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The Million-Dollar NOSE

The wine writer Robert Parker Jr.
may be the most powerful
critic in the world

by WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

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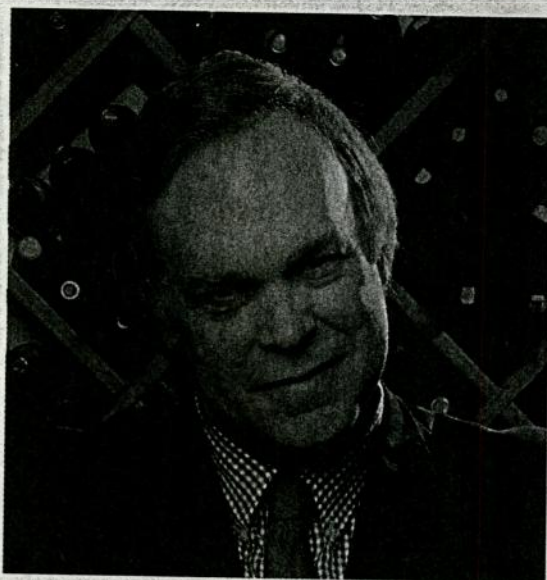
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The Million-Dollar Nose

by WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE



With his stubborn disregard for the hierarchy of wines, Robert Parker, the straight-talking American wine critic, is revolutionizing the industry—and teaching the French wine establishment some lessons it would rather not learn

THE most influential critic in the world today happens to be a critic of wine. He is not a snob or an obvious aesthete, as one might imagine, but an ordinary American, a burly, awkward, hardworking guy from the backcountry of northern Maryland, about half a step removed from the farm. His name is Robert Parker Jr., Bob for short, and he has no formal training in wine. He lives near his childhood home, among the dairies and second-growth forests in a place called Monkton, which has a post office but no town center. A new interstate highway has re-

duced the drive to Baltimore to merely thirty minutes, but otherwise has had little effect. Monkton remains rural and bland—a patch of forgotten America as culturally isolated and nondescript as the quietest parts of the Midwest. Parker likes it that way. He is married to his high school sweetheart, Pat, with whom he has a teenage daughter named Maia, adopted as an infant from a Korean orphanage. The family has a quiet and apparently idyllic domestic life. Parker seems to be a happy man. In repose he has the staid face of an affluent farmer. In his baggy shirts and summer shorts, with his heavy

thinning and pruning of the vines, hand harvesting, and at the winemaking stage the sort of attention to detail that can be achieved only one vat at a time, they lend themselves to production on a reduced scale. At the extreme they are known as "garage wines," smaller-scale even than "micro-wines"—so small that some are produced in garage-size buildings. Such wines are often absurdly expensive, because they are rare and fashionable. That's the bad side. But they allow producers without much money (or the ability to attract large investments) to make a living by making wine. That's the surprise. With his single-minded concentration on taste and his unique ability to communicate his opinion, Parker may be pioneering a new kind of globalization—not the monolith that the world dreads but the monolith's counterforce: a boutique economy that is American in inspiration, individualistic, and anti-industrial at the core.

In France especially—the country, ironically, that fights against the McDonald's-ization of the world—this new form of entrepreneurial winemaking is being resisted. It's easy to understand why. France has long been the bastion of big-time wines. Parker threatens these wines, and the companies and families that produce them. Particularly in Bordeaux, the culturally conservative city that is widely considered to be the world capital of wine, winemakers are engaged in an increasingly bitter fight against Parker and his influence. This year the fight has broken into the open.

most recent offering of Canon, a famous producer in Bordeaux, Parker gave the wine a score of 84–85 and wrote,

Once again, this renowned estate appears to have badly missed the mark. Undoubtedly, part of the difficulty in 1999 was the fact that the vineyard was hit by the hail storm that punished a small zone of vineyards on September 5th. This medium dark ruby-colored effort reveals soft, berry flavors with steely/mineral-like notes in the background. Some of the vineyard's pedigree comes through, but this uninspiring, medium-bodied wine possesses little depth or length. Anticipated maturity: now–2008.

It's an intentional style, and more difficult to achieve than it seems—prose so plain and clear that it reads like a subway map. It is also a particular outlook. Last spring in Monkton, Parker said to me, "What I've brought is a democratic view. I don't give a shit that your family goes back to pre-Revolution and you've got more wealth than I could imagine. If this wine's no good, I'm gonna say so."

That's the sort of English everyone can understand—and the big French winemaking families don't like it at all. Those families are some of the most conservative in Europe, masters of understatement and judgmental silence. They are epitomized by the wine aristocrats of Bordeaux, who pioneered the production of modern red wine 300 years ago, and who ever since have been able, on the basis of their wines' lineage alone,

see it in three dimensions. The textures. The flavors. The smells. They kids in a room. When I put my nose in a glass, it's like tunnel vision."

"A Democratic View"

IT'S a strange position for a man from Monkton. One commonly heard explanation for it is that Parker writes in English at a time when English use is increasing around the globe. But the British, who are the traditional wine critics, write in English too, and they don't enjoy anything like Parker's clout. Many of them have a diploma called the Master of Wine, or M.W., for which they've been required to pass tests—based largely on the identification of obscure or antique wines—that Parker would probably fail. Parker's eminence is therefore annoying to them. They see Parker, correctly, as an American upstart. They see him as a heathen.

Lineage counts for a lot with the British critics and is accorded proper deference. At their worst they seem to practice criticism as an excuse for Continental excursions: the villages were picturesque, the peasants were quaint, and the wines were "noble" above all. In contrast, Parker's criticism sounds like his mother's—direct and pointed, like one American talking straight to another. There are other American critics too, of course, but none who has been able to equal the directness and authenticity of Parker's voice. Last April, after tasting the

to set the standards and prices for the industry worldwide: traditionally, if they declared that their wine was the most desirable in the world, then whatever its real merits, it was accepted as such. Anyone who disagreed, said the Bordelais, simply did not know wine. The magic here lay, of course, in the tight control of definitions. It provided for an enviable commercial position, and allowed the Bordelais to pull off a double trick—producing very large quantities of very high-priced wines. But Parker is changing all that. It is getting harder for the Bordelais to disregard the laws of supply and demand, or the fact that their great wines aren't always very good.

Bordeaux is the key to understanding Parker's role in the world. It produced many of the truly fine wines on which he built his reputation, yet as a place that has come to rely on the techniques of modern high-yield production, it stands as the most important example of the industrialization in wine that he has been fighting against. Bordeaux is big business in disguise. The composition of the aristocracy there has changed over time, but outsiders who have bought into it have always eagerly adapted, mimicking the old families so willingly that by the second generation their carpetbagging is almost forgotten. In recent years a slew of publicly held corporations have

arms hanging wide, he looks as if he could wrestle down a cow.

He couldn't, because at age fifty-three he has a bad back. But here's how strong he has become: many people now believe that Robert Parker is single-handedly changing the history of wine. That's saying a lot. There are more than forty wine-producing countries in the world today, of which France is the first and the United States is the fourth; China is on the list. These countries have planted 30,000 square miles of vineyards and are making the equivalent of 35 billion bottles of wine every year. Parker directly controls the merest patch of all this—a micro-winery called Beaux Frères, near Newburg, Oregon, which he owns with his brother-in-law and refuses to promote. The wines produced there (from pinot noir grapes) are not necessarily among the best, but they keep Parker from sounding off about winemaking as, he says, a eunuch might sound off about sex. He is not an exporter, an importer, or a money man. He is a self-employed consumer advocate, a crusader in a peculiarly American tradition. It's really very simple, or so it seems at first. Parker samples 10,000 wines a year. He sniffs and sips them, and scribbles little notes. Some of the wines are good, and some are not—according to Parker. If he is changing wine history, as people claim, it is purely through the expression of his taste.

His base is a cramped two-room office in his house in Monkton, where the



family's bulldog and basset hound like to lie on the tile floor and sleep and fart and snore. Parker has an acute sense of smell, but unless he is tasting wine, he enjoys their presence. The two secretaries who work in the outer office are less understanding. They told me that they, too, like the dogs but often usher them outside. The older of the secretaries has worked for Parker for years, but has never learned to enjoy wine. She is dedicated to Parker, as women close to him tend to be, in a protective and motherly way. Parker's real mother, who handles the office mail, has a different approach. She is said to be tough and unimpressed. One afternoon Parker, in a self-pitying mood, mentioned to her that for years he had received only letters of complaint. She fixed him with a stare and said, "That's because they're the only ones I've let you see."

Her instincts were probably good. Parker seems to have trouble distinguishing friends from sycophants, and he sets too much store by the compliments he receives. He does his best work not in public but in his private inner office, where he is left mostly alone. That office has a messy desk and a computer, a stereo stacked with CDs (Bob Dylan, Neil Young), a countertop crowded with bottles, a rack of clean wine glasses,

and a sink that is deep enough to allow for spitting without splattering. There he writes and publishes an un-illustrated journal called *The Wine Advocate*, subtitled "The Independent Consumer's Bimonthly Guide to Fine Wine."

The Wine Advocate accepts no advertising. A subscription costs \$50 a year. Each issue consists of an editorial or two and about fifty-six pages of blunt commentaries on wines that Parker has recently tasted. The commentaries are short, usually two or three sentences, grouped by region and winery, and associated with "Parker Points," which are scores on a scale of 50 to 100. One of the lowest scores Parker ever gave a new vintage was 56, for 1979 Lambert Bridge Cabernet Sauvignon, about which he wrote, "One has to wonder what this winery does to its cabernet to make it so undrinkable. . . . This wine has an intense vegetative, barnyard aroma and very unusual flavors." But generally, poor wines score in the 70s, adequate ones in the 80s, and really good ones in the 90s. There are significant gradations within those ranges. Rarely, Parker has given a wine a perfect score of 100—seventy-six times out of 220,000 wines tasted. He always lists an approximate retail price and provides an opinion about when the wine will be ready to drink. He works hard to avoid conflicts of interest: he pays his own way, accepts no gifts or payoffs, and does not speculate financially on wine. As a result he has an unimpeachable reputation for integrity in an industry that does not.

"A wine goes in my mouth, and I just see it," Parker says. "I see it just jump out at me. I can taste with a hundred screaming kids"

The Wine Advocate has 40,000 subscribers, in every U.S. state and thirty-seven foreign countries. These are influential readers, and they pass the issues around, igniting the markets of Asia, the United States, and now even Europe, where collectors and wealthy consumers can be counted on to search out wines on the basis of Parker's recommendations. The effects are felt on store shelves, where retailers display Parker's comments or scores, and up the supply chain, influencing speculation, negotiation, and price-setting, until even the producers of mass wines feel the weight of Parker's opinions. The trade has never known such a voice, such a power, before. When it comes to the great wines—those that drive styles and prices for the entire industry—there is hardly another critic now who counts.

