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# review

## CHÂTEAU LA MISSION HAUT-BRION 1943-2000 by Stephen Brook

La Mission Haut-Brion is one of a handful of properties within the city limits of Bordeaux. As its name suggests, Haut-Brion is a neighbor, and since 1983 the two properties have been under the same ownership. It has always intrigued Bordeaux drinkers that two estates so close to each other should produce wines that are very different indeed. Although La Mission has been in existence since at least the 1540s, its modern era dates from just after World War I, when it was acquired by the Woltner family. Henri Woltner ran La Mission from 1933 until 1974, when his daughter-in-law took over. Although some good wines were made in the 1970s, this was no golden period for La Mission, and investment came to a halt as family members squabbled among themselves. In 1983 the estate was bought by the Dillon family of Haut-Brion. Today the wine is made by

the same team that is responsible for the first growth.

The mysteries of terroir make it difficult to establish why the character of La Mission differs from that of its neighbor. The terrain is flatter than that of Haut-Brion, although the latter is hardly planted on rolling hills, and the soil is both stonier and richer. To reduce the natural vigor of the vines, they are planted to a higher density than those of Haut-Brion, at around 10,000 vines per hectare. For the same reason, there is slightly more bunch-thinning during the summer months. The vines occupy 21ha, about half the area of Haut-Brion; there are roughly equal proportions of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and about 7 percent of Cabernet Franc. The vines are not especially old, having an average age of just over 20 years.

Jean-Bernard Delmas of Haut-Brion

(succeeded a few years ago by his son Jean-Philippe) did make some changes after the Dillons bought La Mission. Haut-Brion had been a pioneer of double-decker stainless-steel tanks, which Delmas had designed specifically for the winery, and in 1987 La Mission, too, was equipped with similar tanks. Under the Woltners, the wine was never aged in entirely new oak, but Delmas changed that, too, and with very rare exceptions (such as 2003), the wine is aged for at least 20 months in 100 percent new oak. Production varies from 6,000 to 8,000 cases, and there is also a second wine called La Chapelle de la Mission Haut-Brion. As at Haut-Brion, there is also a small production of white wine, in this case the prized Laville Haut-Brion.

Now that the Delmas team has been producing La Mission for more than two decades, the differences between the two estates are more transparent. La Mission has more muscle, more tannic grip, whereas Haut-Brion has more succulence, more finesse, and a rounder texture. The differences were probably more marked under the Woltners, since Henri Woltner was no fan of late harvesting, and the grapes would have been picked slightly earlier than those next door; this, too, may partly account for the robust tannins of La Mission. Although no one would dispute that Haut-Brion is fully deserving of its first-growth status, there are vintages when the quality of La Mission comes very close indeed. It is at the very least of super-second quality and status, and this is reflected in the price of the wine.

This tasting (organized by Linden Wilkie of The Fine Wine Experience in London) was in many ways a revelation, since with one exception, the wines were far from tired out. Nor was there any lack of complexity. With the benefit of hindsight, one could hazard a guess that some of the Woltner-era wines might have been quite tough in their youth, but they have aged extremely well. Under Delmas, the tannins of La Mission, while undoubtedly present, are also kept in check. There is no coarseness in modern-day La Mission. At its best, it's a wine that can have the same sensual appeal as Haut-

Brion, especially aromatically, as the following notes on a fascinating tasting should make clear.

### THE TASTING

**2000** No sign of evolution in color, which is deep plum-red. The nose is rich and sumptuous, very marked by new oak, sweet and beguiling, and with unexpected charm and finesse. Although firmly tannic and powerfully structured, there is no lack of sweet fruit and an appealing acidic bite. Far too young to give great pleasure (other than aromatically), this has enormous potential. The very long finish shows tremendous grip; is this the Cabernet talking or the terroir? **19**

**1998** Initially far more closed on the nose than the 2000, the aromas unfurled with aeration to show solid plum and blackcurrant fruit, backed by new oak and a touch of mint, and even a slight herbal character. The texture is sleek, but the tannins are overt. Less full-bodied than the 2000, this has fine acidity and persistence; it may be a touch lean, but it's very elegant—a Graves classic that should keep extremely well. Give it time. **18**

