

What's in a Name? : Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Review of The Fine Wine Experience Ch. Laville Haut-Brion, Ch. La Tour Haut-Brion, Ch. La Mission Haut-Brion dinner, Amuse Bouche, Wanchai, Hong Kong, 2nd September 2015

Unlike Burgundy where names like Clos Vougeot and Pommard Rugiens stand immortal while *domaines* and *negocients* come and go, Bordeaux is a more fluid thing, if you'll pardon the pun. Château Laville Haut-Brion no longer exists under that name, but rather as Château La Mission Haut-Brion *Blanc*. Meanwhile, Château La Tour Haut-Brion, our focus tonight, no longer exists at all, it being swallowed up into Château La Mission Haut-Brion for the second label, La Chapelle de la Mission Haut-Brion (though with the potential for some of it to enter the *grand vin* label some day). To complicate matters still further, Château La Tour Haut-Brion bore two quite different personalities – a concentrated, if rustic red under the Woltners (1935-1983), and a more elegant, but less substantial red under the aegis of Clarence Dillon from 1983 until the label's demise in 2005. More on that in a bit...

In any case, everything we tasted tonight came from one collection of unassuming gravelly vineyards either side of the Avenue Jean Jaurès in Bordeaux. Nominally this is Talence, once no doubt a distinct locale of rural France, but now enveloped in Bordeaux city's suburban sprawl. It's a place once famed for its vineyards, but now almost viticulturally extinct, vines having given way to dreary light industry, railway, shops and apartment blocks. If you head out from the Quai de Chartons through endless sets of traffic lights, the sudden appearance of Château La Mission Haut-Brion on your left and Haut-Brion on your right come as something of a surprise.



We began this evening's dinner with four whites from Château Laville Haut-Brion (which since 2009 has been renamed Château La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc... ka-ching!). While its neighbour in the stable, Château Haut-Brion Blanc can be fine with food, I often think of it as a great aperitif, or 'meditational' wine – i.e. a wine just to enjoy on its own, or with a very simple food accompaniment. Laville on the other hand I think of as a great gastronomic wine, and these four didn't let us down tonight. They showed Laville's delicacy, but also its underlying power. Just right for food.

1995 Château Laville Haut-Brion

Creamy and fragrant, this has evolved nicely and is in a perfect state of evolution in bottle. Still zesty, lanolin note, citrusy, gently creamy. It's fragrance is a little more Haut-Brion Blanc-like than usual. Not quite the full level of intensity Laville can deliver however. Very good.

91

One vote for white wine of the night.

1985 Château Laville Haut-Brion

Fresh, creamy nose, lanolin, low key, but very fine; this is very fine indeed on the palate, a good juicy mid-palate feel, a little oak creaminess and in the phenolics on the finish. Really love freshness and subtle complexity, and the sense of harmony, balance and length are just right. A very fine Laville.

95

Eight votes for white wine of the night

1982 Château Laville Haut-Brion

A touch more colour than the other three, but still bright, limpid; a toasty nose showing bottle age – smoke and citrus, toasted bread; quite mature on the palate, hefty in feel – less refined and less detailed than the others, but richer, more generous. Laville that has let its belt out a notch! It was the perfect foil though for the grilled Wagyu sirloin-wrapped Botan shrimp.

93

Two votes for white wine of the night

1979 Château Laville Haut-Brion

Light gold; this has a beautifully fresh, floral, subtle but complex and elegant nose that kept emerging and evolving in the glass; lively, cool and fresh on the palate, initially a touch slender, but with positive notes of herbs, lime-citrus, elderflower and stony minerality, it filled out just a touch more with an hour or so of air, some oyster-shell complexity emerging, and a lovely filigree-fine mineral acidity. Just perfect with flounder carpaccio.

93

Two votes for white wine of the night

Next up, two great vintages at Château La Mission Haut-Brion – 1989 and 1982, both long since anointed by Robert Parker as “100 point wines”, but I think there are very few in the wine world who would dissent from high praise for these two wines. They are just fantastic. I think the '89 might just have an edge in fruit complexity, but even after two hours in the glass I still sensed the oak component which I felt gave the impression of too much ‘make up’ for this wine. Perhaps in ten more years that distinct note might disappear into the evolving wine, but I’m not sure. The '82 on the other hand is totally seamless, and has a wonderful melting texture. There is also a sense of concentration that has begun to disappear from some wines in the this high-cropping year. There is simply no lack of potency there. For me, tonight at least, it had an edge.

