

Discovering and defining a New World sense of place-how maverick need you be?

Jim Clendenen

I suppose that all I would have to do is put a flashlight under my face to illuminate the “changing face” of wine. But all areas of wine have had their renegades, their mavericks. An astute Didier Dagueneau willing to accuse his neighbors of greed and a lack of passion, while planting direct rooted vineyards in the face of *phylloxera* encroachment. A contemplative Randall Grahm exploring non-traditional varietals in emerging vine areas while creating compelling images and labels to effect market penetration. A Pascal Delbeck, Josko Gravner, Gary Farr, or Larry McKenna, or even a Leroy, Lafon or Leflaive implementing biodynamic farming.

The definition of a maverick is quite simple. Colloquially speaking it has evolved to describe an independent, resolute position rather than ascribing to a “party line”. When I first visited the Barolo region in the early 80’s, everyone wanted to make a “typical” wine. Five years later, almost everyone wanted to be a maverick. Things are not quite so evident when one is pioneering a new wine region. An experience in a totally new wine area can be viewed simultaneously as a search for similarity to established growing areas or a chance for radical and unique departure from other producing areas’ norms. The possibilities become a quandary when the producer must consider the economic reality of appealing to an already educated consumer base (also prejudiced) or creating new customers by demonstrating uniqueness with distinct flavors.

In my discussion of the quality search in the 21st century centering around the reality of developing recognition for non-traditional wine regions, I’d like to start by excluding two large segments of the emerging 21st century wine business. I’m sure that my other colleagues will address them to a greater extent. It doesn’t take a great knowledge of history to remember large portions of the last century when the wine business wasn’t as lucrative as it seems to be now. A cursory visit to New Zealand, the Piedmont or Italy, Burgundy, or Napa Valley shows enviable prosperity. This prosperity, the seemingly glamorous lifestyles, wine passion, and disposable income have flooded the wine business with a new breed of producer. They want it all, want it now, can establish ambitious wineries overnight, and a search for quality wine is a business goal or lifestyle extension. As recently as 1981 when I worked in Chassagne-Montrachet and told my co-workers that I wanted to return home and start a winery, I was told that wineries were owned by the nobility (barons, ducs, comtes, marquis) or inherited by birthright. Someone like me was destined to drag hoses, or drive a tractor for an established domaine. Now large negociant houses like Vincent Girardin or Nicolas Potel can be created by motivated entrepreneurs in one generation by accessing high quality wine and grape sources. I thought my efforts were fairly radical in ’82 being a winemaker with no capital, no ability to raise capital, but possessing a vision of quality wine potential in an unproven area. I found much more radical notions 10 years later when I met people with lots of money, no vineyards, no winemaking skills or understanding, hiring Robert Parker-endorsed consultants to create high-profile wine labels in rented space. The vineyards, buildings, investment could all come later, after they became famous. Fairly peculiar, that. I’m not arguing that dilettantes cannot become motivated by a search for quality wine, but that most of

their goals can be satisfied without that search. The changes in a traditional wine-growing area that allow a Potel or Girardin to recognize opportunity and seize it are all to the benefit of wine quality. The arrival of an artificially competitive sector of wine producers in a New World scenario is probably not.

Which brings me to the second group that I would exclude from my ideas of wine quality production in this century. Lately, after a singular failure in the 70s and 80s, we have seen a reappearance of corporate business in the industry through creation, acquisition, consolidation, and distribution. The search for quality becomes a necessary sidebar in a statement of purpose, but is in no way a manageable notion in the long term, nor a motivational rallying point. I was surprised to discover in Australia in 1981 companies (much smaller at the time) like Penfolds, Lindemans, and Hardy with production facilities in different regions, winemakers making diverse styles, and an overall business program to link it all. In the new century, there is a multiplicity of divergent sites, on different continents, numerous facilities, all unified under a corporate whole. The new corporate wine world is establishing footholds in all areas of wine production, amassing marketing economy of scale benefits, losing regional distinctiveness, and homogenizing quality factors to appeal to current taste. But their search is for profitability or viability, not for wine quality in the absolute sense.