The effects are global. As wines rise and fall on the basis of Parker's judgments, and as producers respond to his presence, the industry worldwide is moving in an unexpected direction, toward denser, darker, and more dramatic wines. It would be simplistic to believe that the movement is entirely due to Parker: he may just be its most effective agent. In any case, these denser, darker, wines are the wines that Parker and now much of the world prefer to drink. Because they require intensive

bought in as well, and even they have played along, furnishing their chateaux with antiques and hiring the second sons of the aristocracy to make their wines in imitation of tradition. This is considered respectable, civic-minded behavior—and indeed it is, in a place that has staked its fortunes on its power to define the meaning of taste.

In Bordeaux the wines are made not of single grape varieties but of ever-changing combinations. Those combinations have been based on the cabernet sauvignon grape, with varying amounts of merlot, cabernet franc, and another, rarer grape, petit verdot, mixed in according to each winemaker's calculation, to provide a bit of "depth," or to intensify the wine. The result has traditionally been complex, light-colored wines, epitomized by the elegant "clarets" produced by the old vineyards north of the city, in an area called the Médoc, on the left bank of the river Gironde. The British have traded in claret since the 1700s, and they have long understood the rules of the game. There are unfortunate years of too much cold or rain, but if the wine is thin, then it is subtle or laudably austere. If it is undrinkably acidic or astringent when young, then, like a family inheritance, it is not intended to be consumed soon but to be put away to mellow, for future generations to enjoy.

But now comes this Parker, a man as naive as America, with his raw talent, his disproportionate weight, and his stubborn disregard for the hierarchy of taste. It is maddening to the Bordelais that even in France consumers increasingly are using him as a reference. The Bordelais believe Parker favors dark and dramatic wines—wines that they claim are at their most impressive when they are young in the glass, or competing in organized wine tastings, and that, more ominously, may well lack a pedigree. Wines like these depend more heavily on the merlot grape than on the cabernet sauvignon. To some degree they have long existed on the Gironde's right bank, around St.-Emilion and Pomerol, areas that in the context of the Médoc are considered to be newcomers, producing plebeian and somewhat simplistic wines. The new small wines are like those right-bank wines, only more so—darker, more intense, and, to the untutored palate, more accessible. These are the boutique growths, the so-called garage wines, that are starting to command the highest prices, and they are spreading like a rot through the region. Parker is to blame.

The old families try to hold steady. Last spring when I went to Bordeaux to ask them about Parker, they told me that he is deferential, that he visits twice a year, that he maintains a small Bordeaux office from which he publishes *The Wine Advocate's* only foreign-language edition, and that he pays homage to the region as the reference point for the world. But they also admitted, when pressed a bit, that he terrifies them. When Parker criticizes their wines, they see their prices tumble. When he compliments their wines, they can't resist using this to their advantage and proclaiming their scores. In private they complain that he is playing them like puppets. In public, for business reasons, they smile and pretend to be his friends. The duplicity is humiliating—and worse, it signals their loss of control.

You have to admire these people for their sense of irony. In the region of Bordeaux one day, one of them—impeccably dressed in jacket and tie, in an office where Thomas Jefferson went to taste wine, with portraits of ancestors hanging on the walls—made the argument to me, with just the slightest hint of humor in his eyes, that Bordeaux should erect a statue of Parker in honor of his contributions. It was the sort of dry joke he might have made to his patrician friends. Twice in the past ten years the Bordelais have arranged through local politicians to award Parker a national medal, the more recent of which was the Legion of Honor—France's highest award. It was presented to Parker at a ceremony in Paris in June of last year, by President Jacques Chirac, for having promoted French wines. Parker accepted the medal with tears in his eyes.

If reform is a form of promotion, Parker has promoted French wines—and perhaps some families felt that he deserved credit for that. But more likely they intended the medal as a public acknowledgment that they would have to find some way to live with him. The impulse is well known: you give a man a badge when you can't shut him up. Not that they hadn't tried. By the time of the Paris ceremony the French had sued Parker for what he had written, sued him for what he had not written, and even sued him for something in between—a mistake in translation. (A cellar that Parker called "disgusting" became "*dégueulasse*"—literally, "nauseating," which was more than he'd meant to say.) They had forced him into formal public apologies. They had cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees. They had banned him from their estates, fired his friends, mounted whispering campaigns against him, and pilloried him numerous times in French newspapers and magazines. To top it all, through blacklisting and a coordinated effort to render him useless to his readers, they had exploited a series of mistakes that Parker had made and had almost managed to run him out of Burgundy. The story of Parker's failure in Burgundy is long and complicated and not particularly relevant to Bordeaux. But in no country other than France has anything similar happened to him. Parker told me that he didn't want to sound like Oliver Stone, though he seemed sometimes to believe in conspiracies. And maybe for good reason. His life is not at risk, of course, but people in Bordeaux talked openly to me about setting him up for a drunk-driving arrest. Parker told me that several years ago one of them attacked him with a dog.

It was a small dog, but aggressive. Parker was in his hotel room in Bordeaux one night, working on the day's notes, when he got a phone call from Jacques Hébrard, the family manager of a famous chateau called Cheval Blanc, whose recent vintage Parker had described as a disappointment. Because Hébrard was very angry, Parker agreed to visit the chateau the following night, after his regular schedule of work, in order to retaste the wine. At the agreed-upon time he knocked on the chateau door. When it opened, a snarling schnauzer came out, leaped into the air, and clamped onto Parker's leg. Hébrard stood in the doorway, staring into Par-

ker's face and making no attempt to intervene. After several attempts Parker managed to shake off the dog, which went tumbling into the night. Parker followed Hébrard into an office, where he saw that his pants were torn and blood was running down his leg. He asked Hébrard for a bandage. Hébrard came across the room and glanced disdainfully at the wound. Without saying a word, he went to the far side of a desk, pulled out a copy of *The Wine Advocate*, and slammed it down hard. He said, "This is what you wrote about my wine!"

In his simplified French, Parker said, "That's why I'm here. To retaste it. Because you think I'm wrong."

"Well, I'm not going to let you retaste it."

Parker got as belligerent as he gets. He said, "Look. I came here at the end of the day. You said I could taste your wine. I've been bitten by your dog. If I was wrong about this wine, I will be the first to say so."

Hébrard stalked out of the office. Parker thought he would have to get up and leave. But then Hébrard came back and said, "Okay, let's go taste the wine." Parker limped after him to the tasting room. He was quick, as he always is; he tasted the wine twice to be sure, as is his habit, and realized to his chagrin that Hébrard was right—the wine was better than he had thought. He returned to his hotel to wash his wound. As a critic who often has to condemn the efforts of people he likes, he now had the equally hard task of admitting that Hébrard's work was top-notch. For the families of Bordeaux it was satisfying: Parker had been punished for his judgment. With luck he would have a little scar as a souvenir.

10,000 Wines a Year

PARKER'S house in Monkton stands in the woods on a hummock, off a narrow road next to a state park. It is an anonymous structure, somewhat like others scattered nearby, and according to Parker, it's just about right. When I went to see him, he told me that he does not like to stand out, that he's glad for his fame but relieved that it is contained within the tight circles of wine. He said he is reluctant to appear on television or the radio, because he has learned how bad it can be. Once, after an hour of waiting, he had an interview that consisted entirely of this: "Welcome to the show, Bruce, we don't have a lot of time, but, real quick here, what's your favorite white zinfandel?" Monkton is a shelter from all that. After Parker was written up in the *Baltimore Sun*, one of his neighbors said, "Hey, Bob, I didn't know you were some sort of wine expert." Parker answered "Yeah" with a shrug, because he wants to be a regular guy.

But of course he's not a regular guy—not anymore. Parker's success has taken him around the world and widened his view. It has taught him to believe in the idea of live and let live—except for anyone making bad wine. Simultaneously it has narrowed him, encouraging a peculiar single-mindedness that sustains his work but seems to have closed him off to topics beyond his immediate concerns. He can mingle with his neighbors at the post office and talk about politics and the weather, but even then what he's really thinking about, according to his wife, is food or wine. Given the chance, he becomes hard to follow, talking excitedly about obscure vintages and elaborate dishes with piled-up names—but he also runs on about plain old Maryland crab. He is a professional critic with strong opinions, and also simply a glutton. His enthusiasm permeates his work. He loves to eat. He loves to drink. And he can't stand moralists who say this is wrong.

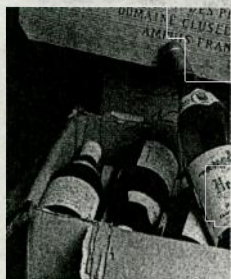
He means the temperance crusaders and righteous nutritionists who are given so much attention in the United States—people he calls the Pleasure Police. When he was with me, he lacked the nerve to take on Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Instead he went after their natural allies at the Washington-based Center for Science in the Public Interest, which he described as being in the business of "the taboo of the week."

