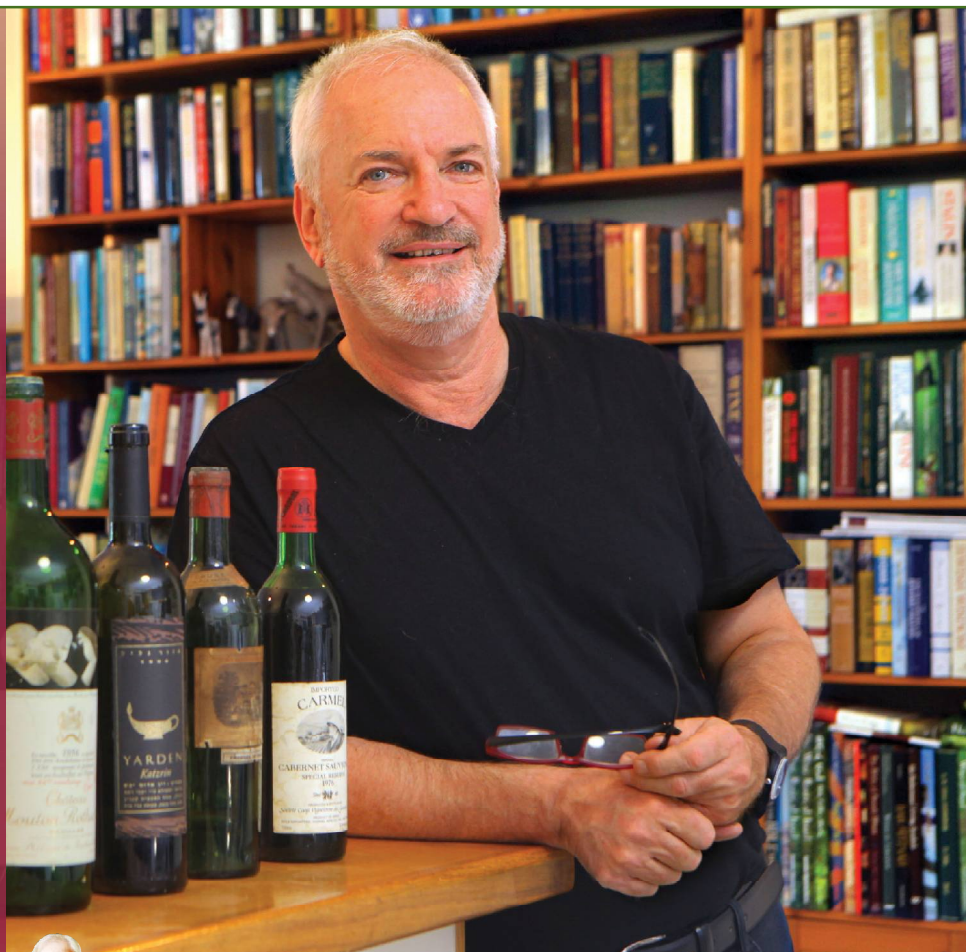


# A journey from Palwin to Lafite



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

THE WRITER with wines and memories.  
(David Silverman)

I started in the wine, beer and spirits trade long ago, in 1976, before moving exclusively to wine in the 1980s. I left Carmel Winery 2016 and Montefiore Winery in 2017 (the family is no longer involved there), so am now truly independent. It seems appropriate on reaching my 60th birthday and celebrating a new year, to look back.

The first wine I ever had was Palwin (short for Palestine Wine) at Seder nights. I am embarrassed to say I quite liked the taste as a child. Funnily enough when I later worked at Carmel, there were more queries, questions and complaints about Palwin than all the other wines put together. For some British Jews it was part of the religion itself.

The first wine I bought through choice was called *Hirondelle*. This was a simple basic branded wine. It was smooth, not astringent and inexpensive, but also with no discernible character. There is a saying “Brand is bland,” and it certainly was, but it was a painless start.

