

FOOD & WINE

INSPIRATION SERVED DAILY

How to Make Great American Wine: A Few Lessons From the French

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NOVEMBER 2008

Once upon a time, the world's best wines came from France (or so the natives would have us believe). Today, the French are still making great wine—but some are doing it on American soil. Richard Nalley reports.

What do you think would make a Frenchman come all the way to California to live?" teases Luc Morlet, of Napa Valley's Morlet Family Vineyards. In his case, the answer is romance: his American wife, Jodie. But there are plenty of other reasons (even for Morlet) that explain why so many winemakers are leaving France to try their luck in the United States.

Certainly freedom is part of the draw. Here, they can plant whatever grapes they choose and make whatever kind of wine they please, unlike in the highly regulated wine-growing regions of their homeland. For example, Morlet (who descends from a centuries-long line of Champagne producers) makes perfumed, perfectly poised Pinot Noirs; Christophe Baron crafts flamboyant Rhône-style reds at his Washington state winery, Cayuse; Philippe Melka turns out top Cabernets all over Napa, including at Métisse, Hundred Acre and Vineyard 29; and Stephan Asseo creates powerful Syrah-Cabernet blends in the Paso Robles region of California's Central Coast.

This freedom from France's stifling wine culture is exhilarating, and the possibilities are seemingly endless. As Melka puts it, "The world of wine in France is very conservative. Here, you not only have a lot more options, but there is an excitement about trying new things."

Nicolas Morlet, brother of Luc and winemaker at the renowned Peter Michael Winery in Knights Valley, California, agrees. "It is completely different here. We have the freedom to fully realize our passion, to push our limits with every vintage. We aren't working under a classification made in 1855 or a constitution of *grand crus*."

But these French-American superstars have one fundamental, Old World belief in common: that a great wine should be a reflection of a particular vineyard. "That's our greatest French contribution," says Luc Morlet.

These are not, of course, the first Frenchmen to come to America and make great wine. Spanish missionaries planted the original wine grapes on the West Coast, but it took a Frenchman to produce the first high-quality fruit. The prophetically named Jean-Louis Vignes ("Vines") is often credited with introducing fine wine to California when he brought European vines to Los Angeles back in 1833.

And the French kept coming. For all the familiar Italian names in California wine history—Mondavi, Martini, Sebastiani and so on—there are also famous French ones, like Paul Masson; Etienne Thée, who created Almaden Vineyards (and Charles LeFranc, another Frenchman who was its longtime winemaker); and, most notably, Georges de Latour of Beaulieu Vineyards in Napa Valley. Some newer French-owned wineries and joint ventures include Opus One and Domaine Chandon (from Moët & Chandon) in Napa Valley, Domaine Drouhin in Oregon, and Gruet, out in the vinous wilds of New Mexico.

Those pioneers inspired, and sometimes employed, the present generation. Philippe Melka, for instance, first came to California in 1991 to work at the prestigious, French-owned Dominus Estate in Napa Valley. Like Morlet, he fell in love with an American woman: his future wife, Cherie.

To hear Christophe Baron tell it, he, too, had been struck by a *coup de foudre*—love at first sight—though it was not for a woman but for a bunch of rocks in a field.

Baron's family members have tended the same vineyards in the Marne Valley of Champagne since 1633. He had been an international "flying winemaker," a consultant with clients from New Zealand to Eastern Europe, when a taste of Domaine Drouhin hooked him on the idea of making great Pinot Noir in Oregon. One day in 1996, he was riding around the Walla Walla Valley, which straddles the Oregon-Washington border, when everything changed. "We passed this field of rocks—the size of softballs, the size of fists—and I told my friend, 'Pull over!' I ran out there and said, 'This is it! I am staying here! I am making Syrah here!'"

The owner of the parcel was no doubt relieved to unload it, as it was utterly worthless for planting wheat. But those stones reminded Baron of the famous ankle-twisting rocks—the *galets*—of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. They spoke to him of soils like those in many first-rate vineyards of France, which are well-drained and nutrient-depleted (great wines, after all, are made from vines that struggle).

This field, which Baron would eventually transform into a vineyard, is now called Cailloux and produces an exceptional and much-acclaimed wine. As Baron puts it, "I have been living in a dream ever since."

None of the winemakers featured here makes large quantities of wine. Melka, for instance, produces only about 450 to 500 cases of Métisse, and Cayuse, like several others, has a waiting list just to get on its mailing list.

Other near-cult wines, like Peter Michael and Vérité, a Sonoma-based wine made by Pierre Seillan, sell for triple-digit figures in wine shops, when they can be found.

Seillan is an especially notable figure, as he was previously an accomplished winemaker in Bordeaux, managing various châteaux for 20 years before enjoying his second act in Sonoma. He is obsessed with the idea of making what he calls "micro crus": wines from small groups of vines in the sweet spots of particular vineyards. The intent is to blend a perfect wine using a few grapes from one area, a few from another and so on. Seillan (who still runs Château Lassègue in St-Émilion) would not be able to do this in Bordeaux, as its top wines, by law, come from an estate's own vineyard. But in California, anything is possible.

A fortuitous 1995 meeting with Jess Jackson, who owns a far-flung empire of vineyards and wineries, gave Seillan his chance at greatness in America. The three Vérité wines he makes for Jackson are based on Bordeaux in their grape blends, but the Sonoma County vineyards they're sourced from (a touch of Jackson Park for finesse, Alexander Mountain Estate for power, Kellogg Vineyard for complexity) yield wines with a lushness of texture and perfume rarely, if ever, found in a wine from Bordeaux itself.

Although American winemakers may have certain advantages, Baron doesn't believe they necessarily have an edge over their French counterparts in the U.S. He's seen newcomers in Washington plant sites that he feels no one with French schooling and wisdom would look at twice. "We French process our decisions very methodically," he says. "It is our whole career, our profession—we aren't trying to buy an identity. I think that is a good model for this country."

Baron admits to occasional flashes of homesickness, as does Nicolas Morlet, who is thankful for the restaurant Cook in St. Helena, with comfort food like mashed potatoes "that remind me of what my mother used to make—it is really like that."

Stephan Asseo of L'Aventure maintains that he feels a greater sense of community and acceptance in the U.S.—he was recently voted Winemaker of the Year by the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance—than he did in France. He observes, "In some places in France, you could be third-generation and still be treated like an outsider. Never would you be accepted like this after just 10 years." On the other hand, he was pretty happy when Paso Robles finally got a cheese shop.

All of these gifted, ambitious winemakers are quick to express their gratitude for the lives they've been able to forge in America. When I spoke with Luc Morlet last summer, he was out walking in his first family-owned vineyard, located in Sonoma's Knights Valley. Morlet was clearly emotional about the realization of his goal. "I came here 15 years ago with a little less than \$1,000," he said, marveling at his success. Clichéd as it may be, his is the realization of the American dream.