



Photo: M. Anglada - Saison d'Or



# CHATEAU CLERC MILON

## RENAISSANCE & A NEW APPROACH

TEXT: Ch'ng Poh Tiong

**C**hateau Clerc Milon came to be as a result of the French Revolution (1789 - 1799). Originally part of the seigneurie of Lafite, it was parcelled out of that huge estate and sold off as a 'national asset' in 1789. The buyer was the Clerc family who join their name with that of the hamlet of Milon to usher in the birth of Chateau Clerc Milon.







The quality and reputation of the wine grew with the passing vintages and in 1855, Clerc Milon was ranked a Fifth Growth in the Classification of the Médoc. At that time, the size of the vineyard was 30 hectares. Then, phylloxera struck in the second half of the 19th century and, in its wake, decimated the vineyards of France and those of the rest of Europe. Recovery was tedious and drawn out. Then, of course, came World War I (1914 - 1918), the Great Depression (1929 - 1939), and World War II (1939 - 1945).

The modern renaissance of Chateau Clerc Milon took place in our lifetime. In 1970, convinced of the wine's potential, Baron Philippe de Rothschild bought what was by then a pretty run down estate. At the time of the purchase, Clerc Milon was just 16.5 hectares, having shrunk by almost half of its original size. The

baron knew potential when he saw it. Clerc Milon, apart from being a neighbour of Mouton, is practically across the road from Lafite. On the same side, farther up the road is Saint-Estephe's Chateau Cos d'Estournel.

In 1983, Clerc Milon was given a new label which depicts a pair of dancers. The motif is an art piece made from precious stones by a 17th century German goldsmith. This striking new label is taken directly from an intricate work of art that belongs to Chateau Mouton Rothschild's Museum of Wine in Art.

What Baron Philippe de Rothschild started when he acquired Clerc Milon, his daughter Philippine de Rothschild completed in a series of added investment to the physical form of the estate. In 1988, on the passing of Baron Philippe, the consolidation of the vineyard

was already well under way and the reputation of Clerc Milon on a steady rise. On the other hand, the technical facilities were limited to a rudimentary vat house and the cellars located some distance away in the town of Pauillac. As for the 'chateau', the was really no more than a small village house. Baroness Philippine de Rothschild set out to complete what her father had inspired when he first bought Clerc Milon.

A vat room, gravity-fed, was introduced in 2007. This had been designed to accommodate the patchwork of parcels in the vineyard and to be as flexible as possible when the manual harvest is brought in. After further hand-sorting, the grapes are transferred to the vats in mobile bins. There are a total of 40 vats, all gravity fed in order to reduce the need for handling and pumping