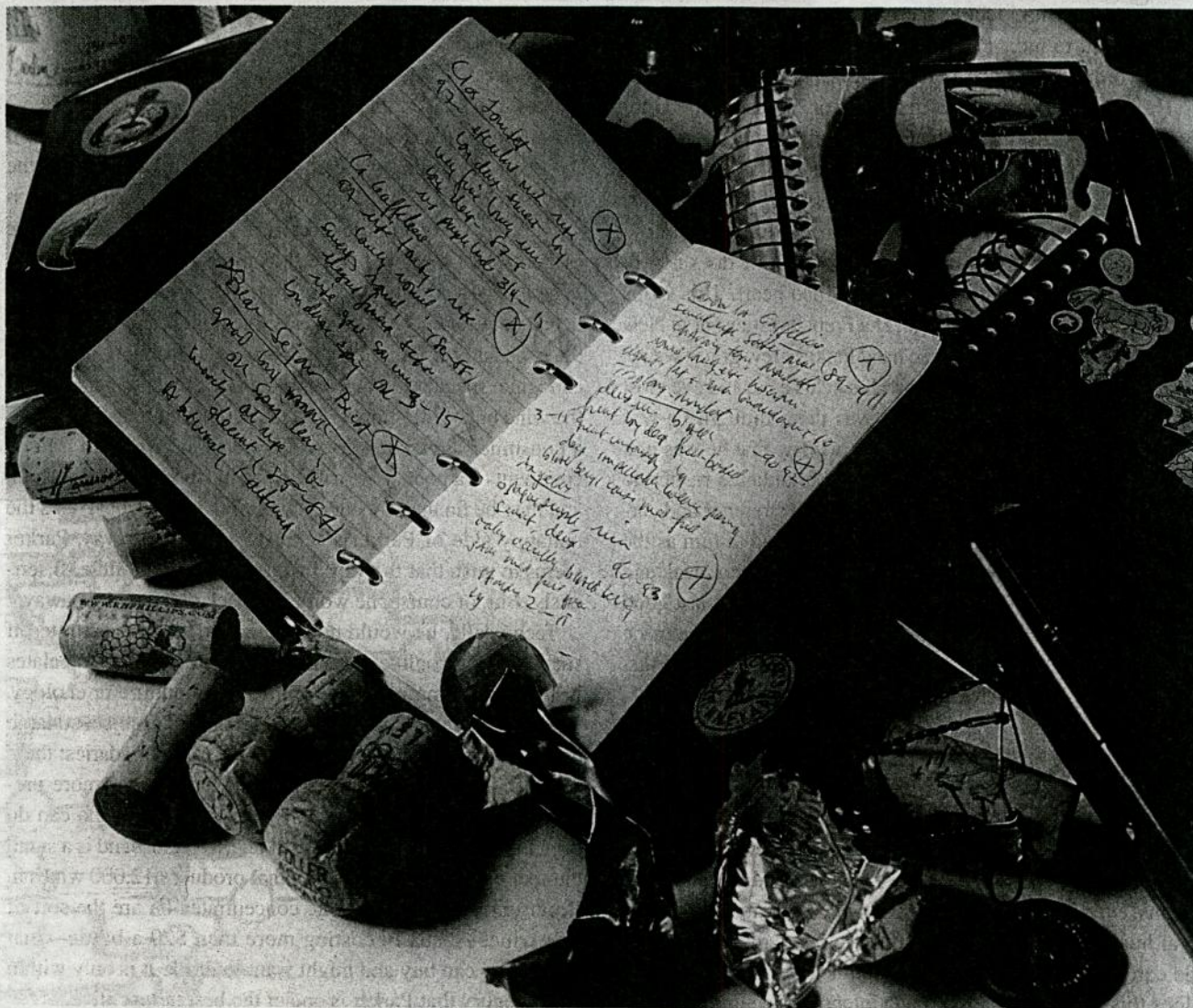
He said, "Fettuccine Alfredo is dangerous for your health. Kung pao chicken will destroy your life. Holy shit, the first week it's one of the classics of Italian cooking, the next week it's one of the staples of Chinese cooking! These are the people who do studies that your carry-out Chinese meals are saturated in fat. . . . I'd just like to *meet* them! I mean, what do they do for pleasure?"

I asked him whether in a world so full of hunger it didn't seem self-indulgent to worry over the choices on a menu. This was a backhanded way of getting at a question that still concerns me: how anyone could dedicate his life to something as superfluous as the taste of wine. Ultimately it was not an answerable question—and Parker didn't pursue my line of thought. Later he told me about losing his temper at a reporter who had asked him how he could possibly spend so much time tasting wine: "I said, 'Look, I don't have an argument for you. I'm a common-sense kind of guy. I wouldn't sit here unless I could do it. I know you can't do it, and don't want to do it. But I *can* do it, and I *want* to do it.'"

He was in a more reflective, less defensive mood with me. He said, "Part of life is to live it, and enjoy it, and seize the moments that you find particularly pleasing." He meant, of course, pleasure as defined by dining. I realized I couldn't blame him for this orientation after all: he was born with such strong taste buds that it seemed to be a biological thing.

The Parker effect is felt on store shelves and down the supply chain. The trade has never known such a voice before. When it comes





He kept calling himself a hedonist. That's a philosophical thing. He gave me a book called *Between Meals*, a profound little memoir by the late A. J. Liebling, the celebrated *New Yorker* writer, who died in 1963, at the age of fifty-nine. Liebling, too, was a glutton, and a famously defiant one. *Between Meals* was his argument for the uncomplicated pleasures of neighborhood bistros in France. He began it with what must have seemed to Parker like words meant for him:

The primary requisite for writing well about food is a good appetite. Without this, it is impossible to accumulate, within the allotted span, enough experience of eating to have anything worth setting down. Each day brings only two opportunities for field work, and they are not to be wasted minimizing the intake of cholesterol.

Liebling believed that it was equally important to research the subject of wine. He grew fat without flinching, and although he suffered a difficult last few years, disfigured by gout, he continued working until the end without expressing regret. He wrote, "No sane man can afford to dispense with debilitating pleasures; no ascetic can be considered reliably sane. Hitler was the archetype of the abstemious man. When the other krauts saw him drink water in the Beer Hall they should have known he was not to be trusted."

Parker gave me Liebling's book because he would like someday to write such a memoir. But the two men are very different. Liebling was a literary acrobat, a sophisticate, and ultimately a nihilist of the boozy kind. Parker is none of that. He is a technical writer faced with tight deadlines. Nonethe-

supply chain, until even the producers of mass wines feel the weight of Parker's
When it comes to the great wines there is hardly another critic now who counts.

less he shares with Liebling an unabashed enthusiasm for dining. He said to me, "I've always followed the rule that anything worth doing is worth doing excessively."

He sees the consequences in the mirror. He was a good runner once, but is too heavy for it now. He rides a mountain bike for exercise, and tries furiously to overtake younger bikers on the trails, and only sometimes succeeds. People in the wine business like to talk about his health. In California recently I heard that he has cancer of the mouth, which he does not. In Bordeaux people told me that he has a bad heart. This stems from an episode three years ago, at a French restaurant in New York, when during a ten-course meal Parker grew gray, sweaty, and weak, heard a high-pitched whine in his ears, and even lost his appetite. A cardiologist who was there thought he was having a heart attack. Parker somehow knew that he was not. His friends waited anxiously while an ambulance rushed to the scene. The rescue team laid Parker on a stretcher and carried him outside. At that point a man identified to him as the governor of New York, George Pataki, arrived for a meal, and Parker, looking up from the edge of death, gave his last good advice. He said, "Don't eat the scallops!" It would have made a nice epitaph, but at the hospital the doctors discovered that he had a bleeding ulcer, and they easily patched him up.

Otherwise Parker shows no signs of slowing down. Not only does he taste 10,000 wines a year, but he stores the sensation of each one into a permanent gustatory memory. When I asked him about the mechanical aspects of his work, he told me in a matter-of-fact way that he remembers every wine he has tasted over the past thirty-two years and, within a few points, every score he has given as well. That amounts to several hundred thousand relevant memories, which apparently he can summon up at will. He said he has no idea how he does this, except perhaps through intense concentration while tasting wine. He said, "A wine goes in my mouth, and I just see it. I see it in three dimensions. The textures. The flavors. The smells. They just jump out at me. I can taste with a hundred screaming kids in a room. When I put my nose in a glass, it's like tunnel vision. I move into another world, where everything around me is just gone, and every bit of mental energy is focused on that wine." Afterward he can't help it—he just remembers.

As a result, he has a breadth of knowledge beyond that of any other critic alive: he remembers not only every French wine he has tasted but also every wine from Germany, Spain, Italy, Chile, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand, among other countries. As a single judge awarding scores across the board, he implicitly compares all these wines with one another—just as a consumer might in a store. That is where his experience gives him an intellectual advantage: many of the other critics also issue scores, but they are hemmed in by the narrowness of their experience or neutered by the consensus of committees. They make bitter puns about Parker's "critical mass," because, it's true, he is a force running wild in their midst, one man dominating their field. It's

easy to see why they would distrust him. But when they accuse him of despotism, that's a harder fit.

He seems to vacillate between regret and arrogance about the position he is in. In principle he does not believe in imposing his will on others, but in practice he often does so. He told me that he is aware of the contradiction, and agrees with the people who question whether any one man should hold such power. His commentaries have become complicated by the certainty that they will be read as more than frank opinions. When he writes that a wine is "an insider's secret," it instantly becomes just the opposite. A positive review and a score over 90, especially for a wine that is produced in small quantities, can ignite speculation that sends the price rocketing and clears the wine out of the stores—just the sort of thing that Parker, as a consumer advocate, would like to fight. Worse, a critical comment or a poor score can also be blown out of proportion, and may be financially devastating to the producer. That's the unhappy side of Parker's achievement. Either way, Parker seems to wish that the world wouldn't take him quite so seriously. But, of course, he won't just back down and go away.

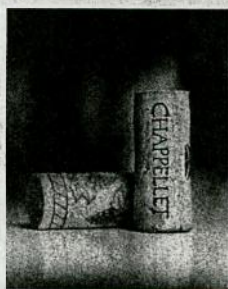
Technically, he would not be the world's greatest taster, if such a person could exist. There are other tasters with palates just as good, who are better trained in viticulture or enology, or who have read more history. But wine is a subject so large that expertise within it has to be defined by boundaries: there are specialists in regions who can identify wines more precisely than Parker, and specialists in subregions who can do even better. Parker is the practical one. Ten thousand is a small number of wines in an industry that produces 12,000 wines in Bordeaux alone: the ones he concentrates on are the sort of fine wines—usually costing more than \$20 a bottle—that Americans can buy and might want to drink. It is only within that category that Parker is one of the best tasters alive.

That's still a big claim. In recognition of his special talent, Parker has managed to add a clause to his disability insurance—a paragraph that insures his olfactory sense, his "nose," for a million dollars. He told me he had taken out the policy after meeting a European critic who had lost his ability to smell and therefore to taste. I mentioned that given the scale of Parker's career, a million dollars seemed like a small sum. He agreed and said he had been unable to get the underwriter to agree to a higher amount. He laughed and said, "I'm sure if I put in a claim saying I couldn't taste anymore, they'd give me some pretty smelly tests." The kind of tests, he said, that would curl a man's nose.

For now, his senses are healthy. Given a choice, he prefers to taste tannic or complex red wines in the morning, when he is at his best, and to finish the day with relatively simple white wines. He stands, in order to be alert. He checks the cleanliness of the glass. If he has doubts, he breathes moisture into it and sniffs for any residual odors—soap, chlorine, wood, or cardboard. He calls this "the Parker exhale test," as if he had copyrighted the term. If the glass is not clean, he rinses it with bottled water and dries it. He pours the wine. Then, with his

hand on his hip, he lifts the glass, looks at the wine, smells the wine, swirls the wine, puts the wine in his mouth, curls his tongue around it, sucks in air noisily to agitate it, distributes the wine throughout his mouth, and forces the vapors into the back of his nose. He hesitates for just an instant and then spits the wine out and concentrates on its residual tastes. He jots a few notes, or mumbles his comments into a tape recorder, and then repeats the process to verify his impressions.

