

LASCOMBES, A beautiful ivy-covered, turreted chateau.



THE WRITER enjoying the Chateau Lascombes 1957. (Photos: Courtesy)



CHATEAU LASCOMBES 2015, for the first time made in a kosher expression.

RETURN TO LASCOMBES



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

“Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again,” began Daphne du Maurier’s famous book *Rebecca*. Unlike the title character, I never thought I would have reason to return to Chateau Lascombes, despite the prominent place it held in my wine memories.

Chateau Lascombes is a handsome, ivy-colored, turreted building in the village of Margaux in the Haut-Médoc. It looks grand and imposing, just like a Bordeaux Chateau should. The first known owner was Chevalier Antoine de Lascombes, born in 1625. In the famous 1855 classification, when Bordeaux wines were ranked in an order still respected today, Lascombes earned the honorable description of Deuxième Cru Classé, that is

a Second Classed Growth. The First Growths include the likes of Chateau Lafite Rothschild and Chateau Haut Brion, so to be second was not bad positioning.

However, just because a winery is ranked well for life, it does not mean there were not ebbs and flows, when standards fell below expectations. When the famous pioneer and entrepreneur Alexis Lichine bought the chateau in 1952, he put Chateau Lascombes on the map through his personality. These were some good years. He was a household name to me because of his comprehensive encyclopedia, which when I started in the wine and spirits trade was a “must have” book.

In 1971, the brewer Bass Charrington purchased Chateau Lascombes. Bass Charrington was then the largest brewery in the UK and a total beverage company similar to Tempo, but far bigger. They were also to become the largest hotelier in the world. However, it was their wine interests that are relevant to this story. Bass Charrington Vintners were major players in the wine trade. They owned Hedges & Butler, a 300-year-old wine shipper, with priceless cellars under Regent Street in Lon-

don. This is where I came in. I joined Bass Charrington and they put me on my first WSET wine course and gradually, (actually, not so gradually), I became more interested in wine than beer.

The jewel in the crown was Chateau Lascombes. This was the wine served at those VIP dinners at Hedges & Butler, and occasionally we found ourselves at the Chateau in Margaux to entertain or be entertained. One night I was fortunate to stay there and opening the shutters to see sun-drenched vineyards all around. This brought home to me the concept of the estate winery. It was a great introduction to wine and Lascombes played a part and secured a soft spot in my heart.

Of course, dreams don’t always last. Eventually the group, adhering to the brewery stereotype, lost interest in wine. Hedges & Butler closed and Bass Charrington was split up. This meant that famous, even historic, companies like Bass founded in 1777, Charrington founded in 1738 and Hedges & Butler, established in 1667, to paraphrase John Cleese in the parrot sketch, “ceased to be.” Ironically almost the last man standing



MENACHEM ISRAELIEVITCH, winemaker of Royal Wine Europe (center right) and famous wine consultant Michel Rolland (center left), flanked by Karine Barbier (left) and Dominique Befve of Chateau Lascombes.

was Chateau Lascombes, which was sold in 2001.

The high point of the Bass ownership was the building of a very impressive fermentation room in 1986, which was a focal point of a great deal of professional interest when it was put on show. Overall though, the quality of the wine was said to waiver, particularly in the latter years of the Bass ownership. Then the new owners decided to recruit the best minds to return Lascombes to its glory days. Dominique Befve was the technical manager of Chateaux Lafite and Duhart-Milon for eight years before moving to Chateau L'Evangile in Pomerol. All were part of the Domaines Barons Rothschild (Lafite) group. He was head hunted to engineer a revival. The winery went back to source, identifying from scratch the different soils suitable for Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon and mapping the vineyards anew. Only the variety at its best would be part of the final blend of the Grand Vin. New equipment was purchased. A slightly garish, but nonetheless striking blue barrel cellar was built (impressive or not, depending on your taste). The winery also employed Michel Rolland, arguably the most famous flying winemaker as winemaking consultant.

Steadily, the wines found their way back, reaching a peak with the Chateau Lascombes 2010, which was praised by everyone from Robert Parker downward as a great wine. However, it still did not become person-

al to me until I saw the launch of two kosher cuvees of Chateau Lascombes and the second wine, Chevalier de Lascombes, at the annual KFWE (Kosher Food Wine Experience) tasting events run by Royal Wine and Kedem Europe. (The largest importers and distributors of kosher wine and Israeli wine.) That piqued my curiosity. In a flash of nostalgia, rather like meeting an old girlfriend again, I decided to visit.

