

Château Musar

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THE AGELESS LEGEND OF LEBANON GOES ON AND ON.

"It's difficult to find the words," said David Denton, CWE, CSS, of the 1961 Château Musar Blanc. "I had an emotional response to this wine. I'm trying to imagine what food to have with this."

"Nah-thing," replied chef-turned-sommelier John Wabeck with impeccable emphasis.

So it went, an epic vertical tasting of 12 wines, spanning the decades from 1956 to 2002. Our host was Maria Denton, CWE, a director of the Society of Wine Educators and general manager of Ruth's Chris Steak House Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C.; the other panelists were Julie Dalton, CWE, wine director at Ranazul in Fulton, Md.; Kathy Morgan, wine director at Michel Richard Citronelle in Washington, who'd earned her Master Sommelier certification six days earlier; and Jay Youmans, MW, wine consultant and founder of Rock Creek Wine Merchants in Bethesda, Md.

Saturated, stubborn, and crumbly plugs necessitated decanting and a deft touch. When David Denton, a sommelier at Washington's Charlie Palmer Steak, opened the eldest wines, the bottles sighed audibly as half-century-old air escaped. We marveled at the semi-centenarian

corks, placed long before the Lebanese Civil War that imperiled later vintages. Remarkably, only two bottles were identified as unsound, and when we revisited these at the conclusion, a rejected 1984 was deemed "self-corrected" and poured with delight.

Château Musar importer Bartholomew Broadbent of Broadbent Selections provided the bottles and the back story, but did not join the discussion until after we had contemplated the wines. Broadbent painted a portrait of the colorful Serge Hochar, whose father Gaston founded the estate in 1930. Although Musar's vines are planted in the Bekaa Valley, the winery is located near Beirut, two hours due west. At the height of the war, it took six days to slip the grapes through mortar fire to the cellar. In 1984, only two truckloads made it through; another vintage, 1976, was lost entirely.

Noting that Hochar adds no sulfur to curb fermentation during transport, allowing the natural yeasts to begin their work, Broadbent called this "the most natural wine in the world." Musar spends its first year in concrete, the second in mature Nevers oak, and a third back in concrete. Then the *assemblage* takes place, and the wine is aged for at least four more years. Hochar was schooled by Émile Peynaud, the innovative enologist who also trained Michel Rolland. "Yet when Serge made wine the way he was taught," Broadbent commented, "it tasted like every other wine in the world."

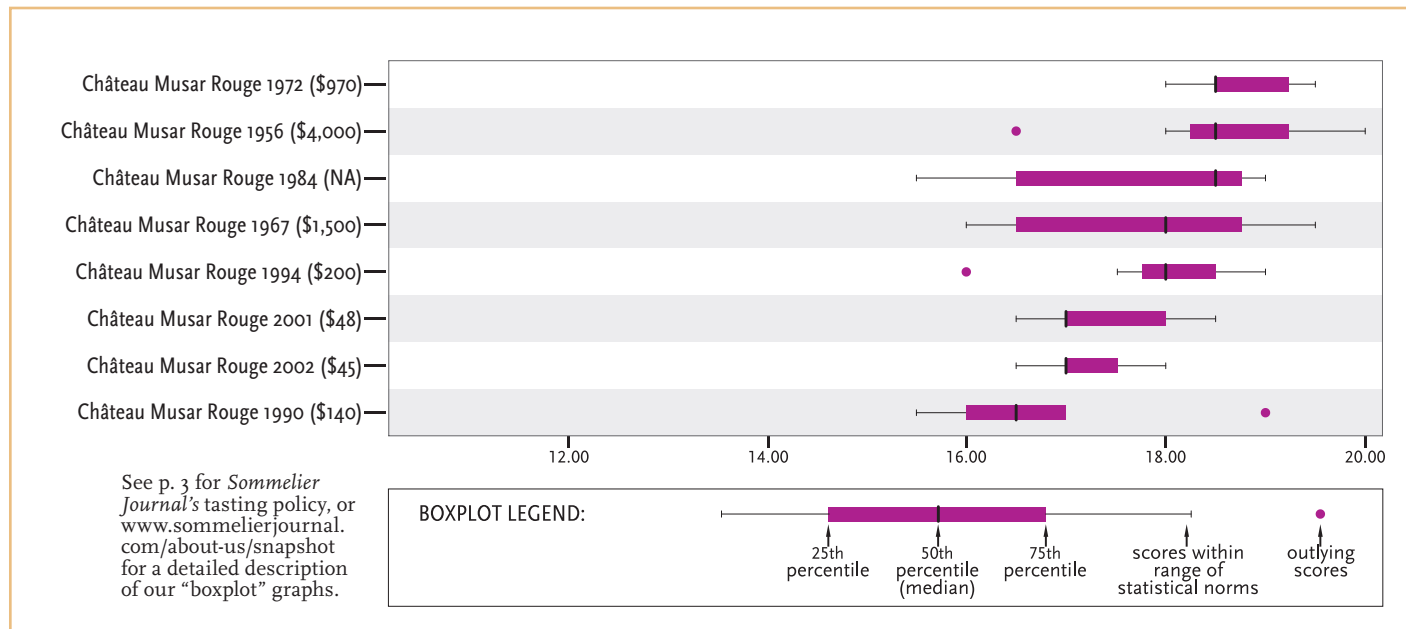
Château Musar Rouge is blended from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cinsault, and Carignan, "but don't ask Serge the percentages," said Broadbent. "He doesn't pay attention to them." Hochar's philosophy is that every wine should be different; in fact, he once went so far as to use different fill levels to create bottle variation. "The complete opposite attitude of commercial concerns looking to standardize wine," Broadbent continued. "Musar is offensive to some, but it's like people—someone who's universally liked is probably boring. Really interesting people offend



