

ROBERSON WINE PRESENTS:

THE
HAUT-BRION
FAMILY

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HAUT-BRION

The history of Chateau Haut-Brion is perhaps the most important of all for the wines of Bordeaux, if not the entire world of fine wine. It is an estate that has innovated and broken new boundaries while establishing Bordeaux's reputation as the world's most prestigious grape growing and wine making region.

Today, the vineyards of Pessac-Leognan have been enveloped by the suburban sprawl of Bordeaux, creating a somewhat bizarre environment compared to the more rural splendour of other famous appellations across the rest of France. It all started back in the early 1300s, just down the road from Haut Brion at what is now Chateau Pape-Clement, when this northerly part of the 'Graves' region (named because of the gravelly soils) was planted to the vine by Pope Clement V. It was over two hundred years later that Haut-Brion was planted, but the man that did it (Jean de Pontac) would create an estate that would go on to change the world of wine forever and dictate the fortunes of the surrounding area.

After taking the lands of 'Aubrion' as a wedding dowry, Jean de Pontac planted the vineyards and built the chateau. Having created the estate, Jean passed it to his son Arnaud on his death (having lived until 101 years old!) before in turn it was passed to his nephew Geoffroy and then his son Arnaud de Pontac III.

This is where the Haut-Brion story begins to gather pace, as Arnaud sent his son (Francois-Auguste, *pictured right*) to London in order to spread the word about Bordeaux's (and the world's) first single estate red wine. The de Pontacs had been wine merchants for many years, selling 'Claret' to England under generic names as was the custom. Haut-Brion was the first estate to be marketed on its own and quickly gathered a reputation as the very best.

The quality of Haut-Brion was due to a combination of factors. On the one hand there is the superb terroir of course, but Arnaud de Pontac was also an enthusiastic wine-maker with exacting standards and an eye for innovation. He was the first to introduce the idea of topping up barrels during maturation as a way to prevent oxidation and also pioneered the idea of 'racking'. Both of these ideas are standard practice today.

In order to make sure the elite of London's society were suitably exposed to their wine, the family opened a restaurant called 'Pontack's Head'. It was quickly established as London's finest restaurant (still a new concept back then) and went on to serve the great and the good for over 100 years. Perhaps the most famous fan of Haut-Brion (or Ho'Bryan as he called it) was Samuel Pepys, but philosopher John Locke, King Charles II and, of course, Thomas Jefferson, were all enthusiastic drinkers down the years.

*“I drank a sort of French wine called Ho’ Bryan,
which hath a good and most particular taste...”*
Samuel Pepys (1663)

With its reputation firmly established in France, London and beyond, it was no surprise that Haut-Brion was designated as one of only four Premier Grand Cru Classé estates in the 1855 classification of Bordeaux wines. What is worth remembering is that Haut-Brion was the only property outside of the Haut-Medoc to be included in the classification.

By this time ownership of the estate had passed to the Larrieu family through a number of people, including Napoleon’s foreign minister Tallyrand, and it was 1922 before they sold it on again to a retired banker called André Gibert.

When Gibert was on his deathbed 13 years later he offered the property to the city of Bordeaux as a gift - provided they maintained its upkeep and vowed never to build on the land. Somewhat amazingly, the municipal government turned him down and the estate ended up being sold to an American financier called Clarence Dillon. Mr Dillon had been prevented from buying Cheval Blanc the day before thanks to a terrible fog that made it impossible for him to view the property. As he was due to return to St Emilion the following day, he was whisked to Gibert’s bedside by one of his advisors and ended up buying Haut-Brion.

And so, in 1935, the modern era of Haut-Brion began. Dillon maintained the services of Georges Delmas (the property manager that had started in 1921) and this combination of the Dillon and Delmas families continues to this day - Clarence’s granddaughter (Duchesse de Mouchey) and George Delmas’ grandson (Jean-Philippe) are now at the helm.

The wines of Chateau Haut-Brion are celebrated today as some of the world’s best and in some vintages they are considered to be even finer than their first growth colleagues.



