

# Ep 178: Chateau Musar: The Icon Wines of Lebanon (Part 1)



**Janina Doyle 00:00:07** Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine friends, and welcome to our latest podcast episode where we are delving into the remarkable journey of perseverance in winemaking amidst the tumultuous backdrop of 15/16 years of civil war. So, I am talking about Chateau Musar, the cult wine of the Middle East. And I'm honoured to be joined by a special guest, Marc Hochar, who is part of the family who's going to be sharing many of their stories.

We'll be talking about his father, Serge Hochar, who was an incredible driving force, who received the greatest achievement of the very first Decanter Man of the Year. We will of course get to know the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon better. The interplay of climate altitude, organic viticulture, how it shapes the distinctive character of the wines.

And I will be tasting the 2016 Chateau Musar Red and we'll be talking about, well, volatile acidity, wild yeast, low sulphur and wine making philosophies. So, there's so much packed into this episode. So, I hope that you can get yourself a bottle of Chateau Musar.

And if not, I'm always honoured and humbled to have the support of my sponsor, Wickham's Wine, whose link is in the show notes. And you can always get 10% off your first order using the code "EATSLEEP10." So, at the very least, grab yourself a glass of delicious wine and enjoy the episode.

**Janina Doyle 00:02:07** Marc, firstly, thank you so much for giving me your time, because if we are gonna talk about not just Lebanon, but Middle Eastern wine, we gotta talk about Chateau Musar. So, thank you very much for giving me your time.

**Marc Hochar 00:02:25** Of course, Janina, it's a pleasure.

**Janina Doyle 00:02:27** Now, what I want to start with before we get into the wines is I want you to take us all the way to Ghazir. Now hopefully, I'm pronouncing it right. I did ask just before we recorded, where you are based, your beautiful castle. So, I mean, when people say that their winery is in a castle, I mean, can we just set the scene a little bit for people who have never been, including me?

**Marc Hochar 00:02:49** Yeah, setting the scene. So, geographically, we're located in Ghazir, which you pronounce actually very well. So, it's a village just north of Beirut. Actually, closer to the coastline. It's at roughly 400 metres of altitude.

But it's a village, so it's not actually where our vineyards are located. The vineyards are located in the Bekaa Valley, which is more to the east of Beirut behind the mountain range of Mount Lebanon at an altitude of a thousand metres. So, roughly a three hour truck drive.

But the winery is located in Ghazir because when my grandfather started making the wines or started Château Musar, he started actually with nothing in terms of finances. And so, he used a castle owned by his cousin, which was called the Mzar Castle, M-Z-A-R. And that's where he started the winery and actually used the cellars of that castle.

It's a 400 year old building. The Mzar actually means, in Arabic, a place where people convene. It's like a structure, which is a bit like a very big hacienda. So, it has a small courtyard of our big courtyard in the middle and it's open air in the middle and then just the building is all around, the square around it. Very beautiful view from there.

**Janina Doyle 00:04:10** And it's, this is quite a historic village as well. I was Googling. Thank God for Google. We can almost take ourselves there without jumping on a flight. And it's kind of like cobblestone white buildings everywhere and walls that look so ancient, right? Almost a bit mediaeval, but brighter and whiter. I don't know.

**Marc Hochar 00:04:32** Yeah, brighter and whiter is relatively typical in Lebanon because we use a lot of limestone, which is from local quarries. And so, all of the houses typically have these stones which are off-white-ish in colour.

And Ghazir used to be at one point, but I can't give you exactly the history, at one point, it used to be the capital of Mount Lebanon. So, it has a fairly significant role or had a significant role in the past. Now it's just a village where the centre part of the area of the village has been relatively well preserved. And so, yeah, it's quite beautiful to walk around. And that castle, the Mzar Castle, was there historically, and was part of, I guess, the whole area that people visited.

**Janina Doyle 00:05:17** So, you've painted the picture and it does sound really beautiful. Well, perseverance is beautiful, but you guys really are the epitome of wine and war. For anyone who doesn't know, you've been through so much and come out on the other end.

A lot of people can do a little bit of research and they'll find out a lot easily. But for you personally, what do you think has been some of the most intense moments, the hardest moments, the toughest points of Chateau Musar's history with the civil war going on for, what was it, about 20 years?

**Marc Hochar 00:05:57** Yes, 17 years. It started, actually, in 75 and then finished in 91. So 16 years, yeah. Depends on exactly which day to start. Well, for us as Musar, I guess, we managed to produce wines almost every year during that period. The first year was okay.

75-76 was the year we did not produce. And then afterwards, my father and my uncle, who used to run together the business at the time, just managed to get the grapes from the Bekaa Valley to the winery.

