

Cognoscenti

Because life is short

WINE PAGE

WINE COLLECTOR PROFILE:
AXEL PARKHOUSE

Recently **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors were treated to an extraordinary wine tasting event hosted by Axel Parkhouse and his lovely wife Mathilde at their superb 15th century chateau in the Dordogne. One of France's premier wine collectors, Mr. Parkhouse, who brings an infectious enthusiasm to the topic, has extensive fine wine tasting experience—here's a man who's tasted Cheval Blanc 1909 on no fewer than 12 separate occasions!

The day-long tasting encompassed 15 bottles, including a floral and musky 1989 *Biandadi Valguarnea* and a well-knitted 1986 *Mouton-Rothschild*. But it was the selection of Burgundies—white and red—that left the most indelible impression.

Mr. Parkhouse's pairings were always highly instructive. "A taster really begins to improve his knowledge of wine when he begins *comparing* wines," he said. "That means opening at least two bottles at the same time, and tasting them *together*. You have to improve your own faculties to be able to find which is which."

Mr. Parkhouse stores his 10,000-bottle collection in an ancient subterranean cellar that stays at 10-13 degrees centigrade throughout the year. He organizes his wines by source on racks 2 rows deep and 20 high, adding approximately 600 bottles each year, most on special allocation from many of the world's most fabled producers. Yearly he travels to Burgundy,

Alsace, Loire, and Bordeaux to barrel-taste new vintages; he tries to add one or two new producers to his collection each year. His approach to buying wine, like his enjoyment of it, is pragmatic and quality-based rather than status-oriented: "I'm not interested in the

etiquette, I'm interested in the wine in the bottle."

Aging wine "is a very difficult process, difficult to understand," he notes. Novice collectors shouldn't assume that a wine they don't care for today will grow into something they'll like tomorrow. "I

keep a certain number of bottles to see how they age. But the first thing to do is to appreciate the wine that you're buying at the moment that you're buying it, and not just say, 'Well, apparently it's a good wine, it doesn't interest me particularly at the moment, but I suppose it's going to age well!'"

A great wine is one that has complexity, finesse, and length. A complex wine "gives one pleasure after another." (As an example of complexity, Mr. Parkhouse cites the 1994 *Dominique Lafon* Meursault Desirée.) "Finesse" is related to the "things that make a wine so characteristic, so different, so unique, so recognizable." This can be "cherries in Lafitte, cedar in Latour, or something *fumé* in Haut-Brion. But it's



Axel Parkhouse in front of his chateau

not just putting the maximum things possible in the bottle, it's choosing what you want it to be. It's when the chap who makes that bottle knows what he wants to get out of it." In illustration of length, he draws upon his recollection of a 1928 *Clos Fourtet*, which yielded tastes that "lasted for minutes, and every other 30 seconds, it was another taste—chocolate, then banana..."

In the first tasting group, we blind-tasted three white burgundies along with a Spanish Chardonnay. The wines had been decanted 90 minutes prior to tasting. "They are classic chardonnays," said Mr. Parkhouse. "Some of the ones that I like best." He selected wines from several different vintages because he believes it is instructive to "put wines together at different stages of evolution."

An initially reticent *Michel Niellon* Bâtard-Montrachet 1994 opened in the glass dramatically over a period of minutes to exhibit delicate tones of vanilla and spice leading into a finish of great power and length. Mr. Parkhouse noted a slight touch of "strawberry bittersweet candy" here.

The Spanish offering was a 1989 *Leon Torrelavit*, which displayed a darker nose than the Niellon along with notes of warm sunshine and ripe olives. "It's incredible they've been able to make a chardonnay as pure as this in an area that is as hot as that," observed Mr. Parkhouse.

The *Etienne Sauzet*, Puligny-Montrachet Les Combettes 1992 was fruitier than the Niellon, with less spice. Currently drinking at its peak, it showed rich butter notes and a hint of what Mr. Parkhouse aptly characterized as "grilled almonds," before ending with a rather more abbreviated finish than the Niellon.

For us the star of the group was the *Jean-François Coche-Dury* Meursault Perrières 1993—deliciously round and smooth with nuts and butter on the palate into a lingering finish, without the slight bitterness noted in the *Niellon*.

Four Grands Cru red burgundies from top vintages were served after more than two hours' decanting. In

making his selections, Mr. Parkhouse applied a criterion of pure and simple delight: "I chose them to show you just how beautiful Burgundies can be."



Axel Parkhouse in his cellar

We began with a 1990 *Comte De Vogüé* Bonnes Mares. In this spectacular offering, powerful aromatics of hedonistic musk, cherry, and chocolate led to chewy tannins, licorice, and a fabulously long finish. This beautifully-made wine showed superb finesse: "Now that's really pinot noir," observed Mr. Parkhouse.

In the *Mongiard-Mugneret* Richebourg 1990, Mr. Parkhouse noted a tell-tale "fading rose" aspect in this producer's offerings. The style was perhaps more rustic and slightly more monolithic than the three other wines in the group. Fully mature and already beginning to drop

its fruit, the wine was still fascinating: "It's what I like in Burgundy," said Mr. Parkhouse.

The bouquet on the 1995 *Domaine Robert Arnoux* Romanée St-Vivant leapt from the glass. Slightly less complex and less rounded in the mouth than the *Comte De Vogüé*, it held fine spice and was more approachable than the others, even as it showed a bit of imprecision at the end.

The *Armand Rousseau* Chambertin 1989, was darker in tone. "With age," observed Mr. Parkhouse, "Rousseau's wines become outstanding," as this example so beautifully illustrated: cherry on the nose led to a complex and captivating finish—our favorite in the group after the amazing *Comte De Vogüé*.

The evening concluded in style with a 1966 *Domaine Boinquères* (Leon Lafitte) Armagnac, deep amber and hinting towards chestnut in color, which offered up rich stewed fruit and nut tones.

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs and Nicole Medvecky-Riggs, Contributing Editors to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.