

Society of Medical Friends of Wine

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

A Non Profit 501 C 3 Corporation

NEWSLETTER APRIL 2018

Society of Medical Friends of Wine

SAN FRANCISCO

281st. QUARTERLY DINNER



PIPERADE

San Francisco

Saturday March 24, 2018

Dinner

Five Course Sauternes Dinner

Seated Hors d'Oeuvres

2013 Opalie, dry wine of Chateau Coutet

*

Foie Gras & Haricots Vert Salad with Figs

2000 Chateau Coutet,

*

Tourtière of Onions, Potatoes, Roquefort

1983 Chateau Guiraud

*

Steamed Lobster, Mangos, Basil, Puree of Yams

2005 Chateau Climens

*

Braised Sweetbreads, with seasonal Wild Mushrooms

or

Roasted Quail, Braised Cabbage, Grapes, Foie Gras & Verjus Sauce

1971 Chateau Rieussec

*

Almond & Pear Tart with Caramel Whipped Cream

2014 Chateau Suduiraut



P I P E R A D E

On Saturday evening March 24th a sell-out crowd of Society members gathered at San Francisco's Piperade Restaurant for our first ever in 70 years Sauternes themed dinner. The menu was especially chosen by Executive Chef Gerald Hirigoyen to pair with our very diverse selection of wines from Sauternes and was an outstanding success. From the richness of foie gras, to the savoriness of onion and Roquefort tart, the sweetness of lobster, and the succulence of sweetbreads and culminating in the delicious almond and pear tart, our wines were carefully matched and allowed the food and wine to show the best qualities of each.

We started the evening with the 2013 Opalie, the dry wine of Chateau Coutet. From a small portion of the estate and from vines more than 45 years old, the cepage is a fifty/fifty blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. The wine is fermented and aged in oak, about half of which is new, and

bottled after nine months in wood. As a dry wine, Opalie is bottled under the generic Bordeaux appellation, as only sweet wines by law can be called Sauternes. As the only dry wine of the evening, its task was to awaken and refresh our palates and serve as an ambassador to the array of luscious wines that lay ahead. It did so admirably, with a complex and mineral nose and palate, a clean and lengthy finish, and a balancing acidity that foretells great life still ahead for the wine. The neighboring dry whites of Pessac-Leognan are well regarded for their flavors and durability, with the whites from Chateaux Haut Brion and La Mission Haut Brion commanding hundreds of dollars per bottle. Our introduction to a dry wine from Sauternes shows that this region should also be admired and followed for this style.

With the foie gras, Chateau Coutet had an encore, this time with its 2000 bottling, now 17 and a half years old. By Sauternes standards this is only a light to medium sweet wine, reflecting its vintage and its age, but one demonstrating that concentrated lusciousness does not have to rely exclusively on sweetness. What a beautiful foil for the richness of the foie gras, the wine came alive in this pairing.

We then went back even further in history some 35 years to the 1983 Chateau Guiraud. Like the 2000 Coutet, this wine had lost some of its youthful sweetness and unctuousness, but retained vibrancy and had acquired a nuttiness and marzipan quality. Had it been served with dessert, it would most likely have been called old. Pairing it with the flakiness of the onion tarte pastry, the richness of the onions, and the salty tang of the Roquefort in the tarte allowed it to shine for what it is—a still elegant and preserved statesman of its era and a delightful pairing. Interestingly, the composition of Chateau Guiraud is higher in Sauvignon Blanc at 35% than the more usual 10 to 20% found elsewhere in Sauternes, with the remainder being Semillon.

We then moved on to what has to be considered a classic Sauternes—the 2005 Chateau Climens. Sweet, unctuous, oily, rich, and utterly delicious, this wine easily could have been served in a classic role with dessert, but it also paired beautifully with the sweetness and tropical character of the lobster and mango dish. Interestingly, the Climens also differs from the classic Sauternes cepage, but in a different direction from the Guiraud, as it is 100% Semillon.

With the main course of Sweetbreads, or the alternate roasted quail, we opened what was for me the most anticipated and most anxiety-provoking wine of the evening, the 1971 Chateau Rieussec. At 47 years of age, would this wine be wonderful and every bit what this evening was supposed to be about, or would it be over the hill and disappointing? The color was certainly dark and foreboding, but the recent tasting notes on Wine Searcher suggested that it retained vitality. I have been fortunate in having had this wine dozens of times since its release, and it was always delicious; but years had passed since my last tasting.

