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CHATEAU BATAILLEY

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Producer profile

Château Batailley

This Bordeaux fifth growth has always inspired a loyal following and quality has steadily improved, leading to the recent release of its inaugural second wine.

Panos Kakaviatos reports

JUST BEFORE EN primeur week in April 2016, Philippe and Frédéric Castéja, the father-son owners of fifth growth Château Batailley in Pauillac, invited a select group of the wine trade to celebrate the estate's inaugural second wine, Lions de Batailley.

Michelin three-star chef Michel Guérard, of the celebrated Les Prés d'Eugénie in southwest France, travelled to Bordeaux to prepare a five-course dinner, accompanied by 12 vintages of Château Batailley, which included legends such as 1961, 1945 and 1900, reaching as far back as 1881. 'A once in a lifetime event,' remarked Belgian sommelier Fabrizio Bucella.

Some noted that the event seemed in contrast with the estate's long-standing image as a discreet wine. Clive Coates MW once wrote that 'the atmosphere at Batailley is quietly efficient, rather than showy, and the wine competent rather than compelling'. The estate's location – not visible from the famous D2 Route des Châteaux and behind the Pichons and Latour at the southern end of the Pauillac commune – still reflects that image.

Ever since Philippe Castéja's grandfather Marcel Borie and his brother Francis acquired the estate in 1932 (see timeline, right), Batailley has enjoyed a reputation for being a good-value Pauillac – a perception that endures to this day. 'It has been one of our most popular wines and best-value Bordeaux for more than 30 years,' says Simon Staples of UK merchant Berry Bros & Rudd.

Michael Grimm of German retailer Bacchus-Vinothek has also been buying Batailley for his customers for several decades. 'Of all the classified growths, it is one of those "lonely riders" – like the Bartons, for example – that don't follow an all-around international style, where all you get is sweet cassis and toast,' he says. 'The château produces classic Pauillac that respects the vintage, and scores are not the main concern.'

Rigorous selection

But over the past 15 years, the wine has gained in both body and structure, thanks to steady improvements in viticulture and in the vat room that ultimately led to the official launch of the new second wine, Lions de Batailley.

'It was complicated to launch it as we discussed the idea for several years,' says 35-year-old Frédéric Castéja. Indeed, his father was content to maintain a single wine for the estate. 'Frédéric wanted the second wine,' says Philippe, who turned 67 in August 2016, but stresses that he will not be retiring 'for a few years yet'. He adds: 'Frédéric is getting more and more involved in managing the estate, both commercially and in viticulture as well, as he is very attached to the terroir.'

Aiming for higher scores proved a factor >

Above right: Château Batailley, discreetly located at the southern end of Pauillac, has been in the Castéja family since 1932

Batailley at a glance

Owner/CEO
Philippe Castéja
Appellation
Pauillac, 5th growth
Vineyard area 60ha
Plantings
70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Petit Verdot
Average age of vines 40 years
Planting density about 10,000 vines per hectare
Target yield 45hl/ha
Barrels
55% to 60% new oak, with ageing for 16-18 months
Annual average production
180,000 bottles of first wine; 70,000 bottles of Lions de Batailley; the rest sold in bulk



Château Batailley – a timeline

Late 18th century
Owned by the St-Martin Family



1816
Acquired by Daniel Guestier of Barton & Guestier. He died in 1847 but his children managed it until 1866

1866-1932
Owned by Constant Halphen, a Parisian banker

1932
Purchased by the Borie brothers, Marcel and Francis

1942
Division into two properties. Francis Borie kept the smaller part, which became known as Haut-Batailley. The larger part, owned by Marcel (Philippe Castéja's grandfather), retained the original name >



Photographs: Andrew Rae, Cuy McLachlan/claypix.com



Left: Philippe Castéja (right) said his son Frédéric was behind the creation of the estate's second wine, Lions de Batailley

Château Batailley: the name

Batailley refers to the site of a 1453 battle at the end of the Hundred Years War, when the French reclaimed the neighbouring Château Latour from the English, ending a 300-year reign of the English in Aquitaine. Although vines were first planted as early as the 16th century at Batailley, official records for the château date only from the 18th century.

in the decision: 'We noted that our grand vin was being scored more highly by critics, and realised that rigorous selection was key to this success. This could be achieved consistently by introducing a second wine,' Frédéric explains. The estate had released about 30,000 bottles of the second wine unofficially in 2014, he says, but it was a 'micro-production' and not the 'official launch'. Some 70,000 bottles were produced for the 2015 vintage, about one-third of total production – leading to a significant decrease in the amount of first wine produced.

