

# San Francisco Chronicle

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**Martine Saunier**

## Pairing wine with pleasure

By *Jon Bonné*, Chronicle Wine Editor

**B**urgundy's Henri Mayer and Domaine Leroy. The Rhone's Domaine du Pegau. Names to make a French wine lover drool.

Thank Martine Saunier for putting them on your table -- or perhaps the table of your dreams, since these wines are as scarce as they are stellar. A mere 75 cases of Mayer's Cros Parantoux made its way to these shores. Individual bottles from Leroy's lone barrel of Musigny start around \$1,100. And after Pegau's Laurence Feraud received perfect scores for her Cuvee da Capo, the cutthroat demand was such that she stopped making the wine.

A Paris native, Saunier came to California in 1964 and settled in Mill Valley. After meeting Napa wine pioneer Andre Tchelistcheff, who told her the only good Pinot Noir was back in Burgundy, Saunier began fondly recalling the wines of her homeland. In 1969, she began importing French wine, and quickly gained a following across California for her exquisite selections. A decade later, with prodding from Jean Bertranou of L'Ermitage, one of Los Angeles' top chefs, she launched Martine's Wines, the first woman to found a U.S. wine importing company. When one of her retail clients sent samples to an enterprising wine critic named Robert M. Parker Jr., word spread nationwide.

Nearly 30 years later, she manages a portfolio from her Novato warehouse that encompasses the best of Burgundy and the Rhone, along with such esteemed properties as Diebolt-Vallois in Champagne and quirky cult wineries like Chateau Gilette, the Sauternes producer that ages its sweet wines at least 20 years before release.

**Q: So what was life like before Robert Parker came along?**

**A:** I didn't sell retail in those days. I started with restaurants, because I thought if I want to establish a reputation and create a consumer, they have to try the wine in a restaurant and then they ask where they can buy it. In those days, the California wineries I knew, they were all going retail, they never had a wine on the wine list. So then the wine would sit on the shelf because nobody knew about it and they never had a write-up. Retailers were passionate people. They knew a lot about French wine. It was incredible the knowledge a few retailers had of French wines. They knew everything and they tasted most of the wines.

**Q: Do you think that retailers are better now?**

**A:** I think they're just as good, and there are a lot more. There are bigger retailers and I must say, when you go to a retail shop like the Wine Club, everybody in the store tastes everything that comes to the store.

**Q: What about sommeliers, has their role really changed?**

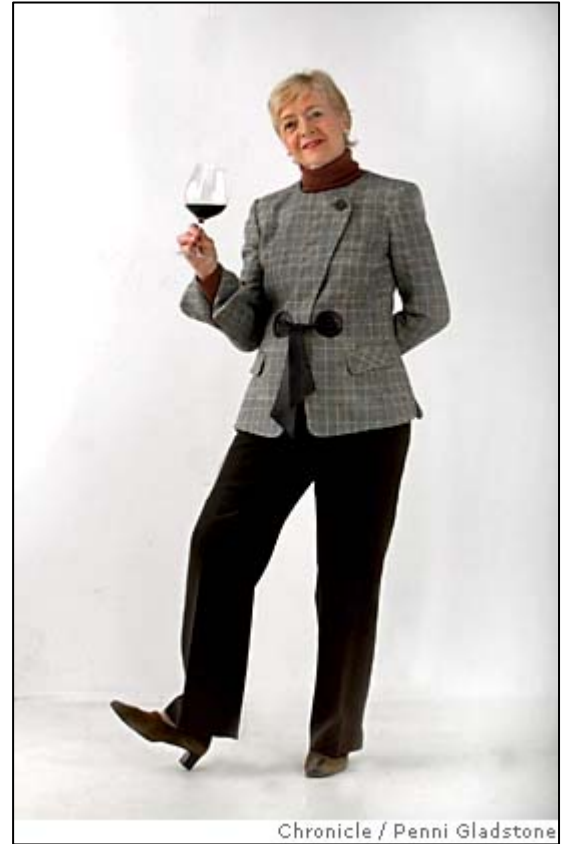
**A:** Sommeliers have made a huge difference. When you go and sell your wine you've got somebody who understands, who's willing to taste something like Irouleguy from Basque Country. Before, you couldn't do that. They would laugh at you. But now you can. As long as it's good, they go for it. They're excited.

**Q: And how has the wine market changed?**

**A:** The big change in the market in the last 10 years is the phasing out of overoaked wines. You have no idea. When I did tastings with my Chablis -- no oak at all -- people said, "Oh, we love it, we don't want those oaky wines anymore." They never realized there was another way of drinking wine besides oaky Chardonnay.