It's again, a three hour truck drive. It depends on the year, some years it's more than three hours, depending on checkpoints and road problems and fuel and getting access to fuel. So, that's always been an issue.

So, 76 was the year where we could not produce. 84 was another year where historically people have said we didn't have wines. Actually, we did have some wines. We just did not release the wines for a while. And we only released them actually after 30 years, the vintage of 84.

**Janina Doyle 00:07:01** Why?

**Marc Hochar 00:07:02** So, with the Musar, you always have to ask why. So, there's a story.

**Janina Doyle 00:07:09** Why? Why? Why?

**Marc Hochar 00:07:11** Yes. So, what happened is in 84, I mean, it was in the middle of the war. So, it was very difficult to get the grapes. Even to pick the grapes. So, normally, we pick in September for the reds at least. And we couldn't at that time. And I think, in the middle of October, my father gets a call from my uncle, I think he was there. My father, I think, was not in Lebanon at the time.

He says, I should come back. We are able to send a few truckloads. So, he went back to Beirut and then we managed to get two truckloads only in late October. So, we're talking about late harvest at this point. But amazing weather, amazing weather up to October. No rain, which is really typical of Lebanon. This is where we're also blessed.

So, one of the trucks goes south. It goes to the port of Saida and takes a boat up north because it could not travel straight. Another truck goes up to the north to the Cedar mountains, up the mountains, 3000 metres high, passes the cold and then goes down. And both of them, instead of arriving after three hours, arrived after five days.

**Janina Doyle 00:08:25** Five!

**Marc Hochar 00:08:26** Okay. So, five days.

**Janina Doyle 00:08:28** But they arrived.

**Marc Hochar 00:08:29** They arrived. So, I tend to call this vintage our truck fermented vintage because obviously by the time they arrived, everything was starting to ferment.

**Janina Doyle 00:08:43** They were already on their way.

**Marc Hochar 00:08:45** Yeah. Exactly. Because we put all the grapes into big trucks. All the grapes are together, so there's no caging, there's no crates, there's nothing. For reds, this is how we transport them. So, obviously, with the weight and everything, we're talking 10, 15 tons of grapes.

So, fermentation had started. The wine was obviously not behaving like a typical wine. In its first years, it behaved more like a Madeira, a bit like a port because it was a late harvest as well. Just the whole process was completely unusual for wine. But then, we realised after 20, 25 years that the wine started to show more as a wine.

Initially, we got people to taste it as our Madeira, but just to taste. And then eventually, we realised after 30 years that when you would open the bottle, it just would go through so much evolution in three to four hours. It would go from, I remember opening one of the bottles in Hong Kong. And the first smell was like a white Sauternes.

I mean, blind, you would say, okay, this is a sweet white wine. Whereas you're talking about the dry red wine. And so, that's the first whiff or smell that you get out of it. Eventually it moves on and the wines go to a bit more port, that's probably linked to the late harvest. And then eventually after an hour and an hour and a half, the acidity starts to pick up and then you're tasting a wine. Obviously, with some maturation, some evolution, but a wine.

I guess it's a testimony to life and to the resilience of life. I guess because of the way we treat our grapes in the vineyards, our wines at the winery and without treating them effectively, it means that we do get wines that have this ability to live and to survive. And 84 is exactly the perfect example of what wine can do if it's left to, I guess, nature to do its thing.

**Janina Doyle 00:10:40** Incredible. And I think for those people listening, am I right, the reason that you took grapes on a boat or the reason you went up into the mountains is because that one road that you're supposed to go down was basically like a death road with all the fighting? It was kind of like, hey, 50-50, let's see what happens if I drive down it. Is this kind of true or have I heard something through Chinese whispers?

**Marc Hochar 00:11:07** We didn't know. When you start something like this, especially if you're in Lebanon. Every day is different when you're in a zone with war around you. I don't know why the decision was taken not to do them both in the same way, but I guess they did not leave on the same day from the vineyards. And so, I guess, my father judged that we had to try both ways to hopefully get one of them to get to the winery. Both were right. So, we were lucky.

**Janina Doyle 00:11:34** Perfect. Right. And talking about your father and in fact, your grandfather who started this. So, let's talk about Gaston, your grandfather first. How would you describe him? Why did this winery even begin?

**Marc Hochar 00:11:46** I didn't know my grandfather very well. He died when I was four years old. So, I have just one image of him actually in his house. And that's it. I don't have more visuals of him. But I spent a lot of time with my grandmother also at the time. And they had the same approach, I guess.