The first great wine I had was Château Mouton Rothschild 1971. The color and depth of flavor were immediately noticeable as was the black fruit aroma, the full body and the whiff of cigar box. Great wine for me, like fantastic views, a memorable meal or music that is particularly moving, is an emotional experience. You don’t do justice by putting the memory into words, certainly not in a tasting note, but when it happens you don’t forget.

The first really great Israeli wine I had was the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985. It won three major gold medals and trophies, then exceedingly rare for an Israeli wine. I remember the pride that Israel could make wines like this and especially the concentration of color, aromas and flavor. It was this wine that illustrated to me that

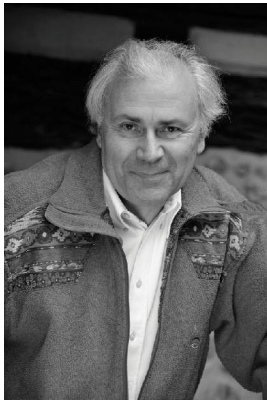
there was a future in Israeli wine. I was especially proud to put it on a number of wine lists in the UK. Of course, I was later to work for them for many years.

The most memorable old wine I ever had was Lafite Rothschild 1947, at a private lunch at the Château with Baron Eric de Rothschild. Talk about drinking history. It was chosen being the nearest vintage to the foundation of the State of Israel. I remember the tawny, brick color and the winey dried-fruit aroma. The wine accompanied the most simple white fish dish. A lesson for all, that when the wine is the focal point, the simplest, plainest food should be prepared.

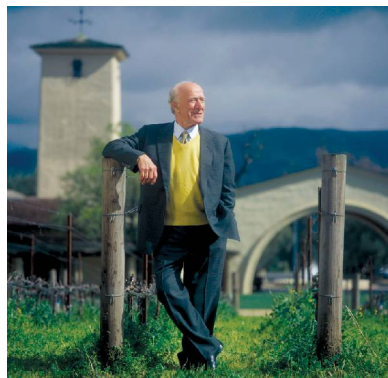
The people who had most influence on me in my formative years in wine were Jean Meyer, Serge Hochar, Baron Philippe de Rothschild, Hugh Johnson and Robert Mondavi.

Jean Meyer was an elegant, sensitive man, the fourth generation in his family domaine Jospmeyer, which was founded in 1854. When I was purchasing wine in the 1980s, he was the supplier of wines of Alsace. What was captivating was his involvement and mastery of so many roles, not only in the vineyard, and of course, the winemaking, but also marketing and sales.

He had an absolute belief in Alsace wines, and was firm in the importance of combining wine and food. He never seemed to consider wine on its own but always related it to the course it would (or should) be consumed with. He was particularly passionate about his beloved Hengst vineyard. However, his main contribution to my own development was his belief in wine as art, comparing the winemaker to an artist. To fulfill his dreams he made an artist label using a painting to transform the wine into an image, which was a visual expression of the wine. The works were all chosen from young Alsatian artists. For me this was a most enlightening concept that lifted wine into the realms of aesthetics and art, beyond aroma and taste. He had a boyish enthusi-



(FROM LEFT) The stylish Jean Meyer of Josp Meyer in Alsace (Courtesy); a young Baron Philippe de Rothschild in the vines (Courtesy); Hugh Johnson, the world's most famous wine writer (Esa Korjula); Chateau Lafite Rothschild 1947 (Courtesy).



(FROM LEFT) the irrepressible Serge Hochar of Chateau Musar (Courtesy); Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985 (Courtesy); Robert Mondavi backed by his winery (Avis Mandell).

asm and a generosity to share. He was a wine poet and artist, who opened a window in my mind. I still have one of the early label paintings framed at home.

For years I received Christmas cards from this quiet, modest man. They were so stylish, in a characteristic “less is more” style, that I used to keep them. When I came to write this article I wanted to contact him for old time sake, only to find he had died, well before his time, in 2016. However, the winery is in good hands with one daughter managing the winery, another is the winemaker and his son-in-law looks after the vineyards. It remains to this day my favorite Alsace winery.

