



BROADBENT

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Palm Beach Daily News

The Spice of Life

Lebanese wines, with cuisine influenced by Turkey, Asia and France, satisfy

BY PAUL WILLIAM COOMBS // PHOTOS BY MEGHAN MCCARTHY // SUNDAY, NOV. 1, 2015

The Bekaa Valley lies at the northern end of the Great Rift Valley—75 miles long and stretching through eastern Lebanon to Syria in the north.

The news from 1975 to 1990 was full of the civil war in Lebanon. Now the news is full of terrorist groups, bombings and killings in neighboring countries and the flood of refugees throughout the region. It's not an obvious place to find a thriving wine growing area, but we did.

Château Musar occupies 371 acres at the south end of the valley, about 15 miles north of Beirut. Founded by Gaston Hochar in 1930, it remains a family business best known internationally for its red wines.

Grandson Marc Hochar was our host at Café Boulud at the Brazilian Court, together with Chef Sommelier Mariya Kovacheva, as the evening was part of a Wine Route series of tastings.

Turkish-inspired Mezze

Chef de Cuisine Rick Mace explained that he had spent a year in Turkey learning about the culinary influences of the eastern Mediterranean, so developing the evening's menu had been an exciting challenge. Spices from Asia, lamb and yogurt from the Ottoman Turks, and tarts and custards from France all provided culinary influences.



Chef Sommelier Mariya Kovacheva, Chef de Cuisine Rick Mace, and Marc Hochar of Château Musar

Mace had decided on a traditional start to the dinner with Mezze, including marinated clams, tarator and spiced chickpeas. This was paired with Château Musar Cuvée Blanc, Bekaa Valley 2004.

Made from the ancient indigenous grape varieties Merwah and Obaideh, it

was a gentle pale gold in the glass. The nose showed citrus, honey and plenty of white fruit and flowers that came through in the palate as a dry, full wine, rich in texture. The palate was an interesting mix of fresh pears and rich figs that worked well with the contrasting flavors of the Mezze.

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Sophisticated pairing

Château Musar made its name from its Cuvée Rouge, so it was interesting to sample two consecutive vintages that were so different. They were a blend of cabernet sauvignon, carignan and cinsault from vineyards near the villages of Aana and Kefraya.

The wine's varietal components are fermented in cement vats for 6 months, then transferred to French oak barrels for 12 months. After blending, the wine is placed in cement tanks for 12 months, then bottled.

The 1999 and 1998 vintages had been opened three hours earlier and double decanted, but they still evolved noticeably during the tasting.

The 1999 vintage was paired with Kibbeh Lakteen: diced lamb and vegetables encased in a bulgur (you may know this dried cracked wheat as Dalia from northern India) and pumpkin dough and cooked in oil. This slightly spicy dish went well with the 1999 vintage, which was dominated by the cabernet sauvignon with a nose and palate of black fruits and fresh figs, although pepper and spice started to show toward the end of the evening. This is a wine that will keep for many years and should develop well.

The 1998 vintage was a lot more approachable, full of fruit and reflecting the cinsault grapes, showing violets, red cherries and Victoria plums that produced a rounded, elegant wine more typical of Bordeaux than Rhône. It was paired with tarte aux prune, a light pastry case filled with almond marzipan mousse, topped with sliced fresh plums and served with honey-scented ice cream. I enjoyed this sophisticated pairing very much.



Less aging, younger vines

Earlier in the tasting we sampled a younger wine from Château Musar: the Hochar Pere & Fils, Bekaa Valley 2009. This was made from cinsault (30 percent), grenache (30 percent), carignan (10 percent) and cabernet sauvignon (10 percent) grapes sourced from a single 50-year-old vineyard that reflects its gravelly soil.

It was a pleasant blend of dark fruit, chocolate and spices, with some tannin in the finish. It was paired with foie gras chaud, with baklava and honey, pomegranate and ground sumac. The honey provided the sweetness that usually occurs in wines paired with foie gras, so this lighter red wine was something different.

We also sampled the Musar Jeune Rosé, Bekaa Valley 2013 and L'Arak de Musar, Lebanon, before and after the meal respectively. The rosé had more depth and interest than most wines of this type, reflecting red fruits but a pleasant dryness in the finish. The Arak was a colorless, unsweetened, anise-flavored



Tarte aux prune: fresh plums, honey-scented ice cream and almond marzipan mousse.

digestive that is traditional in Lebanon. It had been distilled four times, with the anise seeds added during the final distillation; better with a little water, it added to an enjoyable evening.