



Illustration by Conny Jode

Serge Hochar

Decanter Magazine's Man of the Year 1984



New Award 'for services to wine'

U.S. planes shot down
MARINES KILLED IN BEIRUT
 6th Fleet shells Druze positions

Eight U.S. marines were killed yesterday when the American base in Beirut was shelled by Syrian-backed Druze rebels of the U.S. 6th Fleet.

Israeli jets kill 60

By CON COUGHLIN in Beirut

ATLEAST 60 people were killed in Beirut yesterday, including 30 Lebanese, as Israeli jets bombed the city. The attack was the most serious since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

30 KILLED IN BEIRUT BATTLE

By CON COUGHLIN in Beirut

BEIRUT was rocked over Christmas by its worst fighting since the Israeli invasion last year as the Lebanese Army and Moslem militiamen fought during Christmas for control of key posts in the city.

Serge Hochar's Chateau Musar vineyards are in war-torn Lebanon. Miraculously, against all the odds, and despite great danger, he has successfully brought in the 1983 (and 1982) vintage. As he says: 'For others the weather is the problem. For us it is the war.' And a war influenced by the super-powers.

In 1983 3,000 people were killed in the Lebanon. The Chateau Musar vineyards are situated in the Bekaa Valley on the edge of the Chouf Mountains, scene of some of the worst fighting. Usually there is only a short journey from the vineyards to the chateau. In 1983 the Syrian lines ran through the estate so the grapes had to be taken on a dangerous 100-mile journey lasting five hours to reach the winery.

So to introduce this new Award we unhesitatingly choose Serge Hochar as Decanter Magazine's Man of the Year 1984 for his services to wine — and to the people of Lebanon.

No one in the world of wine can have had such an appallingly difficult and dangerous job — and surmounted it. To produce wine at all in the circumstances would be remarkable, but to produce excellent wine is extraordinary.

Regular readers will recall the enthusiasm his vintages, then largely unknown, created when they were first shown at the Bristol Wine Fair in 1979.

On these pages Hugh Pope, UPI's correspondent in Beirut who has been to interview Serge Hochar, reports on just some of the problems the winemaker has encountered. Tony Lord will assess recent vintages and the wine making next month.

Beirut battles rattle leaving 57 dead

From Our Correspondent, Beirut

The fiercest fighting in Beirut since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 has ended. The Syrian Army for control of the city has moved into the city. The fighting has left 57 people dead and many injured. The Syrian Army has also captured several key positions in the city.

Scores die as Israeli hit Shia bases in Beirut

From Our Correspondent, Beirut

At least 30 people were killed in Beirut yesterday when Israeli jets bombed Shia bases in the city. The attack was the most serious since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Sixth Fleet opens Night battle in Beirut kills eight Marines

From Our Correspondent, Beirut

Eight U.S. Marines were killed in Beirut yesterday when the Sixth Fleet opened a night battle in the city. The attack was the most serious since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.



In the years to come Decanter will continue to make this annual Award to recognise the work of outstanding personalities in the wine world. (This year it happens to be a man, but it might well be a woman.) For next year's Award nominations from readers will be carefully considered. Closing date is 30 October 1984.

Most winemakers worry about hail, frost, disease or the market. The main concerns of Serge Hochar, Lebanese vigneron, are international frontiers that won't stay still, massacres, and closed borders. But Hochar does now get the occasional hailstorm — of bullets and shrapnel.

Otherwise Lebanon is a good place to make wine. A climate with 300 days of sunshine, a light frost once every 20 years, and virtually disease-free vines have all been combined by the efforts of the Hochar family into the superb Chateau Musar wines which have had the worldwide markets thirsty for more.

Small consolation for Serge Hochar, now facing the irony that the civil war that forced him to seek the international market in 1975 has now turned international itself, and threatens to leave little of his tiny country untouched, let alone his vineyards.

The latest set of problems started in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon. When the dust settled, 80 hectares of the family's best vineyards were left stranded behind the barbed wire of the Israeli-Syrian front line. Serge calculated he would not be able to harvest again until 1985, if at all.

Miraculously however the confusion of the post-invasion months allowed trucks of Hochar grapes to make their way to the winery behind Mzar castle, north of Beirut, where they were made into the 1982 vintage in the modern stone-faced winery. The Hochar's castle is now packed with refugees, and Hochar directs his chateau from spacious apartments above the winery.

The Arabic name Mzar means 'castle to be visited', and with reason. The castle commands a spectacular view over the Mediterranean bay of Jounieh, standing on the edge of the unspoiled bright stone, red-tiled village of Ghazir among green poodle-tail pines.

More important for the Hochar family is that it is well out of trouble, 12 miles north of Beirut in the Christian enclave of Mount Lebanon.

