

Ten Things Every Wine Lover Should Know About...Smith Haut Lafitte



© AFP

With the 2014 Winter Olympics just weeks away, **Jane Anson** slaloms the course at this Pessac-Léognan estate, owned by two former Olympic skiers.

Posted Wednesday, 15-Jan-2014

No. 1. Bordeaux's power couple:

It was a helicopter flight that did it for Daniel and Florence Cathiard. The bird's eye view of Château Smith Haut Lafitte sealed the deal on their acquisition in 1990. But it wasn't the first property they'd considered. They had looked at – and rejected – vineyards in Burgundy (too complicated), the Médoc (too quiet) and St.-Émilion (too many damn tourists). But Smith Haut Lafitte was an appealing prospect: it produced both red and white wine, had a long history that needed to be reawakened, and was close enough to Bordeaux and its research universities to offer quick access to vineyard experts, city life and the airport. Clearly this appeal proved long lasting, as the couple have since added Château Cantelys and Château le Thil, also in [Pessac-Léognan](#), to their portfolio.

No. 2. Bedding down in Bordeaux:

The Cathiards were outsiders in the tightly knit world of Bordeaux when they purchased Smith Haut Lafitte. Both ex-sporting stars from the French Olympic ski team of 1965, with an air of glamor that has never left them, they made their money through the sale of Go Sport, a nationwide chain of sports shops. Florence had also started her own advertising firm before becoming vice president of McCann Europe.

Faced with resistance to their plans for developing the estate, including a spa hotel, the Cathiards applied the lessons learned as Olympic skiers: get focused, hit hard, and keep your eyes on the prize. One battle they've so far lost is with the mayor of their local commune, who has twice turned down their application to build a golf course on the property.

No. 3. Stellar cellars:

If you're a cellar buff, you're going to love Smith Haut Lafitte. A huge underground cellar lit by candles has space for 1,000 barrels laid out on a single level. The Cathiard's private wine collection is stored separately in a James Bond-like underground cellar accessed through a trap door in the floor of the tasting room. Many of the old bottles laid out on display were bought by Daniel at auction and he's particularly proud of his 1961 and 1947 bottles – two vintages that convinced him to buy Smith Haut Lafitte when he tried them with the former owner.

The most recent addition is the Stealth cellar, built especially for the estate's second wine, [Les Hauts de Smith](#). Located in an abandoned gravel quarry, the "energy neutral" cellar is almost invisible from the outside, being partially underground and surrounded by trees. It garnered headlines last year over plans to turn carbon dioxide released during fermentation into sodium bicarbonate for toothpaste. "This is not to say that we will produce toothpaste," says Daniel, "just that it shows there are always good uses to the byproducts of vinification."



© Charles Hadcock/Hoberman Associates | "Torsion II" has a magnum sealed inside it; Chuck Hoberman's "Nousaison" expanding sphere

No. 4. Art in the vines:

There are 18 works of art scattered around the property, including Barry Flanagan's famous leaping hare that has almost become a symbol of the estate. Daniel's current favorite is a kinetic sculpture by American engineer Chuck Hoberman. Titled "Nousaison," it is an expandable sphere that opens and closes to represent the moment when berries are formed on the vines during early summer.

A Charles Hadcock sculpture titled Torsion II is a tribute to the 2009 vintage. It has a magnum placed inside it, although Florence says that for technical reasons, the bottle contains no wine. "We put a magnum of Château Smith Haut Lafitte red 2009 inside the sculpture only few days before Robert Parker awarded the wine 100 points," she explains. "It was a bit tricky as we had to lift the sculpture up to position the magnum inside and at the last moment Daniel changed it for a dummy magnum, as with our cold winters a real bottle would have most probably exploded."

Daniel adds: "I was happy with that decision after the value of the 2009 vintage shot up with Parker's 100 points."

No. 5. Feeling the heat:

Demand for Smith Haut Lafitte exploded in early 2012 after Parker announced his perfect score for the [2009](#) vintage. The impact was immediate. Both Daniel and Florence recount how overnight the price of the wine almost doubled, and the phone began ringing off the hook. Florence adds: "The most visible impact of the 100 points is the fact that the black limousines of VIP guests that used to leave from [on-site spa hotel] Les Sources de Caudalie to visit the first-growth estates now stay at the château for a tasting."