Even his detractors admit that he is phenomenally consistent—that after describing a wine once he will describe it in nearly the same way if he retastes it “blind” (without reference to the label), and that these descriptions fit among others he makes in the constellation of wines. In theory such steadiness allows experienced readers to calibrate their palates against his, and to make informed choices even when they disagree with him. In reality most readers probably just look at the scores. Parker has become so confident in his judgments that he likes to point out his mistakes—in part because he doesn’t make many. Stories about his natural abilities abound. I was told, for instance, that at an informal get-together in Bordeaux recently, someone handed Parker a glass of Sauternes, and he casually remarked after taking a sip that it reminded him of a certain wine he had tasted ten years before—or at least of how that wine might have evolved. The point of the story, of course, was that he



The wine aristocrats of Bordeaux pioneered the production of wine worldwide: if they declared that their wine was the most desirable

got it right, and that this was an ordinary occurrence for him. The Bordelais would like to believe that his talent is disconnected from his knowledge or intelligence. They would like to believe that Parker is an idiot savant.

The characterization annoys Parker, who points out that he was once an attorney for the Farm Credit Banks of Baltimore—a notably weak defense, undermined by his admission that the job was a bore. It seems likely that the Bordelais are at least partly right—that Parker does have a freakish genius for smell and taste, which by luck he discovered about himself. He calls it a “privileged ability,” but as a true American, he wants to be very clear that he has exploited it too. That’s fair enough, because he’s a hard worker. For about a fourth of the year he travels to the world’s important wine areas, where he shrugs off the impulse to socialize or sight-see and gets down to intensive wine tasting all day, every day. He visits the vineyards and also has the wines brought to a central point—a hotel, for instance—where he can go through more than a hundred in a day without wasting time on the road traveling to vineyards.

There is a machine-like quality to what he does. When at home in Maryland, he continues to work at least six days a

week, tasting, grading, and writing notes at a furious pace. This is out of necessity. Having set himself up as a watchdog, and having committed himself to the rigors of a regular publishing schedule, Parker has been trapped by the math of expanding expectations: not only must he taste the ever-greater number of wines in each new vintage, but, because wines in the bottle endure and evolve, he must also retaste a growing number of old wines. Of course, he does drop some wines along the way, but still the obligations build. Moreover, for the sake of valid comparisons—the across-the-board scoring that is so useful to his readers—he is condemned to work largely on his own. His publisher in Paris told me that he sometimes thinks of Parker as a tragic figure, like a character in a classic play. When I asked Parker about this later, he said that his publisher was wrong. Indeed, one of the keys to his success is his sustained and almost childlike enthusiasm for his job. But it’s true that he faces quandaries.

The math that traps him helps him too. Parker’s output is huge as a result of it. Beyond the nearly 350 pages of new material required annually for *The Wine Advocate*, he compiles and expands on his notes to create bulky wine-buying guidebooks, of which eleven have so far been published in various editions, on various regions. These books have been translated into five languages and have hit the best-seller lists in several countries, including France. For Parker they have been a wind-

fall—generating more income than *The Wine Advocate* does, at little extra expense, and making him a rich man by his own measure. He is frank about his good fortune: he was poor before, and he is glad that he no longer is. Nonetheless, what’s unusual about Parker—this American at work in the world—is that for him money remains intrinsically uninteresting.

The Dark Side of Wine

THE person who made that point most clearly to me was Pierre-Antoine Rovani, a thirty-six-year-old man with a reputation as a brilliant taster, who hired on with Parker four years ago, partly to cover hostile Burgundy, where Parker himself now rarely ventures, and who has been grappling ever since with the perhaps impossible job of establishing an independent yet integrated voice within *The Wine Advocate*. Rovani is a sardonic fellow with a goatee and sparkling eyes—the son of French officials, raised and educated in Washington, D.C., where he lives today. Money is intrinsically interesting to him. He earned a degree in economics, and worked as a business consultant for several years (also, improbably, as the White House correspondent for the Saudi press agency) be-

fore moving into the retail wine business and then making the leap to Parker's side. When I met him, last spring in Georgetown, he told me that he had burned his bridges and would never be able to go back to retailing. I didn't doubt it, because he seemed to have a skeptical view of the business and a habit of speaking his mind. For several hours he told me about the dark side of wine—kickbacks, payoffs, and frauds of many kinds. He saw the humor in it. He said, "You dump the bad stuff on Park Avenue. If the bottle says 'Grand Cru,' or 'Premier Grand Cru,' or 'Pomerol,' or, you know, if there's a word on there that some rich guy recognizes . . ."

"You can sell it," I suggested.

He nodded. "In small quantities. In a place like New York. Where there are *lots* of idiots. You can get away with it."

You can also, if you have a stock of bad wine, take out your scissors, find a relevant issue of *The Wine Advocate*, and, with a bit of tape and a copy machine, improve the score. Rovani mentioned a New York store that had recently done just that, sending out altered scores and tasting notes with its promotional literature. The work was so shoddy in this case that the doctored print lay crooked on the page.

Rovani seemed amused by this. I got the impression that he sympathized with the store's owner. In any case, he seemed to have a better feel than Parker for commercial realities on the front lines, where one of the big problems is how to handle an

Why is it that at a certain age men start buying little sports cars, or the cigar boat that makes so much noise—or they get the trophy wife. How many of these guys don't even drink the wine? They call you up and they say, 'I've got twenty cases of Lafite, I've twenty cases of Le Pin . . .' These are trophies that they're collecting." He described conference calls with three or four competing stockbrokers, made when he was a retailer, in which he sold half a million dollars' worth of wines.

Those men are extreme cases, as is Le Pin, but they set the tone for the business of fine wines. Parker publicly denounces the high prices as "the legalized mugging of the consumer," but in private he admits that the victims are usually all too willing to be mugged. He said, "I know collectors with forty thousand bottles who if you poured them a glass of Gallo Hearty Burgundy wouldn't know the difference. I know collectors who, believe me, if you mixed Kool-Aid into cheap Chilean merlot, they'd taste it and say, 'Well, yeah . . .'"

In a world like this a little doctoring of the tasting notes hardly seems important. Rovani described the industry as a game of musical chairs, in which the players throughout the chain of distribution all scramble to avoid getting stuck with the stock. I asked him about being an importer. He said, "What's it like? You sweat. Very early in the morning, because of the time differences, the faxes start coming in, and you have to gamble your entire business because the figures

*ion of wine 300 years ago, and ever since have set the standards for the industry
t desirable in the world, then whatever its real merits, it was accepted as such.*

annual overproduction of wine worldwide that amounts to roughly 25 percent. The surplus has not been allowed to drive down prices, as it should have to provide for a healthy industry in the long term. This is in part because of wine's residual status as an elite drink. For those in the business, maintaining that image is important not only for commercial reasons but also for reasons of personal prestige. Every stage of the trade is involved in establishing the high prices, but ultimately those prices can be sustained only through the retailers and their sales efforts. The problem for the retailers is that wine—unlike luxurious hotel rooms and other hyperinflated products generally covered as business expenses—is usually paid for directly out of the consumer's pocket. This makes for a scary business, especially toward the high end, where *The Wine Advocate* roams. The truth is that even the best wines cost only about \$10 a bottle to produce, and they are not inherently rare. If the initial cost is tripled to allow for profits along the path of distribution, one can reasonably conclude that retail prices above \$30 are based on speculation, image, and hype.

Rovani mentioned a Bordeaux called Le Pin, which sells in recent vintages for \$600 to \$1,000 a bottle. I asked him what kind of person would buy it. He shrugged. "Look, it's a game.

are so high. If it's a good vintage, you can't sit it out, because you'll lose your customer base. So you gamble."

He offered to show me what the gamble looks like: in Washington alone there are a couple of big warehouses stacked floor to ceiling with overpriced wines that cannot be returned and will soon begin to decline. For anyone interested in money, it's an impressive sight. The only way out is bravely forward again, and into the stores, where finally the customer is left standing and blinking at the price he just paid for the bottle in his hand. Retailers are thankful for the strong economy. Fine wines are selling well, but the structure that sustains them is flimsy. All along the chain of supply people fear a collapse, because they have had to invest heavily in what everyone knows is vastly overpriced stock. A collapse wouldn't look like much in the store. But a reduction of just a few dollars in the price the market is willing to pay would crush businesses around the world.

Rovani would welcome such a "correction," because he is an economist who believes in market necessities. Parker would welcome it, because he is an ethicist who opposes the speculation in wine. This highlights a basic difference between the two men. Rovani, who is a salaried employee, sometimes

chafes at what he sees as Parker's lack of interest in building the value of his own business. He mentioned to me, for instance, that *The Wine Advocate* has never had a marketing budget, that it has not been significantly promoted even in Parker's guidebooks, and that in his opinion the royalties that Parker has agreed to for his foreign book sales are ridiculously small. He said, "Bob is extremely hardworking, extremely loyal, honorable, a great parent, a brilliant wine taster. But he just doesn't get excited by business. When I try to talk to him about the French *Wine Buyer's Guide*, or the contract issues, he'll talk about it for two or three minutes, and then you can see he's bored by it. He'll change the subject to when we can get together and go eat dim sum." Rovani seemed regretful rather than upset. He knew that the weakness he was describing was also Parker's strength. He was resigned to this frustration. He shrugged and said, "Money is not what he's passionate about. And the key to Bob Parker is passion."

An Innocent Abroad

PARKER was born in 1947 into a family of dairy farmers, just a few minutes' drive from where he lives today. His parents did not drink wine. They did not drink milk. They drank soda pop. Parker was their only child. When he was four, they built a house down the road and left the farm. Parker's father went to work selling heavy construction equipment, a job he excelled at because he was good with people and didn't mind driving. He was a regular guy with one unusual quality: he had an acute sense of smell. He could pick up garlic on a person's breath from across a room. Young Parker had the same gift, but he didn't realize it was anything special.

He had a typical American childhood. He attended public schools, had a few bicycles, and played a lot of soccer. At the right age he discovered girls and learned to drive. He went to Washington a few times. He went to Baltimore. But Monkton was his world. And it was not a fine-wine kind of place. The high school was called Hereford. It was a plain brick building in a field, a school attended by front-yard mechanics and Future Farmers of America. Parker was not quite like them, but he played soccer well, and he had a normal number of friends. He was one of the "smart kids" enrolled in a small program for college-bound students whose main qualifications seemed to be that their fathers did not work with their hands. In the tenth grade Parker fell in love with a fellow student, a lively girl named Pat Etzel, who is now his wife. They graduated together in the class of 1965—a typical Monkton vintage of no great distinction, soon diminished by the loss of two boys in Vietnam. On Pat Etzel's eighteenth birthday Parker had his first taste of wine. It was sweet, bubbly, fortified cold duck, and it made him throw up.