When the grape-picking season came round in 1983 the situation was much worse. On September 1st when Israeli troops clanked out of the Chouf mountains ringing Beirut, over the armoured din the boom of Maronite Christian and Druze Moslem artillery could already be heard, and the battle for the Chouf began in earnest.

Ronald Hochar, Serge's brother and partner, was in Beirut but had long banished thoughts of the grape harvest, also due to start on September 1st. The only road through to the vineyards was the coastal highway through the village of Khaldeh, where the Lebanese army was fighting up hill and the Druze fighting down. The Druze bombarded the road daily and snipers raked it with automatic fire. The 'Khaldeh Junction' soon became notorious, littered with the wrecks of cars of those so desperate to travel they risked, and met, death.

Over the mountains in the Hochar's vineyards of the Bekaa, 30 miles to the east, the vinedressers oiled their guns. Sandwiched between two Druze centres, the Maronite villagers feared they would not be spared the massacres carried out by both sides.

But the vinedressers were saved, as with most things in Lebanon, by factors outside their control. The vineyards are on the sunny lower slopes of Mt. Barouk, where it happens Israel has installed a sophisticated electronic surveillance station. The Israelis stayed and no massacres happened.

For what it was worth, the farmers knew something in September 1983 the Hochars did not. An exceptionally severe winter, with thick metres of snow, followed by a tepid summer, had meant the grapes were well behind their normal September 1st ripening date. Colourful Bedouin families pitched camp and were ready to pick the harvest.

The Hochar's bailiff, with typical Lebanese bravery,

decided to take sample grapes to the Hochars in Beirut. Getting up before dawn, he went over the refugee-lined mountain road down to the port of Sidon. Taking his heart in both hands he then drove up the coast road to Beirut. Cracks and explosions rang off the hillside above him, but he made it past the wrecks of Khaldeh and brought the grapes to Ronald Hochar.

Ronald was extremely surprised but took the bailiff at his word, and phoned Serge who was in Paris. They decided to meet the courage of the farmer and take in the harvest. Serge flew to Cyprus to take a boat to Beirut, and Ronald moved down from his hilltop suburban apartment, to direct the harvest from their office in Christian East Beirut. From having a grandstand view of the shelling he was now in one of the hottest targets. 'It was very dangerous,' even the soft-spoken Ronald admits. 'Ca tappait partout.'

They were lucky, after three weeks of war, the 5-inch guns of the American fleet off Beirut forced the Druze rebels to an uneasy stalemate. The Hochar's truck drivers ground through the mountains alone, four hours to the vineyards and four hours back. Shells and rockets still fell round Khaldeh but as Serge says, there was one advantage — their usual headache, the traffic jams, had disappeared.

Serge arrived after the six-hour boat crossing from Cyprus and immediately went up to the chateau to see the harvest arrive. Two big rockets crashed into the coastal road after he had driven along it. Some welcome back, but, and his eyes light up with delight in telling it, he had seen that as in 1982 the harvest had been good and the grapes excellent.

The 1983 vintage is now gurgling to itself in Chateau Musar's concrete vats — where Serge leaves the malolactic fermentation to take place — from where it will go into Nevers oak casks in the 150-year-old vaults of the cellars underneath. This year Serge is much pleased with his best vats of red wine for which Chateau Musar has won its reputation. 'I think it has the makings of a great wine, like the 1970. A lot of power, very well balanced, with depth, deep colouring, practically black — definitely worth the trouble.'

And how much trouble. Every conversation with the Hochars now is punctuated by discussion of the possible political fate of their tiny country, which seems to be at the crossroads of the ambitions of the major powers. The Hochars have special reason to think about their future. Wine-making for the domestic market is threatened not only by whiskies and the local aniseed spirit, Arak, but by the growing influence of Islam in Lebanon and the middle east, which does not tolerate alcohol.

A more immediate threat is the fact that their best vineyards of noble grapes lie across the front line of Lebanon's two neighbours and implacable foes, Syria and Israel. The Hochars had to abandon ten hectares of one vineyard behind the barbed wire of the mine-strewn no-man's-land. For the rest, Israel is now making conditions which mean they will have to get visas to pick up next year's harvest.

For the future, the volatile politics of the region may bring anything between peace and World War III. 'The situation is ageing me faster than my wines,' says Serge, although his inventive mind never rests. Successful test growths have already been made for red wine grapes on the slopes above Chateau Musar, to take the place, if necessary, of the 50-year-old vineyards in the Bekaa.

But the Hochars are still not admitting defeat. Having made the 1982 and 1983 vintages against all the odds, Serge says, 'If there is one chance to do it again in 1984, we will. You cannot have a vintage every year. For others the weather is the problem — for us it is war.'