

Sarah Kemp

'I kept my promise... It was the most bittersweet wine trip I've made'

IN NOVEMBER 2014, while talking to my old friend Serge Hochar of Chateau Musar (see p114) in Shanghai, I promised that I would finally visit him in Beirut. For years Serge had been telling me about Lebanon's historic place in the wine world; how vines had been grown there for more than six millennia, and how his French family had settled there centuries ago after the Crusades.

In October 2015, I kept my promise. But sadly, I was unable to visit Serge, who died suddenly in December 2014. My visit was the most bittersweet wine trip I've ever made.

Serge had been part of my life for more than 30 years. When I arrived at *Decanter* in 1985, the *Decanter* Man of the Year award had just been inaugurated, and Serge was the first recipient. His Chateau Musar reds and whites were made from grapes grown in the war-torn Bekaa Valley, east of the Beirut. Musar was 'discovered' by our columnist Michael Broadbent at the Bristol Wine Fair in 1979 when he declared it the 'find of the fair'.

As I left London, I could not ignore the irony of history repeating itself. Beirut, known as the Paris of the East, used to be a playground of the international jet set; today it is bereft of tourists. With war so close in Syria (Damascus is only 83km from Beirut, a few hours' drive), the city feels like it's holding its breath. It was too dangerous to go to the Bekaa Valley. But Musar's winery is fairly close to Beirut and was reasonably safe to visit.

Any trepidation I had disappeared the moment I met Ronald, Serge's brother, and Serge's two sons Gaston and Marc, as their broad smiles and easy laughter filled the room. Inside, preparation was underway for the winery's 85th anniversary celebrations that night at the 18th-century chateau.

Earlier, I had a tasting with winemaker Tarek Sakr, who has been there since 2001. Musar wines tend to divide the wine community;



there are some who find it off-centre and volatile but, like Michael Broadbent and Steven Spurrier, I am not one. Musar wines are distinctive and, for me, clearly reflect the personality of where they are from. The spirit of Lebanon persists in them, with elegance, and power, surprising and dazzling the palate.

There were a number of stars from my tasting with Tarek. The 2004 was a vintage of astonishing elegance; the virile, almost feral 1999, with layers of truffle and chanterelles dancing on the palate, proved yet again the ageability of Musar reds; and the 1978 reminded me of Broadbent's description of the wines as 'a little bit of Bordeaux, a little bit of Burgundy' – an amazingly vibrant wine today, still with all its brooding power. We finished with a 1975 Chateau Musar white. Bright orange in colour, it showed an intense core of white chocolate and an extraordinary youthfulness for its 40 years of age.

The theme of the 85th anniversary celebration (attended by 300 friends and customers) was a farewell to Serge, and a reaffirmation of the family's wine future. The next night another celebration for Serge was held at Vinifest, Lebanon's wine festival. Many of the country's most prominent wineries – there are now 40 – take a marquee, and there is music and food as well.

When I arrived at Vinifest, I discovered that the guest of honour was Lebanon's Russian ambassador, as Russia was the featured nation. After a poignant tribute to Serge by several winemakers, the ambassador took to the stage and immediately dramatised the topsy-turvy politics here: 'We love vodka', he began, 'but don't worry, we won't drink it before we deal with the terrorists'.

Astonished, I wondered what would – or could – follow that, and soon three crooners began belting out songs from *Cats* while various people danced on the stage, including two men dressed in wooden wine barrels. It was not your usual wine event.

I couldn't help but think how proud Serge would have been that his Lebanon – the place of world-class wine under the constant threat of war – still knew how to throw a huge party and have a ball. *Memories* and memories indeed. Of a great man, a great friend, and his great wine. ■

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