She was a bit strict in the way she spoke and dealt with the grandchildren, like my brother, sister, and cousins. But that was her style. But a wonderful woman. She started the Nurse Infirmier – The Orden des Infirmier/es in Lebanon at the time. And the way she worked with my grandfather is that they always looked to create things that were high quality in terms of premium quality. That was always the focus.

And so, when my grandfather decided to start the winery, he didn't do any of the bulk wines that were normal at the time. We were not selling in barrels, which was common in the 1930s. He went straight away to bottles. Single bottles. And his whole vision of what to produce in terms of wines was to focus on quality.

I remember my father telling me this, and I think it comes from my grandfather. It's like, if you want to be a shoe shiner, fine, but just be the best shoe shiner. So, whatever you do, just focus on being the best at what you do. And so, that's the image that I have of my grandfather. Yes.

**Janina Doyle 00:13:21** Your father says, who was the very first Decanter Man of the Year, created a whole legacy. It must be very, very touching, emotional and beautiful to know that the whole world loves your father and speaks of him in the highest of ways. I'm so sad to have never been able to meet him because I think that would have been an absolute honour.

So, having a father that completely took these unknown wines of Lebanon, even though you guys do have like 6,000 years of history, but nonetheless took them around the world and was so passionate, what was it like learning from him?

**Marc Hochar 00:14:05** Well, passionate. There was always a lot of passion. If I go back to probably my childhood, I think what I remember most was the importance that my father had towards taste. We used to live in Paris at some point because we didn't have a choice. It was nice to live in Paris, but we could not live in Lebanon in order to study.

And I remember that the weekends or Sundays were not to go to do sports or to go to the movies. It was to take the car as a family and then just drive to a Michelin rated restaurant somewhere around Paris.

**Janina Doyle 00:14:42** Well, I don't think that's bad.

**Marc Hochar 00:14:44** No, it's not bad. It's not bad. It's not necessarily what you would do all the time. But what I remember is that it was all about the journey and taste, whether it's food. And also we used to taste once even though we were below 18. But that's fine. Tasting is fine at that stage.

And so, it was always important to taste and to experience taste. And so, anything we ate and in Lebanon, we're blessed with amazing food as well. So much variety in terms of the meze and all the different dishes that we get in terms of the fruit. Fruits and vegetables in Lebanon just taste absolutely amazing and I think that's just linked to the terroir.

And so, the focus of my father's always been taste. And then taste evolved into obviously wine and then from wine into more philosophy about wine and how wine and its impact and taste eventually link into how you live, how you enjoy life, how you perceive life, what you take out of it. And so really, it's a combination of a philosophical approach to enjoying life, but also understanding how the living side of wine actually affects you as a living person. How it interconnects. So, that was, I guess, the passion that my father had.

**Janina Doyle 00:16:02** Well, I think one of the best stories I think I ever heard about him was that he found out that someone had taken a bottle of Chateau Musar and drunk it in Antarctica and brought back the bottle filled with ice or well, melted ice from Antarctica. And then he decided to go there himself and someone said, "What the hell are you doing going there?" And he said, "What? Somebody drank my bottle there. I want to be everywhere in the world where my wine has been drunk."

**Marc Hochar 00:16:32** Yeah, he did it twice. He went twice actually to Antarctica. And so, he took his bottles to taste them there also, to really see how they would taste in a different environment. Because of our wines and the way they're made, they tend to change a lot. You've tasted our wines, so you know that they change a lot in the bottle as they age. They change a lot in the glass as they

open up. You can open a bottle of Musar, white or red, and then drink it over two, three days, five days, even a few months for the whites.

And so, this experience of how the wines behave was part of life. You put any person in a different environment, different city, different temperature and they behave differently. And so, it was just an idea of how his wines behave in a different environment.

**Janina Doyle 00:17:21** I love that. The very essence of being human, imperfectly perfect, perfectly imperfect, different every day. So let's go to the Chateau Musar red. You talked about taste. We're talking about these wines and these wines are iconic. This, first of all, is the flagship of Lebanon, of the Middle East and also the most unique flavour. So, when anyone smells a Chateau Musar, I think it's a very identifiable wine in terms of blind tasting, right?

**Marc Hochar 00:17:58** If you've had it before, yes. If you haven't, then I think you're going to be a little bit lost. More than a little bit, actually. Our wines fairly often have been put in blind tastings. And what's interesting is that they go in blind tastings, either in blind tastings of Bordeaux wines, because we have a component of Cabernet in our wines.

Some people associate them or simulate them to a Bordeaux blend, but we also have Cinsault and Carignan in our blend. And each of the three varieties is roughly a third. And so, this is more Rhône. And so, you could see our wines also being put in tastings with Rhône.