**Q: So you can sell unoaked Chardonnay even in the home of California Chardonnay?**

**A:** Yeah, isn't it funny? But even in California they've started to use less oak. The California palate has changed.



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**Uncorked:** Importer Martine Saunier has a nose for Burgundy's best.

**Q: How do you think the American palate has changed?**

**A:** People discovered the elegance of Pinot Noir. Of course, they like a Pinot Noir that has full body but they like the elegance, the taste of Pinot Noir. And also they started to realize that you don't have to have a Cabernet or a Pinot Noir that are black as ink to be good. They were obsessed with the color before.

**Q: Do you think people who drink New World Pinot Noir will ultimately want to drink Burgundy, or will Burgundy start tasting like New World Pinot?**

**A:** Burgundy is Burgundy. The terroir is different. But I represent Ken Wright, and Ken Wright makes wine very much in the Burgundy style but still it reflects the terroir of Oregon. He's a passionate producer that really believes in terroir. And he can prove it to you by demonstrating each vineyard.

**Q: Was there a time when it was difficult to be a woman in the wine industry?**

**A:** Never. First, because it never occurred to me that I was stepping into a man's world. I did it because I love wine, I knew wine and I thought, "OK, I know wine, why not?" It never occurred to me that I was doing something that nobody else had ever done. In America, people knew -- when I started to talk about my wines, they realized that I knew what I was talking about so they never gave me trouble. When I started in Burgundy, no one ever saw a woman buying wines. So they challenged me, of course. They tried to ask me to determine what vintage it was. (Yet) most of the winemakers would say, "Oh, my wife has a better palate than I have."

**Q: And yet their wives were not making the wine.**

**A:** But they tasted and they'd tell right away what they thought. They were right.

**Q: Do you ever wonder if you should retire?**

**A:** Henri Mayer, when he retired, his wife said, "Martine, when are you going to retire?" I said, "I don't know." One day, she took me aside and said, "Don't ever retire. It's terrible." She worked in the vineyard; he worked as a winemaker. They were going out and meeting people. He was training young winemakers. All of a sudden he's in his little house, his health is going down and it's getting worse because he has nothing mentally to revive him. The only reason I'm still working is because I love it. I have my bad days, you know, business is up and down, but I always trust that I'm a survivor. And I love the contact with a new generation of sommeliers. They're really exciting kids.

**Q: What's the best wine you've ever had?**

**A:** The best wine I ever had is when I tasted the '59 or '61 Chateau Rayas. I just couldn't believe that I had found such a gem. Just extraordinary. And then the Mayer Cros Parantoux, barrel tasting the '78. And (Domaine Leroy owner and Domaine de la Romanee-Conti part owner) Lalou Bize-Leroy's Musigny 2003. Barrel tasted. You never spit it out.

**Q: And what do you like to drink?**

**A:** It all depends on my mood. I love Champagne, I love Pinot Noir. I love really good vintage Champagne if I want to start a meal. I like elegant, pleasurable wine. I drink wine with my food at night.

**Q: So what did you have for dinner last night?**

**A:** I had a Fleurie, Beaujolais, Brunet 2004. With a steak. It was wonderful. I don't have big wines by myself. I share it with my friends. When I have a bottle of great Burgundy, I always have it with company because it should be shared. I think wine is conviviality. I will never open a great bottle just for two people.

**Q: How many bottles do you have in your cellar?**

**A:** I'm afraid I found out a year and a half ago when somebody did the inventory. Because I had no clue, you know? I'd just open a wine on the pallet and label "For Martine," so I had no idea. Somebody said, "We'll do your inventory, we'll do it on the computer." So I said OK. And I thought it was going to be a breeze, like half a day. It took two days and I found I had 4,500 bottles. It's just because I've been doing it for many years. And I bought some Bordeaux futures when it was great years. And I love Cheval Blanc, I'm not afraid to say.

**Q: Where do you like to go out for a glass of wine?**

**A:** I don't go out for a glass of wine. I go out to dinner but I don't go out for a glass of wine. I have too much in my own home.

**Q: And what's the greatest thing about wine?**

**A:** It has to give you pleasure. That's what Mayer always told me. He said, "Martine, you have to think of pleasure when you think about wine." If it is an intellectual interpretation of how dark, how tannic, forget it. You barrel taste, it's got to give you pleasure. Intensely. Now.