

Mouton - the Dhalluin effect

Could I hope for a better job? Surely not. The potential perks are beyond the dreams of avarice. Travelling to some of the world's most beautiful locales. Tasting the world's finest wines. Lingering over the best-laden tables. I do benefit hugely from the first two of these and very lucky I am too. It's the lingering bit I rarely manage. I always seem to be in a hurry, trying to cram too much into my timetable in order not to short-change you, dear reader. But I nurture a fantasy of starting to take it a bit easier and, now that we no longer have dependent relatives of any generation, travelling more with my beloved restaurant critic husband. After all, writing for a paper as global in its reach as the Financial Times, Nick and I have the ideal excuse to travel together, savouring what it has to offer our taste buds.



In early June this year we spent two or three days in and around Bordeaux getting close to this ideal. You can read about our night at a luxurious hotel in Arcachon, for example. I recently reported on our two nights tasting venerable vintages of Figeac at Figeac. I have not reported in any detail on our lunch with the Bartons at Langoa but I did file a report on the progress of the 2015 growing season as a result of this short visit.

During it, one particularly memorable evening was spent at Château Mouton Rothschild at the suggestion of its winemaker Philippe Dhalluin. Also there, was the new man in charge, the elder son of the late Baroness Philippine de Rothschild, Philippe de Sereys Rothschild, just getting into the Mouton groove. Dhalluin was particularly keen to show off what he has been doing since taking over from Patrick Léon with the 2004, his first vintage in solo charge.

More than any other Bordeaux winemaker I know, Dhalluin is almost childlike in his delight in growing, making and blending wine. We were shown the spanking new cuverie at Mouton, carefully designed with all its blonde wood to recall a stage set in homage to Philippine's acting career (below is the upper storey with the cuves below). Philippe Dhalluin is particularly thrilled about the possibilities engendered by the new vat room with its 44 different vats in four different sizes, complete with glass vertical panel so that he can check what's going on. 'We're discovering new flavours in Mouton', he told us excitedly. The wooden vats are supplemented by a few stainless steel ones for the grapes not deemed up to Mouton standard. They go into the wine sold as Baron Nathaniel Pauillac.



After a whizz round the cellar where they keep older vintages, bins carefully locked behind grilles, we were treated to a lightning tour of the amazing wine museum assembled by Baron Philippe's second wife Pauline (aided, presumably, by a very large chequebook as well as her taste), and their impressive new showcase for all the artworks involved in Mouton's artists' labels (except for Prince Charles's watercolour for the 2004 vintage, so far retained by the artist). The ram's head below is just one of thousands of wine-related artefacts beautifully presented here. Visits to the wine museum have to be booked in advance.



After feasting our eyes, it was time to feast our taste buds or to 'work', as Philippe Dhalluin suggested. We were shown into their new 'decantoir', the word Baron Philippe's famous wine butler, Raoul Blondin, used to use for a much darker little bothy where he prepared wine for his master. This new room is designed for tasting, and is dominated by a vast window on to the vines. Dhalluin (shown looking admiringly out at the vines top right) took me over to this window to show me Lafite's cooler, clayier bit of the plateau, and a new little plot of Petit Verdot for Clerc Milon in the distance. He is particularly proud of having such a warm terroir, although of course it can be challenging in seriously hot vintages.

The wines described below were indeed generally very impressive and testament to Dhalluin's enthusiasm.



Philippe Dhalluin was born near Lille but has spent 40 years in Bordeaux and is steeped in Bordeaux's habits and lore. His classmates included Pierre Lurton. His first winemaking stint was in Peru which he relished – because, he says, he was given so much more responsibility than he would have in a France so crowded with winemakers. He ran the estimable Château Beaumont on his return to Bordeaux and really earned his spurs turning round Château Branaire-Ducru before moving to Mouton.

We had a fascinating, if slightly depressing, discussion about Cabernet Franc. It was not stated explicitly but it seemed pretty clear that, although Dhalluin believes that a little of it can really lift a blend, it was deliberately omitted for many years from the Mouton grand vin because the team sensed that Robert Parker didn't like its slightly herbaceous perfume. 'We stopped including Cabernet Franc in blend in 2006 because it was confused with dilution by some critics. We started including small proportions of it once more from 2011. The 2008 Cabernet Francs were exceptional but they went into Petit Mouton.' (See my enthusiastic tasting note for this wine.)

According to Dhalluin, the Mouton stable's finest Cabernet Francs are planted in the d'Armailhac vineyards where the vines are very old and produce wine he describes as 'stunning'. 'If you taste it alone, Cabernet Franc is not as complex as Cabernet Sauvignon. At Mouton our Cabernet Franc can be very salty; the musts have a high pH - almost 4. But it can really help in the Mouton blend to add sapidity [savour].'

