

EGON MÜLLER-SCHARZHOF
by Stephan Reinhardt

It really wouldn't do it justice to say that we tasted 22 Rieslings from the world-famous Scharzhofberg vineyard in the small and sleepy Saar village of Wiltingen. It was not tasting, what we did, since my spittoon was still very light when I left the beautiful and romantic Kronenschlösschen hotel in Hattenheim in the Rheingau where the wines were presented.

Five reasons not to spit
Scharzhofberger

There were many reasons to swallow the Scharzhofbergers. First, the wines were made by Egon Müller from Egon Müller-Scharzhof, Germany's finest Rieslingestate in terms of reputation, quality, and style. Founded in 1797, the Scharzhof is now driven by the fourth generation of Egon Müllers, the 1959 vintage Egon Müller IV. He has been in charge since 1991, and has not seen a bad vintage since 1987. "In the past," he says, "we had problems getting our grapes fully ripe. With global warming we are having fewer problems in reaching sufficient sugar levels, so that now we can concentrate on the ripeness of flavors and acidity." Yields have also been reduced, "but not by much."

The second reason for behaving more like Dionysus than Apollo is that Müller's Rieslings from the Scharzhofberg are rare and expensive. Here he owns 8.3 hectares of mostly old and partly (3ha) ungrafted, low-yielding vines in the best parcels. Planting density averages inbetween 6,000 and 10,000 vines per hectare. But Müller is bottling a huge range of *prädikat* wines that are distributed through different channels all over the world (US, UK, Japan). The different Kabinette, Spätlesen, and Auslesen do not differ much in quality; indeed, there is hardly half a point between them. But because they come from different casks (*fuders* of 1,000 liters) there are different shades in taste. Müller gives all his wines a corresponding *fuder* number.

Scharzhof's best Rieslings are exclusively sold as *Goldkapseln* (gold capsules) at the annual wine auction in Trier, where Scharzhofbergers regularly achieve the highest prices (€250–350 per bottle of Auslese Goldkapsel, €3,000 for

Trockenbeerenauslese). A non-Goldkapsel Auslese costs about €150–170 per bottle. For the extremely low-yielding 2005 vintage Müller is asking about 20 percent more than usual. So if you spit these wines, you have to be sure that you will have a chance to drink them at least once in your life.

The third reason for not spitting on this occasion was that the wines (mostly Auslese, but also Kabinett, Spätlese, Eiswein and Trockenbeerenauslese) stretched back over six decades. I could never not have drunk the Auslesen from 1949, 1959, 1971, 1976, 1999, 2003, and 2004, or the incredible TBA 2003. (Of this last there is less than 100 liters in total, and it is expected to sell at the auction in Trier for not less than €4,000 per bottle.)

The fourth reason is that Müller's Scharzhofberger Rieslings are rich in fruit but low in alcohol. Rather than leaving you drunk or sending you to sleep, they wake you up, so that, like the hero of Wagner's *Siegfried*, you want to sing, "*Heil dir Sonne, Heil Dir Licht, Heil Dir schöner Tag!*" Scharzhofberger is Riesling as laser beam.

Fifth: Scharzhofbergers possess exceptional qualities. Full in taste but low in alcohol, they pair fruity aromas with minerals, hints of spices, and honey, and they dance with acidity. These Rieslings have great complexity, delicacy, elegance, and finesse, which they keep for many decades. "When you have the patience to wait a few decades, you can match Scharzhofberger Auslese with wild boar," Müller advises. "You definitely don't need Burgundy." (Müller loves Burgundy as long as they are of the finest quality.)

If any other reason were needed for swallowing: I never saw Müller spitting his own wines, so why should I?

The legendary Scharzhofberger

The Scharzhofberg itself is one of Germany's most appreciated vineyard sites (28ha in total). Remarkably, there are only banal hypotheses as to why Scharzhofberger is so special. "*Hacken, hacken, hacken*" ("hacking, hacking, hacking"), said Egon Müller III once, when asked by young Geisenheim students. But "terroir," as Egon Müller IV assumes today,

is not much more quaint. "It's a combination of factors, there is something special about the hill," he says with a Sphinx-like smile.

The Scharzhofberg hill has a steep, south-facing slope of pure slate in one of Germany's coolest wine-growing spots. It does not see the Saar river, for it is located in a side valley that is even cooler than famous riverside sites such as Altenberg (Kanzem) or Gottesfuss or Braune Kupp (Wiltingen). The stony soils of the Scharzhofberg drain well and warm up quickly. Here Riesling ripens slowly and late, taking up all the minerals, aromas, and flavors that the soil and the sun and the cool nights have to offer. When there is botrytis ("we can't avoid it"), the grapes gain a concentration that can be spellbinding in the Auslesen, Beerenauslesen, and Trockenbeerenauslesen.

A late harvest is crucial for Müller, who, at the end of October or even into November, sends about 40 pickers into the vineyard. They pick "healthy" grapes in one basket and botrytis grapes in another. "That makes about 1,000 liters of regular wine and 50 liters of botrytis wine a day," Müller explains.

All of the wines (except the TBA) are fermented and matured in cask. Fermentation starts at about 50°F (10°C) and seldom stops before January. Bottling is quite early (the 2005s in early March 2006), in order to avoid oxidation and to conserve delicacy and finesse.

As well as achieving the highest possible quality, there is another goal for Müller—vintage character. "Actually, not every vintage is a big one," he stresses. "Each year is different, shows different characteristics and different qualities. Our wines should reflect this."