And to be honest, when the wines get older, particularly the vintages where Cinsault is a bit more dominant. Cinsault is a lighter variety of grape. It's a lighter structure. It's more similar to a Pinot Noir in terms of its body than a Cabernet. And when the wines get older, they take on this more ethereal side to them, which is much closer to a Burgundy.

And so, we've had also some of our wines appear in blind tastings in Burgundy, again, depending on the vintage, how old the wine is, et cetera. From that perspective, yeah, I guess Musar is a bit of a chameleon. Either chameleon, if you're looking at other benchmarks or its own identity, because it covers a little bit of everything in terms of the different regions.

Okay. Mostly regions from France because our varieties are French, but it has this ability to really take a little bit of everything from different regions. I remember a sommelier in the US once told me, there are different stories about blind tastings. I don't know if you have time, but we can talk about that if you want.

**Janina Doyle 00:19:52** We always have time. I love a story. Go for it.

**Marc Hochar 00:19:55** So, the sommelier was telling me first when people started tasting Musar at the beginning, nobody would get them and understand them or figure out that they were Musar. But then after tasting three, four, five times, they realised that they are so distinctive and so unique that we did not allow them anymore in blind tastings because people would spot them because even though they would taste different vintages, older ones, younger ones, there would be something that's very distinctive.

And so, they said, okay, you're not allowed to put Musar in, first because people will realise what it is. And second, because people usually like them more than others and so we don't want them. I'm not bragging here, but this is the comment that I got. Anyway, so that's one story.

And another story I got from a Sommelier was when I taste a wine, a red wine that reminds me of Bordeaux, has the aromatics of the Rhône, but has the elegance of Burgundy, and I'm a little bit lost as to where to go, then I know it's Musar because it takes a little bit of everything. This is what I was mentioning earlier.

And so, that really came actually from a sommelier who gave me that comment. So yeah, our wines are very unique and that's what makes them, I guess, appealing to people. And it's that signature that is very unique to Musar.

Now the bigger question, sure you're gonna ask me that question, so I'm asking myself already, what is the signature of Musar? And I would say it's difficult to describe because you really need to taste it. I think you have this ability to jump out of the glass that comes through probably our wine making methodology or lack of methodology or the fact that basically we just tend to the wines rather than make them, but it gives a little bit of VA to our wines.

But that's, I think for me, that gives the ability of the wines to jump out of the glass and to actually be alive. And my point of view on that is that if you have no VA at all, then you have something that's flat. Flat means no smell or very little, something that's basically not alive.

The other characteristic maybe of Musar is this ability maybe to change all the time. It's in the glass in particular, obviously in the bottle as well as ageing, but also in the glass. And so, this life that you have in our wines, as they change over time. And then, how do you describe the wines? I can't describe our wines, honestly. I taste them. I don't think...

**Janina Doyle 00:22:28** I can.

**Marc Hochar 00:22:29** Yeah, it's probably better if you do than I do because I probably won't be able to. I just live them. I don't know how to describe them, but I just experience them. That is how I approach this.

**Janina Doyle 00:22:41** You are your father's son. That's it. Just live and breathe the wine rather than going so much into the description of it. That's actually really beautiful. For anyone, you mentioned this VA, this volatile acidity. And for certain people, it is seen as a fault. But as you said, for you, you believe it adds character. And it does. It gives a slight maybe a funkiness, but this savoury, earthy, complex aroma and flavour.

And every Musar, even if I'm like, oh, this is different. It does jump out of glass. So, for anyone wanting to know what VA is. I'm smelling it. I've got the Chateau de Musar 2016. And I will describe it a little bit in a second, but along with all of the fruit and all of the spice and brightness and warmth, this is what I get in a bowl of Musar. But there's this slight touch of maybe, like, a touch of varnished wood in there, but it complements.

It really is different. But for anyone to listen and go, why would you have varnished wood flavour in your wine? Then I invite you to try it and see for yourself what you think. Right? So, what I love, I

said about the fruits and the spice and it really is, it's a Mediterranean wine like you said, mix of Bordeaux, Rhône and Burgundy, totally! Because on the palate, even though it's quite full bodied, it's still actually really fresh and has lightness and brightness. It's not cloying, it's not oily, glycerol, weighty, heavy on the tongue.

It's really about just very kind of lean vibrant fruits and the touch of maybe cedar. And these are really, really, really long aged wines, aren't they? How long has a Chateau Musar aged before... You don't release them, at least for seven years, right?

**Marc Hochar 00:24:49** It used to be seven years. Now it's six, yeah, because we released two years in parallel, because we didn't have stock.

