



**OFF-THE-CHARTS GUEST LIST**  
HBO presents four commercial-free, star-studded hours of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame concert. Page A17

# ARTS & LIFE

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RAISING A GLASS to a good cause is not hard when it's a Chateau Cheval Blanc, one of the great wines of the world. It's just the spitting that's tough



Torrance Raguenneau, who was married a grape's toss from Chateau Cheval Blanc, enjoys one of its wines at Montreal Passion Vin wine tasting. PHOTOS: PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE

## A taste for fundraising



**BILL BROWNSTEIN**  
on savouring the best

*"A group of 330 oenophiles were chomping at the bit ... for a vertical tasting of six Cheval Blancs"*

The name, in itself, might not connote ecstasy. Some even confuse it for a brand of Montreal brew by the same name. But to wine purists and even impurists, Cheval Blanc is almost mythical.

Considered by many to be among the finest wines in the world, this Bordeaux from the St. Emilion region has been immortalized in poem and song and even cinema. And so it was that a group of 330 oenophiles were chomping at the bit — had to find a horse cliché somewhere — for a vertical tasting of six Cheval Blancs, Friday evening at the annual Montreal Passion Vin fundraiser for the Maisonneuve-Hospital Foundation.

Seven vintners — four from France, one each from Italy, California and Canada's Niagara region — served up 50 of their most prized wines and Champagnes over two days of the liver-defying, ever-divine eighth Passion Vin. It wrapped last night with a banquet created by Toque's Normand Laprise and a greatest-hits collection of wines by the participating vintners. But it's safe to say that among the most anticipated tastings in the affair's history was for the Cheval Blanc, some bottles of which — if you could find them — can easily fetch more than \$2,000 each. Which is roughly what tippers pointed up to partake in the city's most prestigious wine-tasting.

Recession? Not here. Regardless,

the \$500,000 netted from this year's event, goes to the Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital Foundation for stem-cell research. In its eight years, more than \$3 million has been raised for the hospital.

And the closest some ever thought they would get to Cheval Blanc was through the flick *Sideways*, wherein flustered anti-hero Miles (Paul Giamatti) is swigging a 1961 vintage — merely one of the best years ever — out of a plastic cup while knocking back a burger at a fast-food joint. The irony of it all is that Miles had been on a debauched, pinstriped noir escapade through California bashing "E@#\*ing merlots" all along the way, and yet the Cheval Blancs are composed of an almost equal blend of merlot and cabernet franc.

There was no '61 to sample on Friday, but few could possibly complain about the six vintages selected by Pierre Lurton, the president of Chateau Cheval Blanc as well as the none-too-shabby Chateau D'Yquem. Included in the group were the much vaunted 1965 and 1998 vintages. "It's a tough job starting my day tasting Cheval Blancs and ending them with Chateau D'Yquems," Lurton quipped. "But someone has to do it."

True. Normally, the 5-S rule applies to tastings: swirl (the goblet), sniff, sip, swish and spit. On this night, the 4-S rule came into effect. And let's just say there really was no need for the spittoons on the tables for most.

Passion Vin patrons are provided with pamphlets in which they write remarks about the different wines and keep score. Most serious quaffers will note the wine's legs, nose and mouth. They will try to determine whether it's cassis or chocolate, pear or peach, or whatever essences, that call out to them.

"Orgasmic," a fellow behind me pronounced. He was talking wine, after tasting the first Cheval Blanc of ferociously.

"Magnificent legs," another patron uttered. He was talking women, specifically one of the sommeliers pouring.

I tried — sort of — to be serious. This



Pierre Lurton, with moderator Michel Phaneuf, brought along his famous Cheval Blanc wine to sample. "A good wine is a good wine," he says.

is what I could decipher from my scorecard:

1976 — "Sweet! A symphony is taking place in my mouth."

1966 — "Wow! My tongue is dancing. Could be a cha-cha or perhaps a tango."

1995 — "Full symphony orchestra with dancers! Definitely tango dancers. I'm in heaven!"

1968 — "Ya-hoooooo!"

2001 — "Lots of swell notes. Wish I could read my own."

2004 — "Wouldn't kick this one out of my wine rack!"

Hey, you want profound? Read Robert Parker or the Wine Spectator: You want honest: check out my ever-dilating pupils and my s@#\* ass grin.

There are those who are passionate about Cheval Blanc and then there is Torrance Raguenneau, co-owner with his dad Bernard of Thursdays and Hôtel de la Montagne. Raguenneau was recently married a grape's toss from Chateau Cheval Blanc in the St. Emilion region. He honeymooned there as well and lunched with Lurton. In fact, he has faithfully made the pilgrimage to the chateau for the last 10 years.

"To my mind, they make the finest

wine in the world," said Raguenneau, who rated the '95 and the '98 as the best of the best. "They have the most illustrious history of any winemaker. And they happen to be among the nicest people in the world, too."

Then again, most would be real nice if they could spend their days chugging Cheval Blanc.

"My neighbours tell me the only difference between them and us is our price," Lurton pointed out. "All I say is: 'yes.'"

A most diplomatic man. A most amusing man, too: "With global warming, things could change. Maybe England will produce the greatest Bordeaux!"

In the short term, however, Lurton claimed that his 2009 batch could be the best ever, surpassing even the 1893 vintage.

Nor is Lurton a snob. When I asked him about Miles's faux pas, drinking a '61 out of a plastic cup, he said he would do the same in those circumstances. "A good wine is a good wine," he replied. "What would you prefer: a great wine or a great glass?"

Yeah. We hear ya.

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