

Lubnan

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Chateau Musar celebrates 85th anniversary

Mat Nashed | The Daily Star

GHAZIR, Lebanon: Serge Hochar was more than just a Lebanese winemaker. He was a man with as much class as the wines he produced. A sage to those who knew him, he first took over his father's winery, Chateau Musar, in 1959. And with Lebanon's civil war looming over a decade later, he would be the one to save it. "Wine is above politics," he said in 2012. "Wine is tolerance."

When the country rapidly disintegrated in the 1970s, Hochar chose to export his wine rather than halt production. Not without risk, he had to double his cellar into a bomb shelter while his vineyards were often shelled. Yet as Lebanon endured its darkest era, Chateau Musar shined through to the world.

This was most apparent in 1984 when Hochar was named the first "man of the year" by Decanter magazine – one of the most prestigious wine publications in the world. Sarah Kemp, Decanter's publishing director, says that Hochar set the benchmark for every nominee they considered in following years. And how couldn't he be: His wine represented the permanent beauty of a country engulfed in civil war.

"We [Decanter] always try to nominate people who have offered a greater contribution in their context than just making a great wine," she told The Daily Star. "Serge was the epitome of that."

Nine months following Hochar's death, Tuesday he was honored again at Chateau Musar's 85th anniversary at Palais Mzar. That night, wine lovers from across the country gathered in celebration. And though he wasn't there to bear witness, his contribution to the wine world remains a cherished legacy.

"Tonight, we are celebrating my brother's continuity," said Ronald, Serge's brother and head of Musar's marketing and finance. "Like Lebanon, his wine will always live on."

Chaeteau Musar gained its reputation from two of its top estate wines. The first was a red that embodied a blend of cabernet sauvignon, cinsault, and carignan while the other was a white made from the local grapes of merwah and obadieh.

Merwah is a light colored grape that produces a nutty flavor while obadieh often instills a sweet aroma of honey and lemon.

Once introduced to the global market, each wine gained rapid popularity for its distinctive taste. And while Musar's funky and wild savor didn't appeal to the palate of every connoisseur, their supreme quality solidified Lebanon's rank in the international wine scene.

"Like anything great, Musar has a distinct signature," said Kemp, after giving a speech at the celebration to honor Hochar's life work. "Musar is to wine what Picasso and Van Gogh are to art: As soon as you taste it, you know that it's a Musar."

Hochar's relationship with wine mirrored his perspective on life. During his visit to New York City in 2012, he captivated his guests with his wisdom while pouring glasses of Musar at a late night dinner.

"I know nothing about wine," he said, to a room of guests much younger than him. "I know how to make wine, but I know nothing about wine, and each day I discover that I know less."

"My brother always said that there are two things in this world that will always be unpredictable – wine and the weather," said Ronald Hochar, a handsome elderly man with grey hair and a sleek suite. "I wish he was here to see this celebration today."

Despite Serge Hochar's humility, no one would dare deny his impact on Lebanon's wine scene. Since the Civil War, the amount of producers in the country have steadily risen from a handful to over 40. And while Chateau Musar remains the pioneer for them all, Hochar's greatest achievement was introducing an alternative image of his country to the world. Often perceived as a ground for conflict, Musar represented Lebanon as a soil where hope can grow.

"A wine like this celebrates the wine tradition in Lebanon," said Ehajic Khalje, a guest at the anniversary. "I first tried Musar 20 years ago and that was when I found perfection in a bottle."

In his later years, Hochar maintained his extensive travels while gradually handing over winery duties to his sons, Mark and Gaston. When he died Dec. 31 of last year, his wine sold out across the world. And though his family now heads the winery in his absence, his charisma remains alive in all those who knew him.

"Serge had much in common with the wine he made," said Kemp, while holding a wine glass in her right hand. "You couldn't compare him to anyone."

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Summary

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