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ALTERNATIVE WINEMAKING Using stars to make wine

by *Emily Wilson*

Posted Sun, 25 Apr 2004

La Revue de Vin de France recently named him one of the hundred best winemakers in the world.



Robert Parker, one of the world's most influential wine critics, has never rated his wine at less than 90. His wines are on the list of some of the most exclusive restaurants in the United States, Europe and Asia.

But Sean Thackrey is far from your typical winemaker. He lives and makes his wine in Bolinas, a beach town outside of San Francisco, which has more than its share of surfers, dogs and poets.

Although less than a hundred miles away from California's Napa Valley, with its stainless steel equipment and sloped floors to make for easy cleaning, Thackrey's operation is a world away.

His wine, all named after constellations like Pleiades and Orion, sits in barrels under the stars in a eucalyptus grove. His property sits on the edge of the lagoon in Bolinas, close to the ocean.

Then there is his training — he has none, and no interest in the programs out there.

"Wine making is to produce pleasure," he said. "It's not carrying out scientific experiments."

Thackrey made his first wine, a Cabernet, over 20 years ago, from some grapes he grew along a low fence in his front yard. From the beginning, he loved the process of making wine.

"It was wonderful," he said. "Like sitting down at a piano and discovering you can actually play."

His earlier career as an art dealer specialising in 19th century European photographs and prints was the perfect training to produce wines, Thackrey thinks.

"I was being paid for my eye," he said. "I was being paid for my senses. Now I'm being paid for my palate."

Bruce Cass, author of the Oxford Companion to the Wines of North American, says that Thackrey's palate led him to make full bodied,

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highly extracted wines before other California wines moved in that direction.

"Fifteen years ago you could have picked out his wine in a blind taste test," Cass says. "Now the field has caught up to Sean and there are many wines that are as big and bad as his."

Cass says Thackrey's eccentric personality stands out as much as his wine. He chuckles remembering going to see Thackrey and being greeted by the wine maker with two women, both over six feet tall, with shaved heads and leather bikinis.

"The California industry has a fairly large number of colorful personalities, but Sean's is distinctive," Cass says.

One way that Thackrey has distinguished himself is by refuting the concept of terroir, which says the growing site influences the character of the wine. Thackrey says this is so obvious that it is not even worth discussing.

"It's a banality — it's self-evident," he said. "Why are we so wrapped up in it?"

What incenses Thackrey about terroir is he sees it as a way to give all the credit to real estate and none to the winemaker. Thackrey says he cares deeply about the quality of the grapes he uses, just as a chef wants the best available produce or a cabinetmaker the best wood.

And just like a chef or a cabinetmaker, Thackrey thinks the winemaker should be acknowledged for what they do with those raw materials.

Thackrey's former broker in Europe, Tempe Reinhardt, says she appreciates Thackrey's artistry and many of her clients, serious collectors, did as well.

"He is so extremely creative," she said. "Really an artist. When you taste his wine, you get that handcrafted element. You can tell it's made with his heart and soul. He just throws his entire being into what he does and it comes through in his wines."

Thackrey definitely has his own ideas about winemaking, but he enjoys reading what other have to say, and so he has collected over 800 books on the subject, all from before 1850, which he keeps in a climate controlled room in his house.

Thackrey reads eight languages and is putting the texts up, mostly untranslated, on his Web site, www.wine-maker.net.

Thackrey would like to someday write a history of winemaking and he is thrilled to receive his latest prize in the mail — a 1779 volume of notes from a winemaker in old German. He has recently returned from his yearly vacation to Kauai, where he took some 16th century Italian texts.

"I sometimes say I enjoy the company of dead wine makers more than most live ones," he said. "It's just as exciting as space travel. It puts you in touch with an alien world."

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