Indulge me in another rant, please. It is very easy to buy a wine company, large or small, mundane or with great caché, famous or emerging. It is even easy to establish, with great fanfare, the largest facility in an emerging wine region, as if that was always smart or desirable. It is, quite frankly, very easy to make wine. Wine is fruit spoilage under controlled conditions. In the years shortly after the death of Christ, wine made itself in stone vessels, skins, or urns without the benefit of a consultant or flying winemaker. On the other hand, it is very difficult to run a successful wine business, especially with current competition in the high quality/high bottle price segment. Juggling the simple but daunting equation of volume of grape supply, quality of production, sales and marketing has been made more complex by the need to seek outside approval from critics and journalists, and a new reliance upon understanding trends in fashion, health aspects, and changes in consumer tastes. I was recently at a presentation where Aubert de Villaine used the French verb that indicated he needed to defend his company's work, *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti's* work, against critics disparaging the standard of recent vintages. When DRC, with immutable terroir, undeniable history, and indefatigable good will in its core customer group, needs to justify itself, it shows that we are all - traditional growing areas and New World alike - thrust into a new world wine model with increasing glare upon us. Recent statistics from the Vinexpo group in a survey of 28 countries posited a world wine production of 3 billion cases. It demonstrated that in a recent 6 year cycle Australia and New Zealand have a 100% increase in vineyard surface planted. Over the same period of time, the USA has increased planting by 60%. I'm currently thinking that the level of competition worldwide might just be more intense than it was during the last century.

So now to the crux of my remarks. How maverick need one be in the establishment of a wine business while exploring a new viticultural area? In 1978 I began making wine in Santa Barbara County at Zaca Mesa Winery where I joined a staff that had a university graduate in enology as winemaking director. This was at a time when the

majority of the vines in the region were 5 years old. The area was planted to most varieties, cabernet, zinfandel, pinot noir, merlot, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling and gewurztraminer, too name a few. The first harvests had been sold to large, modest quality wineries in the North Coast, or custom vinified (when unsold) by similar producers. There were less than seven wineries in the county. The larger start-up wineries, Zaca Mesa included, hired North Coast consultants or tried to emulate the wine styles of their more successful Napa and Sonoma counterparts. It became apparent to me quickly that copying existing successful wineries didn't position you to compete with them well. Many of the varieties planted did not grow well in the area despite a market that favored them. We began to experiment with small batch vinification of chardonnay and pinot noir (two cooler climate varieties that better fit the long, cool growing season of the area) using techniques that we had read about from Europe. I left Zaca Mesa to work 2 harvests in Australia in 1981, one in the hot Hunter Valley in a large, processing oriented facility, and one in a cooler valley near Melbourne at a small winery. In retrospect, the ideas that I learned that helped me the most don't seem unique, avant-garde, or inspiring. In the late 70s and early 80s there was little attention paid to what grape grew best in what area. University recommendation suggested that pinot, cab, zinfandel, merlot and other less popular varieties could grow well side-by-side in California's coastal valleys. Most start-up wineries planted all varieties, made them into wine, and chased the market, grafting varieties when the market shifted. I vinified pinot noir and chardonnay wines in the Hunter Valley where it took immense acid correction, pH stabilization and temperature control in the cellar to correct the imbalance created in the vineyard. In the Goulburn Valley near Melbourne, I also vinified pinot noir and chardonnay, with much less correction needed in the cellar. I was a winemaker, not a viticulturist, but it is strange that one has to be maverick in any sense to understand how grapes suited their environment. My learning curve became sharp after my third harvest in 1981 in Burgundy at the Domaine Duc de Magenta. The lessons there were clear. Since you couldn't ripen cabernet, merlot, syrah or grenache, the area had long since focused on pinot noir and chardonnay as two varieties that could ripen. They certainly did not ripen well in 1981 (a miserable year, rain started the first week of September and rarely stopped), but still better to have pinot in the ground than cab or syrah. I remember talking to a group of Central Coast California winemakers after a trip with André Tchelistcheff, the great American wine icon, to the wine regions of France. To a man, they agreed that they learned how similar things were in France, how Bordeaux was gearing up through technology in the cellar to be more like Napa. I learned that the differences in what grapes were suited to what areas, the processing of the different wines, the stylizing of the wines, and the quality of the wines, were all at odds with the thinking at that time in the New World wine areas. When I returned to California to start Au Bon Climat, I was resolute. Santa Barbara County is nothing at all like Burgundy, but possesses coastal zones with little frost, little late season rain, morning fog, moderated daily temperature due to the Pacific Ocean proximity, and a major difference in temperature between night and day (consistently 12°C difference). The key issue was the ability to ripen grapes in balance when the right area was chosen for the grapes. We obviously focused on chardonnay and pinot noir with an emphasis on low technology, minimum intervention winemaking. The condition of the vineyards was lamentable at the time (we could not afford to plant, but most fruit in the area was available to buy) with 500 plants per acre, no trellis system, excess irrigation, and too much fertilizer applied. But even then, with careful selection, handcrafting, and unique styling, the early wines were promising. We started our

