



How does a 1918 Lafite hold up in 2017? We found out in a wine tasting at UH

By Dale Robertson, Houston Chronicle | November 20, 2017 | Updated: November 20, 2017 4:07pm



Photo: Gary Fountain, For The Chronicle



IMAGE 1 OF 17

Spec's owner John Rydman, left, and Master Sommelier David Keck prepare for the tasting.

Fred Parks was an old-school Houstonian whose living large included drinking well. When word spread that he had pulled into the Spec's Midtown parking lot in his Bentley, the floor staff went on red alert. Attention would be paid. The bon viveur plaintiff's attorney/entrepreneur purchased the Marquis de Laguiche Le Montrachet by the case and Remy-Martin Louis XI by the gallon. Parks collected myriad uber-fancy wines, and his only regret when he passed away in 2001 might have been that he failed to quaff every last drop before

he left us.

But let it be said that he embodied the notion that wine is a health food. He made it to 95.

Sadly, I never had the pleasure of sharing a bottle with Parks, but I'm eternally grateful to him. So are the others who recently had the privilege of tasting his legacy to the University of Houston in the Spec's Wine Lab at the Conrad N. Hilton School of Hotel and Restaurant Management. The timing couldn't have been better - or worse, depending on how you look at it.

An opportunity to sample a cross-section of Bordeaux heavyweights from five different decades of the 20th century conflicted with Game 7 of the World Series. I've ultimately concluded that this historic convergence couldn't have been more fitting - only a couple of hours before the Astros secured their first championship in 56 seasons, I had raised a glass of 1918 Château Lafite-Rothschild to their good fortune.

Yep, 1918.

The only thing that could have made the evening more imperfectly perfect would have been seeing that the rare liquid in the ancient bottle had turned Astros orange, which wouldn't have been particularly unusual for a nearly century-old claret, no matter how carefully it had been stored. But, dang it, the juice was full-on yellow. It didn't taste all that bad, though. A hint of the once-ripe cabernet flavors still lingered.

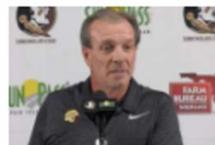
Parks' role in the festivities? He had bequeathed his carefully culled wine collection, which included the Lafite, to the Hilton School. His foundation then paid for the construction of the Fred Parks Wine Cellar, which professor Chris Taylor has watched over since its completion in 2013. Although most of the original 1,000-plus donated bottles have been auctioned off through the years to pay for scholarships and school programs or served at fundraising dinners, about 150 remain. Taylor, the director of UH's beverage-management program, decided to organize a one-off tasting.

"From what I know of him," Taylor said, "this is exactly what he'd want us to do with these wines. It was a great way to get people in the industry familiar with what we're doing in the program and to see the quality of our students. This was a good start."

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Several of Taylor's current and former graduate students, charged with keeping the cellar's 2,000 bottles well organized, assisted with the logistics. Master Sommeliers David Keck and Jack Mason along with Mason's Pappas Bros. Steakhouse colleague, Steven McDonald, and Public Services Wine & Whisky Bar's Justin Vann were asked to pop the corks, several of which were in a fragile state. The pros came through swimmingly.

Spec's owner John Rydman, whose largesse had funded the state-of-the-art tasting workspace we occupied, attended, as did Jim McClellan, the president of the Parks Foundation. The Astros and the Dodgers were on the TV above us, albeit with the volume muted. It helped that the good guys had jumped out to an early 5-0 lead, making concentrating on the priceless juice easier.

"My conclusion is that it was a wonderfully educational tasting," Taylor said, and he was right.

Added Devin Tinney, who gave up a paid wine gig to enter Taylor's grad program: "I was honored to have been invited to attend what was quite possibly the best wine tasting in the world on Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2017." (As well as the best day ever to be an Astros fan.)

The '18 Lafite was served opposite a '28 Lafite, a vintage that upon release was expected to be extremely long-lived. It had indeed survived the ravages of time remarkably well. Although he lived high above Kirby in the Huntington tower, Parks' "cellar" temperature was always precisely regulated.

Next up were two 1959s, the Left Bank superstar from Mouton-Rothschild, once described by British wine critic Michael Broadbent as "magnificence piled on magnificence," and the Right Bank Pétrus, one of the most memorable show-stealers and right there with a label-less bottle that Rydman concluded was a 1953 Romanée-Conti La Tache, the lone Burgundy in the bunch.

Two 1966 First Growths followed, a Margaux and a Latour. The former had fallen off the cliff, but the latter was lovely, and it can be purchased online today for \$700, a relative bargain. Before we finished on a celestially sweet note with a still-young 1953 d'Yquem, the reference-standard Sauternes, we tasted four of the five 1982 First Growths: the Lafite, the Latour, the Margaux and the Haut-Brion. Robert Parker, of course, made that vintage with his rave reviews and the vintage also made Parker, then an obscure Maryland lawyer with a little newsletter who evolved into, for better or worse, the most powerful wine critic of our time.

I was especially thrilled to see the Margaux in the heavyweight lineup. Personal history: I'd heard about this guy Parker, who had given it a 100-point score, signifying perfection in a bottle, in the fall of 1985, and I happened upon a full rack of bottles at Spec's. Swallowing hard, I bought three at \$58.50 apiece - about five times my price limit in those days - and then, zut alors!, drank two of them within six weeks. At least I kept the third for another 14 years, consuming it about the same time as Spec's was restocking. By then, Spec's had raised the tariff to \$700-plus.



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Today the Margaux can be found online for less than \$600. Parker, it seems, had dropped the score to 97 when he retasted the wine about a year ago. If his rating keeps dropping, maybe I'll be able to own another bottle in my lifetime. The Latour and the Mouton, however, have retained their original 100-point halos and range from about \$800 to well over \$1,000 in various auction lots around the world.

Hey, supply and demand. And, yes, if the price isn't a deal-breaker, I'd recommend them with both thumbs up. Remember, however, no one can guarantee the condition of these wines or even if the bottle contains the original wine. That's a story for another day. In short, buyer beware.



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