Like the grand vin, Lions de Batailley is dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon, coming mainly from young vines and from plots deemed unsuitable for the final blend.

Value proposition

Prices have not climbed as quickly as improvements in quality, making Château

Batailley even more interesting for Bordeaux buyers who seek both quality and value. For example, release prices across the top 50 châteaux in Bordeaux increased by about 200% from the 2008 vintage to 2009, while the ex-négociant release price of Batailley increased by a more modest 37% in the same period, according to figures from Liv-ex.

Ben Giliberti, former wine columnist at *The Washington Post*, who now consults for Washington DC-based importer Calvert Woodley, pegs Batailley's noticeable quality increase to 2009. 'It was so sudden,' he explains. 'The market failed to digest it immediately. The 2009 was available at or near-opening prices for a long time, and we made multiple purchases.'

Like Grimm in Germany, Giliberti places Château Batailley in a 'select group that, if not an outright steal like it used to be, still offers fair value, rather like Châteaux >

Château Batailley – a timeline (continued)

1961

Following the death of Marcel Borie, the property transferred to his daughter Denise and her husband Emile Castéja, Philippe's father



2001

Philippe Castéja takes over the property and the family-owned Borie-Manoux négociant house, through which Batailley is sold

2006

Cellar space revamped to allow for parcel-by-parcel vinification

2015

Official launch of second wine, Lions de Batailley



Left: more cellar space was added to Château Batailley in 2006, doubling the number of vats to 60 and enabling single-parcel vinifications

Langoa-Barton and Léoville-Barton, Branaire-Ducru and, in 2015, Rauzan-Ségla'. And sales data prove Giliberti's point: more recent vintages reveal higher percentage price increases – in 2015 the release price was €32 (compared to €22 for 2010), but this remains competitive.

Decanter detailed the improvements at Batailley back in 2009, in an article reporting on experts tasting all Pauillac fifth growths (except Pontet-Canet) in a comparative blind tasting of three different vintages.

The general consensus was that, in the 2004 vintage at least, Batailley equalled the more famous Lynch-Bages and Grand-Puy-Lacoste. But backtrack to 1990, and the tasters favoured – by a wide margin – both Grand-Puy-Lacoste and in particular Lynch-Bages.

A taste of Batailley



Château Batailley, Pauillac 2010 94

£38.50-£55.50 Christopher Piper, Eton Vintners, James Nicholson, L'Assemblage, Lay & Wheeler, Le Vigneron, Rollings Wine Co, Top Selection

Needs a few more years to hit its early drinking window; it's closed now and feels almost like a barrel sample. Over a few hours, though, its enveloping palate displays the freshness of 2014, but with greater depth as cassis and dark and red berry fruits lead to a long and lifting finish. A wine with a potentially higher score. **Drink 2020-2045 Alc 13.5%**

Château Batailley, Pauillac 2015 93

£29.50-£39 (ib) Averys, Bon Coeur, Christopher Keiller, Goedhuis & Co, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Laithwaite's, L'Assemblage, Millésima, Top Selection, Uncorked Tasted from barrel in April 2016, this exudes a deep perfume of violets, while the palate has an excellent structure with smooth tannins and freshness. Neither as overtly rich as the 2009, and not as high toned as the 2010, it mirrors the structure of 2005 but with a touch more body, perhaps reflecting the increased selection of the new second wine Lions de Batailley. **Drink 2020-2040 Alc N/A**

Château Batailley, Pauillac 2014 93

£19.50-£25 (ib) Albany Vintners, Christopher Keiller, Farr Vintners, Goedhuis & Co, L'Assemblage, Millésima, Nickolls & Perks, Top Selection, Uncorked