winery just after the recession of '79, with the US prime rate hovering around 20% and the grape and wine business in a deep funk, and released our first wines when European currencies were devalued by half. Tough times, indeed! By focusing on one red and one white, choosing an environment to ripen grapes in balance, and thoroughly understanding the wine style we wanted, we prospered. Simple ideas, hard work, and a “maverick” attitude gave us impetus.

The second area that I would like to discuss involves how maverick one must be to capture attention for one's efforts and one's area to allow prosperity and development. I will state categorically that for a new wine region to be “discovered”, for a new wine region to develop successfully, image creation, marketing, positive press and public relations are as important as soil types, clonal selection and planting density. It is interesting to me that different markets can identify different pioneers from the same region, because of the relative success of a marketing effort or press tour by different wineries. This is where a coherent, well-conceived winery plan or regional plan can go a long way toward creating an identity and market acceptance. In my personal case, I never asked the press, the trade, or my ultimate retail customers to like my wines. I only asked them all to recognize that we were executing a valid, distinctive wine style, that we understood it thoroughly, and that it was something special that our area could produce. I took a global view, and our first recognition came in the London market with our '85 vintage, a cool, difficult one. It was heartening to produce wine in a traditionally structured style, from a brand new wine-growing region whose quality was recognized in wine-dom's market center. Our '86 vintage Chardonnay placed in the top tier of an *Alles über Wein* international tasting, and we were the top wine the same year in a *Winewise magazine* challenge pitting cool climate boutique Australian wines against Californian. At the same time, roughly, our complex, terroir-related wines were misunderstood, and criticized by our neighbors and the Californian wine press, used to warmer climate, and much simpler wines. Our nadir was probably receiving a “58” score by the *Wine Spectator* for our sold out 1989 Chardonnay. We were making the best wines we could, in the style that we wanted, and all of the controversy lay in how the wines were perceived. This was, and still is, where the maverick in me most came out. Our ability to communicate with passion, our conviction that our wines had merit, and our refusal to compromise our style finally began to get the attention of domestic critics. An east coast critic of great influence, Robert Parker, noticed our wines and by 1989, and again in 1990, placed Au Bon Climat on his short annual list of most influential wineries in the world. During the course of an afternoon tasting, I persuaded Dan Berger of the *Los Angeles Times*, and one of my most persistent critics, that the issue he should address was not whether he personally liked my wines, but whether the style was valid, the quality high, the execution accurate. It was a thought-provoking tasting because he didn't like our wines at all, and yet they were sold out on allocations, consistently praised by others, and aged and developed well over many years. The next year Dan Berger named us “Winemaker of the Year” while stating that he didn't particularly like our wine style, but that we were influential in pioneering cool climate winemaking in an emerging area. If the most important element in an emerging wine region's success is quality wine in the bottle, then the ability to articulate a region's strengths, uniqueness and significance is a close second. New areas gain press attention just from their “newness”, but cannot maintain that attention without a story much more compelling than a search for potential.