Pat went off to a women's college in Frederick, Maryland, to study French. In order to stay close to her, Parker accepted a soccer scholarship for one year at a college in northern Virginia, and then transferred to the University of Maryland at

College Park, where he dabbled in history and art appreciation. He was a strapping young man with sideburns and longish hair—a solitary but affable guy who, like many men at his age, was having to wait around to grow up. He vaguely opposed the war in Vietnam. On the basis of a temporary injury to his knee he got himself permanently excused from the draft. He finally found the courage to tell his father that he didn't enjoy hunting. For lack of genuine academic interests, he decided on a career in law. He sometimes had a surprising seriousness about him that hinted at his powers of concentration. But it would have been difficult to judge his intelligence. He got good grades, but he was an empty page.

Then came the autumn of 1967, when Pat left for a junior year abroad in Strasbourg, France. Parker told me that Pat's parents did not then approve of her relationship with him, and they hoped that this separation would persuade her to break it off. Parker worried that she might. His pretty girlfriend had matured into a strikingly beautiful woman, slender and graceful, with a lively angular face set off by mischievous green eyes, and now she had ventured out into an unseen world full of foreign men. Parker had little contact with her through the fall—a few delayed letters and hurried telephone calls—and he was increasingly unsure of her feelings. Still, they had a plan to meet in Paris for the December holidays.

The trip was a huge idea for Parker. He still gets excited when he talks about it. Until then he had traveled only as far away as New York, by train, and he had never before flown in an airplane. His father, who had often preached to him about the importance of having shined shoes, made Parker buy a white shirt and a dark three-piece suit for the flight. During the short hop from Baltimore to New York, Parker spilled coffee on himself. During the long flight across the North Atlantic he sat next to a casually dressed Harvard student, who had the good manners not to comment on Parker's stains. This fellow spoke impeccable French and had a mother who was waiting for him in some well-known neighborhood of Paris. He was able to offer Parker fascinating opinions about the best European destinations. He was very depressing. It was beyond his imagination that Parker had never flown before.

As the day turned into night, Parker began to brood. What if he missed Pat in the crowd at the airport? Worse, what if she didn't even bother to show up? Or what if she did show up but didn't love him anymore? Parker didn't know much about the world, but he had heard about French lovers. He figured these were the same guys who had developed the French kiss—and that was probably just the start. He ordered a couple of whiskeys and drank himself to sleep.

The flight was due to arrive in Paris at 10:30. Parker woke up at 10:45. When he saw the time, he jumped into the aisle and yelled, "Shit, I've missed my stop!" The Harvard fellow looked at him in disbelief. A stewardess came up and informed him that an airplane is not a train. He sat again. The Harvard fellow said, "You really *haven't* flown before." Then the captain announced that Paris was fogged in and the flight was be-

ing diverted to Rome. Parker panicked again. He said, "How am I supposed to get from Rome to Paris? I don't even speak Italian!" The Harvard fellow laughed and assured him that there would be a flight to Paris in the morning. In the meantime he would have a night to explore Rome. Parker decided then and there to put aside his fears and to embrace this unexpected experience. It was an important moment for him. He was becoming a traveler.

The airline gave him a hotel room in Rome, but he was too wide awake to stay in it. He visited a bar. He wandered the streets. It's characteristic of Parker that his first strong impression of Europe was a smell, and that he identified it precisely. It was the stench of horse urine emanating from a Gypsy encampment by the Coliseum. At dawn he watched Rome come alive for another chaotic day. He was enthralled by the density of the street culture, and by its casual connection to history. He was enthralled by the people, the sounds, and the architectural mixture. He did not shy away from the strangeness of the scene, as provincials often do, comparing Rome with home, or wrinkling their noses. He opened himself completely. He inhaled Europe. He drank it in.

The mood endured, and became in some ways a permanent thing. It helped that a few hours later the airline was able to deliver him to a still-foggy Paris and that his beautiful Pat was waiting there for him and that she loved him very much, spoke good French, and wanted to serve as his guide. She took him by subway to the Trocadéro, led him backward up the steps to the street, and spun him around for his first clear sight of the city: it was a view of the Eiffel Tower, rising gracefully on the opposite bank of the Seine. "Wow!" Parker said, as he often still does.

The young couple stayed in a cheap hotel in the Latin Quarter, a dingy little place called the Danube. For several days they walked through Paris. Parker told me that he couldn't get enough of it. He was in heaven. In the evenings at neighborhood restaurants Pat playfully ordered snails, frogs' legs, mussels, fatty pâtés, and smelly cheeses—foods that should have disgusted a kid from Monkton but in this case did not. Neither of them would have guessed that Parker had one of the world's great palates, or that with these intimate little meals he might be starting down a path toward fame and power. That would have been ridiculous. About the food Parker said, "This stuff is good!" and left it at that, as a regular guy would.

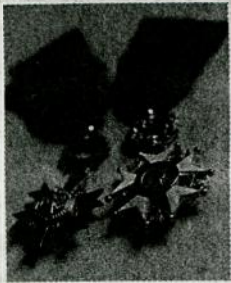
He was alone with Pat Etzel in Paris and ferociously in love. Is it surprising that he learned to like the wine? The wine they ordered with their meals was the cheapest they could find, served in carafes, pale red, pleasantly alcoholic, and unremarkable by Parker's present standards, but it was unlike anything he had tasted before. Parker told me he was immediately fascinated by it. Here was a beverage that seemed to complement food and promote conversation, that gave him a buzz but did not make him drunk, and that never blurred his vision like liquor or bloated him like beer. It's hard to imagine his sensations the first few times he put it in his mouth. It was not sweet like bourbon or soda pop. Did it taste of fruit, as people said? It

was maybe a little astringent. Parker lacked the vocabulary necessary to sort out the confusion of tastes. He idealized the wine at first. He liked the thought that it was a product of French culture, an artifact that was authentic yet accessible and meant to be shared. As it passed over his tongue, he sensed that it was loaded with meanings he didn't understand. But his immediate reactions were typically straightforward. Every night the wine was different, and every night it seemed to work. "This stuff is good!" Beyond that, he knew little.

Pat took him to Strasbourg, where his education continued. Parker described to me how in the cold, gray countryside of northeastern France he was shocked by the lingering evidence, after so many years, of the two world wars—the buildings still pockmarked or lying in ruin, the cripples in the cafés and on the trains, the village monuments engraved with long lists of the dead, grouped by family name. The destruction was worse than anything Parker had imagined, and it made him realize how sheltered he had been. He knew that the United States had fought hard and well to liberate this ground, but he did not swell with national pride or indulge, as others do, in the sly denigration of the French for their claims about *résistance*. He realized that battles alone could not explain such scars. The significance of *résistance* was not martial—it was the underlying stubbornness that had allowed the ordinary French to emerge from an apocalypse with their attitudes toward life still largely intact. Parker admired them for it, and had all the more reason every night to appreciate their wine.

Pat had met a doctor in Strasbourg, who invited the young couple to share a few meals with him in the best local restaurants. The doctor was a gourmet and a generous man, and he enjoyed introducing them to the tradition of the three-hour dinner, and to tastes that lay beyond their means. For Parker, with his acute sensitivities, the meals were not just pleasures but profound revelations. He began to concentrate on food in a way that he had not previously known was possible. He also had his first few bottles of really fine wine. Already he was beginning to sort out the tastes. In France today the story goes that he looked up after sipping a certain wine and said, "Oh, that's good! There's a little taste of grapefruit there, and a little taste of lemon, and a little taste of . . ." The doctor is said to have gazed at him and remarked, "Do you know that you have just defined the main components of a Riesling?" And Parker is said to have understood at that moment that he had the talents of a prodigy.

The story is too tidy to be quite true, but in essence it is correct: after those meals in Strasbourg there was no turning Parker back. His visit to France lasted six weeks, with an unpleasant interlude of bad food in Germany. When it was time for him to go home, he and Pat returned to Paris, intent on spending the last of his holiday money on a final gourmet meal. They chose Maxim's, a three-star restaurant on the rue Royale, which was known as a bastion of classic French cuisine. They checked into their cheap hotel. In preparation for the dinner, Pat pressed the collar of Parker's washed white shirt between two books, and brushed the wrinkles from their



Parker terrifies the old wine families of Bordeaux. When he compliments their wines, they can't resist proclaiming their critic score

best clothes. Parker dutifully shined his shoes.

They arrived at Maxim's, and after a typically disdainful attendant hung Pat's cloth coat on a rack loaded with furs, the couple was banished to a secondary dining room full of foreigners, and assigned to a table with a flickering electric lamp. When Parker complained about the lamp, a disapproving waiter tried to fix it and received a shock that knocked him to the floor. It didn't help matters that the two Americans could hardly keep from laughing. But they settled down, and after a while they ordered their meal. The restaurant photographer came along and took a picture, which they kept, of a smiling Pat and a more somber Parker in his suit, gazing down and away with a shy, thoughtful expression on his face. Maxim's was turning into another lesson for him. The wine they drank was overpriced. The food looked better than it tasted. The dessert was a pretty little tart so tough that it shot out from under Parker's knife, flew off the table, and stuck to the pants of a passing waiter. When Parker took Pat to dance on the restaurant's small dance floor, the maitre d'hôtel came up and explained with regret that the color of Parker's polished shoes was an inappropriate brown. Pat led Parker back to their table. Then came the bill.

Terroir and Tradition

THIRTY-TWO years later there are wine families in France who feel that Parker is still making them pay. Near the city of Bordeaux last spring I talked to one of the most powerful producers in the trade, a businessman with formal manners, who did not want me to use his name. He pretended for a while to be Parker's friend, but finally could not keep his anger from showing. He shut his office door against the secretaries outside, turned to me, and said, "*Monsieur*, do you *know* Robert Parker? Have you met him?" His voice was deep and resonant. "*Monsieur*, you surely do not believe that such a man is simply *tasting wines*! You do not believe that he ignores the *political* context of his work! *Non, monsieur*, Robert Parker knows precisely what he is doing. And he has his reasons."

I was intrigued. Was he going to tell me that Parker was in it for the money after all? That he had hidden allies? Secret meetings? Understandings with governments? I asked him to explain.

From a stack of papers on his desk he slid me a fax that someone had just sent him. It was a page from a recent *Wine Advocate*, a survey of Australian wines. He made a steeple of his hands and watched me darkly while I glanced over what

Parker had written. It didn't take long. He had liked some Australian wines so much that he had scored them in the nineties. I looked up and said, "But your own wines score well too."