Discussing the timing of the annual assemblage, the crucial decision-making process, he declared proudly, 'I'm from the old school. We blend at the end of the calendar year, as recommended by Peynaud and Boissenot. We want to do it before there is any wood effect on the wine'. The winemaking team is just four-strong. And if they are not unanimous about which fate they decide on for each cuve, they set it aside and try it again two or three months after the assemblage.

Towards the end of the tasting we were joined by the boyish other Philippe (his father was a famous actor), shown below in the decantoir, lit by the setting sun.



By this time it was after nine o'clock and after the impressive tasting we emerged blinking into a warm dusky evening to be shown into the garden of Philippine's shuttered Victorian mansion, the evening bugs just starting to emerge.

At this point, as if by magic out of the dark hedges, appeared a team of waiters, a stream of canapés and a bottle of Champagne Barons de Rothschild Blanc de Blancs made in their cellar in the cote des blancs. (Baron Philippe used to have a special cuvée of champagne made for him at Henriot in the late 1970s, I remember.) This had been the first wine project over which Philippe de Sereys Rothschild, whose career has been in finance, had sole control (a trial for Mouton perhaps?). He described how he had to muster the Rothschilds of Châteaux Lafite and Clarke for meetings three times a year and how difficult it is to steer the conversation from shooting and fishing to champagne. He was clearly excited at the prospect of launching the first vintage-dated Rothschild champagne, a 2006, over lunch at Lafite at Vinexpo later than month.

Apparently this champagne sells especially well in Japan – you need markets prepared to pay a premium. In the UK it's on sale at Waddesdon Manor, the Rothschild stately home-cum-museum.

Full of first growth and champagne, we then went indoors to sit at an unusually small round table set in the dining room in the long, low building that Baron Philippe converted from stables into his home, stuffed with wine-related art. We had a terrific dinner of seafood ravioli in richly creamy, lightly-spiced sauce and stuffed quail with a tart red berry sauce, chopped asparagus and a stunning cake of crisp pommes anna. It was so hot that the cheeses served before our melon sorbet were sweating slightly - as were we at the excitement of sharing not just Mouton 1959 with so few fellow diners, but also the 1961 that had been decanted to be served to the Chinese party who had come for lunch that day but had rejected the 1961. 'Haven't you got anything younger?' they had, almost incredibly, asked their hosts.

Philippe Dhalluin is a big fan of Clerc Milon 1986, the warm-up wine, another Chinese leftover, that was certainly hugely impressive. You can find tasting notes on all these older wines in *Mature and maturing bordeaux*.

One final little thing I learnt during this fabulous evening of great food, wine and art enjoyed in the company of a great husband, one of the Philippes told us (I suspect it was Dhalluin) about Bordeaux's famous wine professor, Emile Peynaud: 'Peynaud used to complain about being served old vintages at Lafite because all he could see were the faults.' Poor Peynaud.

The 16 wines below are listed in the order tasted before a particularly memorable dinner.

Ch d'Armailhac 2014 Pauillac

Strangely high proportion, 36%, of Merlot (usually 20-25%), plus 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot. Late vintage so Merlot was able to ripen very slowly.

Excellent deep crimson. Rather sweet, spicy nose. Very fine tannins and super clean and brisk. Trace of oak.

Drink 2022-2032

16.5

Ch Clerc Milon 2014 Pauillac

40 ha between Mouton, Lafite and the river – the only property between two first growths. Have 243 plots. Very old and so with the centuries the terroir has been divided between owners. Strangely lots of Cabernet Sauvignon, 58%, because the Merlot vines are so old that their produce is tiny. 11% Cabernet Franc, 1% Carmenère. Also some Petit Verdot. The Carmenère is very old on a south-facing slope between walls so it's very warm and not too far from water. Most vintages they can use it. Carmenère never has the richness of top Chilean, except perhaps in 2009 and 2010.

Bluer than Armailhac. Also a little skinnier and greener than the Armailhac. Fresh and just a little green.

Drink 2024-2034

16+

Ch Mouton Rothschild, Le Petit Mouton 2014 Pauillac

Extreme because it's 93% Cabernet Sauvignon. Because the Merlots were so good that they went into the grand vin.

Dense and spicy nose with lots of energy. Clean and zippy. Very neat, and actually it seems quite early maturing despite the varietal make-up. Very fine and neat. Just a little dry on the end.

Drink 2024-2038

17+

Ch Mouton Rothschild, Aile d'Argent 2014 Bordeaux

43% Sémillon, 57% Sauvignon Blanc. Not made in such small quantities now – 15-18,000 bottles. Goes through malolactic fermentation. 'We try to compete with best whites of France.'

Dense and rich. Very fine and zesty with no fatness and no cattiness. Philippe Dhalluin thinks it's the best vintage of this so far.

