



# MARTINE'S WINES, Inc.®

Importer & Wholesaler

285 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Ste Q -Novato, CA 94949 – Tel: (415) 883-0400 – Fax: (415) 883-0648 – email: sales@mwines.com

## San Francisco Chronicle

Thursday, October 2, 2003

By Jordan Mackay, Special to the Chronicle

### BOUNTY HUNTERS

**Importers who find the best of the world's offerings and bring them home can exert a huge influence on the domestic wine scene**

Rob McDonald met Chester Osborn one night in a restaurant in Adelaide, Australia, in 1993 and the pair went out and got plastered. McDonald was the founder of the fledgling Napa importing company, Old Bridge Cellars, Osborn the long-haired winemaker for the cult Australian winery d'Arenberg.

Before departing in their respective fogs, Osborn invited McDonald to his winery. Surprising even himself, McDonald showed up the next morning bleary-eyed and hung over. Not the best condition to be in for tasting wine, perhaps, but this was Australia, after all, and no one gets too formal.

"After tasting through all the wines," McDonald says, "I said to Chester, 'Well, give me a little time and I'll put together a marketing plan for you and show you what we're doing and what we could do with your wines in the States.' "

Osborn barely hesitated: "How about we just send you some wine and see what you can do?" One shipment later, and Old Bridge was on its way.

The wines were huge successes, auspicious not only for the fortune of McDonald's company, but presaging the explosion of Australian wine in the United States during the next decade. While not every winemaker is as casual with his wine as Osborn, the spirit of "how about we send you some wine and see what you can do with it?" is alive



and well in the Bay Area. Thanks in part to a huge concentration of wine importers, the Bay Area has become one of the most international wine markets in the world.

Dozens of firms are based in the Bay Area, bringing in wines from Europe, South America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan. Despite stagnation in most areas of the wine industry, 38,651,000 cases of foreign wine entered the United States from January through July, up 12 percent from same period last year, according to the Wine Institute. At 10

million cases this year, Australia is near the top of the list -- second in volume only to Italy's 13.7 million -- a 44 percent increase. France, Chile and Spain round out the top five. In 2002, sales of imported wine constituted 25 percent of the domestic market.

It's clear that people like to drink imported wine. But beyond that simple desire is a story of how wine from around the world has influenced our own.

Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa may be world class, but the benchmark for the varietal is still Bordeaux. California Syrah is red hot now, but the remarkable range of styles displayed in imported versions from Chave Hermitage in France's Rhone Valley to the d'Arenberg Dead Arm Shiraz from Australia's McLaren Vale define the spectrum of wine against which California must be compared.

Local specialty importers tend to be small operations, run by an individual or a partnership. They tend to find and work a niche, focusing on one country or region, or on a category of wine such as value or high-end. For instance, Old Bridge Cellars imports only Australian wine; Via Pacifica, in Sebastopol, works the family-owned operations of New Zealand. Sonoma's Rare Wine Company imports a few hard-to-find and high-end wines from Europe, but mainly specializes in older vintages and unique wines like Madeira. . .

The influence of an importer with vision cannot be understated. He or she can set in motion trends that can come to dominate entire regions.

The best example of this phenomenon is probably Kermit Lynch, who in his 1988 book "Adventures on the Wine Route," described his treks in and out of the cellars of Old France, searching for wine authenticity. Lynch -- whose Berkeley shop, Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, has been stocked with wines he's been selecting since 1973 -- set the standard for small, specialty importers by insisting on quality and trusting his palate to recognize it.

Lynch's name became practically synonymous with wines like Vieux Telegraph, a Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, and Domaine Tempier, the most famous wine from Bandol, in Provence. Lynch's promotion of authentic, estate-bottled French wine has contributed to the evolution of California food and wine. In the '70s, he became friends with Alice Waters, whose celebrated culinary philosophy corresponded precisely with his notion of "natural" wine -- that is, wine that was produced with minimal shaping by the hand of the winemaker, letting the essential nature of the unadulterated grapes be the *raison d'être* of the wine.