It has been during the Dillon tenureship that many of the surrounding vineyards of Pessac have really established themselves, although Chateau Haut-Brion has had a hand in the history of all the estates that feature its famous name in their titles.

The most famous of this group is Chateau La Mission Haut-Brion. The property is literally across the road from Haut-Brion itself and was purchased by the Dillon family in 1983. Prior to that La Mission had built up a substantial and thoroughly deserved reputation of its own .

To the north of Haut-Brion lies the small property of Les Carmes du Haut-Brion which was once part of the main estate itself. To the south of Haut-Brion lie La Mission’s sister estates Laville and La Tour - both were acquired by the Dillons as part of the 1983 purchase.

Still further south (just outside the town of Leognan) is the property of Larrivet-Haut-Brion. This is not part of the Dillon empire, but has not been spared its influence. The estate was previously known as Haut-Brion-Larrivet, but after a legal battle with the Dillons (soon after they arrived in Pessac) they were forced to reverse the name, although the fact that they were allowed to keep Haut-Brion in the name at all was a victory of sorts.

More details of all these estates can be found on the subsequent pages of this brochure.

FLIGHT ONE: The whites

Does Chateau Haut-Brion make the best white wine in the world? There are certainly some that think so and while it may not command the prices of top Grand Cru white Burgundy, it isn't exactly trading at bargain basement prices either.

Haut-Brion Blanc is a white wine that is built to last - whole bunch pressed, fermented and matured in Allier oak (nowadays around 40% new) for about a year, with no batonnage. The wine doesn't go through a malo-lactic fermentation in order to maintain crisp freshness and much needed acidity.

The Chateau also produces a second wine from their white grapes, called **Les Plantiers du Haut-Brion**. This cuvée is made from the young vines in their 2.7ha of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, planted across the road from the chateau on a small hillock.

Just to the south of this are the vineyards of **Laville-Haut-Brion**, which to all intents and purposes can be considered as the white wine of La Mission. Although the vineyards are separate, Laville came under the auspices of La Mission when it was sold to Frederic Woltner (the then owner) in 1931. It joined the Dillon stable in 1983 and has since gone on to establish itself as a top white wine that, while not always as highly rated as Haut-Brion Blanc, is certainly not far off.

Unlike its neighbour, Semillon tends to dominate the blend at Laville although since the 90s the elevage has become very similar. No malo, no batonnage and oak fermentation followed by maturation for 15 months in 50% new barrels.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
1: 2005 Les Plantiers de Haut-Brion 13% ABV	1	£52.95	£47.66
2: 2001 Laville Haut-Brion 13% ABV	n/a	£120	n/a
3: 1992 Haut-Brion Blanc 12% ABV	3	£395	£355.50

FLIGHT TWO: The outsiders

Just to the north of Haut-Brion is a small estate with a history almost as long. **Les Carmes du Haut-Brion** was originally part of the main property during the time of the de Pontacs, but the (just under) 5ha was broken off and donated to an order of Carmelite monks that had been praying for the family! The Carmelite monks gave the property its name and remained there for over two hundred years before revolutionary forces seized it in 1789.

Today the property is owned by the Chantecaille family of wine merchants and managed by Didier Furt. There is no link whatsoever with the Dillon properties - except, of course, for the proximity of the estates.

Despite being part of the original estate, the terroir is infact quite different to Haut-Brion in that it is far less gravelly and there is a high sand content. Perhaps no surprise then that the monks were given this section in the first place! The wines are good, but Les Carmes is certainly no first growth after all. Despite this, the wine has begun to develop a following - certainly the rarity of it has helped to make it quite a sought after wine. Didier Furt has made a host of improvements since he took charge, including the introduction of a second wine and an end to filtration. The wine typically spends 18months maturing in oak, 50% of which is new.

In the south of the appellation, on the outskirts of Leognan, are the vineyards of **Larrivet-Haut-Brion** - an estate that shares nothing with the original Haut-Brion other than a name and some bad blood (as discussed on page 3).

Larrivet's gravelly terroir in the southern part of the appellation is close to that of Chateaux Carbonnieux and La Louviere and as with that famous property they make both a red and a white wine.

