

**LÉOVILLE**

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**A VERTIZONTAL TASTING**

ROBERSON WINE

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Back in the 17th century, the Léoville estate was one of the most important in Bordeaux. It was originally known as the Mont-Moytié estate and encompassed a large swathe of marshland (drained by Dutch engineers in the 1600s) along what is today the Pauillac / St Julien border on the left bank of the River Gironde. Following a bitter inheritance dispute between two sisters, the estate passed in to the hands of a President in the Bordeaux parliament called Blaise Antoine Alexandre de Gascq. He was the Seigneur of Léoville and, after the claim on the land was settled in his wife's favour, the estate was named after him. One of his four heirs was the Marquis de Las-Cases-Beauvoir (the others were a brother and two sisters of the Marquis), but before any of them could enjoy the spoils of their inheritance, the French Revolution threw an all-mighty spanner in the aristocratic works - the Marquis was forced to flee France and the estate was requisitioned by the state. The authorities had planned on selling the estate off as a whole, but they were persuaded to divide it up, so a quarter was sold to a trio of local businessmen. This was the segment that was later sold to Hugh Barton and became Chateau Léoville-Barton. The other three quarters stayed in limbo because the Marquis was absent, but by the time he died and was succeeded by his son Pierre-Jean, the inheritance included all that remained of the Léoville estate.

Despite the death of the Marquis, things were looking up for the Las Cases family. Pierre-Jean had cast aside his bourgeoisie roots to fight alongside Napoleon and had risen to the rank of Maréchal de Camps (Field Marshall), so the authorities took a relaxed view when he inherited the estate in 1815. Part of it went to his sister Jeanne in 1840, becoming Léoville-Poyferré, the rest remained intact and is today's Chateau Léoville Las Cases. In 1855 the famous classification ranked all three parts of the original Léoville estate as Deuxième Cru Classé (2nd Growths), but it was Las Cases that was widely recognised as being the best of the three. Indeed, the wine was so highly thought of that it was commonly recognised as being the finest wine of the Médoc after the four (at the time) first growths - even (Branne) Mouton was seen as inferior to Las Cases at this point.

The Las Cases family remained in complete control until 1900 when it passed to the next generation - Gabriel, Gaston and Clothilde. Gabriel and Gaston were keen to sell their shares of the estate and thus it was turned in to a holding company, with the three of them taking their respective shares. Gabriel bought out his brother Gaston and was then quick to liquidate his holding, selling his shares to a consortium of local businessmen. One of the shares was bought by Théophile Skawinski, the conscientious general manager of the estate who increased his shareholding over time, while dedicating his life to producing the finest wine that Las Cases was capable of. When Théophile died, his enhanced share passed to son-in-law André Delon and it is the Delon family that are the majority shareholders today, with Jean-Hubert now at the helm of Las Cases and the families other properties Potensac (Médoc) and Nenin (Pomerol).

When the final split happened in 1840, Jeanne immediately passed her portion to her daughter. A couple more generational passings put this portion of the estate into the hands of the wife of the Baron Poyferré de Cères and the name Léoville-Poyferré was born. It wasn't long before the property passed out of the family however, as by 1866 financial hardship had forced them to sell up to the Baron d'Erlanger and his business partner Armand Lalande (a Bordeaux negociant). This arrangement continued (via another generation) until 1920, when the Cuvelier family bought Poyferré - ownership that continues to this day. Management of the estate was entrusted to Roger Delon (uncle of Michel Delon who managed Las Cases until 1996) and for many years the wines performed well. Over time, a lack of investment and the ageing Delon led to a decline in quality at Poyferré and it wasn't until Didier Cuvelier took over in 1978 that the required improvements were made. A program of rebuilding and replanting started and the last 30 years have witnessed a steady rise in quality that has reestablished Poyferré as a worthy member of the 'super seconds'.

In the 1820s Hugh Barton inherited the portion that was sold at auction. He passed away in 1854, but his legacy was cemented a year later when Léoville Barton was designated as a deuxième cru in the 1855 classification. The 20th century began with another Barton at the helm but by 1927 Bertram Hugh Barton had been killed in a hunting accident and it was left to the young Ronald Barton to assume control. Ronald's nephew Anthony moved to Bordeaux and began working at the family negociant business Barton & Guestier, before taking over from Ronald with the 1983 vintage. One of Anthony's most important decisions was to hire a new estate manager, bringing the highly rated Michel Raoult from neighbouring Château Lagrange. The 80s also witnessed a program of modernisation at the winery (which is actually at Langoa rather than Léoville-Barton). The château pictured on the Léoville labels is Langoa and because the Barton family had lived at Langoa ever since Léoville was purchased, there was never any reason to build another residence. Indeed, the Barton's tenure at their two properties is the longest continuous ownership of any château in Bordeaux and with Anthony's daughter Lillian an important member of the team, that dynasty is set to continue.

## 1990

Following on from the good 1988 vintage and the great 1989 vintage was 1990 - arguably the best of the three and without question a top drawer year for red wine. It was one of those years that started hot and just got hotter, save for a much needed spell of rain throughout April. These April showers topped up the water reserves and there was very little in the way of rain until September, when a few isolated downpours rehydrated the vines just before harvest. During July it got as hot as 39C, which threatened to cause problems of stress for the vines. Luckily the extreme heat receded, but the conditions remained dry.

The wines themselves were immediately well received and the market bought them enthusiastically. The major critics raved about 1990 from the off, with Robert Parker in particular being a big fan. The wines have developed superbly and it has been very interesting to chart their progress alongside the 1989s (a similarly hot year). In my experience the '90s are a bit more open-knit than the darker, more brooding '89s, with a flamboyant fruity side to them that makes them a pleasure to drink.

## 1995

Following 1990 there was a procession of poor to mediocre vintages that didn't get anyone excited. Then 1995 arrived and was greeted with a combination of excitement and relief, and while it was undoubtedly a great vintage on both banks of the river, there is a feeling that it was a bit over-rated at the time. There was good rainfall over the mild winter and nice weather in the spring precipitated an early flowering, heralding a long growing season. The summer was consistently hot and dry and harvest began in glorious conditions on 11th September, but was almost immediately interrupted by rain. The showers lasted just over a week and then picking recommenced, with the Cabernet being left a little longer. These late showers didn't derail the vintage, particularly at the Cabernet dominated estates on the left bank.

Thanks to the lacklustre run of vintages that had gone before, '95 was a winning En Primeur campaign from the start. The wines have aged well but perhaps suffered slightly by comparison to the 1996 vintage that followed. Arguably there is more consistency in 1995 ('96 was even more of a Cabernet vintage) and there is certainly further development ahead for the best examples.

## 2000

Similar to the wait for '95, the Médoc was ready for a great vintage when 2000 came along, as '97, '98 and '99 had all been different shades of average (excepting right bank '98s). The winter was mild and spring actually quite hot, so the vintage got off to a nice early start. These temperatures continued through April and May but there was a bit of rainfall too and the humid conditions had vineyard managers on their guard against rot. In early summer the wetness continued but temperatures began to fall and hopes for a great vintage began to fade until August opened in glorious fashion and the weather held right through until after the harvest, which was later than expected at the top properties.

With top wines produced on both banks of the river, Robert Parker was particularly bullish about 2000, saying "this is the greatest vintage Bordeaux has ever produced". Wine Spectator were similarly enthusiastic and the prices of the wines has long reflected this critical acclaim. So far, the wines had largely stood up to the hype, with top class examples from all of the headline appellations.