



Paul Jaboulet

Hermitage La Chapelle Rouge

IS THERE ANOTHER 1961 EQUIVALENT IN THE OFFERING? CUISINE & WINE ASIA'S CONTRIBUTING WINE EDITOR CURTIS MARSH PONDERES THE LATEST STAGGERING AUCTION RESULT AT CHRISTIE'S.

In conversation with an enthusiast at a recent wine dinner, the subject turned to the staggering price that a case of 1961 Paul Jaboulet La Chapelle (rouge) fetched in the latest Christie's Fine and Rare Wine Auction in London, a whopping GBP123,750 (S\$342,000) inclusive of taxes and premiums, setting a new European record for the amount paid for a single case of wine.

With a grimacing smile, that expression of anguish which can only be counteracted by laughing at the situation, our enthusiast recounted an incident some years back where he had purchased out of auction, five bottles of 1961 Paul Jaboulet La Chapelle and had them air-freighted to Singapore. He was away when the wines arrived however, his maid dutifully unpack the contents, observing they were covered in thick mouldy grime and cobwebs, decided to wash them, presenting sir with the sparkling clean and shiny bottles upon his return. She declared it took her hours of soaking in hot soapy water and scrubbing, along with the entire contents of glass cleaner and a great deal of effort to polish the bottles! Consequently, he drank the wines in rapid succession over business lunches reciting the fiasco, seeing the humour in the tale as some consolation and expecting the worst for the wine. Much to his surprise (relief) they all were all reasonably good bottles although, having tried the wine before, not the ambrosial elixir he had previously experienced.

The conversation moved to successive vintages of La Chapelle that might equal the enduring 1961. Going by the vintage charts and omnipotent wine critic and Rhone Valley enthusiast Robert Parker Jr (Parker), scoring both the 1978 and 1990 a perfect 100, are the obvious candidates. Dr N K Yong, arguably the most erudite and seasoned fine wine palate in Asia, offered his opinion based on countless visits to Jaboulet and in-depth conversations with the late Gerard Jaboulet, "that whilst the 1978 was a most impressive wine, the 1990 is a stronger contender to match the 1961". Dr N K Yong's sentiments are corroborated by Parker's comment, "The modern day equivalent of the 1961, it deserves all the attention it has garnered."

Seeking a different perspective from the British palate I researched further on Jancis Robinson's excellent website www.jancisrobinson.com. Robinson wrote a compelling article "Hermitage La Chapelle – the rise and fall of a great wine", published in January 2006, including tasting notes of 34 vintages of La Chapelle, 2000 to 1955, ranking 1961, 1990, 1991, 1972, 1982 and 1964 as the most outstanding vintages.

Interestingly she does not view the 1978 in the same light as Parker, although awarding it an admirable score of 17 points out of 20, and commenting that this was "a good bottle" as far as condition, however declaring it at its peak in 2006 and stating, "I can't see this wine improving but it is all in the right place now. Slightly drying on the finish. Cool. Didn't improve with time alas." Conversely, Parker, in his tasting notes from June 2000, indicates the wine living until 2030. Perhaps it is appropriate to apply the old adage, "There are no great wines, only great bottles".

Out of curiosity I looked up the 1990 Paul Jaboulet La Chapelle on www.winesearcher.com observing that Fine & Rare Wines (www.frw.co.uk) were offering a case at GBP7917 (S\$21,886) before taxes, approximately a paltry 8 percent of the cost of 1961! Furthermore, Seckford Wines (www.seckfordwines.co.uk) listed a case of 6 magnums for GBP7960 (S\$22,000), similar money yet we all know that magnums sell at a significant premium; you could say a relative bargain. Notwithstanding 'the horse has already bolted', surely there still ample, possibly extraordinary, upside with the 1990 for the astute collector-investor. The way that interest rates are retreating although the bearish mood of the stock market is a concern, assuming the demand for such fine and rare wines continues unabated, as it has over the last five years or so, I would suggest this is a very good investment.

Moreover, most wine enthusiasts are aware that Paul Jaboulet was acquired by Swiss financier Jean-Jacques Frey in 2006, and just like Frey's purchase of Chateau La Lagune, expect exponential changes in the vineyard and winery, and a quantum leap in quality. The transitional period is never easy and the Paul Jaboulet wines (particularly La Chapelle) that are currently on the market are nowhere near up to speed yet. The Frey's did not make the 2004 La Chapelle, incidentally a mediocre vintage in the Northern Rhone, and reading between the lines, they had to reduce the 2005 quantities by half through a strict barrel selection to produce an admirable wine (see Parker tasting notes).

The 2006 and 2007 vintages in Northern Rhone are supposedly meritorious so it will certainly be intriguing to see how these wines turn out. Personally, I am even more interested in Jaboulet Northern Rhone whites, having cut my teeth on Jaboulet Chevalier de Sterimberg as a budding young sommelier, notwithstanding the new additions La Chapelle Blanc and Petite La Chapelle Blanc. Furthermore, one cannot help but feel enthusiastic about the whole extensive Jaboulet range, owning vineyards in most strategic appellations throughout the Northern and Southern Rhone, whether it is their icon La Chapelle or dependable Crozes Hermitage Domaine de Thalabert; my future expectations of this venerable Rhone Valley house are exceedingly high.

I visited the Paul Jaboulet cellars in early April and tasted through their entire range, and was treated to bottle of 1990 La Chapelle over lunch! Part 2 of this story will include my tasting notes and further insight.

Must dash, need to talk to my London wine merchant about securing magnums of 1990 Jaboulet La Chapelle!

For more information on Paul Jaboulet, visit www.jaboulet.com

