

# HAUT CLASS

A Hong Kong family has been the proud owner of Chateau Haut-Brisson in St Emilion, France for 15 years, and recently purchased a further two promising plots. *Karen Ting* talks wine cultivation and culture with energetic young couple Elaine Kwok and Adrian Cheong.



Elaine and Adrian Cheong on a recent visit to their winery





**E**laine Kwok is probably one of the youngest people ever to become a vineyard proprietor. Her father, Peter Kwok, bought Chateau Haut-Brisson in St Emilion, France, in her name back in 1997 when she was only 16. Kwok senior, whose business interests span oil, natural resources and property development in China, began his career as a banker and was one of the founding partners of Newbridge Capital.

"One of the reasons he bought the property was he wanted to give us a reason to learn French," says the daughter. "We [Kwok has two younger siblings] have been going to France very regularly since then, and now all three of us speak French. We kept up with our school work but would go and tend the vines during holidays," adds the 31-year-old Harvard and Stanford graduate.

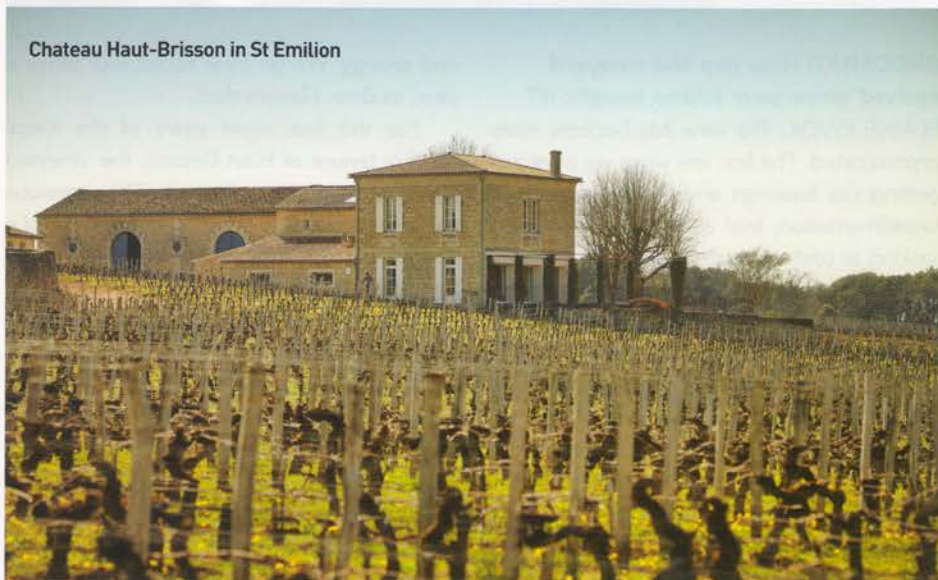
"The goal was always to make a good product – to make a good wine. We own it, but we don't manage it; we leave that to the French. As my father always says, as a

Chinese I'm deeply proud of my own culture and there are not many places where you feel the culture is as rich and as fascinating as your own, but France is one. We feel very lucky to own properties there and to be part of this tradition."

What began as Elaine Kwok's fascination with French culture has also become a labour of love for her husband, Adrian Cheong. The 32-year-old Oxbridge graduate and cardiologist is so passionate about wine that he keeps a blog documenting all he drinks. Kwok credits Cheong as the driving force behind their wine business: "Because my husband loves wine so much, we got involved even more."

The young couple enjoys playing with eight-month-old daughter Clementine in between juggling demanding careers – Cheong at the Prince of Wales Hospital, while Kwok has multiple roles at auction house Christie's. She is business manager of the jewellery department, course director for education programmes and works in the president's office.

Chateau Haut-Brisson in St Emilion







Elaine Kwok : "Oak barrels only give out more flavours if the wine can take it."

**BACCARAT: How has the vineyard evolved since your father bought it?**

ELAINE KWOK: The wine has become more sophisticated. The first few years we were just getting our bearings and there was a lot of experimentation, trial and error. We weren't looking at cost so much. For a while we were using 100 per cent oak barrels for everything. After a while, you realise oak barrels only give out more flavours if the wine can take it. Our second wine, Haut-Brisson La Grave, is much simpler so we don't need the oak.

ADRIAN CHEONG: We are not making our living from this; we are doing it for fun. The vineyard was losing money for a long time. We have put it back on track, which has taken a lot of our time; it is an investment of love

and energy. We go over about four times a year, as does Elaine's dad.

