



CHATEAU HAUT-BRION

THE First Growth! Château Haut-Brion

The Château Haut-Brion Historical Challenge: 1521, the winning mention

In May 2013, Domaine Clarence Dillon launched a challenge: to discover a written mention of Haut-Brion wine prior to that of 1660, contained in the cellar book of King Charles II of England, the oldest known to date. This Historical Challenge was met!

Two mentions emerged from the past, or more specifically from the beginning of the 16th century. The earliest mention discovered now dates back to 1521, in other words 139 years earlier!

Thanks to the verified texts submitted by the participants in the Challenge, we have discovered two new mentions dating from 1521 and 1526: The first one regarding four pipes of a wine “from the vineyard (...) from the place known as Aubrion”, and the other referring to two barrels “of claret or red wine from the Haulbrion vineyard in Graves”.

Let us briefly recap the situation in the region at the time...

Aquitaine had no longer been a duchy of the Crown of England since 1453. Under French rule, it had just managed to heal the wounds left by the interminable conflict, particularly in the countryside surrounding Bordeaux. Times had changed. The great land-owning nobility were gradually seeing their rights being challenged by a new class of men: the bourgeois of Bordeaux, initially important merchants and then owners of vast landed estates, who would become part of the nobility by acquiring parliamentary offices that bestowed a title on them.

In Bordeaux, the most symbolic figure of this incredible social upward mobility, Jean de Pontac, a future civil and criminal clerk of court at the Parliament of Bordeaux, was 33 years old in 1521. In four years' time, he would marry the mayor of Libourne's daughter. In her dowry, she would bring him several vines that would serve as the initial land base for his great vineyard of Haut-Brion, which he would spend almost 50 years creating, patiently connecting the parcels of land together. In May 1533, at the age of 45, Jean de Pontac acquired the noble estate or seigniory of Haut-Brion.

The oldest text is **a notarial instrument dated 21 January 1521¹**, drafted in French – which had replaced Gascon for the past dozen years – by Maître Hamelin Gemisson. It is the sale of a perpetual annuity in wine.

¹ Archives Départementales de la Gironde – 3^E 6533 – January 24th, 1521

Today this type of contract would correspond to a loan whose capital and interest would be reimbursed annually in kind in the form of wine. A loan automatically passed on to the lender and borrower's heirs, without any possibility of repurchase at that time... It was a real form of usury... The name of the seller of the annuity (the borrower...) is Jean de Monque. A squire, he is the lord of the locality of Monque. The buyer (the lender) is Guilhem de Mailhois, bourgeois, merchant and sergeant of Bordeaux. The sale of the annuity is agreed for a sum of 400 Bordeaux francs (a sum that would be equivalent to a current purchasing power of over approximately €50,000).

In repayment of this loan, Jean de Monque undertakes to deliver, each year:

« quatre pipes de vin, seront du cru des vignes appartenant audit de Monque du lieu appelé Aubrion, appartenant audit vendeur. Lesquelles sont sises derrière son bourdieu assis audit lieu appelé du Brion, en la paroisse Saint-Martin de Pessac, ensemble des vignes de Pins Bouquet, de la Gravette et de Cantegrit, le tout appartenant audit seigneur de Monque, assis en Graves de Bordeaux et si cas était que ne vint aucuns fruits de raisins qui fussent pour satisfaire lesdites quatre pipes de vin de rente, bon, pur et net et marchand, le dit vendeur sera tenu lui en bailler d'autres aussi bon provenu du cru desdites vignes dessus déclarées ».

[“four pipes of wine, will be from the vineyard (cru) belonging to the said de Monque from the place known as Aubrion, belonging to the said seller. The said vines being found behind his smallholding established in the said place known as Le Brion, in the parish of Saint-Martin de Pessac, all of the vines of Pins Bouquet, la Gravette and Cantegrit, all belonging to the said lord of Monque, domiciled in Graves in Bordeaux, and if there are no grapes to fill the said four pipes of wine as an annuity – good, pure and clean and sellable, the said seller will be obliged to provide him with others that are just as good from the vineyard of the said abovementioned vines”.]

It is also interesting to read that these four pipes (equivalent to eight barrique casks or 1,800 l) were to be transported *« au lieu, maison et bourdieu dudit de Mailhois, assis au lieu appelé Au Bryon, en la paroisse Saint-Martin de Pessac »* [“to the place, house and smallholding of the said de Mailhois, domiciled in the place known as Au Bryon, in the parish of Saint-Martin de Pessac”].