A promising wine: pure expressions of red and black berry fruit and rich cassis, plus pristine notes of pencil lead. There is a sense of quiet force within the fine tannic structure, yet the palate is smooth and subtle, leading to a lingering finish. **Drink 2018-2040 Alc 13%**

Château Batailley, Pauillac 2005 92

£39-£60 Berry Bros & Rudd, L'Assemblage, Paramount Vintners, Sandhams, South Downs Cellars, Street Vin, Top Selection Tasted at a dinner at the estate in April 2016, the 2005 was juxtaposed with the 1881, 1929 and 1961 and seemed naturally tighter than the rest. But it displayed both power and poise on a full-bodied palate, with bright red fruit and a long finish. Similar in style to 2010, but not as deep. However, compared to the 1982, also at the dinner, the 2005 displayed more concentration and should be a winner in years to come. **Drink 2017-2035 Alc 13%**

Château Batailley, Pauillac 2011 90

£22(ib)-£56 Crump Richmond & Shaw, Corking Wines, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Jaded Palates, James Nicholson, Millésima,

L'Assemblage, The Bordeaux Cellar, Top Selection

Closed with firm tannins. Subtle notes of tobacco and cassis please the senses; very Cabernet-driven. The acidity of the vintage is rather prominent and accentuates the tannic feel. A longer finish than the 2012, but not as charming. **Drink 2020-2035 Alc 13%**

Château Batailley, Pauillac 2012 88

£27.40-£41.10 Davy's, Hedonism, L'Assemblage, Lay & Wheeler, Millésima, Top Selection More Merlot-like charm than is typical for Batailley, with plum, red berry and lightly toasted, lingering oak. While the palate is smooth and even delectable, the finish seems a touch short, and overall the wine lacks some of that Pauillac power. **Drink 2017-2025 Alc 13%**

Lions de Batailley, Pauillac 2015 87

POA Top Selection Brambly red fruit freshness with charm and lift, although the finish is a bit short. This is a wine that can be enjoyed while you wait for the grand vin to age properly in the cellar. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc N/A**

For full details of UK stockists, see p94

Guiding influence

Denis Dubourdieu – Decanter Man of the Year in 2016 – sadly succumbed to cancer just three months after attending the April dinner at Batailley, where he said: ‘This is a great event that celebrates the history of the château, and I am happy to have been a part of the work that led to the second wine.’

Philippe Castéja hired Dubourdieu to replace Pascal Ribéreau-Gayon in 2001 at Batailley, in part because of his specialisation with vineyards as an agronomist.

Dubourdieu introduced environmentally friendly vineyard working methods and reduced soil-damaging chemical treatments. Yields began to be more strictly controlled and a new vat room was added to the winery in 2006. Studies were made to assess how weather conditions affected vines in different parcels, partly to ascertain potential alcohol degrees. The new cellar space doubled the number of vats to 60, which enabled single-parcel vinification.

In the past few years, Philippe explains, Dubourdieu guided staff to change pruning techniques in order to improve circulation of the vine sap, which enhanced veraison (the

moment when grapes change in colour from green to black; the transition from berry growth to berry ripening). Changes in the vat room include Dubourdieu’s introduction of long and warm post-fermentation macerations – about a month, at 31°C – which, according to Philippe, results in ‘more subtle tannin extraction while lending more body and structure to the wine’.

Following the passing of Dubourdieu, the estate will continue to work with his associates Valérie Lavigne and his former student Axel Marchal. Batailley’s current cellar master Arnaud Durand also studied under Dubourdieu.

Given all the efforts in recent years, the improved quality at Batailley has been noticed not only in export markets but in France, too. In choosing the wine recommendations for this article (see box, left), several recent vintages were tasted at Strasbourg wine bar Vino Strada. Bar owner and Bordeaux wine buyer Stéphane Maure concludes: ‘The 2010 is certainly a sign of change for this estate, as the wine just seems more vivid in a great vintage, and more so than in previous great vintages including 2005 or 2000.’ **D**

Panos Kakaviatos is based in France and has been writing about wine since 2001



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