I realize my opinion is not unbiased, but I was very pleased with the wine and regretted the unnecessary angst. Paired with the richness of the sweetbreads, the wine showed well preserved acidity and vibrancy. Now only slightly sweet, there is still a mouth-coating viscosity and a depth of flavors lasting well into the aftertaste. Very few people in our group had ever had a Sauternes of this age, and I do hope they found it as eye opening and delicious as I did.

For dessert we returned to modern times and the classic pairing of Sauternes with sweets. We chose the 2014 Chateau Suduiraut, a wine from an historic property that fared well in a tasting I hosted of 2014 Sauternes last December. The wine was everything it should be—youthful, sweet, honeyed and

floral, but in the setting of this meal it almost seemed simple. It just needs some additional years to develop more complexity and then will undoubtedly reward one's patience.

So, to answer the question of the evening, does Sauternes go well with dishes other than dessert? Yes, and I would pose a counter question. Is a well-aged Sauternes from an excellent property too good to be relegated to dessert? Should it not be served much earlier in the meal when one's palate is still fresh and the wine's complexity can really shine?

On behalf of the Society, I would like to express our gratitude to Piperade's owner and Executive Chef Gerald Hirigoyen and his staff. The food was superb, and obviously a lot of thought went into menu selections to pair with our unique wines. Alternate selections were available for our members who preferred something other than sweetbreads and for our gluten-free diners. The wine service was exemplary. Our discussions on economics were smooth and allowed us to cost out the special event at an affordable rate, and the last-minute accommodation of extra guests allowed us to increase the number of our members who could attend and is very much appreciated.

I would also like to acknowledge the wine donations of several of our members, without which this event would have been much less special and much less educational. The 1983 Chateau Guiraud came from the cellar of Barry and Joan Boothe, two bottles of the 1971 Rieussec from Dr. David and Susan Schwartz, and one bottle of 1971 Rieussec and one bottle of 2000 Coutet were from Drs. Robert and Marion Blumberg. In addition, a prior gift from the estate of Dr. Alan Rider allowed us exchange for some of the Opalie.

If you have wine that you would like to consider donating to the future educational events of the Society, please contact us.

Robert Blumberg, M.D.
Cellar Master, Editor, and admitted Sauternes lover



A full house at Pipeade

Photo by Dr. Jack McElroy



Quail with Braised Cabbage, grapes, foie gras and verjus sauce

Photo by Dr. Jack McElroy



The Remains of the Day

Photo by Dr. Jack McElroy

Sauternes

From Noble Rot to Noble Wine

By Robert S. Blumberg, M.D.

I have had an interest, you might even say a passion, for Sauternes for more than 50 years. In the spring of 1965, as a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of California, Davis, I enrolled in Viticulture 3, Introduction to Grape Growing and Wine Making, taught by the legends of the Viticulture and Oenology Department, Maynard Amerine and Vernon Singleton.

Knowing I would be leaving late that summer for a year of study abroad in Bordeaux, France, with the University of California Education Abroad Program, I thought it would be worthwhile to learn about wine, which is such an important part of the cultural and economic life of France.

As you might have guessed, this was a very popular course among undergraduates, including non-viticulture majors. But it included lots of science and wasn't easy—and many of my English and Poli-Sci major colleagues struggled. Fortunately, armed with some knowledge of biology and organic chemistry and some ability in French, I loved the class and thrived. Even the usually dreaded term paper was exciting to research

I chose as my subject the wines of Sauternes, fascinated by the interplay between a strange fungus and grapes that results in a golden nectar of wine. I remember my concluding sentence "The wines of Sauternes are the finest sweet white wines in the world." To this day I also remember the comment of the TA who graded the paper "French claim, do you believe?" And that, ladies and gentlemen, may well be the question of the evening I will pose to you later.

During the ensuing academic year in Bordeaux, I put my learnings from Viticulture 3 to good use — whether when visiting with French families and commenting on wines they served, or when buying bottles of village St. Emillion at the formidable price of 3 francs each, or when visiting a local wine estate.

Our French administrators did a good job of organizing trips to take advantage of the fact we were so close to the wine country. My epiphany of red wines came with a visit to Haut Brion, when we were served the 1964 out of the barrel, and my epiphany for white wine came during our group visit to Chateau d'Yquem, the most prestigious of Sauternes estates.

We set off on an all-day bus trip that included a visit to Lillet, the local aperitif company located just south east of Bordeaux, a lunch stop with bottles of red and white in abundance, and an afternoon at Yquem. We were feeling no pain by the time we arrived at Yquem, and I am sorry to say my 19 to 20 year old comrades were not the most receptive audience to the detailed explanation about Botrytis, the noble mold that concentrates the grape juice and is responsible for the sweet wine of Sauternes. Even my attempts to recall my term paper and add insight were met with refrains of "enough with the talk, on with the wine," and what a wine it was! Thick, golden, sweet, and luscious.

