



A Rather Special Wine?

John Peck



Recently there was a wine auction (inevitably held online because of you-know-what) which featured some special wines from the 1945 vintage. Apparently one of the highlights was a bottle of Chateau Mouton Rothschild from that 1945 vintage which sold for £9920 a bottle. Yes, that's not a typo - it was Nine Thousand Nine Hundred and Twenty Pounds for just one bottle. Of course, Mouton Rothschild is a very famous (and very expensive) wine-producer in Bordeaux anyway and the prices for its wines are always astronomical, but this one bottle from 1945 did seem quite an extraordinary purchase. The 1945 vintage in France was unique because it represented the first vintage at the end of the Second World War and was intended to commemorate and celebrate the end of that devastating conflict. I decided to look further into the story behind this particular wine.....

In September 2019 a very special banquet was held in the Palace of Versailles in the Gallery of Great Battles. Somewhere between 27 and 30 bottles of the 1945 wine were shared between 200 or so guests. The bottles had stayed in the Mouton cellars for close on 75 years. The Battle Gallery Room in the palace was inaugurated in 1837 just 16 years before the first Rothschild, the English Baron Nathaniel, arrived at Mouton.

All three of the current owners of this property attended this banquet - Philippe and Camille Sereys de Rothschild and Julien de Beaumarchais de Rothschild, along with their fathers, Jacques Sereys and Jean-Pierre de Beaumarchais. Somewhat ironically the family didn't technically own the Chateau when the 1945 wine was made because at that point it had not yet been restored to them after the wartime Vichy government stripped the family of its French nationality and confiscated its property. It was restored to them in late 1945 and in 1947 Baron Philippe gained sole ownership, buying out his brother and sisters' shares.

During the war, it was a team led by Edouard Marjary and cellar master Raoul Blondin who looked after the estate as best they could - although Marjary was himself in the Resistance and so rarely present on the estate. Philippe de Rothschild spent almost five years away from his property during the war. In June 1940, days after he left, Mouton was placed under public administration and occupied by a garrison of the German army. By August 1940, Philippe was arrested under orders from Vichy and imprisoned first in Morocco and then Clermont-Ferrand.

Philippe's wife, Lili, worked with lawyers to secure his release in 1941, and from there he crossed the Pyrenees to join the Free French forces in England in 1942. He took part in the D-Day Landings in 1944. When he eventually arrived in Paris in September 1944, he found his wife had been arrested and had been sent away. Philippe was then posted to Germany as a liaison between French and British troops and was one of the first of the Allied forces into Belsen. By now he had learned that Lili had been sent to a concentration camp, but not what had happened to her.

Philippe was later awarded both the "Croix de Guerre" and the "Legion d'Honneur" but this was scant consolation when he discovered that Lili had died in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp in March 1945. In his autobiography Philippe wrote: " I couldn't sustain the loathing I felt.... what use is revenge? Shooting a man will not bring his victims back to life."

He later went out of his way to help those who were accused of collaborating, including a cellar-hand at Mouton, who he told to lie low for a year, and when he returned gave him back his job at the estate, where he would stay for the rest of his life.

“The only peace I could find was at Mouton, walking among the vines,” Philippe wrote of that time.

He put the German prisoners who were still being held at the Chateau to work clearing up the buildings and the land, tidying the park and laying a road that led from Mouton to Pontet Canet that he called his “road of revenge”.

One feature of the bottles of Chateau Mouton Rothschild is the artwork on the labels. Artists, some of them famous, (such as Miro, Chagall, Picasso, Francis Bacon, Dali and even Prince Charles!) have been commissioned to produce designs for successive vintages. For this 1945 vintage the artist chosen was Philippe Jullian, a young French artist that Philippe had met when he was in England during the war. Jullian himself had suffered under the German occupation, writing in his diary of life in Paris: “ The atmosphere is tense with raids, the fear of departures to Germany”.

The commission to paint the label saw him submit several suggestions, some with French flags and other symbols of the country’s relief and pride at victory, but Philippe chose the one featured around Churchill’s famous V for Victory sign. The reason, he said, was that he wanted to pay tribute to the role of the Allies in ending the war, and to show the gratitude that he felt to them.

Not every bottle of wine has such an amazing story to underpin it as the 1945 Mouton but, despite this, I was not inspired to put in a bid for this rare vintage in the 2019 auction!!

