

IDEALWINE UPDATE : THE CARMES BEFORE THE STORM

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Under the direction of Patrice and Diane Pichet, Château Les Carmes Haut-Brion, the only producer in the city of Bordeaux, is enjoying a revival, with its wines being acclaimed by critics and consumers alike.



NESTLED IN among the city's sprawl, at 20 rue des Carmes, Château Les Carmes Haut-Brion is the only chateau to be located within the city of Bordeaux. It is one of four Graves chateaux to take their name from Jean de Pontac, the Duke of Hault-Brion.

'Carmes' refers to the Carmelite Order, which inherited land and some vineyards in 1584 and owned the property between the 16th and 18th centuries. During the French Revolution, the land was requisitioned and some decades later, sold at auction to the Chantecaille-Furts family. This same family ran the estate until 2010, when it was bought by Patrice Pichet, a successful property developer, who, with his wife, Diane, has made it his mission to modernise Carmes without losing its charm. In the space of a few vintages, they have brought the chateau out of relative obscurity.

The property is small by Bordeaux standards, and its 29.6 hectares of almost inner-city vineyards have more of a garden feel than the rows of immaculate vines usually associated with Bordeaux. The estate boasts an ideal terroir of slightly sloping, well-drained vineyards on soils of gravel, clay and sand. The vineyards' proximity to the city means it benefits from naturally higher temperatures than elsewhere in the region.

This more temperate climate makes it easier for Cabernet Franc to ripen, which leads us to another idiosyncrasy of Les Carmes Haut-Brion: it devotes only a small percentage of its crop to Cabernet Sauvignon, the majority being Cabernet Franc, followed by Merlot. The wine is therefore different from what you'd expect from a Pessac. The château also vinifies some of its grapes in whole bunches, a technique more akin to current trends in Burgundian winemaking than Bordeaux. The percentage of whole bunches depends on the ripeness of the stems; they ferment with de-stemmed grapes with as little intervention as possible, and all the while the cap is submerged.

The arrival of the ambitious Pichet marked a turning point insofar as it saw the beginning of a series of wide-ranging changes on the estate. As well as instituting the supremacy of Cabernet Franc, missing vines were replanted, and the gradients of certain slopes were corrected.

Guillaume Pouthier was appointed technical director, and Pichet sought the enological expertise of Stéphane Derenoncourt. Seeking the most precise expression of the fruit possible, a more environmentally friendly approach was adopted, bringing in horse ploughing, lower yields and meticulous parcel work. Ever the innovator, in June 2016, to coincide with the release of the 2015 vintage, Pichet inaugurated a new cellar on the property. Designed by Philippe Starck and Luc Arsène-Henry, its glistening metallic panels rise majestically out of water; the impressive structure houses new vats, a barrel cellar and reception rooms.



Philippe Starck and Luc Arsène-Henry's impressive cellar

ENHANCING QUALITY

Every aspect of the modern and highly aesthetic chai has been designed to enhance the quality of the wines. And it has succeeded in doing so immeasurably. Everything is done by gravity, and the new winery allows the château to vinify its micro-parcels in many different-sized containers. The wines are left to mature for 24 to 28 months in a combination of demi-muids – many of which are new oak – terracotta and ceramic amphorae. It is state of the art, in more ways than one: every year since 2015, a different artist paints the vat used to age the château's grand vin. Another recent novelty was the release of the Marie-Jeanne, a 2.25-litre bottle, sold in a transparent anti-UV glass container. Only 800 of these bottles were released in the 2016 vintage, at prices upwards of €2,000 (£1,811).

Perhaps the most dynamic property of Pessac-Léognan, the château's progress is reflected in the 2018 vintage. Full-bodied, with lovely purity of fruit and soft, integrated tannins that are barely detectable, the vintage was immediately lauded by critics, and awarded some of the highest points in the region. Along with Calon Ségur, Carmes Haut-Brion was the blockbuster of this year's primeurs season. Within just a few hours of release, the 2018 was sold out. In a few days, the market price tripled the initial price the négociants had bought at. Only one bottle in five is sold in France; the rest of the production is destined for the global market and it is seen by many as the best Bordeaux investment today.

The rise to stardom is down to a combination of factors: phenomenal qualitative progress through Pichet's ambition and hard work; the relative rarity of these wines in a region of high production; highly effective marketing from the château's team; and a context of less attractive prices for big Bordeaux in a somewhat stagnant market. As recognition for its stunning quality, the future for this one-time outsider is looking bright.