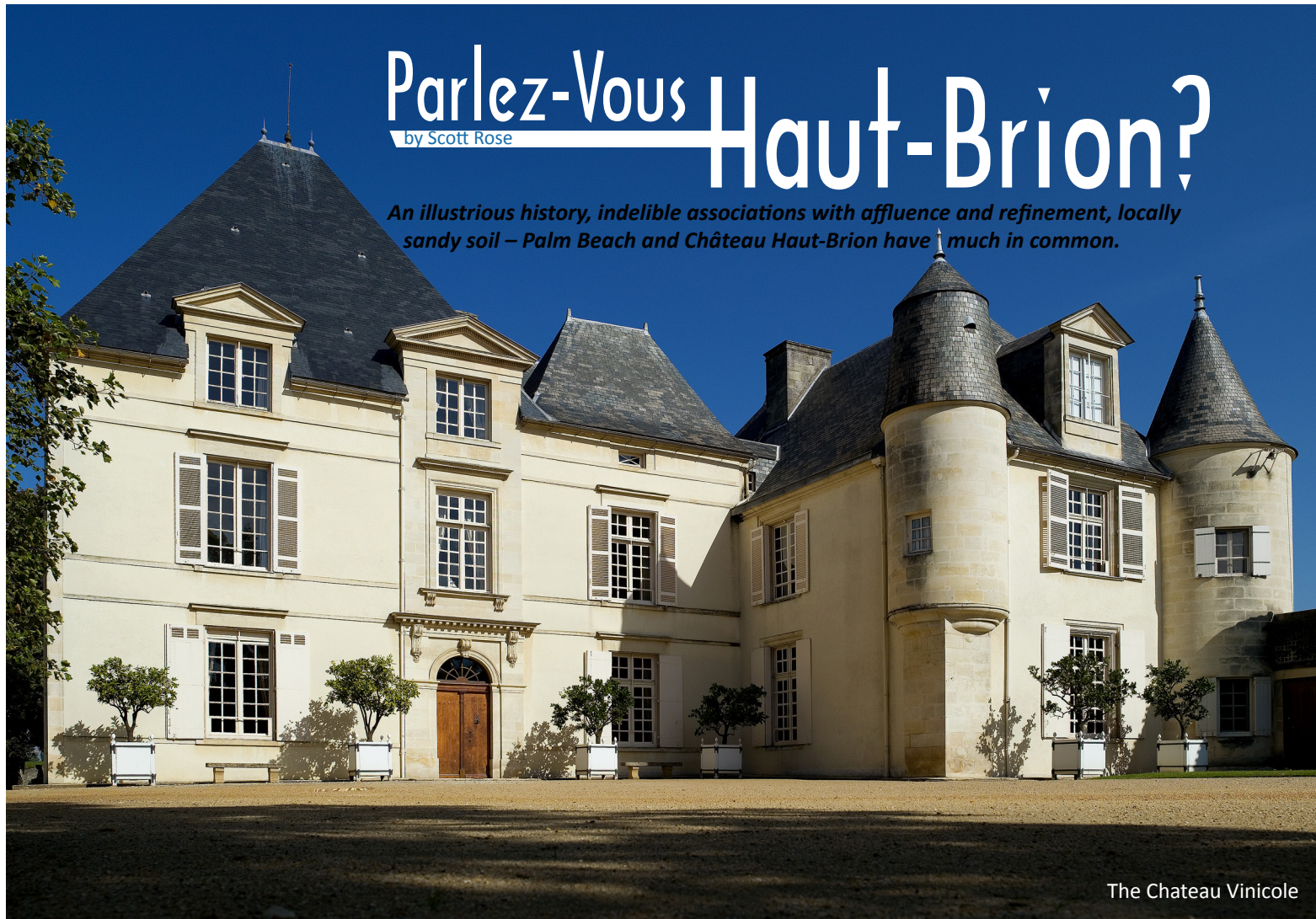


Parlez-Vous Haut-Brion?

by Scott Rose

An illustrious history, indelible associations with affluence and refinement, locally sandy soil – Palm Beach and Château Haut-Brion have much in common.



The Chateau Vinicole

Château Haut-Brion commands deepest reverence in oenological circles. With a history stretching back to the 1500s, the property has been visited by luminaries including Thomas Jefferson and the English philosopher John Locke. Located in Pessac, a Bordeaux suburb, Haut-Brion is best known for its exquisite red wines. Yet there are about 6 ½ acres in these vineyards planted with Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc grapes, and the white wines made from them are among the most highly coveted in the world.

Sémillon is a golden-skinned grape which at the peak of ripeness can turn pinkish. Thanks to low acidity and high yield, it produces wines that age well. In south-western France, conditions for its propagation are near ideal. During the best of growing seasons, its thin skin allows for optimal development of noble rot, essential to Sauternes. What noble rot contributes to dry white wines, though, is a complex, alluring array of aromas and flavors including peaches, acacia flower, almonds, mangoes, apricots, pears and quince compote.

