



IN REVIEW:

The Fine Wine Experience Château La Mission Haut-Brion Dinner

With Jean Philippe Delmas
Tang Court, Langham Hotel, 17th May 2017

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Tonight's dinner was a long time in the making. We had acquired a vertical case at Sotheby's that had been consigned by Château La Mission Haut-Brion directly from their cellars. Not only this, but as Jean Philippe Delmas noted, 4 specialists from Sotheby's visited the estate prior to the sale and carefully inspected and approved each individual bottle prior to accepting the sealed original wooden cases. That fussiness was evident in the pristine bottles. Even all the corks were original – so none of these bottles had been 're-conditioned', all the levels were base of neck or better. Added to our blessings, none of the bottles turned out to be marred by cork taint or other issues.

Four years later (for as Delmas pointed out, he travels to quite a few more parts of the world now than his father did – such is the nature of the market) and we had our moment to open all these bottles around one table – a private room in a Michelin *** Chinese restaurant and a menu that turned out to work very well.

There are plenty of resources to tell you the story of Château La Mission Haut-Brion. I won't repeat all that here. In fact, I'll cut straight to the experience of the wines themselves, with a few tidbits in italics underneath where relevant.

At the end of the night each of us (we were 15 around the table) picked out our two favourite wines. You'll see those results below too.

Yes, this is a highly cherry-picked selection from the past 60 odd years, and from one of the very greatest estates on the planet, so we expected greatness. But boy did we get it. It was almost overwhelming. I honestly cannot recall so solid a flight of clarets as

these. The peaks left me giddy. It's also said though that a great *terroir* is shown not in these great years (Delmas: "easy vintages"), but in tough vintages where on average not many good wines are made. Our third flight – '95, '94, '78 – slipped in to support this point. These 3 wines were not 'shown up' amongst the greatness of the adjacent flights. In fact they shone. While I would put the '95 at the upper middle of that vintage's pack, both '94 and '78 arguably represent the best wines made in all of Bordeaux in those challenging years



2010 Château La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc

95 Points

A lovely fresh nose like cut pineapple, a touch of Semillon's distinct lanolin note, flowers – this is all about freshness ; intense on the palate, creamy, svelte, there's an intensely concentrated core of citrus tinged with passionfruit and pineapple, then a gently unctuous yet dry finish. Plenty of sunshine in the glass, but no heaviness. Delicious.

Always a wine centred on Semillon (85% of the vineyard), it has always had longevity and strength, but there is a gulf between the '10 and '82 stylistically – much more so than for the reds. When Jean Philippe began working officially with his father in 1994 he pressed for a change in the approach to the white – having the 100% new oak, reducing the rackings and taking a more (modern) Burgundian approach. For my money, while I appreciate many of the classic Lavilles, the modern La Mission Haut-Brion Blancs are a big step forward in texture, freshness and aromatic complexity. (NB – "Château Laville Haut-Brion" was made from 1932 to 2008, and "Château La Mission Haut-Brion" Blanc was made from 1928 – when the Woltners acquired Clos Laville – to 1931, and since 2009. The estate is the same.)

1982 Château Laville Haut-Brion

90 Points

A pale old gold colour, still quite bright; a smoky very old school sort of aroma, tree bark and lanolin, smoked lemon peel, and you also get a sense of the higher level of sulphur that was used back in the day; there's a good attack on the palate, its quite fulsome, citrus, and then a lightly toffeed sort of note on the broad finish. This is very enjoyable, not overly complex – indeed just a little muted by the SO2, but it is remarkably fresh and lively at 35 from a vintage not expected to have long legs.

One vote for favourite wine of the night

2010 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

100 Points

This wine really just blew me away for its astonishing aromatic complexity, purity and just divine seduction. The colour is still deep and fresh. The nose... where to begin?! Achingly pure fine fruit, lowers, graphite/mineral notes, mouth-watering roast meat juices sort of savoury notes. It all there, and its all still very openly aromatic and on show. The palate has a lovely svelte, finely trimmed texture, melting, but not unctuously broad-shouldered like the '09 we tasted next. This keeps its shape, but there is just incredible depth, there is so much there you have to concentrate to detect the underlying fine tannic structure as it is hardly perceptible. I do note the high level of alcohol – its not invisible, but it is very finely balanced. The finish is very long, complex, mesmerising. This is monumental La Miss, a thrill to taste. Absolutely exceptional.

One vote for favourite wine of the night

2009 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

98+ Points

The quality here is also immense, but the style is really quite different to the 2010. The colour is of course still deep; the nose is a bit shy coming after the '10, its fruity and sweet, but you have to prompt the glass and search for it a bit. The palate is immediately lush, almost gushing fruit, and then no sooner do you notice the oozing glycerine-laden concentration than some quite formidable tannins quick in and clench the whole thing shut again. I'm sure this is going to prove one of the very great, hedonistically framed La Missions in years to come. For now – at least this bottle anyway – is going through a shut phase. But the fruit flavour, which includes that touch of ginger found in great red Bordeaux, and the very natural feeling unpushed richness and grand frame of tannin, and the overall balance give a clear impression that this will be worth waiting for.

2005 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

99 Points

Quite a step change in personality here after the '10, '09 pair. The colour has shifted a little but it is still a deep youthful ruby. The nose is sweet with lovely fruit expression – not yet fully out of its chrysalis, but there to enjoy. Initially in the glass this came across as quite backward, with an intensely focus and wrapped up tannic (though supple and ripe) texture – almost closed. But with an hour in the glass it opened up and showed some sness for its future charm. The flavour is magnificent – dark fruit, florals, ginger. There's almost an iron-like quality in the tannins. This is fine, architectural La Miss. It's best years are still well ahead of it, but it is revealing just enough now that if you have to broach one, and can give it a few hours to breathe, you'll see the sheer quality it possesses. For me though I would wait at least another 5 years, and would rather drink the 2010 or the 2000 today.