"Our wines taste good one to three years after bottling, then they close down for about ten years before re-emerging as real classics," explains Müller. But once at that stage, as this tasting triumphantly showed, they keep their legendary style for many, many years.

The Kabinette and Spätlesen are always drier in taste but are perfect with food. For Müller there is no better wine with Asian cuisine than Kabinett. But the

classic expression of Scharzhofberger is Auslese—the wine Müller is always striving for. "They are difficult to match with any dishes except cheese when young. But give them 40 or 50 years and there will be almost no dish that does not benefit from an old Auslese. I don't know where the residual sugar goes, but it seems to fade away over so many years. You do not smell or taste the sweetness any more."

The tasting

This tasting of a dozen Auslesen—the most classic Saar Riesling—on the first day involved two comparable vintages per flight. The 2004 and 1975 combined botrytis with high acidity levels, and both should last for decades. The abnormally dry and hot 2003 vintage found its forerunner in the 1959. "As is the case today with the 2003 wines," explained Müller, "45 years ago nobody believed that the wines from 1959 would age well. But in fact they have aged extremely well, and I think the 2003s will be the same." He described the 1999 and 1989 as "classic Saar vintages," whereas 1976 and 1949 were unusually ripe and early. 1997 and 1990 brought high acidity levels but less botrytis, while 1983 and 1971 were outstanding wines in their respective decades.

On the second day we compared the drier Kabinette and Spätlesen, as well as the Auslesen from two of the most recent vintages—the contrasting 2003 and 2004. The former was hot and dry, the latter cooler and more rainy, but with a tremendous autumn. Both years brought wonderful wines—it's more a question of personal preference than any difference in quality. The final wine, the 2003 TBA, represented what we Germans call a *Jahrhundertwein* (a "once-in-a-century wine"). Two TBAs are made here, but both together don't bring more than 100 liters of the finest Riesling nectar. Both wines were auctioned in Trier in September this year.

Faced with the task of summing up Egon Müller's Scharzhofbergers in a very few words, I would say: These are sensual and intellectual pleasures at the same time. Do not spit!

2004 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 20

Very pale with a greenish glint. Beautiful, pure, and clean bouquet of ripe Riesling fruit (apricots, apples) paired with the characteristic spicy aroma of schist and honey. Sensual. On the palate, sapid, with a subtle intensity of fruit and minerality, balanced by a delicate, very elegant and playful acidity. Exciting. This is a fruity, perfectly balanced Auslese that you want to quaff now. But even better would be storing it for as many decades as you can, and starting on the fantastic Kabinett from the same vintage. 18+

1975 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 50

Clear straw yellow. Sappy, spicy, and smoky with a distinct note of schist and just a hint of petrol. Concentrated and intense fruit of bitter orange, honey, and brown bread. The dense and sappy texture is balanced by a penetrating acidity. Fine botrytis notes on the long finish. A very compact style of Auslese. 18

2003 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 22

Pale white-yellow with greenish shades. Very up-front ripe fruit with appetizing floral hints and schist flavors. Seems to be less mineral and fine at first compared to 2004 (another vintage, another character); instead, it is driven by a concentrated, opulent, succulent fruit. The densely woven texture, with its ripe, sweet fruit, is underlined by an excellent acidity that will give this beautiful wine a very long life. 18.5+

1959 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 73

This relatively dry wine—still fresh after all those years!—could indicate the character of the 2003 in 40 years. Intense bouquet, with beautiful fruit and smoky notes of schist and pepper, green tea, dried apricots, and lime. Luscious palate, dense and spicy, with some bitter botrytis notes that are

more obvious as the residual sugar fades away. Very elegant finish of camomile and green tea. Drinking superbly now, but no hurry. 18

1999 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 28

Clear, fresh, and very spicy nose with a pronounced botrytis aroma. Very concentrated and creamy on the palate, this mineral Auslese is marked by a racy acid attack and shy but ripe and complex fruit, giving this exceptional Scharzhofberger a tight structure and great potential. One of the most outstanding wines. 19+

1989 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 26

Mature, and maybe more evolved than one might expect. Waxy, with some musty notes. Rich, juicy, and mature fruit, racy acidity, piquant slate. All in all—despite the slightly unsure start—a very good and joyful Riesling. Probably influenced by cork and not a true representation of the wine. 16?

1976 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 32

Clear golden color. Zesty and multilayered bouquet, with hints of orange tea, cigar, tobacco, and dried apricots. Very stylish, smooth structure, matched by beautifully precise, sweet fruit, layered with honey and cut by brilliant, superfine acidity. Showing both wonderful concentration and finesse, this is an intense, perfectly balanced, totally irresistible Auslese. 19.5

1949 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 10

Bold yellow. Closed nose, showing a slight oxidation, as well as notes of kerosene and rubber. Rich, full-bodied and powerful, this 56-year-old Riesling still boasts tense, vibrant acidity, almost dry fruit, and a persistent finish. Admirable young, lots of character. Drink now or whenever you are lucky enough to have the opportunity of enjoying this wonderful wine. 18



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**1997 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 25**

Quite pale yellow. Corpulent and clumsy bouquet, less brilliant than usual. On the palate, irritating aromas and flavors of red paprika, green leaves, and gooseberries. Less elegant than usual, a little phenolic and drying out. Racy acidity. A Riesling for friends of Sauvignon Blanc. A disappointing Scharzhofberger for me—the wine obviously didn’t like me. **16**