**Janina Doyle 00:24:55** I was just going to say, no, yeah, you're too much in demand. Everyone wants the wine stuff.

**Marc Hochar 00:25:00** No. Yeah, that's not the reason actually. It's just that we were hit in 2015 by a heatwave, so global warming's impact. And so our production of 15 vintage was very, very small. So, we had to release two vintages at the same time. Otherwise, there would just not be enough wine for the market that year. And so, we released 15 and 16. So, now this is why we're at six years after release rather than seven years as we used to be in the past.

**Janina Doyle 00:25:29** Okay. And how much in oak before, because you obviously lie it down in a bottle for so many years, but how long in oak?

**Marc Hochar 00:25:39** Yeah. So, let's just go through the process. So, we harvest, we pick, we ferment and cement vats. We use cement rather than stainless steel for our vats because we feel that cement gives more complexity to the wines. And because we bottle so late, we feel that stainless steel has more of an impact on taste than cement.

So, it's one year in cement. Then after the year in cement, we go through barrels. At this stage, we are still plot by plot, varietal by varietal. So, we haven't blended anything yet. And so, we do one year cement, one year in wood. Mostly old wood.

And then, eventually, we do the blend at the end of year two. And this is when really, I guess, the signature comes in. This is the magic or the touch of the winemaker, the family and the taste. And this is where my father really put on and gave the identity of the wines to Musar. And so, we've been continuing this.

My brother, our winemaker, Tarek. Gaston oversees the winemaking program. Tarek does all the day to day and obviously makes the wines as well. And then, we taste together to do the blend. That's at the end of year two.

Hopefully we agree quickly. If we don't agree, we argue, we argue, we argue until we agree. But that's normal. I guess that's part of, I guess having a business not run by one person.

**Janina Doyle 00:26:57** Wine and war, no matter what.

**Marc Hochar 00:26:58** Yeah, no, it's not war. It's not war. I wouldn't call it war. Just a debate. Let's call it a debate.



**Janina Doyle 00:27:06** Family love.

**Marc Hochar 00:28:07** Yes, exactly. And then after the blend, we go back into cement vats for one year, and then we bottle at the end of year three, and then it stays three years in our cellars in a bottle. So, we release it after that year six. This is the process. This is the current release. So, the current release would be at year six. But then what we do is we don't release everything in year one. We always keep some stocks.

And so, we have a library of vintages going back to the 50s that we still sell. Not super actively, because obviously as we get into very old bottles, we have less and less, but when we met at Prowein a few weeks ago, we had opened a few bottles. I don't know which one you got to taste of the older vintages because we open different ones every year.

**Janina Doyle 00:27:53** We will discuss that when I open up the white wine. So everyone listening, if you want to know what vintage I was drinking, wait till part two. But yes, very old vintages. Yes, they're insane. They are insane.

Yeah. So, I tasted interestingly as well in terms of this Chateau Musar, the 2018, and it was really vibrant, really, really fruit driven at that point. And I'm actually, I don't know whether the vintage is different, but the 16 has got this really nice subtlety.

Now I'm just surprised by the two years difference of all much more of the kind of spiciness. And what's gorgeous about this wine is this orange peel note. I tend to always get red and black fruits with all of your Chateau Musar wines.

I'm smelling it now and I'm getting blackcurrant and I'm kind of also getting this kind of even rosehip florals as well as some red cherries, but there's this orange nature. And then on the palate, it finishes with, like, you know, if you are making a cocktail and you set fire to that orange peel, so it's smoked.

Do you know? And then they put it in, I don't know, I'm really bad with cocktails. Everyone, you know, it goes in a martini glass, but whatever. And they put that burnt orange peel into the wine. It finishes like that. It's savoury. It's elegant. But I love this kind of star anise and liquorice that mixes with this slightly smoky vibe and then orange. Yum. It's good. It's good. Approved. Approved. Eat Sleep Wine Repeat Approved.

**Marc Hochar 00:29:27** Thank you. Thank you, Janina. I think what you're touching on is very important because people focus on fruit in wine. My view is different. I find that fruit is probably the most simple expression of wine.

If you think of wine, and as you get into older vintages, and it depends also on the vines, the varietals, et cetera, you move away from fruit. And when you think of tasting wine, if I taste in a wine, let's say strawberries. Where does this take me? This takes me back to the last time I tasted strawberries, which might've been the visit at the local supermarket one week, two weeks, or three weeks ago.

If I taste, as you say, maybe a cocktail, maybe I taste wood, maybe I taste the jam that my grandmother used to do. Maybe I taste a forest floor. Maybe I taste a cupboard that I opened in an attic somewhere.

All of a sudden, if this wine has this ability to taste or smell of these things, then your memory takes you back, it connects with you as a wine, with you as a person, and it takes you back to the moment you experienced that smell or that aroma.