The last part of my discussion is the most difficult for me to encapsulate, because I'm still living it. After the exploring and pioneering, the understanding and articulating, and the "arrival", if you will, of a new area, how maverick must one be to maintain the recognition of an area, and to keep vital a winery? I have purposely avoided talking about the actual styles of the wines that I make because it may be disconcerting to some of you that the style of wine that I have rigorously adhered to is very traditional. It was maverick in 1982 to avoid settling, ferment whites completely in small barrels, leave them sur lie for prolonged periods, rarely rack them, and bottle them unfiltered after up to 18 months in barrel. The reds were open-top fermented with multiple punch downs, pressed with no settling, in barrel for the malolactic, rarely racked, and bottled unfiltered. While these techniques are traditional in Burgundy, they were rarely practiced in California successfully before the 80's. I like moderate alcohol, firm acidity, good texture, complexity and persistence. I don't care how "black" my red wine is, or how "golden" my white. I don't come from a food and wine culture, but I enjoy almost all of my wine at the table, and love to cook to compliment the wine I'm enjoying. We, possibly more so than any other Californian winery, have enjoyed more international recognition, than local. Part of this is the power of the international wine media. Part is due to my travels, because I love the international world of wine. But, I believe the appeal of Au Bon Climat lies in the refusal to compromise our original wine style to accommodate changes in public taste. An unrestrained Oz Clarke has often touted the quality potential of New World wine producers, because of easier, more temperate growing conditions, research, technology and freedom from adverse regulation. My favorite argument that he has, centers around the qualitative desirability of irrigation in a controlled and timely way in a drier climate, as contrasted to untimely rains that regularly arrive in traditional European growing areas. I bring this up because I believe that the only way to maintain the recognition achieved in newer winegrowing areas is to continue to develop the quality orientation of the areas. Making classic, not exaggerated, wine styles in new regions requires focus on the details for improvement. Modified planting systems, strict yield management, balanced vines producing balanced fruit and better attention to detail in the cellar bring quality enhancement. The problem, as I see it, is that there have been some rule changes in the perception of quality. We can blame some tremendously powerful international journalists, but the perpetrators are really the wineries willing to follow trends, to pander to critics *and* a clientele too ill-informed to buy wine they actually like. The school of bigger is better has a place in the industry, but certainly not at the quality pinnacle. Warm vineyards, overripe grapes, chemistry in the cellar and technological manipulation have long played a role in the creation of standard, inexpensive wine. How these techniques, supermaturité, acidification, reverse osmosis, dealcoholization, concentration and color addition migrated up the quality wineries list of options is perplexing to me. I have never seen a greater disparity between the perception of quality in fine wine, and its reality, in my 25 years in the industry. At a recent tasting in London of "collectible Californian cult cabernets" not only was the perception of quality completely polarized between the American collectors who brought the wines, and the British wine authorities who disliked them, but also hostile words and insults ensued about the hard-headedness, and closed-mindedness of the various tasters. Yes, cultures are different, the American palette has long been understood to be formed differently than the British palette, but it seems now that the criteria for quality wine are less clear than before. Therein lies the challenge for the maverick vintner. We, the producers of quality wine, are supposed to be the leaders of our industry. After we have pioneered new wine

areas, or resurrected older ones, or have mastered the details just a little bit better than our colleagues in traditional areas, we have an obligation to lead by continuing a quality quest in our regions. One thing is certain, success begets success. By achieving certain levels of prosperity, a region has the ability to reinvest in itself. In my area, we have replanted many of the marginal vineyards that I spoke of earlier, and the seven year old vines planted +/- 1700 to 2000 vines per acre on de-vigorizing rootstocks with a vertical, shoot-positioned trellis above Guyot-pruning is delivering controlled amounts of higher quality, better balanced grapes to my winery than 25 year old vines did with the old plantings. We are reinvesting in ourselves with the same quality goals in mind. We want more concentrated, more complex and better balanced wines than before. Not bigger, heavier or more obvious. Yes, we have to defend our wine styles from critics who deride them for being unmodern, too lean when young, too arid or too tight. Everyone should be able to defend their work. Time will tell. We just might manage to be maverick enough to justify our project's direction long enough to satisfy ourselves.