**1990 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 30**

Pale yellow. Very cool and pure nose with flinty notes of slate and stones. Compact structure with a firm and vibrant acidity, mineral freshness, very good fruit concentration, and gentle honey aftertaste. A classic, aristocratic, severe Saar Riesling, with many years to go but less allure than most others in this tasting. **17**

**1983 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 23**

Pale gold. Very particular “south European” bouquet, with aromas of sweet biscuits, petits-fours, banana, and fruit cocktail. Less minerality and finesse here, but succulent, sweet fruit, countered by a delicate, racy acidity. Less complex than a Scharzhofberger Auslese should be, but still a fruit-driven and very well balanced wine that is great fun to drink now. **16.5**

**1971 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese # 16**

Apricot-colored. Delicate, mature, and spicy nose with aromas of orange tea, ripe and dried yellow fruits (apricots and apples), biscuits. Very compact and elegantly structured, this wine displays both fruit concentration and a welcome bite of ripe acidity. Very well balanced, still playful and persistent. The sweetness is fading away gradually now, but this is still an extraordinary Riesling right at its very peak. There is no reason to hurry, but equally there is no reason to hesitate. **19**

**2003 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Kabinett**

White-yellow with greenish shades. Light-bodied, but plenty of ripe fruits. Exciting, fascinating Kabinett. **16.5**

**2004 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Kabinett**

If you could score a Kabinett 20, this would be the one. But as a Scharzhofberger it requires another scale. Cool and fresh, brilliant and subtle nose of slate and apples. Featherlight, this is a beautiful Riesling, with a persistent aroma of fruit and slate, and a transparent, filigree structure. Very pure, mineral style, with a riveting, vibrant acidity. An archetype for Riesling Kabinett. Very good potential to develop over 10–20 years. And then, of course, it will be nothing but a veritable Scharzhofberger. **17.5**

**2003 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Spätlese**

Ripe, sappy fruit of healthy, raisined grapes that at first dominate the schist. Succulent Riesling fruit, nervous acidity, and wonderful structure. Very luscious throughout. **18**

**2004 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Spätlese**

Very clear and pure nose with flinty minerality and spice. Spicy palate, too, with rich fruit and a taut structure, good concentration, very good length, and hints of pumpernickel. Very good potential. **17.5**

**2003 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Trockenbeereenauslese (sample)**

At less than 6% alcohol, this TBA will be legendary. Clear orange in color, hinting at its astonishing concentration. Terrific, extremely intense nose, with otherworldly fruit purity of dried apricots, mango, honey, wax, and flowers. This is the quintessence of Riesling. Incredible, densely textured, thick and sweet like honey, but again the purest fruit expression, cut in a magical way by a brilliant and ripe

acidity. There is still finesse in this unforgettable, immortal wine. **20**

Dinner wines

**1976 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Kabinett**

Delicate bouquet of sweet herbs and wok vegetables. Light body, full in taste (thanks to some botrytis), severe acidity, well structured, slightly bitter on the finish, but good length. Appetizing and delicious with food. **17**

**1988 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Auslese (Magnum) # 32**

This was a very welcome vintage after a series of weaker ones. In their excitement, the Müllers bottled in magnums for the first time. Although lacking the ripeness and concentration of 2003 or 2004, it still offers a flavorful, mouth-filling Riesling with the taste of dried fruits, honey, and herbs. Delicate schist notes and elegant structure, but maturing early for a young Scharzhofberger in magnum. **17**

**1990 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Spätlese # 23**

Delicate, fresh but mature bouquet of herbs, caramel, and schist. On the palate, full of finesse and elegance, fresh and luscious, not very sweet but fruity, and, thanks to the nervous acidity, scintillating. Lean appeal. **18**

**1996 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Eiswein # 2**

Brilliant fruit aromas of dried oranges and apricots with hints of honey, very concentrated and precise. On the palate, again very clear and exact, showing concentrated fruit and electrifying acidity. **18**

**1997 Scharzhofberger Riesling
Kabinett # 12**

Luscious Kabinett with the structure to last 10–15 years. Concentrated and dense fruit, full-bodied, but balanced by a fine acidity. (Better than my Auslese impression of the year.) **16.5**

**DOMAINE DE CHEVALIER
ROUGE 1916–2004
by Stephan Reinhardt**

Domaine de Chevalier is very well known for its great whites, whereas its red Grand Cru Classé de Graves is one of the most underrated wines of Bordeaux (see Stephen Brook’s profile of the property in *The World of Fine Wine* 7, 2005, pp.100–103). To demonstrate the real potential of what owner Olivier Bernard calls “one of the finest great growths in Bordeaux,” he showed 44 vintages of his red wine (as well as seven of his white) at the Kronenschlösschen hotel-restaurant in Hattenheim in the Rheingau in December 2005. To anticipate the more detailed notes that follow, Domaine de Chevalier revealed itself as one of the region’s most balanced, elegant, and pure red wines, while the scintillating whites thrilled with their mineral complexity and longevity.

Domaine de Chevalier was established by Jean Ricard in 1863, and qualified as a Grand Cru Classé de Graves in 1959. After the Bernard family became the new owners in 1983, Claude Ricard and Olivier Bernard worked together until 1988, when Ricard bowed out. “When we started at Domaine de Chevalier in 1983 it was already famous for the quality of its wines,” says Bernard today. “It just needed to stay that way.” His family has, however, invested a great deal of money and know-how to that end. The vineyard was expanded (from 15 to 45 hectares) and replanted, after every single plot was revisited. The winery was rebuilt and is far better equipped now than it was in Ricard’s days, even if the goal remains “to achieve balance and to bottle one of the finest terroirs in Bordeaux.”