Fast forward four years and Marion and I, having finished an elective in Pediatric Radiology in Paris, spent two weeks driving around France. When we arrived in Bordeaux I recalled my fond memories of Yquem and decided to take her on a visit to Sauternes.

We began the morning at Chateau Rayne Vigneau, a property of fame but suffering at the moment from the economic declines in the region we'll talk about in a few minutes. We knocked on the door of the tower and waited for what seemed like a long time as we heard distant steps ascending slowly. We were greeted by an elderly gentleman, actually he seemed ancient at the time and in retrospect must have been at least 65, who was the cellar master—the maître de chai—a position his father and grandfather had also held. He interrupted his chores to take us around the winery and offer us tastes. He answered questions like "how do you know when to pick" or "when do you bottle" with answers like "when the grapes are ready or the wine is ready". No scientific machines or formulas, just years of experience. We had a great insight into traditional French wine making and pride and enjoyed every minute of it.

But Rayne Vigneau is not Yquem, and I looked forward to my second visit to the pinnacle of Sauternes.

We drove my newly acquired red Volkswagen-bug into the courtyard of the chateau, whose towers date back to the 15th century, and knocked on the door. This time it was answered promptly by a middle-aged gentleman who raised his eyebrows at the same time he said "Oui?"

Mustering up my best French, I replied "Bonjour Monsieur, we were wondering if we might visit the chais." "But Monsieur", he replied, "it is 5 minutes to twelve, and we are closed from 12 to 2." "Of course. How silly of me", I replied, "but we have driven a long way, and we do have food for a small picnic in the car, would it be alright if we had our lunch on the grounds of this beautiful property." "comme vous voulez"-as you wish- he replied and closed the door.

We proceeded to get out the baguette, pate and cheese and had a nice meal while I updated Marion about the story of Sauternes and the prestige of Yquem in anticipation of our visit.

So as not to appear too eager, we waited until about 2:05 before again knocking on the door. The same gentleman appeared, looked at us as if he had never seen us before, and asked "Oui?" I politely refreshed his memory that we would like to visit the chais, when he asked "Do you have an appointment?"

Now at this point the average American, confronted with this gallic attitude, would have raised his voice and protested like an enraged barrister. But if I had learned anything from my year of study in France, it was that such an approach was not going to get us anywhere. You see, this gentleman had in his lifetime never known a major French victory or battlefield success. And neither had his father, and possibly his grandfather. Twenty years after the end of World War II, France was still suffering economically and spiritually. And de Gaulle was President, preaching his own version of French nationalism and independence at the expense of NATO and the United States. There was no way this Frenchman was going to let a young American have the last word on his homestead.

So, I fell into the apologetic mode which had worked for me so often four years earlier. "Oh Monsieur, I am so sorry, I should have known. You know I was brought as part of a group to this great property when I was a student in Bordeaux, and all arrangements were made for us. I have such wonderful memories of this beautiful property and its glorious wine that I wanted to share them with the beautiful young lady at my side and we have been so looking forward to a visit."

Well he said, "even if I wanted to make an exception, we are expecting a group this afternoon."

Continuing to grovel I added, "couldn't we just wait and silently attach ourselves to the end of this group and by that way visit." "Well, why would you want to do that?" he replied, "just come with me now." We then proceeded to spend several hours in his tow. They were indeed expecting a group as there were long tables set out with linen and glasses and bottles of 1966 d'Yquem, although they never appeared during our stay.

As we visited and asked intelligent questions and shared our stories of wine in France and California, his brusque de Gaulle-inspired exterior departed and left in its stead a Maurice Chevalier type of charm. After a while he said, "well, it is time for a little taste." When I commented on the bottles of 1966 on the table, he pursed his lips and let out a "psst" noise as only the French can do and said "not that good, come with me" He then proceeded to pour us a glass of 1967 from the cask. The smell and taste of this wine stayed with us the rest of that day and for much of the following day as well and remains one of my favorite taste memories. My infatuation with Sauternes only grew.

So where is this magic part of France and what is it that makes its wines so special? The Sauternes district with its five communes is located about 25 miles southeast of Bordeaux, south of the Garonne River, traversing the intersection of the Ciron River with the Garonne. It is this juxtaposition of the two rivers that leads to morning fogs and ideal climates for the development of Botrytis mold, the secret of Sauternes' luscious sweetness.