Photo: Alain Benoit/Deepix

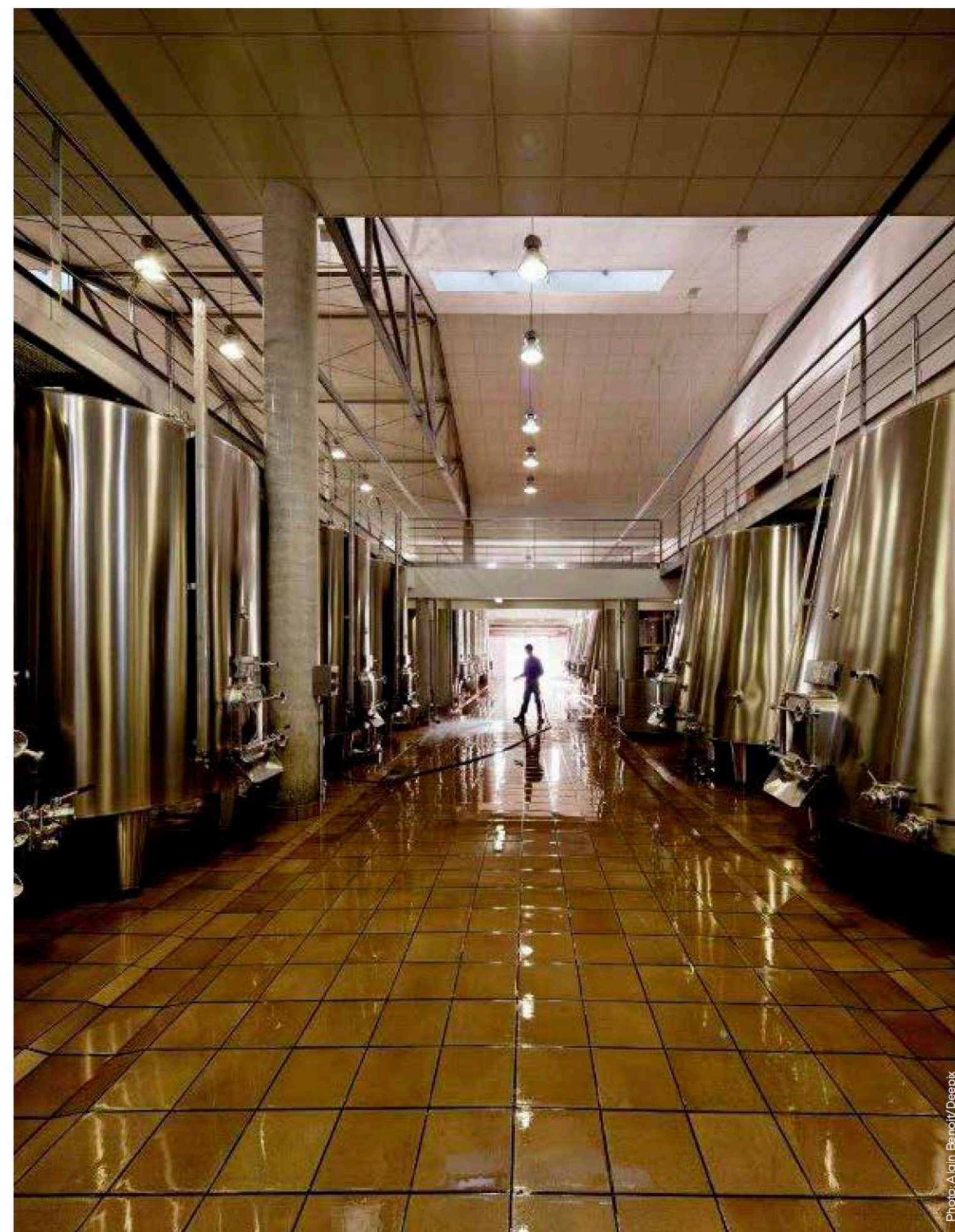


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The proprietors of Chateau Mouton Rothschild and Chateau Clerc Milon. From left, Philippe Sereys de Rothschild, Camille Sereys de Rothschild and Julien de Beaumarchais de Rothschild.

which, in turn, makes it easier to keep the grapes intact, thereby retaining all their aroma and flavour. The technical winemaking concerns addressed, the next stage was no less important.

In 2008, the Rothschild proprietor family separated the winemaking at Chateau Mouton-Rothschild, Clerc Milon and Chateau d'Armailhac. Prior to that, there was one over-seeing director of winemaking for all three properties, and also one person overall in charge of viticulture for those three chateaux.

'Previously, the organisation was horizontal,' explains Jean-Emmanuel Danjoy, who had joined as winemaker at Clerc Milon after

having spent 10 years at Opus One in Napa Valley.

'The new idea was for each chateau to be independent. And, although part of the old team continued to be here, my first vintage with the new team was 2009.'

As a result of the change, Erick Tourbier became in charge of winemaking at Mouton; Jean-Paul Polaert at Chateau d'Armailhac; and Jean-Emmanuel Danjoy at Clerc Milon. The person who oversees all three properties is Philippe Dhalluin, who joined in 2003 following the retirement of Patrick Leon.

