



CHÂTEAU CLARKE: THE STORY OF AN ENTREPRENEUR'S WINNING GAMBLE



In 1973, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild learned the Château Clarke was for sale, he began to dream. Yet the winery lay abandoned. At the same time, a few kilometres away, Château Margaux and its Premier Grand Cru Classé were also on the market. Why would anyone choose the former? For the challenge? Possibly. For the passion? Probably. But mostly for all the richness and potential of this terroir. The Baron's vision and daring would prove him right: fifty years on, Château Clarke is an icon in the region and one of the treasures of the Listrac-Médoc appellation.

INVESTING IN THE LAND AND ITS HISTORY

Edmond de Rothschild, a visionary, builder and wine enthusiast – true to his family culture of great vintages – had his own private dream: to work an as-yet unknown vineyard and bring it to the pinnacle of excellence. When he purchased the Château Clarke and the surrounding lands in 1973, his ambition was transformed into an entrepreneurial adventure. Still, it was a bold choice. Indeed, the winery had fallen into disrepair, and its wine was quite ordinary. And yet – the land had one major asset: its high-quality characteristic soil, primed to ripen the greatest Bordeaux grapes.

A STRONG DECISION TO FURTHER A VISION

With all the pieces in place, the story could begin. But before setting things in motion, it was time to start testing. With the help of celebrated wine expert Emile Peynaud, who revolutionised wine-making techniques in the second half of the 20th century, Edmond de Rothschild quickly understood that to transform this ordinary wine into an exceptional vintage, the grapes and soil had to harmonise. And on the 55 hectares of vines that now cover the estate, the Merlot grapes, which cover the greatest area, really thrive along the outcrops of limestone clay. The rest is formed of soil more suited to the Cabernet Sauvignon varieties. After several years of

researching, sampling, blending and experimenting, the Baron decided to increase the proportion of Merlot to really elevate the terroir and the wine. It was a visionary wager and it pushed him to invest tirelessly in this terroir. Disparaged at the time, today – with climate change – this land is especially well-suited for growing large vines. And bolder still, right from those first releases, unlike the great châteaux that extol the virtues of dusty bottles, he was creating “natural” wines made for drinking after just a few years of ageing.

A BOLD MOVE PAYS OFF

From 1973 to 1978, every last one of the plots was uprooted, redesigned, regraded, drained and replanted. The vine planting process was developed to bring it into perfect harmony with the property’s different soils. At last, following a learning period to come to a fuller understanding of the vineyard, the estate brought in 70% Merlot and 30% Cabernet Sauvignon. This was ambitious, because a vineyard takes about thirty years to reach true maturity. But in this venture, nothing was left to chance.

To see his vineyard’s metamorphosis all the way through, Edmond de Rothschild simultaneously launched several major operations: he modernised the cellars, renovated the buildings, built new facilities and landscaped the gardens. He also acquired a neighbouring estate in the Haut-Médoc appellation, Peyre-Lebade, known today as Château Odilon in homage to the painter Odilon Redon, who once lived on the property. Edmond de Rothschild also set up his own wine-distribution system: just one more way in which the family is unique. They remain fully responsible for selling their wines, unlike the other châteaux, which all use merchants on the Bordeaux wine market.

THE ART OF LIVING – A LEGACY

Today, as it celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the property’s purchase, success is on the menu – and Château Clarke is served at tables in almost 80 countries worldwide. With an average of 150,000 bottles per year and 15,000 of the Merle Blanc – a rare, highly aromatic wine, forever entwined with its estate – Château Clarke has, over time, become one of the jewels in the Médoc region. Its exceptional production also adds to the family’s eight other estates, bringing the figure to 4,200,000 bottles in 2022 – ten times its 1981 output.

The adventure of taking on Château Clarke perfectly captures the mission and values not only of the Edmond de Rothschild Bank, but also of the structure that supports all the ways in which the Group cultivates the art of living: Edmond de Rothschild Heritage. With the aim of enhancing, preserving and growing the family’s historic heritage, this entity operates as an entrepreneurial laboratory. It’s a space where the Rothschild family’s non-financial activities in winemaking, farming, hospitality and fine dining all serve as examples and inspiring stories.