#### Discovering Syrah

Precocious young winemakers like Bob Lindquist and Adam Tolmach of the Santa Barbara County wineries Qupé and Ojai -- two of the state's top producers of Rhone-styled wines -- discovered French Syrah through Lynch, 61. While working for Zaca Mesa Winery in Santa Barbara County in the early 1980s, Lindquist says his trips to the Bay Area would inevitably include a visit to Lynch's shop.

"The Gripas St. Joseph, both red and white, which he was importing at the time, were wines that Kermit introduced me to and were hugely influential," Lindquist says. "I had had some Syrah, but hadn't had as much or as diverse a line until I tasted what Kermit was bringing in."

Lynch, recalls Lindquist, would tell him that California winemakers should be

planting Syrah and Viognier, not Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, advice Lindquist would eventually follow.

"A lot of people credit me with launching the Rhone movement," says Lindquist, "but it's too much of a credit. It was a chain of events. Kermit's store got me to drink more Syrahs and because of him getting me to drink them, I wanted to make them. And because I wanted to make them, other people wanted to make them and it snowballed."

**Another French-wine importer who helped shape the landscape is Martine Saunier, whose Martine's Wines in Novato was one of the first companies to bring in high-end Burgundy and Rhone wines starting in the 1960s and '70s. Saunier, a legend in importing circles, was the rare woman to break into the business. Her importations of top Burgundy producers like Henri Jayer, Domaine Leroy and others helped set the groundwork for the advent of Pinot Noir in this country, again seducing young winemakers with beautiful wines, in the process exposing them to a vision of what exceptional Pinot Noir could be.**

**"While I went straight to the source in Burgundy," says Au Bon Climat founder Jim Clendenen over the phone from his Santa Maria winery, "the people and wines I found most stylistically inspiring were all brought in by either Kermit or Martine. I think there was a whole generation of winemakers influenced by what they were bringing in."**

**Arriving from Paris in the 1960s, Saunier made her first business trips to France, buying on the confidence in her own palate. In 1979, she founded Martine's Wines on the strength of the great producers she had discovered and signed.**

One wine that's all the rage these days is grassy, high-acid Sauvignon Blanc, the kind that's a hallmark of New Zealand. For this a lot of thanks can go to Sebastapol importer Via Pacifica.

Founded in 1998 by Howard and Shelly Kalmer, a retired professor and social worker, respectively, and their eventual partners Jennifer and Paul Tincknell, Via Pacifica has developed an impressive portfolio of top, small New Zealand producers, Thornbury, Lake Chalice, Huia and Lawson's Dry Hills among them.

Suggesting the reaching influence of these wines, Jennifer Tincknell, 45, says that, "amazingly Sonoma is consistently our top market because we have so many winemakers who are just passionately in love with our wines. We'll have wineries call up and say we're having a party and we'd like five cases of Lake Chalice Sauv Blanc. And you see it now in this country; more and more wineries are going for that New Zealand style in their wines.

"But," she adds with a grin, "of course, it's not really possible to duplicate it here. That's what makes New Zealand so special."

How do these importers find their wines? Ultimately, it boils down to the palate.

Palate is very important," says Peter Granoff, a wine industry veteran and co-owner of the wine shop at Ferry Plaza. "If the palate isn't there, (importers are) not going to make good selections themselves. I've sat through presentations and tasted wines from newcomers to the importing arena who were very well intentioned and sincere, and the wines were not good. They hadn't made good selections, found good producers and it was based on their own lack of palate experience."

As an example, Granoff cited the portfolio of Eric Stauffenegger, who founded the French-wine house Vigneron Imports in Oakland, saying that 20 years ago it was hit and miss.

"When he first came to me with a line of wines he had a few good things, but a lot of what he had didn't hit the mark. It took time, but I've seen his palate grow and with it the quality of his entire line, which is now superb. It's been very gratifying to see him grow. . . ."