Of the 45ha now under vine, only five are white (75% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Semillon). The rest is 64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc and 3% Petit Verdot (planted in 1996 and part of the grand vin from 2001). Chevalier always contains at least 65% Cabernet Sauvignon. Between 1985 and 1993, the Cabernet content was as high as 85%.

The average age of the red vines is only around 20 years, since many plots were

replanted in 1989. Since 1996, therefore, about 10% of the old vine must has been bled off, whereas the young vine must has been concentrated by up to 5% by evaporation since 2002. Fermentation occurs at up to 89.6°F (32°C), and after pressing the wine is aged 15–20 months in 40–60% new oak, about 30% of the malolactic taking place in new barrels.

During this tasting, 40 wines were tatsted blind. All we knew was that each flight comprised eight wines from different decades, and that we were proceeding from oldest (1924) to youngest (2004). The vintages 1916, 1948, 1987, and 1991 were served from decanted magnums with dinner. The bottles came from the Domaine and from Jan-Erik Paulson (rare-wines.com) who co-organized the tasting.

Conclusions

1. The strongest impression was that the Chevalier character is remarkably consistent down the years—these are balanced, elegant, pure, powerful, structured, and taut terroir wines, with a more lush and supple texture in recent vintages. Changing hands did not mean changing style—or, as Olivier Bernard puts it: “An exceptional terroir always dominates a good winemaker.” At the same time, the consultant enologists retained could hardly be more distinguished: Emile Peynaud (1953–88), Pascal Ribèreau-Gayon (since 1988), Stéphane Derenoncourt (since 2002), and Denis Dubourdieu for whites.

2. Forget the vintage charts here! You could easily miss lovely Chevaliers if you avoided supposedly “tricky” vintages. “Compared to many other 1975s today, ours is not dried out,” Bernard observes. Another good example is the 1991, which was served from magnum and turned out to be one of my favorites in terms of balance, delicacy, and finesse.

3. Chevalier is “rarely a big, powerful wine” in its youth, “yet somehow takes weight and flesh as it ages,” wrote Stephen Brook (*WFW* 7, p.102). He is clearly right, as the powerful wines from vintages such as 1937, 1943, 1948, and 1962 demonstrated. In recent vintages the wines have reached slightly higher alcohol levels

than before (up to 13% from 12 or 12.5%).

4. The tasting testified to the extraordinary longevity of Domaine de Chevalier wines. When served the deeply colored 1916 blind with dinner, all tasters were decades out when asked to estimate its age. They thought it had to be much, much younger. The 1937, 1943, 1947, and 1948 were all very much alive and kicking.

5. All in all, the tasting demonstrated that Domaine de Chevalier is not only an accurate expression of its terroir but also a reliable witness to the vintage. There is no sense of manipulation, and you never get the impression that the wine was made for instant media recognition. In blind comparative tastings, Domaine de Chevalier might not get the highest scores. But in vertical tastings like this, it amply demonstrates its own beauty and class.

In the early 1990s, the proportion of younger vines might have been too high for the grand vin, but 75% of vines had recently been replanted. “When we bought the Domaine we had to have a long-term strategy,” explains Bernard. “We wanted the best fine-tuning in our vineyards, so we had a kind of restart. But I think that now we are reaping the rewards.”

6. The quality from 1998 onward is consistently high. But so far no wine seems to perform quite as the greatest Chevaliers of the past. This may be a question of vintages, of age (both: wine and vines), of course, but more likely it could be a question of style, or better: the interpretation of the Chevalier style. Whereas the Ricard style was often graceful and delicate (and sometimes austere), the Bernard area has given the wine greater fruit concentration, more weight, more power—especially since Derenoncourt started with manual punching downs and extended the fermentation time and lees contact up to eight months. The wines are better balanced, more supple and smooth now—but maybe with a little less mystery about them?

Bernard has prepared Domaine de Chevalier for the 21st century, while respecting its tradition. And as the Chevalier vines become older, they, like the wines, have time on their side.

Domaine de Chevalier Rouge

1916 (Magnum) Dark ruby. Dried figs, dates, plumcake, and sweet tobacco. Rich, elegant, and supple, still alive and kicking, with intense tobacco notes and a noble sweetness. Finishes dry and bitter. A fascinating experience—notably with a good cigar. **15.5**

1924 Brick-red. Indistinct on the nose, hints of red paprika, raspberries, unripe apple. Little extract, short and hard. **12**

1928 Dark fruits, spices, wet earth, green apple. Lean, yet silken fruit texture. Lacks some extract and power. Slightly rough and short finish. **13.5**

1929 Brick-red. Very nice earthy nose of dried fruits, plums, caramel, and meat. Elegant body, fine tannins, very mineral, beautiful balance, remarkable length. Great terroir wine. **17.5**

1937 Brick-red. Concentrated, earthy and meaty nose, with dried berries and leather. Rich, warm, supple yet firmly structured, perfectly balanced, very good concentration, fine and rounded tannins, very persistent. A great wine, years away from retirement. **18.5**