That was not the point. His own wines were traditional, and these most certainly were not. He saw the very comparison as a betrayal of Bordeaux. He said, "Bob is a big, dramatic man, with big, dramatic tastes. But our wines are supposed to be *red*, not *black*." He held up his pen, a shiny black Mont Blanc, to show me the color of the wines that he thought Parker favors. He said, "I have known him for twenty years, but I will no longer read what he writes. He wants to lead us down a path to destruction."

That's Bordeaux—a place so steeped in tradition that it's not unusual to find people who go around actively regretting the French Revolution. When I told the story of the Australian wines to Rovani, he said, "What did you expect? Those people *own* the town. The bottom line is, when that's your business, how much do you like the big, goofy northern-Maryland guy who rates you? Because your game is control."

Rovani does not cover Bordeaux, but he knows it well and seems to enjoy the scene. He told me about a conversation he had one day with a powerful chateau owner there. "I asked him how he got interested in wine and he said, 'After I finished school, my father had really nothing of importance to give me as a gift, and so he gave me . . .'" Rovani named a famous chateau. He laughed. "I mean, the thing's worth millions!"

I said, "And when he says that to you, does he realize that he's . . ."

Rovani interrupted. "That he's talking to a guy who plays with his credit-card debt? It's beyond that. It doesn't matter. I'm not in his life—you know what I mean?"

"Yes, but does he realize he's playing a role?"

"I always wonder. I always wonder how far over the line these people get."

In Bordeaux the answer to that question is all about a person's connection to the right class of wine. This is a place where strangers ask you your birth year to establish not your age but the associated vintage. Among the great wine families, I met one man who smiled about his position in life—but he had just gotten remarried. The others did not smile. They belonged to a rigid and self-referential society, similar to a hereditary aristocracy but mercantile in its essence, and shaped in a peculiar way by the formal rankings of the nearly two hundred top chateaux, the so-called "classified growths." The language is confusing, because "growth" refers not to the vines or even to the individual wines but to the participating chateaux, each of which has been assigned a more or less permanent ranking according to traditional perceptions of its relative prestige and quality. The first classifications were created in the nineteenth

he criticizes their wines, they see their prices tumble. When he scores. This is humiliating—and worse, it signals their loss of control.

century as marketing tools to justify the prices that the top Bordeaux wines were already commanding. They were a huge success, allowing consumers to sort through the confusion of labels, and providing the producers with price-setting structures and a stability that had been lacking in the business. But they went too far. The great weakness of the Bordeaux classification system is that it allows for little or no change. And so it has had the effect of ossifying the entire industry of Bordeaux wines and with it the structure of society.

Parker is a revolutionary because he disregards the traditional rankings and simply tastes the wines. He has in practice created an entirely new and simplified classification system, based upon his own judgment. This is of grave concern to Bordeaux, and especially to the Médoc, which has the most important and prestigious of the classified growths, and where

traditionally the most expensive wines have been made. The Médoc is a rolling expanse of vineyards punctuated by overblown manors and occasional impoverished villages (some of them largely inhabited by Moroccan field workers) from which the life seems to have been sucked. It is not an attractive place, but because of its famous wines, it thinks highly of itself. I had been warned that the families there would close their doors on me, as they would close them on Parker if they could. They did not. They guided me through the intricacies of the business, introduced me to their friends, and patiently explained the error of Parker's ways. But nowhere among them was I able to find the person I sought—someone with the humor and perspective necessary to make a persuasive argument for the preservation of their world. These people were not playing roles. They had crossed a line at birth.



Among them I found a man who seemed to embody their fears—Bernard Ginestet, the aging scion of a once-great family, an aristocrat fallen from the heights, who in his loss is said to have become a philosopher of wine. I met him for lunch in Bordeaux, in the medieval center of the city. He was a gaunt, gray, unshaven man with heavy-lidded eyes and the voice of a chain smoker; I thought he looked a bit roughed up by life, and probably for the better. He had the demeanor of a disillusioned aristocrat, at once detached and self-abandoned. When he smiled, his face remained serious. When he said, "In every family there are people who are failures," I could not tell if he was referring to himself. Years before, he had inherited and then been forced to sell the historic Chateau Margaux, a large estate in the Médoc that has been making wines for centuries and that stands at the very peak of the classification system, as one of only five classified "first growths" in the Médoc. When he lost the property, in 1977, the Bordelais were horrified by the depth of his fall.

After honoring the family debts Ginestet had little left. He was elected mayor of the local village, also named Margaux. To make a living he became a writer and an editor, and produced a series of narrowly focused books, each on the subject of a single official wine-production area, known as an *appellation*, often of only a few square miles. Because of the geographic concentration of such work, he became an authority on the central concept of the Bordelais culture: a belief in the fundamental significance of what is called *terroir*. The word *terroir* has no concise translation but relates strongly to history, class, and pedigree; it means the soil both real and metaphorical from which a vine, a wine, or a person emerges. Ginestet told me I could spend days trying to understand it. Because weather matters too, as do changes brought about by economics and technology, there is a need to consider the vintage. But for the aristocracy of Bordeaux *terroir* matters most of all.

My conversation with Ginestet did not go well. He had lived for a while near San Francisco, and he thought he knew the American mind. Few of his books had been translated. I asked him why. He waved his fork vaguely, and in English he said, "Too *Frenchy*," as if that explanation were enough. He thought my questions about Bordeaux were simplistic. He denied every premise. But rather than clearly expressing himself, he grimaced and shrugged in the Gallic manner, lapsed into silences, worked the food on his plate, glanced at the elegant women at the next table, sipped his water, sipped his wine. He erected barriers. He was very relaxed, but he seemed to feel he was under attack.

I was able to draw him out only on the subject of Parker. He acted fond of him, as an uncle might act toward an obstreperous nephew. Parker had dedicated a book to him, but had also given his wines some very poor scores. Ginestet said, "Bob has succeeded in providing the image that fits today."

"What image is that?"

"The guru. The one who knows."

"Wasn't there a need for a guru before?"

"Yes, but it was fragmented by country, or zone of influence. Today there is the 'globalization.'" He thought it through, and coined a nice phrase. He said, "Bob is an artisan in the globalization of wine."

He meant globalization by the French definition—the imposition of an American style. Like a lot of Frenchmen, he seemed to see the United States as a single, unified culture. He had lived there, but possibly had not understood its true dimensions—the coexistence within it of so many different nations. He knew something about San Francisco and New York, and had a superficial view of the rest.

He said, "The American taste is very standardized. Price-conscious. Unsubtle. And that is where Bob excels. He has understood it—partly by intuition, partly by deduction. Americans like simple things. 'Square.'" He drew a square in the air. "And Bob has a 'square' taste."

I mentioned that Parker's books sell well in France. But Ginestet wanted to keep talking about the United States. He said, "What bothers Americans is, they like certainty. If wine contains a truth, it is the *absence* of certainty. But one of the reasons Bob has succeeded is that he knows no doubts."

"And the French—what do they like?"

This was a more complicated thing. He didn't exactly say that the French like uncertainty. He said, "My personal philosophy is, you can be sure of nothing." Then he chose to give a little. He lit a cigarette and inhaled. His voice softened. He said, "Lighter wines. Wines of pleasure. Wines of . . . emotion." I wanted to try him again on the idea of *terroir*, but he closed up when I fumbled for definitions, and so I called for the bill.

Waiting for Parker

IT was a rough spring in Bordeaux. Parker had left town after a ten-day stay, during which he had tasted the wines made just a few months before, in the fall of 1999. The early sale of such very young wines, two years before they can be bottled (let alone consumed), is considered to be a prerogative of Bordeaux's top chateaux, most of which now try to sell their entire production this way. These wines are known as "futures." They provide the chateaux with obvious financial advantages, and with the valuable appearance of enjoying a frantic demand for their wines. They provide consumers with the pleasure of playing an insider's role, and with early access to wines that in theory will become more expensive when they mature. The process is extraordinarily complicated. It kicks off each spring with a wild scramble that lasts for several weeks, during which the chateaux sell the fall's vintage in allocations to the traditional traders in Bordeaux—the *négo-ciants*, who enjoy exclusive purchasing rights and have maintained a lock on the business for a few hundred years. Each chateau negotiates its own prices—but as much in jealous relation to the prices that its neighbors are getting as in anticipation of the market. This is more rational than it might seem,

because prices help to determine prestige, and prestige is always relative. Each spring, when it's time to start over again, no one wants to go first. One of the smart new winemakers told me that Bordeaux is like *barbichette*, a schoolyard game in which children hold one another by the chin to see who laughs first. The child who loses gets a slap in the face.

Parker makes it worse. When he is in Bordeaux, he keeps mostly to himself, and though the city studies his every gesture during the tastings, hoping for some indication of his thoughts, he keeps his face neutral and his notes private, and he goes home to Monkton without expressing his opinions. The business then plays *barbichette* for several weeks while waiting for *The Wine Advocate's* regular Bordeaux edition to appear, in late April. Last spring, after Parker left, the wait was said to be more intense than ever before. All of Bordeaux knew that 1999 had been at best an average year, and that the market was already flooded with overpriced and mediocre 1997s and the uneven and still more expensive 1998s. Retailers worldwide were rebelling against an allocation system that, rather than being a privilege, felt like a feeding tube shoved down their throats.

Back in Bordeaux the production levels were very high. Chateau Margaux alone was making 440,000 bottles a year—of what was supposed to be expensive stuff. At a similar chateau in the Médoc,



At an informal get-together in Bordeaux someone handed it reminded him of a wine he had tasted ten years before—or

a place called Léoville-Barton, the owner told me he sometimes wistfully considers that if he could just get each person in Bordeaux to drink one bottle of his wine every year, he could sell out his entire stock right there. But of course that would include children, practicing Muslims, and a sizable population on welfare. Short of such reveries, some chateau owners hoped that an economic bridge could be maintained to what was likely to be the sought-after vintage of 2000.

It was obvious to everyone that deep and wide price reductions would soon be needed. It was also obvious that Parker would agree, and that in the coming issue of *The Wine Advocate* he would advise his readers to stay away from 1999 futures in general. Still . . . again . . . *barbichette*. Who would reduce his prices first? Who would give that tactical advantage to his neighbors, allowing them to set their prices higher than his—if only just slightly? Moreover, who among Bordeaux's natural leaders would ignore the certainty that Parker would celebrate some of the wines and score them, perhaps, merely one point beyond 89 and into the magic 90s? For those wines the prestige would be all the greater in a year of general decline. So Bordeaux waited.