Drink 2016-2021

17

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2014 Pauillac

Cask sample. 81% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc. Just a little more lustrous than the Petit Mouton to look at. The Merlot was like 2005 and 1999.

High-toned nose – not light but great lift and precision. Dry rather than sweet. Clean finish and snappy and fine.

Drink 2026-2040

18+

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2013 Pauillac

Just being bottled - bottling ends tomorrow, 5 June, when it's usually in July or September. He usually plays more with time of élevage rather than % of new oak. 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, tiny Cabernet Franc. 'Very interesting, haven't tasted this vintage for months', he shakes his head from side and side and widens his eyes.

Mid crimson. Broad and ripe on the nose. Sweet and fresh but without real depth and density. Just slightly sweet oak on the end. A bit awkward. He admits the sulphur level was a tad high pre bottling. Relatively soft. Just falls away a little on the end.

Drink 2021-2035

16.5

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2012 Pauillac

First vintage in the new cuverie. 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Cabernet Franc. Bottled 10 months ago. Philippe Dhalluin said, 'that's a very good bottle'. First vintage in new facilities.

Very deep blackish crimson. Spicy, luscious, polished and very flattering. Mid weight and pretty round. Early maturing but with lots of pleasure. Just not much undertow.

Drink 2020-2032

17+

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2011 Pauillac

90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc. Lots of temporary vat houses while the work was going on.

Light and a bit disjointed. Bit of chocolate, bit of acid, bit jagged. Lots of structure.

Drink 2022-2035

16.5

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2010 Pauillac

94% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Merlot.

Very dark, blackish crimson. Lustrous. Something lightly burnt, sort of essence of Mouton but not very aromatic – all buried and dense. Sweet start but then very savoury and meaty with yeast extract and really extreme. 13.5% - much higher than usual (it's rarely more than 13%). Very tarry and dry and massive. Muscular. 13.5%

Drink 2025-2050

18.5+

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2009 Pauillac

Philippe Dhalluin: 'The best vintage I made in my life – I prefer subtlety to muscle. Closest to 1945. Barbie to 2010's Ken.' 88% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Merlot. Last vintage made in the old cuverie.

Even darker than 2010, and more youthful looking. Blackish crimson. Amazing opulence and richness. So sweet and yet with classic build and tension. Richness and tension. Long. Already enjoyable even if so youthful.

Drink 2020-2055

19

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2008 Pauillac

They had exceptional Cabernet Franc but it all went into Petit Mouton because Philippe Dhalluin feared its saltiness would have been misinterpreted. So Petit Mouton 2008 is exceptionally good.

Blackish crimson. Looks much older than the 2009. Already evolved nose with mature Cabernet on the nose. Sweet and succulent even if without enormous density. Sweetness overall. Tannins starting to dissolve. Bit of mild heat on the end.

Drink 2018-2035

17.5+

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2007 Pauillac

87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Mouton.

Blackish crimson that is deeper than I expected. Quite a tarry nose and very spicy Mouton character. Very charming with both sweetness and freshness. Very slightly simple but fun. Very strict selection. 'Petit Mouton 2007 is so good', Dhalluin says! He shows Petit Mouton 2007 to show 'the least we can produce'.

Drink 2015-2028

18

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2006 Pauillac

87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Merlot.

Dark blackish crimson. A little skinny on the nose. Lots of Cabernet stringiness and then lacks a bit of zest. Just a little dead. Tobacco and dry. This bottle is a bit severe.

Drink 2020-2040

17+

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2005 Pauillac

1% Cabernet Franc, 85% Cabernet Sauvignon. 'Today, if you decant it four hours before, you really can enjoy this vintage – my favourite in recent years to drink.'

Dark lustrous ruby. Great energy. Sweet and bloody and maybe a little more transparent than the average Mouton but lots of appeal. Mineral notes. He deliberately made a less extracted wine. Masses of tannin and masses of fruit here.

Drink 2020-2045

18.5+

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2004 Pauillac

Dhalluin's first 100% harvest. Picked the young vines separately and sacrificed them. A transition vintage. 73% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Cabernet Franc, 14% Merlot, 2% Petit Verdot. Wanted to avoid a revolution. Very strict selection. Just 50% of the total crop. 'My predecessor was allowed to make far more Mouton. Very good, very Mouton nose. Mouton has an advantage in cooler years because of our sunny terroir. But in very hot vintages, we have to work very hard and be very careful to avoid overripeness. We always have two to three days in advance.'

Dark crimson. Fresh and gorgeous. Ready. Just very very slightly stringy on the end.

Drink 2014-2028

18

Ch Mouton Rothschild 2003 Pauillac

'Patrick Leon said about this vintage, "Philippe, I will show you how to make great wine." So in 2003 I learnt how resistant Cabernet Sauvignon is.'

Pretty simple and sweet and dusty. Tad dull.

Drink 2010-2023

16.5