And therefore, you're not talking about just living back to the last visit of your supermarket to taste the strawberries, but maybe 10 years ago, 15 years ago, maybe a person, maybe a place, maybe a feeling that you had because you were experiencing something personally in terms of either emotions or whatever. And so, this is when the wine talks to you. And it talks to you if it has the ability to move away from pure fruit. If it's just pure fruit, the conversation is going to be very simple or basic.

And this is where I find that if you have the ability to have wines that age and that evolve away from pure fruit to these all the other complex things that wine can bring – And by the way, grape juice is the only wine that creates an alcohol that has this ability to cover so many different flavours, why would you limit wine to fruit? It's the most reductive concept possible, just to talk about fruit. So, that's why I don't talk about fruit. I talk about everything else and emotions and life and not fruit.

**Janina Doyle 00:31:40** Good. I like it. Well, now, I also just want to touch on the fact that some people will be very happy to know all the grapes as well are organically farmed. These are organic wines, aren't they? Wild yeast, very low sulphur. This is your whole kind of, there's a philosophy with viticulture.

**Marc Hochar 00:31:57** Yeah. So, we have organic vineyards. We don't have an organic wine certification. We have organic vineyard certification, but we don't certify the wines as organic for several reasons linked more to confidentiality than anything else, to be honest.

But also we realised that even if you have organic wines, understood that the whole chain of logistics, even to ship the wines, has to be considered organic. So, you need an organic approved warehouse. And getting all of this out of Lebanon, shipped everywhere doesn't really work. So, I think it would add just another layer of complexity that we cannot handle out of Lebanon. We just have organic vineyards.

**Janina Doyle 00:32:41** That's fine. I'm very happy with organic grapes. No, actually, I think for people listening, they might be like, where are these grapes growing? Where the hell is Bekaa Valley? It's actually a pretty good climate to grow grapes. It's decent enough and easy enough to be organic, right? Can you talk about the warmth, the sunshine, the Mediterranean vibes, please? Take me on holiday with my mind.

**Marc Hochar 00:33:05** Okay. The land of milk and honey. This is how the Bible describes it. I think it's the Bible that described Lebanon. So not because there's a lot of milk or because it's a lot of honey. I think there are more references or allegories.

Milk, I think, refers to the motherland that gives. So, we're talking about a very rich agricultural land. And so, this is what I think milk stands for. And honey is obviously not honey, but it's more the sweetness. So, it's the sweetness of life and just enjoying life because, you know, sweet is what people tend to enjoy and I think this is what honey refers to.

So, if you look at the land, we're talking about a very small country, which is 120 miles long along the coastline and 30 miles wide on average. And you have two chains of mountains running north to south. One, the border with Syria, Mount Anti-Lebanon and one in the middle of the country, north to south, Mount Lebanon. And these mountains go up to 3000 metres. So, 10,000 feet.

And between these two mountains, you have the Bekaa Valley, which is at 3,000 feet of altitude. So, when you're in the Bekaa Valley, which is the bread basket of Lebanon, where all the vegetables and fruits, most of them are grown, there's also some on the mountain side. You have two mountains on both sides.

One to the east that goes up from 3,000 feet your altitude to almost 10,000 feet. And that protects you from the desert in Syria. And then you have another chain of mountains to the west, also at the same altitude, so going up 6,000 feet on your western side, that protects you from the sea and from the humidity. So, you end up with a microclimate that's very unique, I think.

If you think of Lebanon and you draw a line westwards, you get to Morocco. So, you're much more south than all of the European countries and it's more south than Spain, than Sicily, than Italy. But what saves us in terms of our terroir...

**Janina Doyle 00:35:07** It's the altitude, right?

**Marc Hochar 00:35:08** It's the altitude, yes. It's the attitude and the altitude. I think both of them actually say that.

**Janina Doyle 00:35:14** The altitude and the attitude. Please explain.

**Marc Hochar 00:35:18** The attitude towards just, well, it's an attitude in a positive way, in a sense that, trying to make the best of what we have and using the resources we have. We're blessed with this terroir and so we end up having, I say, almost organic vineyards by default.

Almost because it's not exactly that. And some other growers would probably grow differently compared to what we do, but we just don't irrigate. We have bush vines. We use a fairly wide grid of plantings so that there's enough water for each vine to survive on its own.

And so, if you have this approach to winemaking and to growing your vines, then yes, you will end up having hopefully vines that have this better ability to resist to the environment, to oxygenation, to ageing, to everything.

You just give them a better start with life in the vineyard and then just continue the same approach of what we call non-interventionism in the winemaking process in terms of natural yeasts, no additives, very little sulphur, just to be able to have the wines that can travel around the world. And that's it. We don't do anything else. We don't add anything in.