One afternoon I went to a professional tasting at Chateau Pavie, a revitalized winery near the hilltop village of St-Emilion, where several hundred buyers from around the world were milling about in an elegant vaulted hall, sampling a selection of about forty 1999s, which were being presented by a Bordeaux trade association, the Union des Grands Crus. The buyers kept to themselves in groups of two or three, and wandered among the offerings, spinning and sloshing the wines, tasting them, and leaning forward to spit them into centrally placed porcelain funnels. The funnels drained into buckets encased in wooden barrels. The buckets were carried off by young men slipping quietly through the crowd.

A lot of thought had gone into that setting. The lighting was cool but not cold. The art was bright and modern. The floors were a lovely tile, a shade of desert tan. A few steps away, wide doors opened into a still-larger vaulted hall—Pavie's lavish temperature-controlled production room, which was three stories high and had double walls and a viewing platform overlooking lines of dramatically lit oak barrels: a fortune in new wine. But the buyers seemed hardened to any such efforts, whether in architecture or in wine. They were not aesthetes. They were not dilettantes. They were professional skeptics, people who made their living by being unimpressed. Now, like everyone else, they were stuck having to wait for Parker in order to come to terms on prices. They jotted dis-

gruntled little notes about the tastings. But mostly they were just biding time.

Our host was the president of the Union des Grands Crus, a vocal Parker supporter named Alain Raynaud, who at his property in nearby Libourne was making some of the best wines in Bordeaux. Raynaud was aware of his guests' frustration, and he blamed the *négociants*, the traders in Bordeaux. He said, "If Parker has too much influence, it's the fault of the traders. They have the chance right now, while their clients are here, to decide for themselves what they think of these wines. If they want to, they can make the deals. But whether because they are cowards or lack the will, instead they will wait. I find it completely surprising, and I know that Parker does too."

I said, "But Parker is not just some critic. The traders have to take into account that he makes the market."

Raynaud said, "Last year I brought my 1998 right here, to show it to Bordeaux. I was very proud of it. And I said, 'Voilà! I propose this wine at one hundred francs a bottle, before tax. Everybody said—*everybody!*—'This is very great wine that you've made! But you've raised your price too much, and we won't buy it.'"

"And I said, 'Okay, very good, we'll just wait until Bob Parker gives it a score.'

"Parker scored it ninety-three to ninety-five. That very day I could easily have asked two hundred francs for it, and it would have been snapped up. I didn't do that. I sold it at a hundred and twenty-five francs. But the last I heard is that in the dealing between the traders just here in Bordeaux it's now going for three hundred francs a bottle."

Raynaud was not simply gloating. His point was that the traders had profited more by waiting for Parker than they would have by fulfilling their traditional role, negotiating prices and investing in wines on the basis of their own independent judgments. In other words, Raynaud believed that the traders were shirking their duties. He was probably right, but he was also being unfair. What he left unsaid is that because of Parker—this one man with so much power—the terrain has become much less certain for the Bordeaux traders. The critical decisions are made not about the ordinary wines but about the very best, especially those that when tasted young might qualify for a Parker score in the 90s. Yes, there is money to be made by exploiting the advantage that traders have of being first in line and simply following Parker's lead. But there is also money to be *lost* by moving out in front of Parker. If a trader decides that a wine is very good and agrees with the chateau on a moderately high price for it, he runs the signifi-

twenty-two he married Pat and went back to Europe with her for the summer. After finishing college, he started law school, still at the University of Maryland. The young couple moved into a cheap basement apartment that they kept at a constant 55°, just perfect for wine. Parker was becoming more serious about his hobby. Pat was willing to go along with it because she was young, but she sometimes quarreled with Parker about the money he was spending on wine. She had a job teaching French in a public school. Parker told me he was known as the phantom of law school, because he liked to stay up late watching Dick Cavett and then needed to sleep through the morning. But one class started with a roll call, so he usually managed to show up for it. The class was about conflict of interest—a hot topic in the early 1970s—and was taught by the Watergate counsel Sam Dash. Parker thought it was fascinating, and he began to think of wine in these new terms, to wonder why so many famous wines were watery and bland but were written about as if they were not. As a budding consumerist, he began to feel indignant. He felt he had been ambushed too often.

Parker passed the bar in 1973 and dutifully took a job in Baltimore, which soon confirmed his suspicion that legal work would bore him. As often as possible he escaped with Pat to Europe. They concentrated on France, where she could serve as his translator and charm the chateaux into letting

Parker a glass of Sauternes, and he remarked after taking a sip that at least of how that wine might have evolved. He got it right, of course.

cant risk that Parker might score the wine at 89 as opposed to 90 or 91—and that in a generally skittish market the price for it will tumble. That is one of the ironies of Parker's role. He regrets the skittishness of the market. He opposes speculation of any kind. But inevitably he fuels it.

The Rocky Balboa of Wine

PARKER says that he never intended any of this. When he went home from his first trip to France, he got together with a few college friends and began drinking wines for fun. He read some British wine books, which he found interesting on historical topics but strangely impractical on the subject of taste. What did it mean when a wine had a hint of Russian leather? Worse, what did it mean when a wine elicited metaphors? "This wine is a beautiful lady in the last years of her life, wearing a bit too much makeup, perhaps, who can no longer hide all the wrinkles she has. . . ." What Parker wanted to know about a wine was whether to buy it or not.

He took a class from Gordon Prange, the author of *At Dawn We Slept*, who taught him the discipline of writing short, clear sentences. He kept tasting wines. When he was

them inside to talk and taste wine. Parker was very serious, and he took notes; Pat enjoyed looking after him. With a hobby as expensive as wine, they did not have much money to spare. They traveled light, and in the evenings ate cheaply. They managed Europe on ten dollars a day. It was a simple time for them. They look back on it now with nostalgia.

By 1978 Parker was ready to put his experience to use. He typed up the first issue of *The Wine Advocate*, including on the front page a consumerist manifesto. He bought a few mailing lists from wine retailers and sent out 6,500 free copies. Six hundred people subscribed—a disappointment for Parker at the time, but by direct-mail standards a success. In the second issue (the first for which people had paid) he wrote a scathing critique of the industrialization of California vineyards—a trend that he blamed for producing bland, sterile, and overly manipulated wines that tasted alike and seemed designed to survive the rigors of mass distribution and generally to minimize business risk. It was a battle cry heard initially by very few people, but they must have welcomed it. The circulation of *The Wine Advocate* began to climb. Parker still needed his earnings as a lawyer to pay the bills, but he consoled himself that the journal allowed him his independence of mind.

Such independence was not a hallmark of most other critics—a collection mostly of ineffectual men whom Parker in his moral rigidity and his ambition began to despise. The feeling was soon reciprocated, dividing the wine press into camps so hostile that the slick New York-based *Wine Spectator* has never run a profile of Parker and will barely mention his name. But in the early days, before Parker was known, a British critic came up to him in London and said, “Living in America, how hard is it for you to get your cases of first-growth claret?”

Parker said, “What do you mean?”

The critic looked confused. “Don’t you get a case of Latour, Lafite, and Margaux sent every year?”

“No,” Parker said. “Maybe I should be insulted.”

He meant insulted on behalf of his readers. But he cannot have been surprised. The setup is an open secret. In Bordeaux people say that the critics’ car trunks automatically pop open at the famous estates, and just can’t be closed until they are full of bottles. Some critics are consultants. Some are importers. Some simply write for magazines that depend on wine advertising. The problem they all have is how to make a living. In English this generally leads to a critical technique known as “varying the degrees of ‘wonderful.’” In French the relevant technique is called “drowning the fish”—a slightly different thing, which contributes to the tendency toward bewildering complexity in French prose.

At one of the middle-ranked chateaux in the Médoc, during the wait last spring for Parker’s declarations, an iconoclastic winemaker named Olivier Sèze called most French critics “odious.” He said, “They use our wines as a pretext for their writings. ‘Look—what I write is good! Look—what I write is intelligent!’ But you read a full page of it and you say, ‘What was that about? About wine? About a car? Perfume?’”

With Parker there was never any question. By 1982, after four years in existence, *The Wine Advocate* had a circulation of 7,000. Then came the Bordeaux vintage of 1982, whose young wines were unusually dark, powerful, and fruity. When Parker flew home from tasting those “futures” in the spring of 1983, he was so eager to get back and write about what he had found that he worried uncharacteristically that the airplane might crash. This was the scoop of a lifetime, a vintage that he was convinced would become one of the greatest in history, and that the other critics, within their variations of “wonderful,” seemed to have underestimated. Parker advised his readers to buy the wines, and many did so—in large quantities. A lot of money was at stake. The established critics attacked, arguing that the young 1982s lacked acidity and therefore would not age well. They were saying, in essence, that these wines tasted too good too soon—an argument related to the traditional one that bad wines require age to become better. Parker suspected the opposite—that the greatest vintages (he thought of ’61 and ’49 and ’47) are so seamless and free of imperfections that they are balanced from birth—and that 1982 was just such a vintage.

With his career on the line, he returned to Bordeaux and started asking about the past. In the archives of Chateau Haut-Brion he found an old diary that expressed concern about the famous vintage of 1929—that the then-young wines were too intense, and would not endure. Parker knew those wines after fifty years, and considered them to be excellent still. He re-tasted the 1982s and was again astonished by their splendor. He went home to Monkton, and reiterated his earlier judgments. By 1984, when the wines were being bottled, it was obvious to everyone that he was right. Most of the opposing critics began to back down. One who didn’t was forced into an increasingly untenable position, and finally lost his job. *The Wine Spectator* eventually came out with an issue celebrating the 1982 vintage, but by then those wines were hard to find and very expensive. Parker’s reputation was made. Some of his readers had gotten rich on his advice. Others simply had picked up good wine at a good price. *The Wine Advocate*’s circulation jumped past 10,000. Parker quit his job as a lawyer. Several weeks later he signed his first book contract in New York. He told me that going home on the train, he felt like Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*.

Saving Bordeaux From Itself

LAST spring, when the annual Bordeaux issue of *The Wine Advocate* finally came out, the Bordeaux establishment lashed back angrily. In a campaign led by some of the large chateaux, people attacked Parker in the local press, accusing him not only of undue influence and technical incompetence but also of cronyism and, by innuendo, of malice. The Bordeaux newspaper, *Sud-Ouest*, published several articles laying out the accusations, and a wider press spread the story—through Europe and to the United States. These accusations were for the most part unfounded, but they were serious enough to leave Parker feeling wounded and perhaps genuinely threatened. He took the unusual step of writing letters in his own defense—but he was hampered by a lack of detail in the accusations, and by the fact that during his last stay in Bordeaux he had indeed not handled himself well. It was a matter of appearances: he had gone for a private dinner with Alain Raynaud at a remote country hotel, and the next day had tasted the wines of the Union des Grands Crus and rated Raynaud’s very high.