'The family realised that if they want to have the best from the

estates, then each estate must become entirely focussed on just its own terrior. It's not just winemaking that is involved because we work in the vineyard too. Clerc Milon alone has 247 blocks of vines. The majority of the soil is gravel, limestone, and with some clay. Clerc Milon attains freshness easily from those soils which is a challenge because if we don't have enough ripeness, the freshness becomes acidity. There must be commensurate ripeness to harness that freshness,' elaborates Danjoy.

The consequence of the new approach is that the new team and regime at Clerc Milon now gets a better picture of their terrior and all the varieties in their vineyard. The Pauillac Classified Growth is

quite special in that it is planted to the five varieties of 54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 31% Merlot, 12% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit-Verdot, and 1% Carmenere. Planting density is between 8,500 and 10,000 vines per hectare. Chateau Clerc Milon has 41 hectares of vines in the north-east of the Pauillac appellation, on the Mousset crest overlooking the Gironde. The gentle slope favours natural drainage and exposure to sunlight, while the nearby river creates a microclimate that protects the vines from frost in spring, reduces the risk of hail, and brings a nippy coolness in summer. The soil is made up of two-thirds deep sandy gravel over a clay-limestone base. The average age of the vines is almost 55 years, one of the highest in the Médoc.

The strive for a deeper understanding of the vineyard has given Danjoy and his team a clearer, crisper, more resonant picture. It's as if they have become more bonded with their charge.

'Our understanding of our terrior has gone from 5,000 to 5 million pixels,' Jean-Emmanuel Danjoy sums up.

In 2011, Chateau Clerc Milon unveiled a striking 3,600-square metre complex comprising a half-underground barrel hall, a cellar, and reception and tasting rooms. Power is provided by 300 sq m of photovoltaic cells on the roof, such is the concern for the environment. As for the chateau, that's a rectangular building in the form of a temple, encircled by a spacious terrace giving an uninterrupted view onto the vines and the surrounding estates. A Pauillac classified growth was reborn. 🌿



Photo: Alain Benoit/Deepix

'The majority of the soil is gravel, limestone, and with some clay. Clerc Milon attains freshness easily from those soils which is a challenge because if we don't have enough ripeness, the freshness becomes acidity,' Jean-Emmanuel Danjoy spent 10 years at Opus One in Napa before being lured back to Bordeaux.



