Vinaceous Correspondents: Martin Ray's Friendships with Eminent Oenophiles

SECOND SECTION OF THE SECOND ARTICLE IN A SERIES

by ***Barbara Marinacci***

[*This segment follows two earlier pieces: the Introduction in the April 2003* WT *and the initial section, printed in the July issue, of this long article that will cover winegrower Martin Ray's remarkable epistolary relationship with wine authority Julian Street.*]

PART II — 2. JULIAN STREET AND MARTIN RAY: 1939-1947

The previously published piece explained that I had found it impossible to condense the extraordinary correspondence between Martin ("Rusty") Ray and Julian Street into a single printed article. Ray's original letters to this East Coast writer and wine expert of the 1930s and early '40s are many, with some amazingly lengthy. These letters, begun in late 1939 and fortuitously preserved among Street's papers at Princeton, amply express the California winemaker's passionate commitment to creating superb wines in the difficult years following Prohibition.

The comments and stories that Martin Ray provided in his lengthy letters to Street were either dictated to his secretary, who typed them on Masson letterhead stationery, or else typed or (more often) handwritten by him—at times, it seems, in a state of rapt concentration, with these ones particularly intimate and discursive. Street wrote in response to MR's letters but he also elicited the winemaker's opinions or information, provided advice, or simply chatted about his life. Unfortunately, though, few of his letters are in the Princeton collection. The existing ones are carbon copies of letters that he typed, not handwrote. MR's letters often enable one to figure out questions asked or comments made earlier by JS in missing letters. There are also some notes by JS about MR and his wines. Additionally, there are carbon copies that MR or JS made of letters written to other people, as well as clippings from periodicals and several wine industry documents that MR believed would interest Street, some of which may even interest present-day readers.

At the start of their correspondence, each man addressed the other formally as "Mr" in the salutation—the polite habit that mostly ended after people started using first names when communicating with total strangers. (Occasionally JS would drop the "Mr" nicety and simply use "Dear" plus the Ray surname.) But in October of 1940, nearly a year after they started exchanging letters, Street began with "Dear Rusty: How did you get that name?" (In his youth MR had rust-colored hair.) So in his next letter MR boldly called him Julian, saying, "If you are going to take liberties with my name, I shall do the same with yours, in spite of your seniority." However, he volunteered to be addressed as Martin instead of the nickname by which he was always widely known to others. "I am more concerned with what I do (and therefore am) than what people call me," he said. So he was Martin in Julian's subsequent letters.

This #2 segment will focus on Martin Ray at the peak of his tenure at the Paul Masson Champagne Company, in 1940.

Publicizing the Masson Wines

From the start of his contact with Julian Street at the end of 1939, when sending him a case of six different 1936 Paul Masson wines to sample (two bottles of each), Martin Ray recognized that the Paul Masson winery—and his own proprietorship of it, of course—would surely benefit if this renowned East Coast wine author approved heartily of any or all of these wines. Since the Masson winery lacked an effective national distribution setup—it could scarcely compete with the aggressive sales efforts mounted by the major wine firms—MR believed that the best way to build a reputation and steady customers for his fine wines was to gain favorable attention from highly influential persons. A favorable reaction from Street could boost his sales by getting them talked about and sought by connoisseurs. Also, Street's position as a director with the reputable wine and liquor distributor Bellows & Co. might enable them to be marketed eventually far beyond the San Francisco Bay area, where the new Paul Masson wines were already earning gratifying attention from fine-wine devotees.

Initially Street sampled approvingly the Masson Champagnes he'd received, but he allowed the three still wines to rest before decanting. Then on January 17 of 1940, he opened his first bottle of the Pinot Noir '36 that Martin Ray had vintaged soon after taking over at Paul Masson. And he tasted a wine that not

only closely resembled the authentic French Burgundies that he knew so well and loved, but, unbelievably, had come from California. It was indeed Pinot Noir, as its label indicated. Street impulsively sent off a congratulatory telegram to the vintner. Never before had Julian tasted a young American-made wine that held such promise for the future. Up to now, whenever he opened a bottle claiming to hold a genuine red Burgundy, he detected barely a trace, if any at all, of Pinot Noir, that supreme red grape and wine of Bourgogne. Moreover, California wines rarely seemed made by vintners who took great pride in their winemaking. And true enough, by then Julian had already received three long letters from Martin Ray—priming him for appreciating the Masson wines by detailing his perfectionist approach to winemaking. So Street was already entranced by his California correspondent's spirited eloquence and obvious devotion to his chosen art and craft.