The very interesting comparisons though were between the brace of La Missions, and their sibling bottles of Château La Tour Haut-Brion. The approach to the '82 and the '89 was very different. Much in the same way that Pierre Lurton gave the Ygrec dry white a real shake up at Yquem when he took the reins there (while being careful to only delicately touch Yquem itself) I have the feeling the Clarence Dillon family took a similar view when they acquired Laville, La Tour, and La Mission Haut-Brion from the Woltner family in 1983. I think there was definitely a style shift in La Mission Haut-Brion, but it feels more linear, more gradual, very carefully done. On the other hand La Tour Haut-Brion changed significantly.

According to Robert Parker, in his *Bordeaux: A Comprehensive Guide (1998 Edition)*: *The wines of La Tour-Haut-Brion up to 1983 were vinified at La Mission-Haut-Brion and handled identically. After both wines were completely finished with the secondary (or*

malolactic) fermentation, a selection process commenced in which the most promising barrels were chosen for the wine of La Mission-Haut-Brion and the others reserved for La Tour-Haut-Brion. In vintages such as 1982 and 1975, the difference in quality between these two wines was negligible. To give La Tour-Haut-Brion a unique personality, the wine had more of the black/purple-colored, very tannic press wine added to it than La Mission-Haut-Brion. The result was a wine with more size, tannin, colour, and grip than even La Mission-Haut-Brion. The addition of press wine caused most vintages of La Tour-Haut-Brion to evolve slowly. In a few vintages – notably 1973 and 1976 – the wine turned out better than those of the more famous sibling.

Since the Dillon family and Jean Delmas assumed control of the winemaking, the style of La Tour-Haut-Brion has changed considerably. It is no longer the second wine of La Mission-Haut-Brion. Delmas has chosen to make La Tour-Haut-Brion in a lighter style from the property's own vineyards, which are now planted with relatively young vines."

The question then for the 1982 – made by the Woltners – was, how similar is it to the 1982 La Mission Haut-Brion, and how much of a departure from the 1989 La Mission Haut-Brion is the 1989 La Tour Haut-Brion. I'll address that in the tasting notes that follow –

1989 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Fine garnet, mature but full; sweet berry and sweet pea nose, earth and iodine notes in the background; sweet fruit, slightly cherry-edged berry flavor, old school, elegant-weighted, reasonably long. This is in a very good state of bottle maturity – open, fragrant and drinking very well. It is seductively delicious, if just a little less perfectly uniformly ripe and refined as La Mission. Clearly a major style change.

92

Three votes for red wine of the night.

1989 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

Semi-clear, so deep and fresh in appearance; lovely freshness, sweetness, perfume on the nose, floral, rather grand, touch of oak still; superb texture – caressing, effortless, pure, very detailed precise flavours. Plummy, curranty. We had given it an hour in the decanter, but it really took another two hours in the Zalto Bordeaux glass to really hit its straps. Just so perfectly composed, exquisite flavor. I peg it down just a notch because the oak is still visible. Perhaps that will change.

97+

Seven votes for red wine of the night.

1982 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Clear, deepish colour and appearance, bricked rim; sweet cherry nose, candied, very sweet and intensely fruited, this shows immediate exuberance and seductive fruitiness on the nose; on the palate too, it is quite intensely fruity, plump-textured and concentrated, touch of earth and leather in the background. Melting chocolaty tannins. After 20 minutes in the glass it dissipated a little, becoming more savoury, and its more rustic, somewhat cruder texture and flavor (next to the La Mission) became more obvious. I'm nit-picking here though, as this is clearly a very grand wine in its own right.

95

No votes.

1982 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

Still deep-garnet with a slightly developed rim; very fine but reserved upon pouring, the complexity took time to emerge – initially slightly leafy and dusty and old school in aroma; on the palate reserved at first, but ripe, fruity-laden, very Graves ‘cigar’-like in flavor and tone, this evolved in the glass to reveal a perfect texture, balance and length and a truly seductively beautiful flavor, well balanced between lovely fruit and more umami notes of cigars and mineral/earthy notes. So lush, the seduction builds slowly in the glass. A Siren of a wine!

99

Five votes for wine of the night.