**Janina Doyle 00:36:37** Now you mentioned bush vines. Are these all bush vines planted in your vineyards because basically we're talking they're pretty old now and that was more of the thing you did in the past? Or actually are you continuing now new plantings to stick with bush vines?

**Marc Hochar 00:36:51** Everything we do is bush vines. We don't have any trellises. We don't irrigate. So, we really rely on the canopy to protect the vines from the sun. Not the vines, the grapes from the sun. And that comes as a bush vine.

If you have trellises, you will probably have a bit more exposure, which we don't need. We have enough sun in Lebanon to not need extra exposure. The alternative would be to do trellises and to irrigate, but then you would dilute your taste. I mean, we have very low yields in all of our wines. We're talking 25 hectolitres per hectare, which is roughly, let's say.

**Janina Doyle 00:37:31** Oh, but that is very low. Yes. Like just, yeah, whatever that translates into, that's low.

**Marc Hochar 00:37:35** It's low. It's roughly 40% or maybe a third of a normal production that you would see in other places.

**Janina Doyle 00:37:40** 60 hectolitres per hectare, 70 hectolitres per hectare are often in premium regions like you need to be this yield or lower. So, to be at 20.

**Marc Hochar 00:37:53** Okay. Yeah, we're very, very low. And what people don't maybe know or appreciate is that these yields are the same for our Chateau Musar label, which is our premium label. Also for our Hochar Père et Fils, which is our second label of the reds, and also for the entry level, the Jeune. Musar Jeune Red is also with the same yields.

So, it's not that our entry level wines have higher yields, therefore lower quality juice. It's the same quality of the juice. It's just a different blend and a different winemaking process in terms of bottling earlier, wood, no wood, et cetera.

But the quality of the juice is the same. And so the concentration, I would say, the concentration, but the intensity of the flavours that we get is there because of the low yields and it's across all of our range from premium to entry-level.

**Janina Doyle 00:38:44** Amazing. I suppose, like you said, the roots are obviously having to go much further down to try and find that water because it doesn't rain that much. I mean, am I asking you a number that you're going to know, millimetres per year of how much rain you actually get?

**Marc Hochar 00:38:58** It's a very good question, Janina. No, I don't.

**Janina Doyle 00:39:02** And it's one that deserves an answer.

**Marc Hochar 00:39:04** No, I honestly, I don't know. I don't know the number, but what I can tell you is that we have snow in the winter.

**Janina Doyle 00:39:11** Okay. Right. Yes. That helps.

**Marc Hochar 00:39:13** Yeah. That helps because it means that the water gradually goes into the aquifers. It's a clay and limestone base in terms of soil. And then we have actually a lot of rain and when it pours, it pours, but then it's really seasonal.

And then it stops usually from April until October, which is great because it means that we have less humidity in the summer, so less pests, less problems in terms of dealing with the vines. So, this is, again, a perfect terroir and weather for growing vines.

**Janina Doyle 00:39:49** Well, I'm just having a look because our friend Google is around and apparently the Northern section has an average annual rainfall of 230 millimetres, which is almost nothing as opposed to apparently the central area, it depends on exactly what part you are, of about 600 millimetres. So, what part are you? Are you more central?

**Marc Hochar 00:40:08** Yes, we are more central.

**Janina Doyle 00:40:10** Or are you more north?

**Marc Hochar 00:40:11** No, we are more central.

**Janina Doyle 00:40:12** You have a little bit more rain.

**Marc Hochar 00:40:14** Yeah, no, we do. Again, we have snow also, but we are basically at the level of Beirut. You go east, you go up the mountain, and then you go down into the Bekaa Valley. So, we're really in the centre of the country between the north and the south of Lebanon.

And as you go more north, the mountains are high and then they start to really drop. And same thing for the South. So, generally speaking, the higher altitude is, let's say, yes, in the middle of the country as well, in terms of these two mountain ranges. Well, it's not exactly correct, but this is closer to reality. That's it.

**Janina Doyle 00:40:55** It will do. Now, you mentioned your second wine and your second wine is the Hochar Pere Et Fils. It's all the French way. So, Fils, which is like family or..?

**Marc Hochar 00:41:11** No, Pere means father and Fils means son.

**Janina Doyle 00:41:15** Right, there we go. I knew it had something to do with that. Okay, right. So, I have a bottle of this. This is a 2020. And actually just looking at the two, the Chateau Musar 2016 is lighter in the glass. Makes sense. It's had some more time to actually start ageing. This is a little bit denser looking in the glass, but this is made from different varieties, isn't it?

