

Maintaining and building a legacy



HANDS-ON: Baroness Ariane de Rothschild.
(Photos: Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The Rothschilds are big players in the wine trade, not just the world of finance. The French wine story began when Baron James de Rothschild bought Chateau Lafite in 1868 for four million francs. His nephew and son-in-law from the English branch of the family, Nathaniel Rothschild, had previously bought Chateau Mouton in 1853 for one million francs. Oddly enough, he was also a nephew of Sir Moses Montefiore, from my own family. Lafite Rothschild and Mouton Rothschild, both First Growths (Premier Cru Classe) are two of the most famous wineries on the planet.

James's son, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, founded the modern Israeli wine industry starting in 1882, planting vineyards and building Rishon LeZion and Zichron Wineries. He built deep underground cellars at a cost of 11 million francs. This later became known as Carmel, the largest and most historic winery in Israel. James Rothschild, the son of Baron Edmond, donated the cellars to Carmel in 1957. The junior Edmond de Rothschild, the grandson of Baron Edmond, set up the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation to manage Caesarea and surrounding areas. The foundation contributes to Israel until today.

Baron Edmond was the richest Rothschild, and a one-sixth owner of Chateau Lafite Rothschild. Yet when he had the opportunity to buy Chateau Margaux, another First Growth, he chose instead to be a pioneer and build. Memorably, he was quoted as saying "I don't want to put on other people's slippers." In 1973, he bought Chateau Clarke and Chateau Malmaison from the unfashionable Listrac and Moulis growing regions, in order to create and build his own wine legacy. Compagnie Vinicole Baron Edmond de Rothschild (CVBER) was born.

Baron Edmond and his wife, Baroness Nadine, had one child, Benjamin, who took over the family interests in 1997. He married Ariane and they had four daughters together. Baroness Ariane de Rothschild initially managed the non-finance part of company, which included wine, agriculture, hospitality and philanthropy. She showed her energy, rare abilities and a drive to get things done.

For years, the family has given millions in philanthropy. Ariane decided to modernize and professionalize this largesse in order to increase its effectiveness. She wants philanthropy to be sustainable and beneficiaries to learn to run things for themselves. "Traditional philanthropy is about drip feeding. Our aim is not to give fish, but to teach people to fish for themselves."

In 2015, she was appointed chairwoman of the executive committee of the Edmond de Rothschild Group, an independent, family-owned company specializing in finance. Benjamin prefers sailing, hunting and driving fast cars over the grind of the business day-to-day. "He has great distance. I have to be hands-on." Ariane explained. She is someone who leads from the front with her heart on her sleeve, but she is also intuitive and sometimes sees things others don't. She made many changes and went through a few ups and downs in the early days. "People don't like change," she acknowledges ruefully.



EDR HERITAGE also produces wines in (from left) Argentina, Spain and New Zealand.

In fact, she took on three worlds in which women have been downtrodden and ignored for centuries. I refer to those bastions of male supremacy: the financial world, the wine trade and the Rothschild family! She is confident, determined and not easily deterred by the answer “No.” It has not been easy, but she now has earned the respect of her peers and colleagues in the different worlds she manages. As such, she is a role model and an inspiration to women everywhere.

Baroness Ariane de Rothschild had a very international start in life. She was born in El Salvador and lived her youth in Bangladesh, Colombia and Zaire. She entered the financial world when working in New York City. She is French, speaks five languages and now lives in Geneva. A few years ago, I was fortunate to show her around Rishon LeZion Cellars, the historic winery her family established in Israel. I found her charming, with her feet firmly on the ground and no airs or false graces. In the short time I was with her, I could not help observing that she was sharp, interested, knowledgeable and very passionate about wine. There were a lot of questions, not all of which I could answer.

Recently, I was fortunate to meet her again at the beautiful, tranquil Chateau Clarke in Bordeaux. She is bubbly, vivacious, yet down to earth and unpretentious. What is wine to her? Ariane de Rothschild says, “Winemaking is an act rooted in aesthetics.... There is an undeniable extra beauty and elegance within that is essential to me... Wine is about pleasure and sharing. Wine is very relevant to the ‘art de vivre.’”

She is also passionate about all her interests and constantly dreaming. “No small dreams,” she says!

