment used.

"When you feel emotions through a wine, it's very important," he told a small group who gathered at the Spotted Pig for dinner and Musar last week. "The mystery of wine? I will go beyond mystery and use a stronger word, the miracle of wine."

It would be easy for a cynic to dismiss Mr. Hochar and Musar as the products of so much hype. Yet I can't help but agree with Mr. Hochar. Great wine is emotional, not merely rational, and romance — taking risks — is an essential feature.

"When you make wine, you gamble," he said. "You don't know where it's going to go. It's the power of nature. The miracle of wine goes to the miracle of life, it goes beyond understanding, it

makes you a believer."

Indeed, great wines do that, and many people feel validated by Musar and Mr. Hochar.

"When he comes through the country, or when he goes on any of his travels, there's this wave of Serge," said Christy Frank, a fan who sells Musar at her shop, Frankly Wines, in TriBeCa. "It's like a tsunami."

After New York, Mr. Hochar was bound for Texas and a quick tour of the United States before heading back to Beirut. He is constantly on the road. In May, he is planning a trip to Lourdes in France — he goes every year — then back to Beirut, on to London, then Hong Kong, South Korea and China. After returning to Lebanon, he will head to Turkey, Paris, Lebanon again, then Brazil.

Where does he get the energy?

"You wouldn't understand," he said. "You are too young."