Next was Serge Hochar of Lebanon's Chateau Musar. In a world of globalization and sameness the world over, where a wine from one place tastes like another, Chateau Musar was a revelation. Whatever you thought of the wine, you could not fail to be moved and enchanted by the owner Serge Hochar. Sadly, he recently also died all too soon. Hochar was a wine philosopher for whom wine was a greater constant than religion or life itself and more expressive to him than both. To meet him was a lesson in the art of life. He would never answer a question, but instead pose a question of his own. His own statements always ended in three dots leaving his conversational partner time to ruminate, consider and try to catch up.

What he gave me more than anyone else was respect for the individual approach – for someone who follows his own way, whatever. Critics and consumers can be quite unforgiving of the wine that does not conform. Standardization, elimination of faults, making sterile wines with no dirt in them is a by-product of the technological revolution and globalization. The element of person and place can be ironed out in the quest for perfection. Hochar made wines in his way. He flouted the acceptable rules and I admired him for that. He used to be dressed like a banker in a pinstriped suit,

with his French accent, expressive eyebrows, talking with his hands. He would prompt and provoke in a way that I have never experienced before or since.

He taught me about individuality, honesty in following his own way in winemaking and the importance of giving a wine time to express itself. I once hosted a vertical tasting of his in the late 1980s. It was a wonderful memory and an educational event. *Vive la différence!*

From Chateau Mouton Rothschild I learned about grandeur. I never met Baron Philippe de Rothschild, but I believe he was the leading wine figure of the 20th century. He was the first to produce Chateau bottled wine, the first to declassify and produce a branded wine, Mouton Cadet, now the largest selling Bordeaux wine in the world. He was the first to realize the marketing and artistic potential of the label and invited famous artists each year to paint a unique label for that year's vintage. I have had a framed poster of all the paintings in every office I have ever worked; it just gets bigger as the newer vintages are added to it. He created the unique museum of wine in art and the pioneering joint venture Opus One with California's Robert Mondavi. Above all, he was the only figure to get his wine upgraded in the famous 1855 Bordeaux classification.

I worked for the company that represented his negotiating company (Baron Philippe de Rothschild SA) in the United Kingdom. As such, I was invited to do a harvest at the chateau. I would later receive three magnums of the vintage harvested (one of which was a 100-point wine in Robert Parker's estimation).

We toured the dark, cobwebbed cellars with candles, and saw wines from past centuries one could only dream of. In the evening we had dinner at Mouton hosted by Baroness Philippine de Rothschild. I remember the unique tall-necked decanters with a red napkin tied with a flourish at the top to catch the drops. From this experience I learned about style, quality and the grandeur of

the wine world at the highest level. It was intoxicating and a life-changing experience. I was hooked. By an amusing coincidence, the person who bought the Chateau Mouton for the Rothschilds was Nathaniel, originally from the English Rothschilds, who happened to be a nephew of Sir Moses Montefiore, from my family.

Hugh Johnson, the world's most respected wine writer, accompanied me as my passion for wine increased. He taught me about the joy of reading wine literature. I was enchanted by his prose and the way he painted the wine scene. His *World Atlas of Wine*, *Wine Companion*, *Art & Science of Wine* and *Story of Wine* are books to read and reread. When I took my first WSET course in London in 1979, I was given Hugh Johnson's *Pocket Wine Book*. (Who would have thought then that I would later contribute to this book for over 20 years?) Since then, I have an obsession with buying wine books, and Johnson's books remain amongst those I value the most.

The final person who influenced me greatly, as well as almost everyone else the wine world, was Robert Mondavi. I met him when he came to Israel and hosted him in Tel Aviv one memorable evening. Any student of wine should follow the steps that this great man took to establish his Robert Mondavi Winery and put California on the map. He was a driven genius and his passion and determination were unforgettable. He showed us how to market wine, build a brand, advance wine tourism and present a winery. Many who succeed follow his way. He was a tour de force.

Robert Mondavi always quoted Petronius, for the memorable but simple statement: “Wine is life.” Well, thanks to the wines I drank and the people that inspired me, wine became my life. ■

*The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for more than 30 years. He is known as the “English voice of Israeli wine.” [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*