Photo by Jason Tesouro

TASTING PANEL

SNAPSHOT: CHÂTEAU MUSAR ROUGE



some and are beloved by others. Serge's wines are the same." Musar Blanc contains Obaideh and Merwah, the ancient indigenous varieties from Hochar's 100- to 150-year-old vines. "One glass per vine, like Yquem," said Broadbent, "but due to age, not botrytis."

We tasted blind in terms of vintage, although the panel was informed that the wines were arranged from youngest to oldest. The reds were tasted before the whites because the *blancs*, in Broadbent's words, "think they're red. They show best after 50, and they live longer than red wines." As recommended by Hochar, the whites were left unchilled. After the panelists rated the wines on a 20-point scale, according to *Sommelier Journal* policy, I moderated a discussion of each wine. Representative comments are listed in order of the rankings in the accompanying "boxplots."

CHÂTEAU MUSAR ROUGE

1972

Not only was this the highest-rated wine of the day, but the scores were nearly unanimous: the high and low among the seven panelists differed by a mere 1.5 points. As Broadbent noted afterward, "If there's an iconic Musar out there, '72 is it."

Wabeck: I don't feel I have the right to speak about this wine, it's that good.

David Denton: First word that comes to mind is "complete."

Morgan: Absolutely my favorite. It tastes younger than the '90 or '94. Great raisin and raspberry flavors, but also cinnamon and fennel. Vibrant, silky, long. I'd like it on my wine list because there aren't very many excellent '72s from anywhere else.

Dalton: As comforting as a baby blanket.

1956

This was Hochar's first red-wine vintage. Beginner's luck? "Serge can neither screw up nor improve a vintage," said Broadbent, "because Musar makes itself."

David Denton: Looks completely oxidized and madeirized, so it's a bit unnerving. Then you put your nose in and the gates of heaven open.

Morgan: Aging very gracefully. Lauren Bacall, not Joan Rivers.

Youmans: It's remarkable how dark this is. Maybe the most interesting of the flight.

Wabeck: Very unique, like it was made by a different person. It's reminiscent of late-harvest Grenache.

Maria Denton: Like the '84, only everything has deepened. Makes me curious: how much farther will it go?

1984

Because of the war, "it was physically im-

Co-author of *The Modern Gentleman: A Guide to Essential Manners, Savvy & Vice*, Jason Tesauro has worked at Virginia's Barbourville Vineyards since 2002. With Champagne saber in hand, he specializes in wine, spirits, and men's lifestyle as a contributor to *Maxim*, *Match.com*, and *Washingtonian* and *Richmond* magazines, while sipping and studying for the Certified Sommelier exam.

possible to bring grapes to the winery, so we did not harvest the vintage,” Hochar explained by e-mail after the tasting. “However, on Oct. 23, we managed to harvest two truckloads. One took the road to Sidon from the south, took a ferry to Jounieh, then to the winery; the other took the road to Baalbek, then to Sidon in north Lebanon, drove to Tripoli, and then to the winery. Six days to make the journey. As a result, we had something new, probably something like a Madeira, but definitely not wine.” This vintage was never released or sold, but we were able to taste it.

Dalton: Interesting rancio qualities and vinosity. All leaves and tar, and then caramels and cherries on the palate.

Wabeck: If I wasn’t sold on Musar at this point, the ’84 really did it for me. At 26, the power it still has is incredible.

Maria Denton: It has a Sherry-type color and characteristics of fig, prune, and raisin. Every time I taste it, I taste something different.