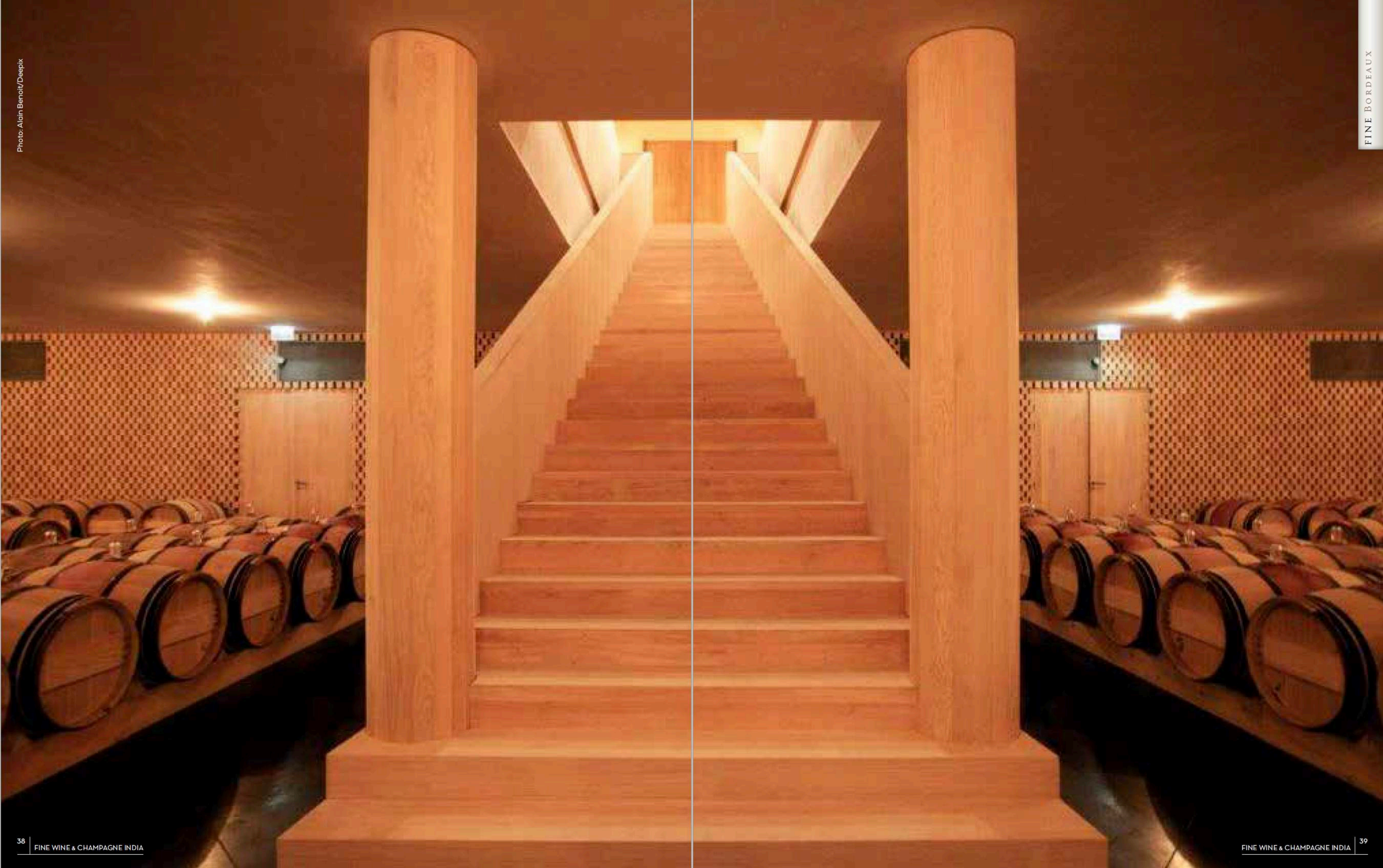






Photo: Ching Poh Tiong

## TASTING NOTES

I asked my host for me to approach the 10 wines in three flights. From experience, you get much more from each wine this way as we are better able to focus on three or four wines at any one time than have your mind range back and forth 10 of them. Jean-Emmanuel Danjoy then asked in what order I wanted to taste the wines. I asked to be guided by him. The tasting notes are in the sequence in which Danjoy arranged the vintages in the tasting on Monday 8 January 2018.

### FLIGHT I

2007 ★★★★★

This was the first vintage to be vinified in the new cuverie. The aromatics are delicate and include a whiff of mint, soft sandalwood, a dab of tobacco, and light blackcurrant fruit. Medium-plus-ish in body, the wine shows an early maturity. Now to 2025.

2008

More closed on the nose than 2007. And equally tight on the palate. The structure is in front of the fruit at the moment. Blue/black fruit is detected. This needs to be re-tasted in the future when the wine will become more expressive. No rating given.

2009 ★★★★★

Immediate sensation of generous fruit: blackcurrant and cassis. The succulence is matched by ripe, rich tannins. Still very youthful. The firm finish is wrapped in freshness. This buoyancy is quite remarkable given that 2009 was a heat-ravaged vintage. Then again, this is the northern Médoc where Pauillac borders St-Estephe. And, as Danjoy alluded to in the first part of this article, freshness is a forte of Clerc Milon. (Chateau Clerc Milon is located practically opposite of Lafite-Rothschild and, just farther up the road on the same side is St-Estephe's Chateau Cos d'Estournel).