1943 Dark and dense ruby. Intense, mature bouquet of red berries, black tea, and a fine sweetness. Powerful, tight, firm tannins, yet balanced and elegant, expressive and silky. Tobacco, berries, and brandied cherries on the very long finish. A great wine! **18.5**

1945 Ruby with orange tinge. Meaty nose with tobacco and brandied cherries and dark berries. Concentrated, compact structure, with firm tannins; seems young. Good, somewhat dry finish but far from drying out. **17**

1947 Ruby, with orange rim. Black-pudding and mocha nose, dense and intense. Mouth-filling, succulent, firm tannins, still seeming young and elegant. Distinct terroir notes. **17**

1948 (Magnum) Purple. Sweet, intriguing, intense fruit nose, with hints of truffle, tobacco, plum, and dried fruit. Complex, supple, and elegant, with ripe fruits, silky yet structured tannins, holding up very well. Still amazingly fresh and youthful. Superb structure. Terrific wine! **19**

1949 Garnet. Meaty nose with tobacco. On the palate, silky then slightly tart. A little too much tobacco, drying out on the astringent finish. **14**

1953 Nice ruby with orange shades. Mature and sweet wild berries, with shades of tea, earth, and minerals. Very well balanced, delicate fruit, fine tannins, nice concentration, very charming and elegant. A classic. **18**

1955 Somewhat muted and rancid nose, with notes of old chocolate, potted plums, and meat. Soft, silky, yet slightly flabby, lacking structure and finesse. Seems tired, but we seem to have been unlucky. Stephen Brook described his bottle as “still alive and kicking,” scoring it 17.5. **15.5**

1957 Ruby. Mature fruit nose, raisins, oranges, and raw dough. Delicious. Supple, lots of fruit, dried berries and plums, noble yet grippy tannins, very balanced and elegant, with mineral length. A full-bodied, classic Graves, still in great shape. **16.5**

1959 Intense ruby. Graceful, transparent nose, with delicious aromas of wild berries and cherry, tea, truffles, and earth. Tight, almost astringent, yet with good extract and full body. This is a firm Graves of excellent quality. **17**

1961 Dark fruits, dough, and mint on the nose, almost New World in style. On the palate, fruity, lush, and supple, with lots of cherries and dark berries. Quite opulent for Chevalier, this is more than dramatic: epic. Finishes with a delicious fruity/meaty sweetness and fine acidity. **17.5**

1962 Vibrant ruby/garnet. Captivating, courtly bouquet, where everything is discreet and perfectly woven together. Supple and smooth, with blackberries, wild strawberries, and meat; very silky and elegant, perfect maturity, excellent sweetness, finest tannins, good grip. Finishes with dark berries, cedar, and tobacco. Great wine, firm yet finely balanced and perfectly preserved. **18.5**

1964 Animal nose—meat, blood, iron, damp earth, ripe blackberries. Lush, smooth yet compact structure, with dried currants, leather, black pudding, and lead pencil. No rush. **17**

1966 Light but graceful fruit nose, coffee hints. Lean yet well structured; grainy tannins, pleasant roughness, good minerality and length. Very Chevalier, if a little short on fruit. **16.5**

1967 Ruby with orange shades. Very nice mature fruit nose. Lean body, delicate and full of finesse, fine tannins, good length. **16**

1970 Ruby with orange hue. Intense floral and herbal bouquet, with dried blackcurrant, coffee and leather. Very delicate and silky texture, with a remarkable robust fruit and firm structure; sappy, spicy, wonderful balance, elegant maturity. Caramel and candied fruits on the long finish. Showing extremely well. **18**

1975 Deep fruit nose of raisins and sweet chocolate. Mature, supple, mouth-filling, smooth, and harmonious, but well structured with tannin. Fine, very pleasant sweetness. **16**

1978 Ruby/garnet. Earthy Graves nose of tobacco and wild berries; good transparency. Medium-bodied, very well balanced and delicate, with pure fruit and minerals. A classic Léognan. Not great, but charming and fine. **15.5**

1979 Vibrant ruby. Earthy and meaty nose, with ripe fruits and scents of

truffles, damp forest, licorice. Full-bodied, with wonderful silky texture, grippy tannin, and good concentration; give it time to open. **16.5**

1981 Dark ruby. Spicy tobacco and blackcurrant nose. Medium-bodied, delicate fruit, balanced and very honest, even if it lacks some length. Nice to drink now. **14.5**

1982 Vibrant ruby. Meaty Cabernet nose, with blackcurant, leaves, paprika, and a strong sense of terroir. Medium to full-bodied, balanced, elegant, and sappy, concentrated and taut. **16**

1983 Spicy nose, with herbal and meaty aromas, coffee, and cherries. Full-bodied and meaty wine, with good fruit concentration and firm and grippy tannins. Seems quite shy and a little rough today. **15**

1984 Purple/ruby. Classic Graves nose: cool and earthy, with a concentrated fruit aroma. Silky, sappy, delicate fruit, mouth-filling, fine yet firm tannins, quite vibrant. Very good savory length. Drinking now, but no hurry. **17**

1985 Clear Cabernet nose, fresh yet ripe and spicy, even if not as complex as the best forerunners. Fruity, subtle style with fine and lively tannins, supple, meaty, and the concentration to develop over 10 or more years. **16.5**

1986 Corked. **NS**

1987 (magnum) Light, delicate, and fresh Cabernet nose. On the palate, elegant, graceful tannins, and delicate, sweet Cabernet fruit. Remarkable balance and charm for the year. **15.5**