**Marc Hochar 00:41:29** Yes. Yes. The base is the same.

**Janina Doyle 00:41:41** Okay. So, what have you chosen to put in this wine?

**Marc Hochar 00:41:44** All of our wines are blends of typically three varietals, but they're not always the same varietals and I'm talking about the reds here. So, we always use Cabernet Sauvignon. That's the structure. That's the backbone of the wine.

But in the younger wines, that backbone tends to be a smaller percentage. 10 to 15%. But that's the very masculine side of our wines and the structure. This is compensated by another varietal that always exists in our wines called Cinsault. And the Cinsault is the more feminine, elegant, subtle, lighter coloured, lighter structured wine component. That's the other side, I guess, of the spectrum. And then in the middle, we add a third variety that changes depending on the wine.

So, for the Chateau Musar, our top label, it was Carignan that we added. In the Hochar Père et Fils, the third variety that we add is Grenache. And in 2020, we had a big, I mean, very good ripeness on the Grenache.

Grenache tends to be very gouleyant very warm, very hearty as a wine. It gives you really a mouthful – It's still very elegant, but it's just so easy to drink as a variety when it ripens well. And so, the Hochar Père et Fils 2020, for me, is like a beautiful expression of what you can get with Grenache in that year in particular.

**Janina Doyle 00:43:06** Well, it's interesting because Grenache is a much more kind of full-bodied grape variety. One, this is a younger wine, but two, you are using this kind of rounder style of grapes. And for me, it's really plush in the palate. And I love that you get a lot for me without focusing too much on the fruits, this kind of real raspberry nature, but then like tea leaves and espresso and a bit of tobacco nature.

So, whereas the other one was a little bit spicier and more for me, I actually just felt like I was being transported to the Mediterranean with all this kind of zesty, vibrant brightness. This is a little bit rounder and this is a little bit darker. Kind of the choccy, the chocolate, the mocha, the espresso, that sort of thing. It's fabulous. This is presumably a less oak as well, because I don't get so much of the cedar as much. Little earthiness, but not too much.

**Marc Hochar 00:44:03** This is three months in wood. And it's bottled actually at year two, whereas the Chateau is bottled at year three. And so, when you bottle a little bit earlier, you have wines that are ready to drink earlier, also. This is what we've seen in our wines.

**Janina Doyle 00:44:18** But it is beautiful. There's still a consistency of fruit and spice and earth across the two. And for anyone who wants to try the two, I have written down. So, the flagship Chateau Musar is around £40, £45, depending on where you can find it.

Fenwicks is doing it for £42. There's Mumbles Fine Wine. Broadway Wine. To be fair, when you Google, you can see loads of places. And then the second, the Hochar Père et Fils 2020 is around 22, 25 pounds from Field & Fawcett, Secret Bottle Shop, York Wines. However, caveat. At the moment, Marc, most people are selling 2019, not 2020. We're obviously just changing across, aren't we?

**Marc Hochar 00:45:08** Exactly. So, this is actually the wines that I sent you and the wines that you tasted at Prowein were the new vintages. And so, 2020 is now available, but obviously some shops will have the 19.

But to be honest, then the question is, which one is better? And here, you know our wines, the reds, when they get older, as they get older, they just become more complex. They open up, they settle. The way I describe visually a wine is when it's young is it's not a bowl, it's a spiky bowl because the wines are still trying to show off things.

As they get older, they tend to have rounder shapes, more smoother shapes in terms of how you visualise it and also in terms of how they taste. So, 19 although it's a different vintage, it will start to have a bit of these rounder, smoother shapes and flavour profile compared to the 2020. That's how I can describe it.

**Janina Doyle 00:46:09** No. Perfect.

**Janina Doyle 00:46:12** Now make sure you join us back here next week as we continue with part two and we start discussing the allure of aged wines, through that lens of experience as Marc recounts some of the oldest vintages he's ever tasted.

I will tell you one of the oldest vintages of Chateau Musar White that I've ever tasted and we'll be discussing the intricacies of how the wine evolves and changes and may I tell you Chateau Musar, its ability to age, is insane. We will be, of course, tasting a Chateau Musar White. And with that in mind, we will be delving into the ancient grape varieties Obadiah and Merwah.

But before I finish, as always, a wine quote for you all. And as Serge Hochar was just so much more than a winemaker and a driving force behind Lebanon's best known winery, this is from his very mouth.

“Wine is communication. We agree on one word to use, but sometimes the meaning of that word for each of us is different. This is how we can communicate more clearly through wine.”

Well, I'm raising my glass to you all. If you're enjoying this episode, don't forget to like, share, subscribe, leave a review, it all makes the podcast far more discoverable. You know what's happening next week. Sending you all love and light, more wine, less war and until next Monday, Wine Friends, cheers to you!