I was intrigued why a successful winery with a grand name would be interested in making kosher wine. I sat down in the drawing room with Dominique Befve, a good-looking tall grey-haired, slightly round shouldered man, with a wry, dry, almost English sense of humor. He explained as a believing Catholic, he found it of immediate interest. He told me the compass of Lascombes (on the capsule) points in all directions and he liked making wine everyone could enjoy. As for quality, when I asked how he could be sure the kosher wine was good enough, he shuddered and muttered as an aside, "Actually I think the kosher wine turned out better than the non-kosher wine" in the 2015 vintage. He even said he thought of becoming Jewish so he could "enjoy all those Jewish holidays during harvest!"

The credit for pushing Befve to make kosher wines goes to the persuasive Menachem Israelievitch, the sharp, savvy and talented winemaker for Royal Wine Europe's extensive wine interests. Israelievitch broached the idea, pushed and then gave Dominique all the support services to ensure the wines adhered to the standards set. The kosher cuvee was not a kosher orphan left to fend for itself. It was made with all the attention to detail of the regular wines. When the great Michel Rolland came to formally taste the blends, the kosher cuvee was part of the discussion with both Befve and Israelievitch present.

We sat down for a meal at the small round table I had probably eaten at 30 years ago. After the meal, a bottle was presented clad in a black sock for us to taste blind. I was asked when it was from, a favorite game of hosts at wine occasions. It was muddy, browning, but the fruit was enchanting. I knew it was old. I guessed the 1970s. "No - older" I was told, until it was revealed to be the 1957 vintage, which just happened to be my date of birth. This scheme was cunningly cooked up by Israelievitch, Befve and Karine Barbier from the winery. Now, 1957 was not a good vintage. However, in a good year we say: "Thank God for a good vintage" and in a bad year we say: "Thank God I have a good winemaker!"

Amusingly, Dominique had to leave before the bot-

tle was revealed. He told me later he would have loved to have tasted it because he was born in 1957, too! Unfortunately for him, when I left, I made sure to take the bottle and the remaining contents!

A 60-year old wine showing well could only be in France! To make the point more clearly, Chateau Lafite Rothschild held a 150-year celebration while I was in Bordeaux. Unfortunately, I was not invited, though I was prepared to volunteer to make up the numbers if someone felt unwell. No chance of that. They opened a Chateau Lafite 1875 and 1918, and the 1918 was apparently magnificent!!

In Israel, the best we can hope for is 12 or 15 years maximum, although in the last year alone, I have tasted some wines from the Golan Heights Winery & Margalit Winery over 20 years old, which proved the exception to the rule. These two wineries appear to be the best for library wines that have real ability to age. So maybe Israeli wines can last longer than we thought. Still, the potential for aging of Israeli wine, pales into insignificance against the French, as the Chateau Lascombes 1957 clearly illustrated.

Back to Lascombes, I confirm the kosher wines are good but expensive, as you would expect. The second label Chevalier de Lascombes 2015 is made from 55% Merlot and 45% Cabernet Sauvignon. It is a big wine with hints of the famed Margaux perfume. It has a freshness that makes it more immediately drinkable than its big brother but has great complexity and length, too. The Chateau Lascombes 2015 (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and a small amount of Petit Verdot) is deep-colored, with rich ripe fruit aromas, hints of tobacco, a touch of spice and cigar box. It has a long-lingering, powerful finish. Kosher mavens could buy these wines and cellar them. There is great aging potential. Befve summed it up well by saying, "I would prefer Chevalier de Lascombes for lunch and Chateau Lascombes for dinner."

In the end, Rebecca never returned to Manderley, but I did return to Lascombes. It was like visiting an old friend. You know the qualities and faults, but love them all the same. On the surface, nothing much has changed. It still appears rather sleepy and a time capsule of a century before. Within the vineyard, winery and barrel room, though, the pursuit of quality has gone up a gear. At Chateau Lascombes, it seems good days are here again. ■

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