1988 Earthy, toasty nose, concentrated. Almost rustic, strident tannins; darkly fruited and meaty; stubborn and probably not in the best of moods. **15?**

1989 Clear and intense fruit nose, with earthy and spicy notes. Rich, full-

bodied, and succulent, a mouthful of sweet fruit, good structure, with well-integrated tannins; quite modern appearance. Very good concentration and length. **17**

1990 Clear ruby. Subtle and spicy nose, again displaying a classic Graves terroir. Subtle and stylish fruit, showing great refinement, grainy yet fine tannins, gentle acidity, very elegant and long on the finish. An absorbing and classic Chevalier. **17**

1991 (Magnum) Absolutely delicious Chevalier, which should be drunk soon while it still has its perfect shape. Fresh and graceful fruit intensity that delivers the Chevalier terroir in a very pleasant way. Almost Burgundian structure; elegant, fragile, full of finesse, precise fruit character, finest tannins, very harmonious. Enjoy! Now! **16.5**

1995 Fleshy, spicy nose, with dark berries, cherries, and lovage. Supple and round, a little bit smoky, good concentration, firm, still dryish tannins (somewhat overextracted?). Powerful, yet still closed for now. **16**

1996 Very darkly colored. Concentrated, noble, oaky nose, meaty underneath. Rich, with a good concentration of ripe fruits, again with oaky-toasty aromas of smoked speck; still drying tannins and a somewhat astringent finish. Still with the potential to soften. **16**

1997 Purple. Flintstone and wild berries on the nose, also charcoal, grilled meat, allspice and licorice. Vibrant, mineral, fresh Cabernet fruit, not very opulent, but still very recognizable and welcome as a Chevalier in the classic style. Needs some years to develop. **16.5**

1998 Meaty and spicy nose, with ripe and concentrated dark fruits as well as as an animal side. On the palate, powerful and sumptuous, with a tight structure and concentrated fruit; spicy

and quite striking, still with a discreet elegance but an indiscreet, exceptional length. Huge potential and a very long life ahead. **17.5**

1999 Ripe yet fresh fruit with good concentration and noble intensity. Concentrated, powerful, rich blackberry fruit and licorice on the palate; succulent, vibrant, with taut yet well integrated tannins, very good balance and length. Very promising. **18**

2000 Very dark. Ripe and smooth berry fruit, still dominated by toasted oak and mocha. Silky texture with plenty of fruit and stylish spices, good concentration, tight yet elegant structure, already harmonious and approachable. Does not appear to show the austerity or strength of Ricard’s older Chevaliers. **17**

2001 Purple. Spicy terroir nose with meat and fresh fruit (cherries). Vibrant, powerful, good concentration of healthy fruit, delicate acidity, firm tannins, full of finesse. Rather discreet still, with sappy length. A rather more classic Chevalier, with the potential for at least 10–20 years. **17.5**

2002 Purple/violet. Concentrated primary fruit, fleshy. Silky fruit with a pleasant, ripe sweetness, and stylish tannins. Balanced, with good length. Combines power and elegance. Already tasty, but still plenty of potential. **17**

2003 Very modern in style. Powerful and rich, concentrated, almost “thick,” with a Port-like nose and taste. Voluminous fruit, massive tannins, good length. There is potential but less of the classic Chevalier refinement in this atypical vintage. **16**

2004 (Barrel sample) Dark violet. Very yeasty and fruity (blackberries). Taut yet elegant structure, ripe fruit, good concentration, depth, and length. Quite promising but embryonic, and again slightly Porty at this stage. **17–18**

**TORRES GRAN CORONAS
MAS LA PLANA 1970–2001**
by Neil Beckett

Blind-tasting triumphs from 1979 onward certainly helped prove that a little-known Cabernet from Penedès, Torres Gran Coronas Mas La Plana, could stand shoulder to shoulder with the finest wines of Bordeaux. But what were then shock victories were not one-off flukes—as Hugh Johnson has said, comparisons with Latour were not too exaggerated—and those first two vintages, 1970 and 1971, are still superb today. Moreover, there have been several equally worth successors over the 30 years since, the most recent release as thrilling as any.

The perfectionist streak in Miguel Torres has led him to experiment freely in both vineyard and winery, as he strives for the most convincing expression of what is clearly a special site—29 hectares of deep alluvial soil, first planted in 1966, and one of five single vineyards that his firm bottles separately.

The following wines were tasted with Miguel Torres in London in November 2005. As explained on the back labels, the bottles from the '70s have been recorked and topped up with younger wine. The front label has omitted Gran Coronas from the 1983 vintage onward. But the best of the wines are all worthy of a crown, are all equally Mas La Plana, all equally Torres.