A well-known chateau called Bouscaut ran a sarcastic advertisement for its 1999 wines, including a defiant proclamation of its score of only 79–82. In the ad a cartoon depicted a retailer saying to a customer, “A good wine with a real *terroir*? An individualistic wine? No hesitation—find one with a bad Parker score!!!!” Parker’s response was typically blunt. To a query from a London wine magazine he responded, “The cartoon was a splendid idea. Given the wine Bouscaut has made, I would resort to humor, too, if it helped to sell the wine. But purchasers of it will find out who the joke is really on.” As a consumerist, Parker naturally is self-righteous and

maybe too easily aggrieved. His mother could have told him just to smile and sit tight.

At first glance Bordeaux seemed to be upset about very little. In his April issue Parker praised some producers for their 1999s but reported, accurately, that the year had been excessively wet and hot, resulting in few compelling wines and little reason to buy futures. This was hardly a surprise. But then Parker went further. He wrote a few paragraphs that were unusual for him, in which he expressed his thoughts about Bordeaux's business side and discussed the global glut in its wines. He said the retail trade worldwide would have to cut its losses by dumping the 1997s en masse and skeptically judging each wine from 1998. Then, while scolding the Bordeaux producers for their "egregious blunder" and foolish greed, he called for a reduction in the prices for the 1999s by 30 percent or more. He wrote, "If arrogance prevents them from understanding this, they will see the irresponsibility of their ways . . . sooner rather than later."

This was getting closer to a reason for a fight. A 30 percent reduction in prices? The producers choked at the very thought, and they knew that Parker's opinions, once expressed, are not just abstractions: this issue of *The Wine Advocate* would be wielded by the disgruntled buyers, who were already murmuring about a boycott. Parker had the audacity to claim that he was trying to save Bordeaux from itself. Those few paragraphs of his were going to cost Bordeaux a lot.

But the truth is that the chateaux have the financial reserves to ride out a downturn in the market—along with the cushion that the 2000 vintage is likely to provide. They are not, in other words, so obviously beleaguered that they need to fear Parker's frank assessment. Their reaction to it, therefore, can only be understood as an expression of a deeper problem: what they are really worried about is the accelerating movement toward the garage wines, those dark, dramatic, small-production wines that are being made with fanatical devotion to detail.

The garage phenomenon began in Bordeaux less than a decade ago as a novelty, but it seems now to be evolving beyond mere fashion, and taking shape as one of the more important changes of the past 200 years. The competitive advantages are clear: the garage wines do not require large vineyards, big crews, a manor house, or a classic patch of *terroir*—and they are now fetching the highest prices in Bordeaux. This is extremely threatening to the established families, whose very society requires them to hold stiffly to the idea that price is a reflection of quality. Privately, the families claim that the "*garagistes*" are cheating—that because of the ultra-small quantities involved (for any label, typically less than 15,000 bottles a year), the new producers are able to manipulate their prices in the most cynical ways, buying back significant percentages of their own stock in order to stimulate the market, or working through unnamed agents to ratchet up demand artificially at the famous London and New York auction houses. In some ways the big families are right. It is certainly true that many of the garage wines are terrible buys and

that if a wine-drinker wanted one rule for Bordeaux it would be to stay away from them entirely. Another rule, however, might be to stay away from the famous chateaux as well. For the established families it's a predicament: after so much market manipulation of their own, they are hardly in a position to complain on behalf of the consumers. Meanwhile, the garage wines are spreading through the cracks and odd parcels of the best wine-growing region in the world, the finite realm of Bordeaux, where rapidly and insidiously they are subverting the structures on which the great families rely.

It's no wonder those families fear Robert Parker. He is indeed the man to blame. He claims to disapprove of the prices for the garage wines, but insists on judging such wines as a purist would, concentrating entirely on their taste. It is true that the garage wines are dense, impressive, and often extremely good. Parker likes the idea of them, and in the new Bordeaux *Wine Advocate* he said so more clearly than ever before.

There's an argument now that the *garagistes* are making wines to suit Parker's taste, and that therefore the world is getting smaller here, too. I heard it many times. Parker is a monopolist, the Bill Gates of wine; Bordeaux must follow the example of José Bové, the French anti-globalist, and fight back against Parker's domination. The image of one American with so much power seems valid from a distance. But up close it tends to fall apart. No two fine wines are ever the same. I moved for weeks among the *garagistes*, and even I, with my lack of knowledge and my dull palate, would never have mistaken any one of their wines for any other. Parker is making the world not smaller but larger. Bordeaux distrusts him for that reason. After 300 years he is breaking up the *terroir*.

The leading *garagiste* is a brash, self-confident man named Jean-Luc Thunevin, who with his wife, Murielle, makes a ripe red wine called Valandraud, one of the stars of the region. The Thunevins are seen in Bordeaux as the ultimate outsiders. He is a "*pied-noir*," the son of refugees from the Algerian war for independence, an outsider who worked in a bank for thirteen years and nearly went broke in the restaurant business before acquiring a scrap of ground and getting into wine in 1991. Until a few years ago she was a nurse's assistant.

The Thunevins do not have a chateau, though they could almost afford one by now. They live in the center of St.-Emilion, in bright and minimally furnished quarters directly above their wine-production rooms. One evening over dinner there he said to me, "People think our wine is a product of Parker—but it's not true. Parker is prudent. He didn't know if we were going to keep producing good wines—if we were serious, if we were honest. He started grading only after four years, when he had tasted our wines in the bottle. For the first few years he gave us scores only in the eighties. But the effect of Parker was to accelerate things. Before, we would have required fifty years to be recognized—and, of course, we would never have been able to survive. But thanks to Parker, we needed only four years. It was his willingness to taste our wines, and the speed of the information, that mattered."

Thunevin is openly despised by the old families of Bordeaux, who call him "*Tue-le-vin*," a shortened form of "He who kills the wine." I asked him what he thought about them in return. He said, "I'm not trying to be accepted. People have problems because they absolutely want to enter a milieu that is not theirs. I have the advantage that I don't care. When I started into the business, I had a friend who warned me. He said, 'In Bordeaux they don't like newcomers. They're going to break you.'" Thunevin smiled, as if to say, "And now look who is afraid."

The subversion has spread even into Bordeaux's heart, the Médoc, where Murielle Thunevin in 1999 starting making a new garage wine, called Marojallia, in a neglected patch of vineyard, with a little stone shed, a little tractor, and not much else. Every day through the summer she drove there in her jeans and rough shirts, and worked side by side with two Moroccan women to tend the vines. In the fall, with a slightly larger crew, she harvested the grapes and made the first wine. Her powerful neighbors at the surrounding chateaux were shocked and outraged, and came by to peer into the shed, but they could do nothing about her presence.

During Parker's tastings last spring the current owner of Chateau Margaux, a woman named Corinne Mentzelopoulos, wanted to talk to Parker only about the Thunevins' new wine. Parker later told me that she was resentful, and viewed the innovation as dangerous. She said, "We believe in *terroir*."

Parker refused to accept the traditional meaning of that word. He said, "Well, it is a *terroir*. It doesn't have a history of three hundred years, like Chateau Margaux, but it's a *terroir*. Why shouldn't someone try to improve the quality of wine that comes from this parcel of land?" She retreated to the old answer—that no one knew how the wine would evolve.

Parker, for his part, refused to budge. In *The Wine Advocate* he discussed Murielle Thunevin's new wine, which he had tasted as a future. He wrote,

This is the first of what will likely be an increasing move toward limited production "garage" wines in the Médoc (something the powers in the appellation are totally against). An impressive first effort, it has the potential to merit an outstanding rating after bottling. There are nearly 600 cases of this saturated purple-colored offering, which exhibits low acid, sweet blackberry aromas backed by chocolate and toast. In the mouth, the wine is voluptuous, opulent, pure, and harmonious. My rating is conservative since this is the debut release, but this 1999 has enormous potential, and since it is likely to be bottled without fining or filtration, it should merit an outstanding score.

He gave it 89–91, neatly signaling his view of the years to come. The message to the old families was clear.

In the essay accompanying the tasting notes, Parker pro-

fessed astonishment that anyone might fear the *garagistes*. He wrote,

There is no stopping this new phenomenon in spite of the hostility it has received from *négociants*, the Médoc's aristocracy, and those reactionaries in favor of preserving Bordeaux's status quo. These wines are not the destabilizing influence many old timers would have consumers believe. What's wrong with an energetic person taking a small piece of property and trying to turn out something sensational?

But Parker knew perfectly well that a fundamental change was under way—that a vast industrial structure seemed about to break apart. When I saw him again at home in Monkton, with his dogs snoring in a corner of the office, he admitted that these might be the final years for the old families of Bordeaux. Olivier Sèze, the iconoclastic winemaker in the Médoc, had been gleeful at that possibility. He had said, "If people start to make better wines than the first growths, the whole system falls apart. It becomes a revolution. It is a revolution!" Parker, too, sometimes used that word. The coming vintage of 2000, he told me, would strengthen the great chateaux, but only temporarily. He had a long-term view. He said, "A hundred years from now the garage wines won't be a separate category. They will be up and down the Médoc. Everyone will be making wines that way. And if someone wants to go back over the history, Thunevin will be seen as the pioneer who totally changed the system."

"And Parker?"

"My name might come up too—maybe as a footnote."

He pretended to have a workman's view of himself in history. He said, "I'm an anti-industrial kind of guy." As if he were just another critic expressing an opinion, he said, "I don't like manipulation, compromise, or interventionistic winemaking—unless something goes wrong. I believe that the responsibility of the winemaker is to take that fruit and get it into the bottle as the most natural and purest expression of that vineyard, of the grape varietal or blend, and of the vintage." He also said, "When I started tasting wines, in the 1970s, we were on a slippery slope. There was a standardization of wines, where you couldn't tell a Chianti from a cabernet. That's pretty much stopped now." He refused to say it had stopped because of him. I figured he was being willfully modest. His own mother seems to believe he has developed a big ego. But the furthest he would go now was to express surprise that the logo he had chosen for *The Wine Advocate* had long been overlooked. It is a corkscrew in the form of a crusader's cross, and he admitted almost shyly that at last it has been noticed. ☼

The online version of this article, at www.theatlantic.com/wine, features excerpts from Robert Parker's introduction to the 1999 edition of Parker's Wine Buyer's Guide, including his commentaries on the role of a wine critic and "the dark side of wine."

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ROBERT PARKER AND HIS BELONGINGS WERE TAKEN AT HIS HOME, NEAR BALTIMORE.