For the first eight years of the Kwok family's tenure of Haut-Brisson, the vineyard was pretty much unknown. The previous owners had been running it to the ground – like a lot of these vineyards, they were living hand to mouth, selling the wine and using the cash to make the next vintage. That was the problem. So when Peter took over, he made a lot of changes.

**What are some of the key recent milestones?**

KWOK: All those years of investment have been really rewarding. It wasn't as if we had to put a huge amount of capital into it, but when we

finally started to break even around 2009-2010, we made back all the money we put in within two years. That was really great. You realise how much of it is a brand-building exercise, and that's still something we are working hard on.

CHEONG: Since 2010, our wines have been certified organic, which isn't a simple thing to do. You have to follow organic principles for a number of years and be inspected several times before you can be certified organic. It meant a lot of work for our vineyard workers; like in spring you are not allowed to use pesticides so you have to do everything by hand. That's a lot of manpower and you have to sustain it. If you have a difficult year, the question is: do you spray herbicides and pesticides and lose those three years of work getting the organic certification, or do you persist and lose your whole crop?

**What do you find most challenging?**

KWOK: Hiring the right talent. We are absentee vineyard owners; we aren't trained winemakers ourselves, so it's about having the right team. What you need are great farmers, people who can tend the vines, who can cultivate them and get you the best yield. You need a good winemaker, who knows how to blend and give you the best final product. You need a good salesperson because if you have got a great wine and nobody knows about it and it's not being sold it's pretty pointless. And you need a good accountant. To find the right group that can work together and who are happy to stay with is very challenging.





CHEONG: To new workers who join our team we are known as the chateau where the owners come and host dinners. We cook for our workers every time we go there.

**How do you view the wine-drinking culture in China?**

KWOK: As with any market when there is a fad, everyone goes for the first growth and that's why the prices are going way up, because these are the only wines people know. But I see that China is slowly getting to know about wine, and it's just about the first growth any more. Young people are becoming more educated and wanting to learn more about wine, and drinking is part of their life when they go out at weekends. So I see wine as becoming more a commonplace product in China.

CHEONG: At the moment the Chinese market is divided into three sectors: you have the first growth, the very low-price bottles, and this huge middle market. More people are earning a decent middle-class income, so it's a wide open territory. People will look for a brand that's consistent and good. I believe Haut-Brisson is priced exactly in this place, and it's a wine that's only going to improve. If you buy it now at an extremely good price, at a young age, you will have a wine that probably will appreciate in the future and mature into a lovely wine to drink.

**What are your future plans?**

KWOK: We just bought two new properties on the right bank of Bordeaux, Tour Saint-Christophe in St Emilion and La Patache in



Adrian Cheong: "We are doing this for fun"

Pomerol. There is a lot of work to be done with these. Another thing is to build up our brand. We want Haut-Brisson to be a really good name that people care about. We are always talking to more people and hoping to sell to them.

CHEONG: The style of wine we will produce at the three places will be different, because the land is different. Haut-Brisson is mainly based on vines that are grown on sandy and gravel soils, so that gives the wine its characteristics of concentration and roundness. Tour Saint-Christophe is actually located on a hill and a slope. The slope is quite steep, limestone covered by clay, which is terrain that can produce wine with a lot of finesse - very smooth and silky, it persists on your throat for a long time. With the new vineyards, our total production will exceed 200,000 bottles across several wines, whereas we have probably about 10,000 to 15,000 bottles to sell at most of our Haut-Brisson La Reserve label. 17

**PRIDE OF ST EMILION**  
CHATEAU HAUT-BRISSON  
CURRENTLY PRODUCES  
THREE LABELS:

**CHATEAU HAUT-BRISSON LA RESERVE**

"It's made from our oldest vines, which produce the most concentrated grape juice, and on some of our best plots of land," says Cheong. "We make in a style that's very powerful, very perfumed, fruity and concentrated. We make it with 100 per cent new oak and there is a great ageing potential, probably 20 years. We first started making in 2005, and every single year since we have gained 90 points or above from Robert Parker. Our proudest achievement was in 2009 when he gave us 95 points."

**CHATEAU HAUT-BRISSON**

"This is our classic cuvee. It's a very classic St Emilion. It has some ageing potential, needing some years to soften up in the bottle."

**CHATEAU HAUT-BRISSON LA GRAVE**

"Our second wine. It's an everyday wine, the kind of bottle you just grab for dinner."

*Chateau Haut-Brisson wines are available from Rare & Fine Wines, Shop L6, Bank of East Asia Building, 10 Des Voeux Road, Central, tel: 2522 9797.*