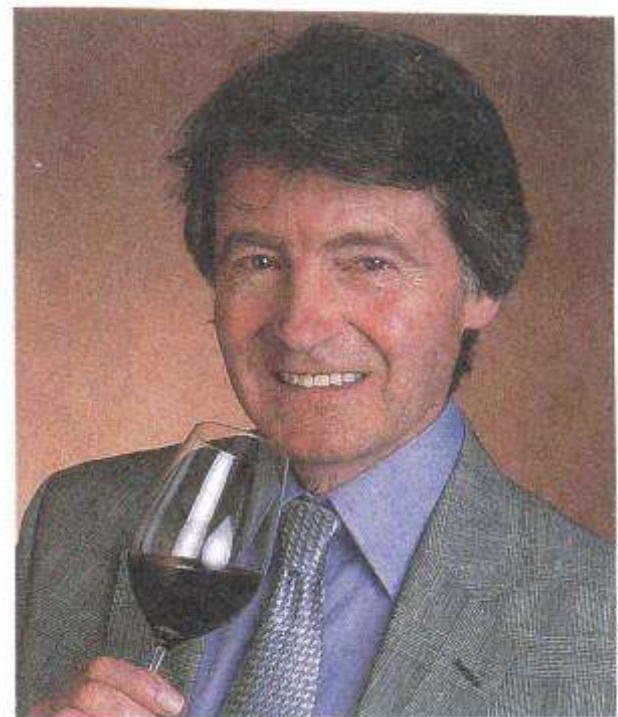


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The renaissance of Smith-Haut-Lafitte



PHOTOGRAPH: DEBBIE ROWE

CLASSIFIED 'GRAND CRU de Graves' in 1953, although its appellation since 1987 has been Pessac-Léognan, Château Smith-Haut-Lafitte covers 72ha (hectares), of which 56ha are under vine: 45 for red wine and 11 for the excellent, but unclassified, white. The Verrier de Bosq family were the first recorded owners, as far back as 1365, which pre-dates the planting of vines at the other Lafite in Pauillac by some 250 years. The property owes its name to Scotsman George Smith, who built the manor house in the 'chartreuse' style and exported the now-famous wine in his

most of which concentrates on the complete renovation of the winery and reception buildings, their art collection and more especially the Hotel-Spa, Les Sources de Caudalie, which is co-financed by the skincare products company – based on the essential oils found in grape pips – created by their daughter, Mathilde, and managed by their younger daughter, Alice. Still more will be written when their golf course with its own hotel, separated by a line of pine trees from the vineyard, opens, despite the objections of 'elitism' from the socialist mayor, in 2008. Mention could also be made of the recent purchase of a 52ha private island 10 minutes away in the middle of the Gironde, which they use for propagating cuttings from their own vines and for weekend picnics. All this would miss the real passion of the Cathiards: the urge to translate into bottle the unique quality from deep Gunzian gravel of the Smith-Haut-Lafitte vineyards.

In 1990, the property was farmed industrially and the grapes machine-harvested. From 1991, hand picking into small crates was introduced. The following year weedkillers and other unnatural sprays were banned and the property returned to sustainable viticulture. Malolactic fermentation in

own ships. It was, however, Monsieur Lodi Duffour-Dubergier, mayor of Bordeaux and one of the larger négociants, who, inheriting the property in 1842, raised its quality to the level of the future second growths of the Médoc. For most of the last century the wines were distributed by Louis Eschenauer, who became owners of the property, as well as of Rauzan-Ségla, in 1958. At the end of 1990, Smith-Haut-Lafitte passed into the hands of Daniel and Florence Cathiard.

The Cathiards met in 1965 as members of the legendary National French Ski Team that won so many awards under Jean-

barrel began in 1994, and in 1995 the Cathiards created their own 400 barrel-a-year cooperage. By 1997 the estate was producing all its own organic compost, while in the cellars half the stainless steel vats were replaced by cone-shaped truncated wooden vats to obtain richer extraction. Sorting tables, both before and after de-stemming were replaced by

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vibrating tables in 2002. 2003 saw the red wines undergo both alcoholic and malolactic fermentation in small barrels, while in 2004 experiments were made in whole-grape fermentation, promoting the full expression of aroma and flavour. Such pursuit of perfection is usually limited to the first growths.

Claude Killy. Daniel inherited a small chain of country supermarkets which became the 10th largest distribution company in France, and then created Go Sport, a sporting goods venture that was even more successful. Florence formed her own advertising agency and ended up vice-president of MacCann Erickson-Europe. Achievers of the highest order, their eyes fell on a dilapidated 'sleeping beauty' in the northern Graves. Fifteen years later, the renaissance of Smith, as they call it, is complete.

Much has been written about what the Cathiards have achieved at Smith,

From the start, the Cathiards turned to Michel Rolland – theirs was one of his two first consultancies on the Left Bank (now he works with eight properties in Pessac-Léognan alone) – for advice, and since 2001 Stéphane Derenoncourt also acts as consultant. Fabien Teitgen has been technical director, after some years as vineyard manager, since 2000. That this is a winning team was evident during a tasting of every vintage since 1990 held at the château in September. I gave 18.5/20 to the red 2000 and 2001, 17 to 2002 and 18 to 2003 and 2004, while for the whites my marks were 17, 19, 16, 17 and 18.5 for the same vintages.

Reflecting on their 15 years at Smith, Daniel is more sanguine than Florence. He sees the trials of the early 1990s – frost in 1991, rain in 1992, 1993 and 1994, a combination of four deficient vintages that might have discouraged someone less committed – compensated by the ever-increasing quality from the vineyards. He seems relaxed, even serene about the future, for 'the passion has taken over'. Florence, more impatient with the past, limited herself to stating that, '2005 will be the best ever of our 15 years at Smith.'

Steven Spurrier is Decanter's consultant editor and a renowned taster.