It was an embarrassment of riches, but to my palate the two La Mission wines stamped their authority. In the case of the 1989 the La mission is simply grander, more refined, more effortless, but less ready than the somewhat rustic, but very flavourful and fragrant La Tour. But in the 1982 pair it is quite a different sort of comparison, because the La Tour competes for sheer richness and seduction of fruit. Ultimately though I felt it was clear to see the La Mission’s superiority, its greater depth, and better balance. It makes the La Tour seem just a touch superficial – that’s being too harsh on so good a wine, but it’s the word that popped into my head. I can see though why Parker might rated the two so closely though, when they were still in their infancy and adolescence.

Given that, it was perhaps something of a surprise just how great the next flight was. It was one of the most thrilling Bordeaux flights I’ve had in years.

1975 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Deep set mature garnet, bricked right through; rich, sweet, earthy nose with notes of licorice, cigar and earth – a big nose; rich and concentrated on the palate, sweet fruit, loads of cigar and licorice notes here too and what Michael Broadbent describes as ‘hot tiles’. This is a big mouthful of old school goodness, and definitely in a sibling style of the enormous, tannic but concentrated ’75 La Mission (not tasted tonight). However, this is fully evolved,

and beginning to show the springs through the upholstery. It declined a bit in the glass after an hour. Beginning to dry out. Very impressive still though.

90

One vote for red wine of the night.

1967 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Mid depth of colour, lovely brightness and clarity here still; beautifully fragrant, with herbal-edged sweetness, freshness, and elegance on the nose; crisp, ripe, light but with persistent berryish flavor, plenty of vivacity. Well cut. This has the sort of charm we see in top tier '85s. Just such a surprise from a so-so vintage. An effortless, pure, expressive and very fragrant style. So easy to drink. Lovely wine.

93

No votes.

1961 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Deep still, garnet colour; sweet, dark-fruited nose, bright with a cherry scent; dense, concentrated on the palate, a touch spicy too, cigar notes there, bright and punchy style. Wow! Super layering here and a rather tannic, but sweetly so, finish. Tannins to pucker the palate, but so much flavor. There's a sort of wildness to this.

95

One vote for red wine of the night.

1955 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Deep, dense garnet, bricked; very complex sweet fruit, loads of cigar, touch of gravel, but so sweet too – soaring from the glass; concentrated on the palate, with just perfect flow and balance, so full of sweet and savoury complex flavor, lovely freshness. An extraordinarily long and fragrant finish. An astonishingly good Bordeaux – I'd trade any great 20th century Bordeaux for another chance to drink this.

100

Seven votes for red wine of the night.

It is very rare that I rate a wine 100 points, but this '55 was just so stupendously good. I had high hopes for it, because the reputation for 1955 La Mission Haut-Brion is so high, but I could not have imagined just how great this would turn out to be.

It's an experience with the very slimmest of chances to be repeated too. Both the '61 and '55 tonight were shipped in cask and bottled in Sweden, so even another bottle of either, chateau-bottled, might not taste just quite the same.

1929 Château La Tour Haut-Brion

Recorked by the chateau in 1979 and ex-cellars around then. From Graham Lyons' cellar.

Some depth of colour, bricked right through, healthy but tawny rim; sweet, lovely, cedary nose, blackcurrant winegummy fruit, very complex aromas with a good whiff of volatile acidity providing plenty of extra lift; sweet and concentrated, winegummy and very intense flavor, a touch of toffee cream comes to the fore, the tannins are plentiful, ripe but old-fashioned, a touch raw-edged like a '28 or a '45, and there is the sense that very ripe must went into – back then – not temperature-controlled vats, the prickle of volatile acidity running through. But the glorious fruit just pushes through all this with authority.

94

No votes.

1964 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

Sweet, lively, with good fruit, lots of earth and cigar, the acidity is a touch pinched and lean, and chicory-edged, but this opened up fleshily. Not the most complete or generous La Mission, but complex and flavourful. A good, solid '64.

91

No votes.

1950 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

Deep coloured but healthy tone; four square, earthy, creaking acidity, a potent, burly, fleshy and deep style. Dense, concentrated La Mission, but it feels a bit rough-edged and the acidity now a bit shrill. Lost its charm if it had it to begin with. "The loud, mean great uncle" I wrote, but such a character is entirely imagined!

87

One vote for red wine of the night.

A note on the voting – this was a single bottle dinner, so everyone tasted the same bottle of each wine. 13 of us assembled voted once for our favourite white, and then voted twice for red wine of the night. The '89 La Mission and the '55 La Tour tied for top place with seven votes a piece. I preferred the '82 to the '89 La Mission – and it came third.