David Denton: Reminds me of a 1978 Clos des Papes. A sense of sweetness on the finish, herbal, very meaty, lots of ox blood; very impressive.

Youmans: This looks like an Oloroso, and it’s the most aldehydic of the lot. What strikes me is how chameleon-like each wine is. Each vintage is a different style, a different part of the world.

1967

According to Hochar, although the 1969 seems to be getting younger, “the 1967 is still finer.”

Youmans: Great nose. The wine’s biggest problem is that it followed the ’72.

Maria Denton: Although I liked the herbal, Burgundian nose, on the palate, it was a little wan.

Morgan: Tight and short. I had to give it props for being this young at this age.

1994

“If I’d wanted to impress you with sheer quality, I would’ve picked ’91, ’93, or ’95 from this decade, but I chose ’94 because it was rejected when it was first released due to incredibly high volatile acidity,” said Broadbent. “Lebanese Taverna bought 300 cases—we had to take it all back. We wanted to return it, and Serge said, ‘Just wait, it’s one of the best Musars I’ve ever made.’”

Youmans: Brett and VA start to enter a little bit, but in a very attractive way. A lot of dried meat, a little dill. Very soft.

Dalton: Reminds me of Savigny-lès-Beaune. I love the barnyard, mushroom, dried cherries. Lots of butter retronasally, but I preferred the nose to the palate.

Wabeck: Being a Burgundy guy, I love my finish, and this is extremely long.

David Denton: A lot of floral, coffee bean, red rose, a little fennel, saddle leather. Earthy, complex, and very powerful.

Morgan: This was in my top three. Butter peanuts, black earth, underbrush, with a vibrant raspberry note.

2001

In tune with Hochar’s “wine equals life” philosophy, which holds that Musar is made by instinct, not by a laboratory, the notes on the ’01 shifted from adjectives about the wine to descriptions of the feelings it induced.

Maria Denton: I don’t usually write whimsical tasting notes, but the change to ’01 is night and day. It turns to earth and farm animals stepping into fields, crunching wild herbs underfoot.

Wabeck: Incredibly in balance. This is more exciting than I thought it was going to be for a young vintage.

Morgan: Much more expressive. Loads of orange peel on the nose, anise, rhubarb. Very spicy, incredibly silky.

David Denton: Feels like Burgundy.

2002

The 2002 is the winery’s current release. Broadbent informed us after the tasting that “Musar is often compared, depending on the year, to great Burgundy, Bordeaux, or Châteauneuf-du-Pape. And it’s known for two characteristics: *Brettanomyces* and VA. Some people hate Musar because they can’t get over brett or VA, but it’s also why many are passionate about Musar.”

Wabeck: It’s important to have this wine here. As the progression gets older, you can see how this is going to become much more elegant. A very good starting point.

David Denton: Bordeaux-style, but fruit-forward. Powerful, with sweet tannins. Beautiful, but needs evolution.

Youmans: Higher acidity, dried cherry fruit. Chianti Classico Riserva-esque.

Dalton: Not having had Musar before, where would I put this? Based on the soft tannins and stewed fruits yet orange marmalade, it took me to Southern Rhône and Italy.

Maria Denton: What is Musar typicity? Looking for fruit is almost secondary in these wines, and that’s what the ’02 offers most predominantly right now.

1990

According to Broadbent, at this point of the war, Hochar had to harvest two weeks early, and he got the last grapes through at 10 p.m. By midnight, the roads were closed. If he hadn’t picked early, he would’ve lost the entire vintage. “As a result, 1990’s always been lighter in style,” Broadbent remarked.