1970 Gran Coronas Mas La Plana

(70% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana, 20% Tempranillo, 10% Monastrell) Beautiful deep ruby, rich luster, a little even gradation toward the rim and first shade of tawny. Captivating first sniff—aristocratic, queenly rather than kingly—frank, fresh, harmonious, still with a very vivid blackcurrant fruitiness and underlying minerality. Medium body, with brisk, refreshing acidity seamlessly integrated, the elegance and race on the mid-palate enhanced by the purity of fruit and suavity of tannin. Great direction and momentum, seeming to narrow and thicken at the same time. A crisp, dry finish of very good length. After more

than an hour in the glass, there was no hint of decay or wayward volatility. For those not lucky enough to have tried it, the closest parallel might be with fine old Bordeaux, though there is a more full-blooded warmth, the fragrant fruit ripeness matching the natural sweetness from the two years in American oak. **17**

1971 Gran Coronas Mas La Plana

(70% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana, 20% Tempranillo, 10% Monastrell) A similar color to the 1970. Always a shade deeper and richer on the nose, which is also the most lifted of the three wines from the '70s. Still great integrity of fruit and minerality, and a faint cedary whiff is the only intimation of wood, but slightly wilder, with wet leaves, a light beefiness then gaminess, juniper, tobacco... complex and exciting, and ever more so over time. While there is a powdery quality to the nose, the palate still has plenty of creamy blackcurrant fruit, multilayered, plush, ravishingly smooth across the mid-palate, despite the more powerfully supportive suede tannins. Invigorating acidity extends the finish, again of very good length. **18**

1975 Gran Coronas Mas La Plana

(90% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana, 10% Cabernet Franc) Deep ruby, with less gradation than either of the two previous wines. Very exotic, fragrant, rich and ripe on the nose which, Miguel says, used to have a rather roasted, coffee-like scent, but which has now softened to a gentle, soft sandalwood spiciness. The higher Cabernet content has given even more cassis depth, but also a firmer, leafier, more vegetal touch, welcome in that it helps temper the sweetness of the wood. Medium-full body, dense and on a grander scale, even more richly layered, with fully resolved, velvety tannins. More flesh, less sinew. Still some freshness to the fruit, if less definition and drive, but although there is not the acid extension on the finish, there is even greater fruit persistence. Another lovely wine. **17**

1981 Gran Coronas Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Medium-dep ruby, glowing rim. At first sniff, fresh, refined, restrained, herbal rather than vegetal, then more animal, gamier, stronger, and finally more perfumed and sweeter—lead-pencil and strawberry. Still very vigorous, and might have been rather raw when younger. Medium-bodied, expansive on the mid-palate, drier, more extracted, with much more evident grip and rub to the tannin, but despite the growing resistance underneath, there is still sufficient fruit gliding over the surface. If it has for the moment a shade less complexity and subtlety than the earlier wines, and is still moving at two different speeds, it offers even more intensity of fruit. Chewy, dry, long, straight finish, which needs food to round and soften it. **16.5**

1983 Gran Coronas Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Medium-deep ruby, impressive intensity. Full and rich on the nose, a touch of Brett, stems, and undergrowth, but not too distorting or distracting. Medium body, elegant, harmonious, pleasingly supple, with a lighter, more relaxed grip than the '81, but still sufficient structure for its size. Sapid, savory finish, if a little lean. Still very pleasant, but this faded in the glass while the '81 and '89 were still rising to full stature. **15**

1985 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Intense medium ruby, fading only a little on the rim. Very closed and shy initially on the nose, but blossomed—less cassis than wild strawberry and mint. Miguel said he used to find the American oak a little dominant, but it is now fully integrated. An austere elegance on entry, mineral, but growing succulence and sustain across the mid-palate, fine-grained, polished, silky smooth tannin, rubbery squeeze. Fresh, harmonious, vigorous finish of excellent length. Less

dramatic and tannic than the '81, but greater finesse and purity. **17.5**

1994 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Deep ruby, almost opaque, only a little give on the rim. Aristocratic purity and restraint on the nose, but fully ripe fruit, opening up to chocolaty richness, incense and spice. Bright, very marked acidity and dense, shiny tannins, giving it great surface tension. A swirling mid-palate that has still to settle down, the fruit still coming to terms with the wood, which saps it of some succulence. Impressive depth and length. A more searching wine at this stage than the '95, but its full potential has yet to be realized. **16.5**

1995 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Again, aromatically tight, but more fragrance and lift, partly due to the more evident new wood. Full-bodied, rich, round, supple, and warm, still with a fine seam of acidity and slick tannins. Already balanced on the mid-palate, but while the brightness of the fruit manages to shine through on the finish, this is still rather in thrall to the wood. More approachable than the '94, but not as complex or profound. **15.5**

1998 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Almost opaque, deepest ruby. Again, abundant, evident new wood on the nose, but here more than matched by the intensity and vibrancy of the fruit. Higher pitched, higher toned—indeed nosing through these last three wines is like going up an aromatic scale. Medium-full body, densely packed, energetic, with the same rush of fruit as on the nose, real intensity and sapidity. Brisk, enlivening acidity and carefully extracted, richly layered tannins. All coming together well on the long finish, which will broaden to



greater complexity over the next few years. The most complete and promising wine of the '90s, and very good by any standard. **17.5**

1999 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Deepest ruby, again almost opaque. Assertive, incense-like nose, the intensity such that it has still to unfurl, but already a medley of fruit and ginger spice under the wood. Medium-full body, dense, well extracted, the fruit not forced, still succulent, though the dry tannin from the wood (the wine was also racked into 100% new oak barrels) makes it seem strangely hollow at this stage, despite the richness, sweetness, and volume of the fruit. **14**

2000 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Deep ruby. Still quite closed on the nose, gradually revealing dried fruit and flowers (almost Barolo-like), and

a nutty torrefaction. But this again appears to be from the wood, since the wine is far from dried out on the palate, dripping with glossy, very vivid blackcurrant fruit. Expansive, grand, profound, richly layered, supportive tannins, but still with sufficient sap and savor. Real flourish on the finish. **17**