French newspaper Les Echos Patrimoine recently analyzed the effect of the Parker rating on prices in France, noting that Smith Haut Lafitte's 2009 vintage stayed close to the release price of 97 euros (\$132) from June 2010 to June 2011, then shot upwards to almost 150 euros (\$204) in January 2012. By June 2013, the price of the 2009 wine had risen to 234 euros (\$316). This is certainly not a trend widely seen in Bordeaux wines over the past year. Wine-Searcher's data shows that the global price of Smith Haut Lafitte doubled between January and May 2012 and continued rising to its current level of \$261 excl. tax.

No. 6. Monsieur 1855:

As mayor of Bordeaux during the lead-up to the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris, Haut Smith Lafitte owner Lodi-Martin Duffour-Dubergier was asked to create a map showing the location of the region's main châteaux. To add interest to the map, he decided to show the classified growths in a clear and readable form – namely, a list of five different levels of prestige. Duffour-Dubergier contacted the Bordeaux brokers' union for a list of red classed growths "as exact and complete as possible." It's fair to say, then, that this former owner of Smith Haut Lafitte was responsible for the world's first wine classification, one that brought Bordeaux riches and renown. Ironically, his own estate was not in the Médoc and so could not benefit from his map work.

No. 7. Barrel man:

One of the key members of the team at Smith Haut Lafitte is master cooper Jean Luc Itey. The estate has made nearly all of its own barrels since 1995, joining Châteaux Lafite, Margaux and Haut-Brion as the rare Bordeaux properties that prefer not to buy their barrels from outside sources. The onsite cooperage produces 450 barrels per year – around 70 percent of the estate's overall needs. The rest are made by two other barrel makers, who almost always use Smith Haut Lafitte's own oak.



© Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte

No. 8. Bio-precision:

The Cathiards have invested millions in the estate's vineyard, applying organic winemaking across the 78 hectares (67 planted to red, 11 to white). Technical director Fabien Teitgen's buzzword is "bio-precision," an approach that combines low-intervention, almost entirely biodynamic viticulture with satellite technology that reveals how the grapes have ripened.

When the Cathiards first arrived, Bordeaux legend Emile Peynaud helped them with the winemaking for a few years, while Daniel also learned from Pascal Ribeyreau-Gayon, Denis Dubourdieu, and finally Michel Rolland, who continues to work as a consultant.

"But it was the vineyard that taught me the most," says Daniel. To better understand the terroir, he and Teitgen conducted an 18-month study to measure the electrical resistance of the soil. When the results were combined with a normal geological study, they were able to increase the density of the vines, understand the differing needs of each vineyard plot, and ensure better-adapted plantings.

No. 9. Island life:

This is one of the few properties in Bordeaux to graft its own vines, select the most efficient clones, and maintain its own rootstock mother vine on sandy soil – all on a private island on the Garonne river, a 20-minute boat ride from the main château. The island, called La Lande, is also the family's private gourmet retreat. "We have no electricity, no running water on the island, so it's a complete getaway," says Daniel. "But we have hundred-year-old fig trees, an array of other fruits and vegetables, and have just planted oak trees for truffles."

There is another family hideaway back at the estate, in the shape of a smoke hut in the garden. A reindeer skin blanket inside came with the shed, according to Florence, having been included when it was shipped to France from Finland. Vineyard workers regularly use the shed for their lunch-time base, especially in winter, lighting the wood-burning stove inside to barbecue food over old vines. The family can also be found holding wine tastings there for small groups of friends.

No. 10. What to drink now:

In recent years, the Smith Haut Lafitte wines have become more structured and thus built for longer aging. Bottles from the 2005 vintage onwards need a good 8 to 10 years in the cellar before opening up. The 2009 and 2010 vintages are both in for the long haul, although I recently enjoyed a 2008 with the characteristic licorice and black-cherry slickness that is a signature of this wine when young.

Digna Edale of [TH Fine Wines](#) in Macau reports that Smith Haut Lafitte is one of their strongest Bordeaux brands at present, with clients responding well to the prices. She points to the 1996 for drinking now, while Florence Cathiard recommends opening either the 1998 or 2000, especially after an hour of decanting.

"We enjoyed, with our family and friends during the Christmas period, some Smith Haut Lafitte red 1998, which was absolutely brilliant, served blind next to some prestigious Left Banks of the same vintage," she says. For drinking-now whites, Florence recommends the concentrated 2009 blend or the mineral 2010 vintage.

Lydia Serrano at [Zachys](#) in New York notes that while they sell Smith Haut Lafitte to retail customers, it's not yet a brand that changes hand at auctions. "It's a great wine, and our clients are interested in a variety of factors when assessing value, including Parker points, so perhaps in the future it may transfer to the auction market," says Serrano. "These kinds of trends tend to hit later in auction than retail."