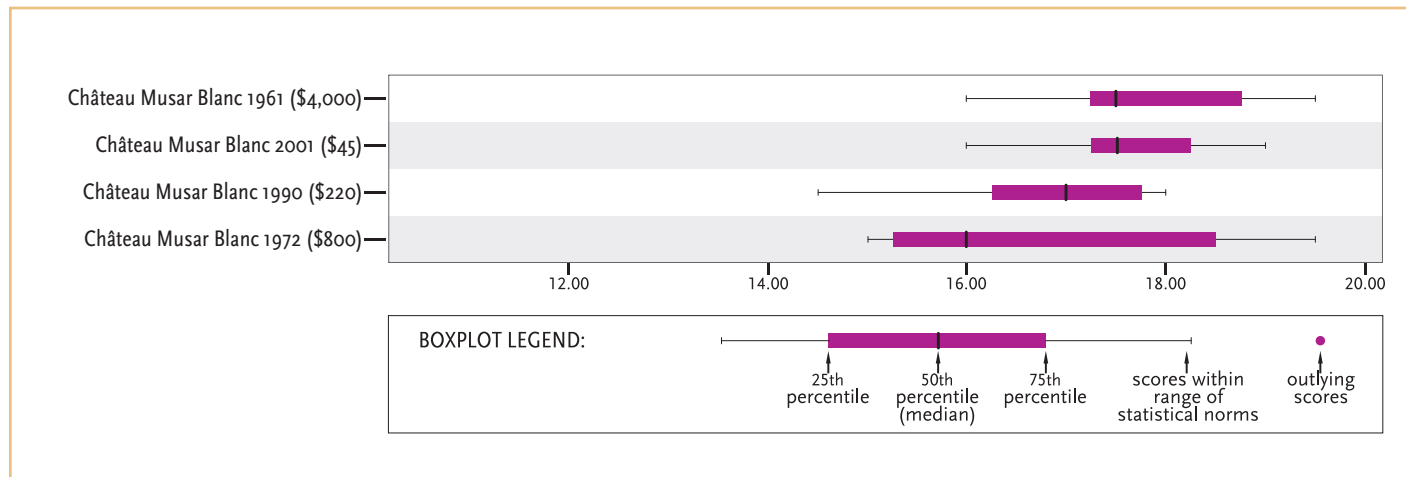
Youmans: Darker than the ’94. Dried fruit and grilled pineapple; surprisingly tart acidity given the climate. Less dominated by brett than by VA. Fully mature.

Dalton: My top-scoring wine. Tasted like old Brunello—so complex I couldn’t stop writing.

Wabeck: I got tomato paste and beef bouillon right off the bat. Making a guess, if there’s a war vintage in here, 1990 would be it.

Maria Denton: Giving up its fruit and starting to give tobacco, leather, and coffee, but it’s a little awkward.

SNAPSHOT: CHÂTEAU MUSAR BLANC



CHÂTEAU MUSAR BLANC

1961

Although Hochar had little to say about the vintage—“my memory has no memory to tell you a good story”—the panelists found quite a bit to talk about.

David Denton: Fifty-year-old white wine and still so elegant.

Wabeck: Few wines in the world can taste like this: white Burgundy, white Bordeaux, white Rioja. It's almost like a lowland Scotch.

Youmans: There's nothing subtle about it: honey, orange peel, baked apples.

2001

The '01 is the current release. We noted a day-bright reflectivity that was impressive for a 9-year-old. “Once you understand the reds,” said Broadbent, “you can understand the whites. Serge says you can taste sunshine.”

Wabeck: For someone who doesn't get the reason to age white wine, this is it.

Morgan: Rich, vibrant tangerine, melon, tarragon, lanolin; long finish.

Dalton: Mango, cantaloupe with vanilla ice cream. You'd think it would be fat and flabby, but it's balanced.

Maria Denton: Marzipan made from unroasted almonds; lush waxiness; something brioche-like and confectionery in there without any sweetness.

David Denton: Amazing wine of great weight and extract. Reminds me of Corton-Charlemagne in that you put your nose in and immediately say it needs 10 more years.

1990

According to Hochar, this vintage gained quality with maturity, “which made it great.” Our panel was divided.

Youmans: The amber-gold color makes you think it's clearly

oxidized, yet it's more Burgundy-like than the other whites.

Dalton: Top score on the whites.

Maria Denton: Least favorite of the whites.

1972

Hochar also felt '72 was a great vintage, but more for the *rouge* than for the *blanc*. In this case, the panelists generally agreed with his assessment.

Wabeck: It has big-time lemongrass and florals. I think it's brilliant.

Maria Denton: Butterscotch-coated orange rind—a bitter element in there.

David Denton: Lots of apricot, lemon curd, toffee, orange marmalade—like Sauternes of the 1970s.

Morgan: I thought it might be corked, but it had lots of minerality, herbs, and caraway peeking out from beneath.

Youmans: Holding, but just, in my opinion.

CONCLUSION

In the end, we learned that Musar needs context, and that enophiles don't just wait for their Musar to mature—they wait for their palates to mature to Musar. Finally, after a dozen wines had calibrated our taste buds, we mused again over typicity and markers.

Morgan: There is a family resemblance: earthy wines with brett, VA, spiciness, and silkiness.

Dalton: With the brett, I'm in the Burgundy camp, but the structure puts me in Southern Rhône. I still don't know, and I'm happy to not know.

Youmans: The wines are vintage-specific, like Châteauneuf with lots of age.

Wabeck: Seamless structure. A lot of Serge's energy in the wines, but as much a sense of place as a sense of person.

Maria Denton: Consistency of quality and agelessness.

David Denton: The wines are singular. 🍷