



THE PARTNERS of Champagne Barons de Rothschild (left to right): Camille Ogren (Mouton), Benjamin and Ariane de Rothschild (Clarke), Philippe Sereys de Rothschild (Mouton) and Eric de Rothschild (Lafite). (Photos: Courtesy)

Five arrows, three Rothschilds, one champagne



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

At the end of the 18th century, Amschel Rothschild sent his five sons out of the Frankfurt Ghetto to establish banks in the main cities of Europe. The symbolism of the emblem of five arrows, pointing in different directions, but remaining attached at the center, was clear. He might have had an inkling they would influence the financial world, but he would clearly have had no idea the family would become arguably the No. 1 wine family in the world!

It began in 1853, when Nathaniel Rothschild, from the English Rothschilds purchased Chateau Mouton. Today the parent company is called Baron Philippe de Rothschild SA, and it includes Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Chateau Clerc Milon, Chateau d'Armaillac from Bordeaux, Opus One from California, Almaviva from Chile and Mouton Cadet, the largest selling Bordeaux brand in the world. The company is named after Baron

Philippe de Rothschild, who in my book was the most influential wine figure of the 20th century. He was the first to Chateau bottle, the first to declassify and produce a branded wine (Mouton Cadet). He was one of the first to use the canvas of the label for art and marketing, and also did the high-profile joint venture with Robert Mondavi, resulting in the founding of founding Opus One.

In 1868, the French Rothschilds began their foray into wine when Baron James de Rothschild purchased Chateau Lafite, arguably the most prestigious winery of all. Today the company Domaine Barons Rothschild (Lafite) owns Chateau Lafite Rothschild, Chateau Duhart-Milon, Chateau L'Evangile, Chateau Rieussec from Bordeaux, Vina Los Vascos from Chile and Bodegas Caro from Argentina. The most influential person during a key period was arguably Baron Eric de Rothschild. During his wise tenure, Lafite returned to its greatest days and the company DBR grew and expanded.

From 1882 onward, Baron Edmond de Rothschild

established a modern wine industry in Israel, built the two largest wineries and planted vineyards throughout the country. He also founded Societe Cooperative Vigneronne des Grand Caves, otherwise known as Carmel Winery. In 1957, his son James Rothschild donated Rishon Le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov Cellars to Carmel.

In 1973, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, grandson of the original Baron Edmond, purchased Chateau Clarke. His Compagnie Vinicole Baron Edmond de Rothschild now includes Chateau Clarke, Chateau Malmaison, Chateau des Laurets from Bordeaux, Bodegas Macon from Spain, Bodegas Flechas de los Andes from Argentina, Rupert & Rothschild Vignerons from South Africa & Rimapere from New Zealand.

LIKE ALL families, the Rothschild family were not always of one mind and for many years there was acrimonious rivalry, particularly in the days when Elie de Rothschild managed Lafite and Philippe de Rothschild managed Mouton. In the classification of 1855, Lafite was made a First Growth (Premier Cru Classe) and



AIMING HIGH: The Rothschild Champagne label.



FREDERIC MAIRESSE, director-general of Rothschild Champagne.



ROTHSCHILD CHAMPAGNE, suitable for the finest occasions.

Mouton a Second Growth. Nathaniel then uttered the immortal words: "First I cannot be; second I do not deign to be. I am Mouton."

After years of lobbying that ruffled the feathers of their family neighbors, Mouton became the first and only winery ever promoted to First Growth. Baron Philippe de Rothschild then changed the slogan to: "First I am. Second I was. Mouton does not change!" There were real tensions, but certainly in the more recent days of Eric, Philippine and Benjamin, relations were on a more even keel.

The family's wineries together produced almost every style of wine from a wide range of terroirs, but shared a basic problem: what to serve when people arrive to be entertained. I once did a harvest at Mouton Rothschild in 1986. I worked for the UK agents for Baron Philippe de Rothschild SA. In the evening, we were wined and dined at Mouton Rothschild, and the aperitif was a specially made cuvee of Henriot Champagne. In 2005, I was entertained to lunch at Chateau Lafite and was served a private-label champagne, possibly made for them by Krug, so I experienced the problem first-hand.