2010 ★★★★★

A much more complete wine than 2009. The intensity and concentration of fruit - including cherries - is cocooned in an atom of vivacity. Bright, lifted, and with great length. The tannins are very polished. Incredible balance and energy.

### FLIGHT II

2011 ★★★★★ - ★★★★★

Delicately smoky and vanilla on the nose. Peppery/capsicum/blue fruit. Fresh, fine tannins. Elegant. Medium-plus bodied. Danjoy informs that

spring was warm and dry and the vines struggled for water. The small berries had thick skin and the wine has more tannins and minerality but is less aromatic.

2012 ★★★★★

Considerably more aromatic than 2011. Delicious, vivacious red and blue fruit. Lots of freshness. Texturally not as silky as 2011 but the fruit has more vitality. There's just a touch of sappiness on the finish. Medium-plus body. Danjoy informs that 2012 is the total opposite of 2011. 'Spring was very wet and the vine grew a lot. There is a lot less tannins which is why it is so much more aromatic.'

2013 ★★★★★

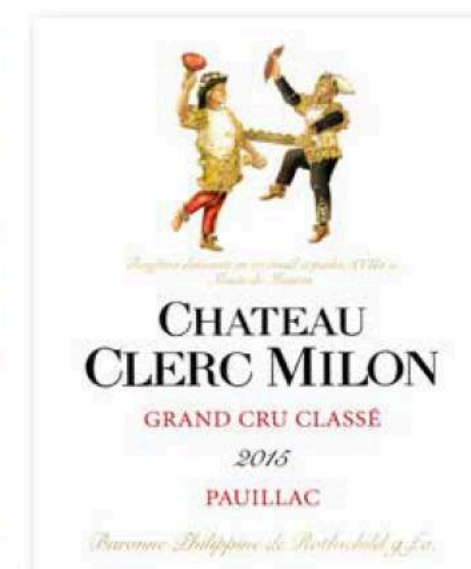
The red fruit, although light, is very elegant. So too the tannins. Lovely balance. Feminine. Danjoy informs that some of the fruit 'was not in good shape in 2013'. As a result, the maceration was shorter. So too the extraction which was also more gentle.

### FLIGHT III

2014 ★★★★★

Floral and whiff of violets (for Danjoy, it's irises). Ripe red fruit and blueberries. Silky tannins. Marvellous texture. Very polished and classy. Clerc Milon 2014 is truly impressive and over delivers for the vintage which is already regarded as a good to very good year. Danjoy informs that the end of August was completely overcast and that there were small showers. The temperatures were not very high. The general opinion, at the time, was that the vintage would not be very good. Nature then sprung a surprise. The gift was a belated but much appreciated long and dry Indian summer. The harvest started on September 22nd on a few young plots of Merlot and only finished on October 17th for the Carmenere. Reflecting on the 10 years he had spent in California, Danjoy remembered that the 2014

Médoc harvest was 'like in Napa where you could wait and not worry about rain and come back anytime to harvest the grapes in optimum ripeness'.



2015 ★★★★★

The 2015 was somewhat closed up when I visited on January 8th. But not entirely. The undoubted quality of this stunning vintage simply would be denied. On the nose and palate, there's just richer, riper blue fruit, and riper, richer tannins. The wine has more density, concentration, and power. What makes all that so impressive is the unyielding freshness that accompanies the bounty of fruit and tannins.

2016 ★★★★★

Nature smiled on Bordeaux in 2015 and 2016 and delivered two magnificent wines. The fruit of 2016 is considerably more exuberant, forward, and upfront. I remember, in April 2017, tasting La Fleur Petrus in the Pomerol chateau with Christian Moueix, how I described it to the proprietor as 'the Beaujolais Nouveau vintage of Bordeaux', so juicy was the fruit at that youthful curve of the wine. Since then, 2016 has closed up considerably. Still, there's the whiff of violets. Tight but very rich fruit and tannins. The texture is very impressive.