2000 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

100 Points

A deep garnet ; open, sweet, super-floral fresh nose – just amazing. I felt like I was spun around in my seat smelling this. In a youthful, still florally fresh phase, this had the most thrilling nose of the lot; sweet and elegant on the palate, very floral, exotic, intense, completely seamless, super pure and long. Less bold – lower alcohol no doubt – than '10, '09, this is all seduction tonight. Wow!

One vote for favourite wine of the night

1998 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

96 Points

A deep garnet, and the first tonight to show a little ageing on the rim ; a deep-set aroma of dark fruit, dark chocolate and a touch of fine cigar tobacco edging out – but this is still young on the nose; fine, fleshy on the palate, with a lovely piquancy, real depth and reserve. I would still wait for this as the feel is very *vin de garde*, but the fruit is delicious and the very beginning of its tertiary development is beginning to peak through.

1995 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

94 Points

Full garnet with a bricked edge ; expressive on the nose, showing sweet dark fruit, a hint of green pea, sweet new leather, sweet herbs, and freshness ; quite an elegant La Mission on the palate, good flavour, not especially concentrated in the context of this estate, but all the hallmark mature flavour is there, particularly the fine cigar note and minerality. Fresh, lively, long, and now drinking perfectly.

1994 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

93 Points

Bricked garnet ; a sweeter nose than the 1995 (amazingly), leather, a mature old school aroma, ripe and exuberant ; plump, rounded in texture, open and delicius. Not huge depth, but gourmand in style, plenty of substance, and now drinking fully ready. I 'rate' the 1995 just a smidgen higher, but holding both glassed in my hand if I had to pick just one to drink (a ridiculous idea!) it would be this 1994. Probably the best wine of the vintage.

One vote for favourite wine of the night

1978 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

94 Points

This wine has always been a real pleasure to drink, and is a great choice to serve blind because while all the best qualities of 1978 are on display (soaring aromatics, elegance and finesse), none of the poorer qualities of the year are evident (dilution, unripeness / weediness). The colour is still a healthy deep garnet – not out of place next to the 1995 and 1994, with a broad fairly bricked rim; the nose is wonderful – sweet and smoky, piquant, a little earthy, very cigar-oriented; elegant and fresh on the palate, a really lovely core of curranty fruit, noticeably elevated acidity (after the '10 – '94 vintages just tasted), a touch of dark chocolate, fresh mint, lots of ginger. This has amazing energy reserve for a 1978, and easily holds its own in the flight.

Four votes for favourite wine of the night

1990 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

95 Points

An open and clear mature shade, lighter depth appearance ; the nose here is just killer! So sexy, fully evolved, sweet, even 'singed' a little, with coffee beans, cigars and sweet dried herb / mulch notes; the palate is very relaxed, soft, easy flowing, with loads of up front appeal. You could easily find yourself at the end of a magnum without really noticing you'd drunk it all. If it lacks for anything it's a bit of tension, end-palate intensity and length. But it is a very appealing wine.

1989 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

98 Points

A mature garnet, a bit more colour depth than the '90; initially a smoky, meaty nose, with earth notes, truffle, complex but aromatically discrete. It took a bit more time to coax out of the glass. The palate though shows a huge depth of fruit and vigour atop of full bed of ripe mineral-laden tannins. There's real depth here – the same sort of visceral satisfaction as a perfectly roasted cote de boeuf on the palate. Coffee bean note in the long finish. Amazing.

Three votes for favourite wine of the night

1982 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

95 Points

A deep garnet colour still; smoky, sexy aromas full of spices, toucher of tannin-promising leather; extraordinary depth and richness on the palate, denser than most '82s are today, fleshy and expansive. A full meal of a La Mission Haut-Brion. Initially it trailed slightly at the finish and then after two hours it felt a little pinched at the end. Clearly great, but this bottle a little behind the pace set this evening, and not quite the peak I have experienced with this wine in the past. Tonight...

1975 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

94 Points

A fine deep colour, fully bricked and tawny olive at the rim; the nose is so super spicy, full of leather and tea, dried fruits, earthy; sweet dried fruit on the palate with an intense and highly complex Pu'er tea earthy taste, Chinese red dates (I'm running with the theme here), dark fruit and wet earth fragrance. This is about a sweet and generous as a '75 could possibly be, but a '75 it is and you do feel the austerity in the tannins at the end. Still at its height, but perhaps now beginning its slow decline.

1961 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

98 Points

A deep garnet with an olive rim; sweet open super fruity nose, dates, earth and cigars; super sweet and exuberant on the palate, amazing concentration, candy-sweet, incredibly rich, quite sexy, with cigar-like spiciness all through it. A party wine of broad appeal, and great complexity.

Eight votes for favourite wine of the night (1st=)

1959 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

100 Points

Deep garnet, great colour; fine, sweet medicinal-laced aromas, open, sweet Indian curry spice notes, very detailed, open, but ultimately quite subtle and classic in expression; super fresh and elegant on the palate, extraordinary fruit, impressive purity – this is tear-jerkingly pure, heart-achingly pure, fine La Mission Haut-Brion. This just does my head in. It is astonishing.

Eight votes for favourite wine of the night (1st=)





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