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SERGE HOCHAR, THE BRAVE KNIGHT OF LEBANON

Serge Hochar's ancestors were Crusaders and he wears the pin of the Knights of Malta. That martial background helps when there are battle tanks in your vineyard. // BY KATHERINE COLE



How did you first become involved in your family winery?

I am one of five children: [I have] one brother and three sisters. We were raised in a very traditional family atmosphere. When I was 12, 13, 14, I went to work in the winery. I used to go and hand-wash the bottles with the workers. And also during harvest I would come to the winery and help. I learned how to put the grapes in the crusher and the press. In those days, everything was done manually. Officially, I entered the industry at 18 because my father wanted me to take care of the winery. I said: "Yes, but on one condition – that you retire." So he gave me a free hand and

I was responsible. The minute I entered, I said: "I will make the wine naturally. No additives, no fining, no filtration, no sulfur. Nothing." This upset my winemaker. He went to my father and complained. My father said: "Tough. You have to do what Serge says. He is in charge now."

Your heritage is French. How did your family come to settle in Lebanon?

The Hochar family comes from Picardy in [northern] France. My ancestors were knights who traveled here during the Crusades. And they stayed. Lebanon was maybe the world's first "melting pot."

You are on your 55th vintage at Chateau Musar. What about winegrowing has changed since you began?

Global warming. In 2010, we had a week in July in which the temperature went up to 48 degrees centigrade (118F). This destroyed 35 percent of our crop. This made me very worried about the future of the grapes in Lebanon. If global warming continues in this direction, in 50 years we will not be able to produce grapes at all. Fifty years ago, I used to harvest after the 15th of September; 10 years ago, we were harvesting the first week of September. Now we are harvesting whites in early August and reds starting in mid-August. This is worrying. It is my main concern. I intend to develop new vineyards at higher altitudes. But I cannot yet assess exactly what will be the outcome. Our white grapes, Obaideh and Merwah, are already growing at elevations as high as 4000 feet.

Your part of the world has seen its share of turmoil since you've been running the winery. I understand you lost two entire vintages, 1976 and 1984, to the Lebanese civil war.

In fact, we just lost one vintage. In 1976, we could not produce because there was no electricity and the roads were impassable. In 1984, we could not get to the grapes until the 23rd of October, by which time the grapes were raisined. I fermented the wine anyway. It was odd, quite acidic, with high residual sugar. In fact, it had such high

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From Winesearcher.com, June, 2014



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volatile acidity and residual sugar that it, in effect, ended up as a Madeira. After two and a half years, I said: "I should throw out this wine or else bottle it." I decided finally to bottle it. I bottled something like 1000 cases. I never thought to sell it. But ... four years ago, there was a tasting in Washington for sommeliers. I could not make it, but my agent in Florida sent six bottles of 1984, which he had stashed away. Three months later I received the magazine *Sommelier Journal*. They mentioned that they could not understand the 1984 until after the tasting, when they tasted it again and were thrilled by it because it had opened up. Paul Grieco (owner of *Hearth* and the *Terroir* wine bars in New York) said: "Serge, if you ship this wine to me, I will list it at my restaurant." So, after Paul's request, we have just released the 1984 in the United States.

Four years after the outbreak of the Civil War, in 1979, Michael Broadbent MW discovered your wines and gushed over them in *Decanter* magazine. Did this open up a new market for your wines?

Yes. To make it simple, in 1975, we were selling 97 percent of our production in Lebanon. But when the war began and the wine market started to disappear, we had no choice but to look for markets outside of Lebanon. When the war end-

ed in 1990, I was selling 97 percent of my wines in the outside world and just 3 percent in Lebanon.

Did bombs ever fall on your vineyard or winery? Was the wine affected?

The war did not affect the wine. The family, yes, but it did not affect the wine. Yeast makes wine, war or no war. Wine does not care. Once, while we were tasting, shells started to fall all around us. It troubled my brain and the way I was tasting. So the war did not affect the wine but it did affect my ability to taste. And yes, at certain times, Israeli tanks were in our vineyards. But I never worried. In those years, our underground cave was used as a bomb shelter for the people of the village. Yes, we had shells landing very close to the winery. We just had to believe.

You eventually sent your wife and children to live in France for seven years while you stayed in Lebanon and kept the winery running. I can't imagine how difficult that time must have been for you. And yet your attitude is so sunny.

I like to say that my HPF wine – *Hochar Père et Fils* – stands for "happy, positive and funny." Any person I meet I will joke with.

Now the Syrian civil war is happening next door. You don't get a break, do you?

We received an influx of Armenians after World War I and Palestinians in 1948. But over just the past two years, we have absorbed 1.3 million Syrian refugees. Adding that to a population of just 4 million, this has put our economy under a great deal of stress. Lebanon has been a country of refuge throughout history; this is why we accept it. Iraq, Jordan and Turkey are much larger than Lebanon. They could absorb many more refugees. But they don't take them. It is a problem. Lebanon is a small country and we cannot absorb all of these people.

Critics have asserted that your wine is high in VA and Brett. How do you respond to these accusations?

Ten thousand people have asked me this question. Once, a man who was a great taster and painter painted a portrait of me holding a bottle next to a horse. This is the farmyard smell of *Chateau Musar*. It is fun. Wine is fun. I don't care. All I care is that you enjoy the wine.

Why do you say that your white is your biggest red?

We pick the *Chateau Musar* White fruit around the 15th of October. The grapes get two more months of sunshine, so the wines have more tannins than the reds.

What do you drink at home?

I don't drink with my wife. She is allergic to wine. She found this out after we were married. I taste everything but I don't drink. I have stopped buying new wines. I don't want to know any more.

What was your happiest moment?

It was to be born. Because I did not want to come out. The doctor had to use forceps. He made two holes in my brain. This is why I came out as a crazy guy.

What is your greatest regret?

Nothing. I have no regrets. If you start with regrets, you end up with only regrets.