Botrytis is a mold known in France as La Pourriture Noble, or noble rot. You may also have heard of it in Germany, where it is called Edelfaule or in Hungary, where it is called Aszusodas. Under favorable conditions on perfectly ripe grapes, the mold will appear, nurtured by the humidity. The mycelles or roots loosen the intact skin of the grape berries. This allows for water to evaporate from the grape, concentrating acids and sugars in the juice. At the same time, the fungus does metabolize some sugars and acids, while also creating other compounds such as glycerine. The concentration process exceeds the metabolizing process, so the result is a very sweet, rich, and concentrated grape juice with adequate acidity capable of producing a super sweet and luscious wine with refreshing acidity and no taste of rot.

The conditions must be ideal: humidity from morning fogs or brief rains, followed by dry and warmer weather so that the mold does not grow rampant and destroy the grapes. The grapes must be ripe when infected. Mold on unripe grape berries ruins the crop before it can reach flavor maturity. Mold on damaged berries with cracks in the skin from birds or insects allows undesirable bacteria to enter and leads to spoilage, fermentation, and acetification. Unfettered growth of Botrytis leads to what is called gray rot—the ignoble rather than the noble rot.

In Sauternes in many but not all years, the conditions are favorable to the slow growth and spread of Botrytis, allowing for the gradual increase in affected berries and the progressive shriveling and concentration of grapes. Harvest occurs in series of pickings, or tries, and only the most affected berries are culled by hand with each passage. A labor intense and expensive undertaking to say the least!

No one seems to know for sure when the cultivation of botrytis-affected grapes began in Sauternes. By most accounts it seems to be sometime in the 19th century, considerably later than in Tokay in Hungary or in Germany. One account has it that it was visiting German vignerons, familiar with the benefits of Botrytis, who alerted the French growers.

Though the mid-19th century is often quoted as the starting period, it may have been considerably earlier. Notes on the great sweet wines of the region go back to the 18th century. Thomas Jefferson was a buyer of Chateau d'Yquem, and a letter exists from him to "Monsieur Yquem" requesting some of the famous wine from the estate. The reply came from the Marquis de Lur Saluces, the then new proprietor of the property, stating that he would be delighted to sell wine to Mr. Jefferson. The latter must have appreciated it, as a follow-up purchase was later arranged.

The wines of Sauternes were the only white wines of Bordeaux included in the famous 1855 classification. Unlike the reds that were placed into five classes, the Sauternes were listed in three, with Yquem being the only Grand Premier Cru. Eleven other properties were classified as first growths, (premiers crus) and 12 others as second or deuxiemes crus. It is hard to believe that they would have reached this status of recognition if they were just dry white wines. Of further interest is that, in those days the price of Yquem exceeded that of the red first growths.

The prestige and pricing power of Sauternes probably reached their pinnacle in the latter half of the 19th century, when the wines were a favored beverage of the Russian aristocracy and were sometimes bottled in crystal decanters with the chateau name etched on the glass. Alas, the 20th century brought with it two world wars, a great depression, the fall of imperial Russia, and a general decline in the world's taste for sweet wines in favor of dry wines.

Most Sauternes producers fell on hard times. This is an expensive wine to produce. Harvesting requires multiple passes through the vineyards, shriveled berries produce little juice, and fermentation is long and slow. When you cannot sell your product for much money it is hard to survive.

While some Sauternes had always been sold in bulk, in these days, selling wine cheaply to negociants might have been the only outlet. Shortcuts were taken. It is legal to add sugar in Bordeaux, so chaptalization was an option to produce high alcohol sweet wines without relying on Botrytis or the need to laboriously harvest the vines multiple times. Unsold wine was kept in cement cuvees until an order for bottling was received. Needless to say, cutting corners in production did not help quality and did not encourage demand from connoisseurs. While the best names survived and continued to produce quality wines, the vast majority of properties suffered. Many chateaux started selling dry white wines and red wines, even though they could only be labeled Bordeaux superieur and not Sauternes. This practice of selling dry wines continues today.

Fortunately, in modern times there has been recovery in the area and in the market, but it must be acknowledged that today prices for the wines of Sauternes still lag well behind those of other French and California wines, especially given how difficult and costly they are to produce. Prestigious names and big money interests are investing in the region. After four centuries, the Lur Saluces family has sold Yquem to the French luxury products company LVMH. (Louis Vitton Moet Hennessy). Lafitte Rothschild now owns Rieussec. Chateau Coutet has a marketing and technical agreement with Mouton Rothschild.

And now, what about the wines and the land?