So, when Baron Benjamin de Rothschild (Chateau Clarke), son and heir of Baron Edmond, broached the idea of producing a family champagne, Baron Eric de Rothschild (Chateau Lafite Rothschild) and Baroness Philippine de Rothschild (Chateau Mouton Rothschild), daughter of Baron Philippe, swiftly agreed. The project began in 2005.

The Rothschilds aimed high, using the resources of Cave Vertus in Reims and making contact with some of the best growers in the most sought-after growing areas in the champagne region. These included the Cote des Blancs for Chardonnay and the Montagne de Reims for Pinot Noir.

They were walking on eggshells at the beginning. The biggest challenge was sourcing the grapes and building a relationship with the growers. It took five years to find the right growers and five years to build up reserve stocks. The result though was the release of a new series of champagnes under the Rothschild name.

The directeur-general of Champagne Barons de Rothschild is the sharp, impressive Frederic Mairesse.

He said, "We knew we want to be a small producer at the premium end. We source from the Cote de Blancs, over 80% of which are grand and premier cru sites." He has knowledge and experience of winemaking, is intimate with champagne and also marketing savvy. Always immaculately dressed, he is another key reason for the success of this enterprise. He can be spotted in photos surrounded by pretty models on one hand or in stylish surroundings like the Ritz on the other. He can even be found pictured alongside Orthodox Jews with long peyot (sidelocks) at the Kosher Food & Wine Experience, organized by Royal Wine, in New York. No matter the backdrop, two things never change. His expression is always the same and he is always touting the Rothschild champagne. The absolute professional!

I tasted the non-vintage Champagnes with him. The Rothschild Brut is a subtle blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. It is lively, with small, persistent bubbles. It has a fragrance with aromas of pear, the most delicate white flowers and a hint of yeasty toastiness in the background. It is flavorful, yet refreshing with a long, clean finish.

The Rothschild Rosé is a beautiful onion-skin color, with a tight, even mousse. It is made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, has aromas of delicate berry fruit, with a hint of strawberry and raspberry, and a light, refreshing finish.

The Rothschild Blanc de Blancs is made from some of the finest Chardonnay grapes from the Cotes des Blancs crus. Reserve wines are used for a large proportion of the blend. This is an exquisite wine. Delicate, creamy and elegant, with great purity and a citrusy finish. They have now produced prestige and vintage cuvees too.

TODAY, AFTER a changing of the guard, the Rothschild wine businesses are run respectively by Ariane de Rothschild (wife of Benjamin), Saskia de Rothschild (daughter of Eric) and Philippe Sereys de Rothschild (son of Philippine), who acts as chairman of the Champagne Barons de Rothschild board. In discussions agreements by two out three of the partners is not sufficient. There has to be 100% agreement to proceed. Now, each of the companies hosts visitors to

their wineries by serving their own champagne and because of its quality and breeding, Rothschild champagne has already made impressive inroads in export markets at the highest level.

Philippe Sereys de Rothschild said, "The Chardonnay is the white truffle of champagne. It's the best. In order to put the Rothschild name on it, it had to be the best." He reminisces how his grandfather Baron Philippe, was a major shareholder of the Champagne House Ruinart, but sold his stake in the 1950s. He also had his own label, Reserve Baron Philippe, which he grew up drinking as a teenager. Now the three great Rothschild families of wine have become champagne producers and produce their own champagne.

So, when I recently visited Chateau Clarke to meet Baroness Ariane de Rothschild, I was pleased to be served with Champagne Barons de Rothschild. The hole has been filled, the circle closed and the need satisfied.

Sadly, though the family contributes massively to Israel in so many ways, they no longer contribute or invest in Israeli wine. However, to their credit, they still show respect to the Jewish community by producing kosher wines. There is a kosher Mouton Cadet, that was not great when I last tasted it, but CVBER / Edmond de Rothschild Heritage continues to be a firm, loyal and longstanding producer of quality kosher wines from Bordeaux and Argentina. Now the Rothschild Champagne is also made kosher in the Brut and Rosé styles, and the Brut is even made *mevushal* (flash pasteurized) for those Jewish caterers and American kosher restaurants that require it.

The five arrows and three families have now joined forces to make a champagne that is worthy of the Rothschild name – a quality champagne with which we can toast the remarkable contribution of the Rothschild family to the wine trade. The success so far has been reasonably meteoric and I think we will be hearing a great deal more about Champagne Barons de Rothschild in the future. ■

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