The green-skinned Sauvignon blanc grape on its own makes for refreshing and crisp, dry white wines. Climatic conditions in the Bordeaux region slow its ripening, yielding a lovely balance between

sweetness and acidity. Sauvignon blanc wines have a distinctly forward aroma profile in which the most frequently discerned components are lime, grapefruit, green melon, passion fruit, gooseberry and freshly-mown grass.

Sémillon and Sauvignon blanc grapes are, of course, greatly influenced by soil. The Château Haut-Brion property is famed for its gravelly top soil rich in quartz and quartzite stones. That topsoil allows for thorough drainage while compelling the vines to grow deep down into a layer of alios... a hard, iron-rich sandstone... in order to obtain nutrients. These conditions make for relatively sparse fruit endowed with dramatically intense flavors. They also make for a pronounced mineral character in the wine. This gout de



The harvest

terroir, literally taste of the soil, is the pride of the Graves region of France.

Château Haut-Brion whites are roughly 55% Sauvignon blanc, 45% Sémillon, but the ratio changes from year to year, as the vintners must make judgments apropos of which assemblage will produce the finest wine. In the blend, the innate softness of the Sémillon is enlivened by Sauvignon's high acidity.

Selection and triage of the grapes at the Château occur by meticulous process. After picking, all leaves as well as any grapes that are split, unripe or rotten get removed by hand. Then a special machine, an égrappoir, eliminates the stalks. The juice and the must are pumped into stainless-steel vats to begin fermentation, macerating with the skins for an average of ten days. Aging in traditional, new-wood oak barriques follows, and is expertly controlled to determine the optimal moment for bottling, which generally takes place 14 to 16 months after the harvest. The oak aging softens acidity and adds body along with a hint of vanilla flavor.

"Chateau Haut-Brion is a wine of first rank and seems to please the American palate more than all the others that I have been able to taste in France."

Though Château Haut-Brion white wines reveal fine qualities early, they also age stupendously well. The best vintages when aged twenty, thirty and sometimes even more years reveal a complexity and a depth akin to those of the best Sauternes.

There is always competition for the best available bottles of Château Haut-Brion blanc, but the rewards of acquiring them are considerable. It is more the rarity of the wine than its price that leads connoisseurs to save it for premium occasions. One vintage might be a deeper gold than another. A bottle aged 20 years might have creamier and more pronounced notes of apricot, apple pie and honeysuckle than its younger fellow aged just 15 years. Yet an encounter with any bottle of Château Haut-Brion blanc is likely to tower among your oenological experiences.

That, bien entendu, pertains to the reds as well. On the estate grounds is a marble plaque engraved with Thomas Jefferson's comment that Chateau Haut-Brion "is a wine of first rank and seems to please the American palate more than all the others that I have been able to taste in France."

How did a bottle of the 1990 Château Haut-Brion impress this American palate? In my tasting notes, I said that the wine could be likened to poetry, but that for the comparison to ring true, one would have to compose a poem with a mesmerizingly intense, garnet coloration, a bouquet that sings of the earth . . . its ripe dark fruits, its fragrant woods, its leathers and its fresh-dried tobaccos . . . and a divinely complex, finely nuanced evolution of flavors that is nothing less than a thorough flowering of the wine's bouquet in one's mouth. The poem would need to have an ineffably beautiful structure, layer after layer of minerality, cocoa, cassis and spices, all inflected with impeccably integrated, silken tannins. Its finish

HRH Prince Robert of Luxembourg, who began administrative service at Château Haut-Brion when 18.



Internet Resources for Learning More about Bordeaux and Château Haut-Brion:

- 1) <http://www.haut-brion.com/home/en/> Haut-Brion's official website offers a virtual tour of the Château
- 2) www.1855.com Named for the landmark Bordeaux Classification year of 1855, this site appears first in French, but at the bottom of the screen you may click for the English version
- 3) www.bordeaux.com For English, click the "Pays et Langue" tab at the top of the home page

would have to linger, like a double rainbow arched over a waterfall, leaving a cherishable impression of balance and elegance.

According to historical gossip, after King Louis XV gave Château Haut-Brion wine to his mistresses Madame du Barry and Madame de Pompadour, they would settle for no other sort of claret. Talleyrand, King George II, Samuel Pepys, President Eisenhower, Queen Elizabeth II and Malcom Forbes have all been fans. But the only way to fully comprehend why so potent a mystique attaches to Haut-Brion

is to enjoy its wines yourself. For showing a circle of friends how profoundly you appreciate them, nothing is superior to a vertical tasting of Haut-Brion vintages, be they red or white. À votre santé! Cheers! ■