**1990** A slightly atypical bottle, I suspect. The color, though deep, showed considerable evolution. There was also a hint of herbaceousness on the nose, whereas previous tastings of this vintage have shown a rich, almost decadent earthiness—classic Graves aromas. The palate was far less evolved than the color, with a sweetness of fruit supported by firm tannins that led to an austere finish. The acidity is not that apparent, but the wine is certainly not flagging, and there are some appealing tobacco and spice flavors. The finish is long but not exceptionally so. **18**

**1989** Although even more evolved in color than the 1990, with some brick

tones, the nose was ravishing: leafy scents of undergrowth and truffles, coffee and cocoa. It was hard to stop inhaling. The palate is more closed, even rugged, with great intensity of flavor and purity of fruit, as well as firm tannins and considerable persistence. What it seemed to lack was some complexity and finesse. Other tasters present with more experience of this vintage also expressed a slight disappointment and suggested that this bottle was slightly below par, though not evidently faulty. **17.5**

**1985** The color, surprisingly, shows less evolution than the 1989. The nose was quite toasty, with aromas of cedar and tobacco, and a slightly baked tone, though it was in no way jammy. On the palate, this is absolutely delicious, with a fine attack, a sweet and open texture, an intensity that came close to raciness, and again that La Mission grip on the finish. Yet the overall impression is one of harmony and elegance. Drinkable now, but it will clearly keep well. **18.5**

**1982** Despite considerable maturity of color, the robe was extremely dense, almost opaque. The nose oozed sensuousness: discreetly herbaceous, with light tobacco tones, and very Graves-like in its sweet mulchy character. There are mighty tannins still powering this wine, yet it was also lush and sweet, smoky and very intense, with the fruit still very much to the fore and a very long chewy aftertaste. This has the hedonistic appeal of the top 1982s, and there is no sign of the fatigue some have predicted for this vintage. This has opulence and glamor, albeit in a Mae West style. **19**

**1975** The color resembles the 1982, though slightly less opaque. There's real complexity on the nose, which is sweet and leafy, even floral, intense and elegant, with aromas of coffee and woodsmoke. The notorious

tannins of the 1975 vintage are certainly here, but there is no harshness. The wine is lean and incisive, with bite and vigor. Despite the sweetness of fruit, there is a slight dryness on the finish, but this is still a very impressive 1975. **18**

**1964** This really does look its age, with some orange tints on the rim. Yet the nose was enchanting, with its light truffley tone, its delicacy and elegance, perhaps a hint of iodine. A rainy autumn compromised what could have been an excellent year, but La Mission has come through well, with weight and freshness, a sleek texture, fine concentration, and a long sweet finish. But it's clearly at its peak, perfect to drink now, and unlikely to improve further. **18**

**1962** Lightly corked and mushroomy on the nose, this was hard to assess. It seems medium-bodied and translucent in structure, but a dry, faded finish undermined the few positive qualities that survived the cork taint. **NS**

**1945** Brick-red in color, yet bright and clear. The nose is remarkable, still rich and sumptuous, with an intensely truffley aroma and that typical Graves leafiness; though mature, it hardly seems tired or flagging. The attack is fine, the concentration impressive, the acidity firm without being aggressive, the core of fruit sweet and persistent, and the finish robust and long. Probably at its peak, though still going strong. **18.5**

**1943** Brick-red, yet surprisingly dense. The nose was tired but not musty; it just lacked freshness and zest. The attack is remarkably sweet, the texture still quite lush, the tannins hefty, and the fruit touched by smokiness. There is slight maderization here, but the wine remains readable, as it were, and still pleasurable, despite some dryness on the finish. Drink up. **16.5**



Notre-Dame de Haut-Brion, the chapel built by the priests of the Mission, who inherited the estate in 1664

Photograph courtesy of Domaine Clarence Dillon