Since Baroness Ariane took over at the helm, there have been changes of personnel, bringing new expertise and energy in the financial and wine companies, but my interest is vinous, so let’s concentrate on that. I learned how CVBER has grown over the years. It is today made up of Chateau Clarke and Chateau Malmaison in the Medoc, Chateau les Laurets and Chateau de Malengin from St. Emilion, Bordeaux (France), Bodegas Flechas de los Andes in Mendoza (Argentina), Rupert & Rothschild Vignerons in Fredericksburg (South Africa), Rimapere in Marlborough (New Zealand) and Bodegas Macan in Rioja (Spain). The wineries have 500 hectares of vines, and production has increased from 400,000 bottles in 1981 to 3.5 million today. Ninety percent of their wines are sold in export to 80 countries. She says: “The strategy over the last 15 years has been to move toward ‘wines of the world’ from the best terroir.”

The latest addition is the Bodegas Macan project, a joint venture with the iconic Vega Sicilia, arguably Spain’s most famous winery. This project was initiated and implemented from the first prompt of a wild idea, until the first wines rolled off the bottling line by the Baroness herself. Sometimes dreams come true. “We also have to create our own legacy,” she says.

The wine company has recently been rebranded under the umbrella heading Edmond de Rothschild Heritage, which includes all the family’s non-wine interests. The branding is a massive change for a family that usually embraces change slowly and with difficulty; however it is wise, looks good and is very stylish.

SHE EXPLAINS: “The renaming focuses on who we are. Our new brand is tremendous step forward, sharing our passion for a living heritage.” They are aiming

high. The new wine consultant for their Bordeaux properties is the quiet, modest Eric Boissenot, who is most revered by the leading wineries.”

I feel her spirit in the beautiful manicured gardens of Chateau Clarke, where style, quality and beauty intermingle. The interests of the family are so diverse, but the personal imprint of the baroness may be seen everywhere.

She explained: “The attraction of wine is the agricultural side and being responsible for the entire process from soil to bottle.” She saw similarities in managing risk in winemaking as in banking. She considered it very humbling to work in wine. “Planning is long term and there are no certainties.”

The EDR Heritage wines are a high quality and cover a number of different styles. For instance, I enjoyed tasting and comparing the complex Le Merle Blanc de Chateau Clarke and the up-front Rimapere Sauvignon Blanc, two different takes on the same grape variety. You can compare their Argentinean Malbec, South African Cabernet and New Zealand Pinot Noir. Most represent excellent value. It is clear the wine company is thriving and heading in an upward direction. Impressively, they also continue to be loyal to the Jewish community by producing kosher wines.

The major milestones in French kosher wine production were 1986, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild insisted on producing the first quality Bordeaux for the kosher community. Now called Barons Edmond Benjamin Rothschild, Haut Medoc had a few dodgy years quality-wise, but in the last few years is much improved. Then in 1993, the first Cru Classe kosher wine was produced at Chateau Giscours. Now for the first time, in honor of the 30th anniversary of Edmond de Rothschild’s initial commitment to the kosher market, CVBER has decided to produce the first ever kosher Chateau Clarke 2016. The wine is 70% Merlot and 30% Cabernet Sauvignon. It is beautifully silky and elegant. A wonderful food wine and an important addition to the kosher portfolio. It joins other kosher wines made by the group like Chateau Malmaison, Les Lauriers, Flechas de los Andes and the Rothschild Champagnes. It underlines EDR Heritage’s continued loyalty and support to the Jewish community. It is already the largest producer of quality kosher wines for Royal Wine Europe. Chateau Clarke will be eagerly enjoyed by kosher wine mavens.

Throughout our conversation Baroness Ariane talked about honoring “my father-in-law’s legacy.” She has been quoted as saying, presumably in answer to criticism: “I always said the Rothschild name belongs to Benjamin. I am not a Rothschild and don’t pretend to be one. Benjamin is and my daughters are.”

I disagree. Of course she is a Rothschild. We are in the 21st century, after all. Yes, maybe a large part of her raison d’être is to preserve the family legacy, but she is also now creating a Rothschild legacy of her own. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years, and is known as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com.



THE BEAUTIFUL, tranquil gardens of Chateau Clarke.