As early as 1521, this text highlights the beginnings of an evolution spanning over three centuries that would take Haut-Brion to the rank of “First Growth” in the Gironde Wine Classification in 1855. This makes our Haut-Brion brand **the First Growth brand associated the longest with this specific and prestigious term, from the Renaissance onwards.**

The fact that Guilhem de Mailhois insisted upon “wine from the vineyard of Aubrion” as a priority over wine from adjacent vines, by notarial contract, is written proof that he was aware that this wine had a quality and taste that were particularly “good”!

We are therefore able, without any doubt, to say that Haut-Brion, a **“Growth” wine as early as 1521, is a Renaissance wine**, which already stood apart from “simple” claret wine from the Middle Ages, the requirements for which in terms of provenance were limited to a wine-growing region “les Graves” or to vines located, without any great precision, in a parish.

Through the sale of his annuity in wine, we can surmise that the noble squire Jean de Monque's financial situation was most likely not the most comfortable in 1521. This seems to be confirmed by the sale, certified in 1531, of his smallholding (wine-making building) to Jean de Pontac... For the latter, this purchase would be, following the dowry of his wife Jeanne de Bellon, the second major step in his creation of the current vineyard of Château Haut-Brion.

The second instrument submitted in our Challenge is dated **1st September 1526²**. It was therefore drafted just over five years after the first, one year after Jean de Pontac's wedding. It is a sale of wine, made before Maître Peyron, a royal notary in Bordeaux. The instrument is rather succinct, but its historical significance – following directly on from the first – is considerable. A Bordeaux woman, Esclarmonde de Lagarde, is selling to two people named Pierre Gassies and Pierre Mulle – their profession is not mentioned, but we suppose that they were merchants – a quantity of two barrels of wine, equivalent to eight barrique casks: *“two barrels of claret or red wine from the vineyard of Haulbrion in Graves”*.

On this date (1st September), it therefore represents a sale on the vine. The year's grape harvest has not yet been gathered. The quality of the harvest is not yet certain... If it is good, the wine will naturally be concentrated, with a red colour... if it is very average, the colour will be dark pink (claret)... hence the possibility accepted in the contract.

At this time, it was still out of the question to lengthen the fermentation and maceration times. In addition, the wine purchased, paid for on the day of the contract, was to be delivered before the date of Michaelmas, in other words 29 September!

The free run wine, having been fermented and macerated in vats for a period of between one and four days, was then run off and immediately put into barrels before being transported to the impatient customer. The newer the wine, the better...

The most remarkable feature of this instrument lies in the fact that, in this business transaction made – as we would say today – between “professionals”, the name of the product sold has been simplified since the instrument from 1521: “wine from the vineyard of Haulbrion”!

The reference to the vines and their owner is no longer even present in the trade name... From 1526, therefore, the fusion between the name of the vineyard – or *terroir* – and that of the wine produced there is already virtually complete. We are very close to the designation “vino de Hobbriano” in King Charles II of England's cellar book in 1660.

This Château Haut-Brion Historical Challenge has therefore been extremely enriching for the history of this great vineyard and the wines of Bordeaux. We would like to thank and congratulate all those who researched and helped us to go back even further in time to discover evidence regarding the birth and development of what might be the oldest luxury brand in the world: Haut-Brion.

² *Archives Départementales de la Gironde – 3^E 9802 – September 1st, 1526*

Domaine Clarence Dillon

Created in 1935, the family-owned and managed company, Domaine Clarence Dillon, has the unique privilege of producing five rare and exceptional estate wines: two red wines and two white wines from First Growth, Château Haut-Brion and its sibling Château La Mission Haut-Brion. Since the 2011 vintage, the company is also proud to represent one of the finest wines from Saint Émilion: Château Quintus.

In 2005, the Company created the Bordeaux Fine Wine Merchant, Clarence Dillon Wines, and launched Clarendelle, “Inspired by Haut-Brion”, Bordeaux’s first super premium luxury brand wine, thus testifying to the far-sighted spirit that has characterized Domaine Clarence Dillon from the onset.

As wardens of three mythical Estates, steeped in close to two millennia of history, the family company strives to have this deep heritage reflected in all of the wines produced under its name. Domaine Clarence Dillon combines tradition with innovation in order to extract the quintessence of an exceptional terroir and produce comprehensive families of authentic wines that are defined by their complexity and elegance.

*For more information, please contact Sabrina Ubinana-Fournier:
phone: +33 (0)1 40 73 87 23 / mail: s.ubinana@domaineclarencedillon.com*