Sauternes is a low-lying area of vines interspersed with small sleepy villages. There are some knolls, with the highest part of the region being the location of Chateau d'Yquem, a few hundred meters above sea level. The two principal grape varieties are Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc, with today a typical proportion being two thirds to 80% Semillon. This was not always the case, with historical plantings of Sauvignon blanc being greater. But with the need to replant after Phyloxera in the 1890's, Semillon was favored, as it is more susceptible to the noble rot. Sauvignon Blanc is retained for its freshness and acidity. A small percentage of Muscadelle de Bordelais is also included in the cepage of many properties. This grape adds floral qualities to the wine, much as a muscat does, but is not actually related to the muscat family. I have even heard of small plantings of Ugni Blanc and a rare Riesling vine, although these are not likely to find their way into the products of a grand cru.

The most prestigious properties, such as Yquem, ferment in small oak barrels. Cement cuvees and stainless steel can also be used. Oak aging is common, although expensive new oak is more likely to be used in those properties who are financially doing well or have had an infusion of capital. The usual range for aging in oak would be 18 months to 3 years. Since the harvest period can easily span 4 to 6 weeks of different pickings, the different wines must be brought together, known as assemblage, when they are about a year old.

Today most if not all bottling is done at the chateaux, although there is still a market for negociant-bottled wines from lesser known properties. After all there are nearly 200 producers of Sauternes, only a couple of dozen of which are classified growths. I have heard of the recent establishment of a cooperative winery in the region. These wines can supply some domestic outlets in France as well as chain stores or state liquor industries in markets like England and Scandinavia. You should know also that Sauternes is not the only appellation for sweet Semillon- and Sauvignon-based wines from the southwest of France, and many of these can be readily found in France and occasionally in this country. The regions of Loupiac and Sainte Crois du Mont and Cadillac are just across the Garonne. Near Bergerac, the wines of Monbazillac offer Sauternes-like flavors, although lighter and less complex in style, at very favorable prices. A glass of Monbazillac alongside the local foie gras is a treat not to be missed when touring the Périgord.

The wines of Sauternes are golden in color, typically light golden in youth and progressing through bronze to a deep amber as the wine ages. How light the wines are in youth depends on vintage and on the use of sulfur. Botrytis actually has oxidative properties on the juice, so some young Sauternes are fairly deeply colored, especially if sulfur is kept to a minimum.

The aromas are enticing and complex. Fresh, floral, apricot, honey, and citrus in youth, with sometimes tropical elements of pineapple and passion fruit. Do not be put off by some sulfur in young bottles; it will blow off in the glass and will protect the wine in the bottle and dissipate in time. With age, deep bouquets of roasted nuts, mahogany wood, and dried fruits come forth.

On the palate the wines have a luscious sweetness, although the degree of sugar does vary from vintage to vintage and property to property. Residual sugar usually falls in the 8 to 12% range. What distinguishes the sweetness of Sauternes from many other sweet wines is the word luscious, implying a richness and concentration of fruit and flavors due to the effects of Botrytis, along with an unctuous oiliness imparted by glycerine, also a product of Botrytis. Sauternes are full in body, for the alcohol content must be at least 13 degrees and can approach 15 or even 16 degrees. This is in marked contrast with the wondrous Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese of Germany, which rarely exceed 7 or 8 degrees.

Sauternes may and usually are enjoyed when young, but the best chateaux also have a tremendous capacity to age in the bottle. Even when the color has turned to deep mahogany and much of the forward sweetness has evolved into a minor component of the wine, a freshness and depth of flavor can still persist. An evolution occurs from fresh sweet fruit to concentrated dried fruit, from forward outright pleasure in the glass to subtle taste complexities and nuances worthy of savor and contemplation.

Traditionally, especially in this country, Sauternes is thought of as a dessert wine, or dessert in itself. Like many sweet wines, it is actually best savored just before dessert, when its own sweetness can be appreciated and not overwhelmed by the sweetness in cakes and tartes..

In actuality, Sauternes is multifaceted and flexible in food selection. Pairings with foie gras or salty blue cheese such as Roquefort, especially for the less sweet style of Sauternes or those with some bottle age, have become much discussed and classic. In an attempt to boost sales, Sauternes producers are not shy about touting the pairing of their wines with fish or shellfish, fowl or meat in cream sauces, and other dishes.

But that, ladies and gentlemen, is indeed the subject of tonight's gathering, for you to explore on your own. I hope you enjoy tonight's wine pairings and are inspired to make your own visit to the famous chateaux of Sauternes. Just remember to make an appointment.

Bon Appetit and Sante!