Mistakes were made

Informed of that, Stauffenegger laughs, saying, "I've always thought I had a good palate, but I wouldn't deny that I made some mistakes in the past when I was a young importer."

Granoff points to Vigneron-imported wines like the sparkling 1999 Domaine Laurens Blanquette de Limoux (\$16) or the 2002 Quincy from Domaine Tremblay (Sauvignon Blanc, \$14.50) as examples of what Vigneron does best.

For Rob McDonald, 40, who started the Napa-based Old Bridge Cellars in 1993, importing has been a way to not only stay in touch with, but to learn about, his native Australia.

"All the stories and geography I've had to learn to sell the wines," says the soft-spoken McDonald, who moved here in 1988, "has helped me become more Australian, even though I don't live there."

McDonald started off trying to import Australian beer, but found that it was foolish to challenge the enormous companies that dominate the beer market.

"You're competing against the big guys," he says, "but it was just a natural evolution from beer to wine to high-end wine. Partly by luck, partly by whatever, I ended up going to Australia chasing up these small high-end family-owned wineries that were famous in Australia and Europe and England and had great reputations and had been producing wine for 20 years, but had no exposure in America."

They do now. McDonald's efforts have introduced a whole generation of Americans to such remarkable producers as d'Arenberg of the McLaren Vale, Leeuwin of the Margaret River or Yarra Yering of the Yarra Valley.

While McDonald is justifiably proud to be bringing in expensive, cultish d'Arenberg wines like Dead Arm Shiraz (\$65) and the red blend Ironstone Pressings (\$65),

his face seems to light up even more when he points out the quality of d'Arenberg's Stump Jump blend, which is only \$10 a bottle.

## GREATEST HITS OF BAY AREA IMPORTERS

Here is a selection of the top  
imported wines available  
locally:

### MARTINE'S WINES

#### NV Champagne Henriot Brut Souverain (\$22)

Pale and lively, with a bready nose and citrus tang, this Champagne entertains with ripe fruit and spirit.

#### 2000 Feraud-Brunel Cotes du Rhône-Villages Rasteau (\$20)

Chocolatey, earthy and spicy, this dense wine is chunky and luscious.

The missionary success of the work done by Kermit Lynch and Martine Saunier for French wines in the 1960s through the '80s, or by Old Bridge and Via Pacifica for Pacific Rim wines in the '90s, isn't easily duplicated, as in each case the importer was fortunate to both foment and ride the particular wave of popularity blooming for a specific wine. The most successful importers seem to be the ones that didn't jump on a bandwagon, but created the bandwagon that others would later join.

If importer Mannie Berk, of Berk's The Rare Wine Co. in Sonoma, has his way, then a new bandwagon could well be Madeira, the underappreciated sweet wine from the island off the coast of Portugal with the same name.

"I think Madeira is one of the great wines of the world, but a lot of people have never had the chance to try it," says Berk.

In an effort to seduce the public into discovering the joys of older Madeira at affordable prices, Berk teamed with one of his producers, Barbeita, to create the Historic Series, blends of older and younger wines to produce bottles with vintage character. The New York Malmsey (\$20), capturing the aromatics, flavor and texture of rare vintage wines, is a great example.

"Madeira's come a long way since we started," says Berk, "but it's still got a ways to go."

Every foreign wine that's successful today had a long way to go at some point. Crucial to the journey is a passionate importer willing to champion the wine in a crowded marketplace.

Madeira may be a smaller island than either New Zealand or Australia, but you can bet that if Berk keeps up the hard work, its time will come.

And then who knows what? Maybe a promising winemaker will be blown away by Berk's Malmsey and change the course of California wine history.

*Jordan Mackay is the San Francisco-based wine and spirits editor for 7x7 and wine columnist for the Austin (Texas) American-Statesman. E-mail him at [wine@sfcchronicle.com](mailto:wine@sfcchronicle.com).*