2001 Mas La Plana

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Mas La Plana) Deep ruby. Exciting, exotic, cedar and spice nose, still with the shoe polish shine of new wood, but very fresh and harmonious. Full-bodied, dark, glossy fruit, opulent and powerful, but satin smooth, racy as well as rich. Grows and slows on the mid-palate, but rallies on the finish, generous and long. Already great composure, effortlessly grand, magnificently structured and textured. At this early stage, the purity of fruit might be mistaken for simplicity, but the complexity will surely show over the many years that this splendid wine still has in hand. **18**

HINE VINTAGE COGNACS 1858–1996 by Nicholas Faith

"We can make a Vintage Cognac in any normal year." The words of Bernard Hine, who's been responsible for his firm's brandies since 1974, make the scarcity of Vintage Cognacs even more puzzling. In fact the explanation is very simple. For over two centuries after the French Revolution, the Cognac market was dominated by two firms, Hennessy and Martell, who wanted to sell blends distinguished purely by their brand names and didn't want to complicate matters. Their influence was such that until very recently only a handful of vintage brandies reached the market, and most of those were the so-called "early-landed late-bottled" Cognacs sent to Britain immediately after distillation and matured in cool, damp cellars in the docks of London and Bristol. It was only in 1987 that the restrictions on single vintages were finally removed, so that it will only be later in the decade that the quantities available will be of any consequence. At that point Hine—together with Delamain, the other historic favorite of the British aristocracy—will face some competition, especially from Rémy Martin, whose 1965 is a beautifully rounded brandy.

In terms of quality, vintages in Cognac should be the opposite of those in the Médoc across the Gironde estuary, where the winemakers are looking for ripe grapes, whereas the Cognaçais are looking for acid fruit of around 9° alcohol. But in fact there is no real correlation, positive or negative between the two. Of course, Cognac vintages are not always "normal" in Hine's terms. In some years—often with one in the year, like 1961, '71, and '91—late frosts keep strengths down as low as 8°, while in the "sevens"—1977, 1987, 1997—low summer temperatures and late rains spoiled the harvest. By contrast, the excessive heat of 1989 produced brandies that were simply too rich. But otherwise it is, in theory, merely a matter of selecting "the best brandies of the year," invariably from the Grande Champagne, the "inner ring" of the Cognac appellation, brandies

that have been distilled on their lees to increase their capacity to age.

Hine then leaves its brandies in new oak for about nine months, lowering them from their basic strength of around 70% to 60 to reduce the influence of the wood. They're lowered further, generally to the standard 40% (the strength of those written up below unless otherwise stated) before they are sold. Hine then ages them in older casks for at least 20 more years. "After five years we can tell if they will be good enough to sell as single vintage," says Hine, during which time they develop the precious rancio—the complexity reminiscent of rich fruitcake stuffed with nuts, raisins, and candied fruits that is the hallmark of great old Cognacs. For, as Hine points out, "the most important aspect of the brandy is that it should be typical of the year." Nevertheless, all Hine's brandies, whatever the vintage, will be marked by the firm's special qualities—elegance, balance, and fruity depth—as against the sometimes ethereal elegance characteristic of Delamain. Hine's provide a balanced brandy, flowery and fruity. "We don't want them to be too woody, we're not making brandies to please Monsieur Parker," observes Hine tartly. In other words, he wants the "distilled version of a fine wine." But they should not be too old: "We face the problem of age snobbery," says Hine, because so many drinkers assume that older inevitably means better as far as Cognac is concerned. This is especially the case with the Early-Landed Cognacs, softer than their Cognac-matured brethren, at their best after a mere 20 years, and liable to fade a decade or so later.

I had happy memories of the balance, depth, and elegance of such vintages as Hine's 1948 and, above all, the 1940—a miraculous product of the most miserable year in the history of 20th-century France. So the brandies I tasted recently *chez* Hine at its historic offices in Jarnac, the lovely little town on the Charentes river east of Cognac, had a lot to live up to. By and large they did, but all the time I had ringing in my ears Hine's insistence that "we don't have the right to *declare* what it's like, we have the right only to *describe* the brandy."

Early landed

1982 Floral, delicious, light, but very long. **18**

1981 More classic than the 1982. A small crop that produced soft, spicy brandy with a good depth of orangey fruit. **19**

Aged in Jarnac

1996 "One of the few good years in a generally disappointing decade," says Hine, but it lacks the warmth of the 2000, which will probably merit 20. **18**

1988 Like the vintage in the Médoc, the Cognacs were balanced but tight when young. Already lovely, with some rancio on the nose, though inevitably a bit firm still. On release it will be **19–20**

1975 "All I love about Cognac," declared the late Maurice Fillioux, Hennessy's legendary blender, about this year. A full, rich, chocolaty brandy far better suited to cigars than the usually cardboard-tasting "cigar blends." **18**

1966 (45.9%) A bit hot, but colossal concentration. **17**

1957 Admirable rancio, but the fruit is drying out, leaving drier raisins. **17.5**

1953 (44%) Still some real power. More plain chocolate than fruit. **19**

1945 (43.5%) All the qualities I associate with great Cognac: fruit, nut, chocolate, and colossal concentration. **20**

1937 (37.2%) Very light and floral; totally delicious. **19**

1920 Magnificent Hiney nose, albeit light, with a fresh mushroom palate. **18**

1918 Light, agreeable, but no real concentration or character. **15**

1858 Mushroomy, reminiscent of very old Champagne. It was in wood for 70 years—nearly twice the usual time—so felt like a mouthful of leather. **13** ■