The red is what we are tasting tonight and is a blend of almost equal parts Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Some Cabernet Franc vines were recently planted although it will be some time before they come on-stream.

The wine spends 12 months in oak, 50% of which is new barrels.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
4: 2005 Les Carmes du Haut-Brion 13.5% ABV	10	£ 61.95	£55.76
5: 2000 Larrivet Haut-Brion 12.5% ABV	3	£ 42.95	£38.66

FLIGHT THREE: The second wines

Considered by Robert Parker to be one of the very best second wines of Bordeaux, **Bahans Haut-Brion** was introduced in order to ensure that only the best barrels made the final cut and were labelled as Chateau Haut-Brion.

Unlike many second wines, Bahans is produced in an identical manner to the Grand Vin. In fact, it is only at final bottling that the barrels deemed not worthy are deselected and bottled as Bahans. So first growth standard it may not be, but in many years it gets very close and Bahans is rightfully respected as a superb wine in its own right.

As of the 2007 vintage, Haut Brion's second wine has changed its name to 'Clarence de Haut-Brion'.

Down the road at La Mission there is also a second wine, although **La Chapelle de la Mission Haut-Brion** is more conventional in that it is sourced from the young vines on the property. Other than the age of the vines however (and the parcels are vinified separately), the wine's elevage is the same as that of the Grand Vin.

A little further to the south of La Mission is another estate called La Tour Haut-Brion, which was procured by the Dillon family as part of the deal to buy La Mission. For years (before the inception of La Chapelle in '92) it was thought of by many as La Mission's second wine, despite the fact that it was sourced from different vineyard plots and vinified separately. It was then, a wine unto itself. That was until 2006 - when the powers that be decided to incorporate La Tour into La Mission after all!

So while it wasn't a second wine, now it is (the production goes into La Chapelle), although tonight we are tasting it from when it wasn't. Confused?

Previously, when it was bottled separately, the fruit was fermented in stainless steel tanks before being aged for 20 months in 100% new oak barrels.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
6: 2001 La Chapelle de la Mission Haut-Brion 12.5% ABV	1	£89.95	£80.96
7: 1998 Bahans Haut-Brion 13% ABV	10	£69.95	£62.95
8: 1995 La Tour Haut-Brion 13% ABV	5	£76.95	£69.26

FLIGHT FOUR: The *Grand vins*

So we know all about the history of **Chateau Haut-Brion**, but what about the contemporary situation at the estate? Well, it is perhaps in ruder health than it has ever been, with good management and a string of spectacular recent vintages over the past generation meaning big scores from the critics and big price tags on the secondary market.

Haut-Brion has always been a centre of innovation (topping up and racking are credited to the Pontac family of yesteryear) and this continues today with the work being done at the estate on matching clones and rootstocks to different terroir. The Delmas family that have managed the estate for almost 100 years were also the first to introduce stainless steel fermentation tanks, a practice that was copied by producers all over the region.

The red wines of the estate begin their life in these tanks before being transferred to oak barrels (now around 35% new) produced by their in-house cooperage employing barrel makers from Seguin-Moreau to make bespoke barriques. The wine is aged in these for 18 months before bottling.

While not as well known or highly respected as its sibling, **Chateau La Mission Haut-Brion** is a wine revered by connoisseurs throughout the world and in some vintages has been said to outperform its more famous neighbour.

La Mission owes its name and religious iconography to the order of Lazerite monks that took charge of the estate in 1664 and made wine there until it was confiscated during the revolution. It was owned by various families after that until the Woltner family took over in 1919 and established the modern day reputation of the property. The Dillons bought it in 1983 but have been mindful to maintain its independence in reputation and style from the main Haut-Brion estate.

The wine is considered to be the more masculine of the two, often beginning its life with a strong tannic backbone and structure that enables it to age for many years. Like Haut-Brion, La Mission is fermented in tank and then aged for 18 months, although the Dillons use 100% new barrels here.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
9: 1990 La Mission Haut-Brion 13% ABV	1	£485	£436.50
10: 1985 Haut-Brion n/a ABV	10	£350	£315
11: 1964 Haut-Brion n/a ABV	1	£230	£207