

# Chateau Musar 1964

Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

## A legend because...

Chateau Musar is a distinctive wine, for many years the only one that could demonstrate the potential of the vineyards of Lebanon. It also, in certain vintages, has a remarkable capacity to age. But the vineyards lie within the Bekaa Valley, which frequently became a war zone during Lebanon's seemingly endless civil strife. With its imperfect infrastructure and relative isolation, Lebanon can never have been an easy place to produce a wine with an eye on the international market, and military and terrorist action between the vineyards and Beirut offered an unwelcome complication. In 1983, the harvest had to be postponed for a month because of fighting in the valley. Only one vintage (1976) had to be abandoned.

## Looking back

Gaston Hochar founded Musar in the 1930s, and in 1959 handed the reins to his son Serge, who had studied with Emile Peynaud in Bordeaux and ran the estate until his accidental death on New Year's Eve in 2014. The Hochars were not dependent on the winery for their living, as they had a thriving construction business. But Serge was no dilettante, and wine for him was a consuming passion. Nor was he a formulaic winemaker, with each vintage a variation on the theme provided by the grape varieties and terroir. In 1984 he was named the first Decanter Man of the Year.

## The vintage

Civil war broke out in 1975, so the 1964 vintage was produced in less traumatic times. Musar was the only producer of Lebanese wine then, so few records of climatic conditions exist. But it appears that the Bekaa Valley enjoyed a very good summer that allowed all three varieties planted to reach full maturation.

## The terroir

The organic vineyards, both owned and leased, are planted in three villages in the Bekaa Valley: Aana, Ammiq and Kefraya. Soils are rocky and vary in fertility and richness; Ammiq has more gravelly soil. Then as now, Musar is an unusual blend of bush-vine Cabernet Sauvignon, Cinsault and Carignan. Elevation (about 915m) and cool nights are key factors in the wine's

*'A great year often has a baked character, as well as herbal, truffley complexity'*

balance and ageability. Cabernet usually forms its backbone, with exact proportions in the final blend varying from year to year.

## The wine

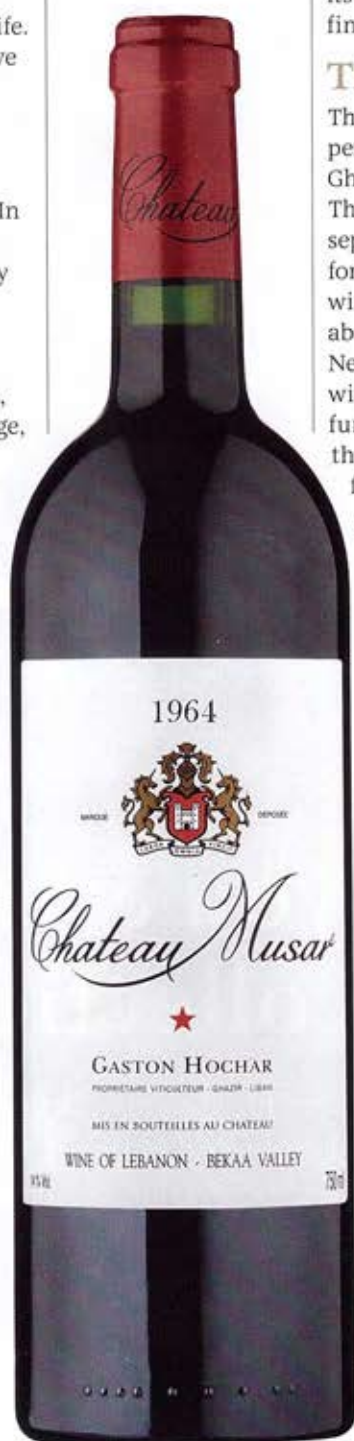
The grapes are transported, gunfire permitting, to the winery 70km away in Ghazir, a village perched high above Beirut. The fruit from each vineyard is fermented separately with wild yeasts in cement tanks for five weeks or so. After fermentation the wine is aged, still separately, in those vats for about nine months before being aged in Nevers barriques for 10 to 14 months. The wines are then returned to vats, blended and further aged in cement before being bottled at the end of the third year. There is no fining or filtration. Bottles are stored for up to three years before release. A great vintage, such as the 1964, often has a baked character reflecting the climate, but also great complexity in the form of herbal and truffley aromas and flavours. The wines can be deceptively pale, and can display high levels of volatile acidity and traces of oxidation, which admirers easily overlook.

## The reaction

Tasting notes on the 1964 are scarce, probably because a decade or two would go by before Musar attracted the attention of wine writers and collectors. It was tasted in 1986 by Michael Broadbent, who recalls: 'Nose like Turkish Delight, delicious flavour. Impressive, Bordeaux-style, fleshy.' In 2013, an avid New York collector of 1964 vintages from around the world declared it to be 'the youngest 1964 vintage I have ever tasted'. **D**

## THE FACTS

**Bottles produced** 35,000  
**Composition** Roughly one third each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan and Cinsault  
**Yield** 20hl/ha  
**Alcohol** 14%  
**Release price** N/A  
**Price today** £887



by Stephen Brook