In his earliest letter to Street, who would quickly become his confidante, MR had said [11/27/39]: "I hope that you will find it possible to visit here some day, at which time I would like you to taste other of our varieties and vintages. If I am ever in the position to be of any service to you here in California, I would consider it a distinct pleasure to be permitted to so assist you." Julian Street would not come soon—though come he would someday. In the meantime, he served Masson wines to fortunate friends and associates and urged others among his acquaintances to get them, somehow. Wine connoisseurs weren't rife even in Manhattan society in the 1930s and '40s, so they were apt to know each other. By the late 1930s, though, Julian, because of a heart condition, had left New York City, and with his wife Margot had taken up quieter living in rural Connecticut. But he still kept in close touch with his urban friends as well as the management at Bellows & Co. and had frequent visitors.

In the early '40s Street also sent emissaries to Martin Ray. They joined the growing pilgrimage of people—either involved in the wine business or else just lovers of wine (but usually having some celebrity status)—who came to the Paul Masson hilltop premises in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, not only to drink the wines, but also to enjoy stunning vistas of Santa Clara Valley and the southern reaches of San Francisco Bay. At first Rusty and Elsie Ray's visitors had tended to be either local to the Bay area (such as former President Herbert Hoover, novelist Kathleen Norris, and Romanov family members—exiled Russian nobility); or high-profile show-business people coming up from Hollywood (like comedian Charlie Chaplin and actresses Gertrude Lawrence and Ina Claire). Increasingly, though, "name" visitors from the East Coast (such as Alexander Woolcott and Alfred A. Knopf) arrived too, when the Masson wines became better known there—mostly thanks, it seems, to Julian Street's proselytizing. The Ray scrapbooks hold a number of browned and tattered newspaper clippings attesting to the Rays' ability to attract and then publicize visits from well-known personalities. Several national magazines, featuring stories that included photographs of the picturesque winery, the lush vineyards, and the glorious views, added to the allure of the place.

When told about a special banquet to be given on March 30, 1940, Julian Street sent an approving note to the host organization, the Wine and Food Society of San Francisco. Additionally, he wrote a special tribute describing what Martin Ray had accomplished with the Masson wines for the society's president Harold Price to read aloud at the event. After seeing the text, MR could scarcely contain himself. On March 14 he sent off a telegram to the author:

> WE WERE THRILLED TO READ YOUR LETTER TO HAROLD PRICE STOP GREATER INSPIRATION OR MORE CHERISHED PRAISE BY MAN COULD NOT BE GIVEN STOP FROM THE BOTTOMS OF OUR HEARTS WE THANK YOU STOP YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WINE AND FOOD SOCIETY HONORING US WITH THE DINNER STOP YOUR DISCOVERY RECOGNITION AND PRAISE OF OUR CALIFORNIA WINES WILL BE THE MAKING OF THE WINE INDUSTRY IN THIS STATE STOP FOR WHILE OTHER PRODUCERS MAY RESENT IT TO SOME EXTENT AT THIS TIME THEY WILL COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT THEY MUST IMPROVE THEIR WINES THE COMPETITIVE SPIRIT WILL BE SHARPENED BY THE NEWCOMERS WHO THUS ENCOURAGED WILL COME ON TO ULTIMATELY MAKE THE GREAT WINES AND YOU WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR LAUNCHING A NEW ERA IN CALIFORNIA VITICULTURE OF WHICH NO ONE ELSE IS CAPABLE = MARTIN RAY

The dinner was attended not only by the Society's wine-aficionado members but also by a number of persons prominent in the wine industry. Curiously, though, MR himself had declined to come, explaining that attendees would feel uneasy about discussing his wines if he were present. (Actually, MR habitually stayed away from large gatherings, since he would likely become overstressed, as the stroke suffered in the mid-'30s had permanently damaged his nervous system.) In his place he sent his principal cellar man, Oliver Goulet, who afterwards reported most favorably on the event, as did some of MR's acquaintances in the wine trade.

In addition to reading Street's praises, Price had also given a talk of his own—which was, as MR reported it to JS, "inspired by your letter and in which he spoke out freely without regard for personal feelings of wine men present. It was bold and without

precedent." Reportedly, overall good spirits prevailed among the attendees, who feasted and drank Masson wines far into the night.

THE WINE AND FOOD SOCIETY

A
Paul Masson Dinner
HELD AT
Jack's Restaurant
SAN FRANCISCO
MARCH 26, 1940

Later, JS asked MR whether other wine men resented his widely circulated ardent appraisals of the Masson wines and their maker. And the vintner replied:

> No, they do not wish you had kept your mouth shut, they feel that somehow or other what you have said has been intended for all California wines, and they are very happy to enjoy that part of your praise which they individually feel may be intended even for them. It is a very nice, chummy thing which you have done for them, they feel. [5/16/40]

Numerous MR letters gave JS glimpses at his interactions with people who drove up Paul Masson's mountain road to spend time with the innovative winemaker. Especially fascinating are his frequent reports to JS on his close friend John Steinbeck, who at the time lived close by, in Los Gatos. With his wife Carol he was a frequent guest, and when taking breaks from his writing he often worked alongside Rusty Ray in the Masson vineyards or cellar. MR later said that when Steinbeck's own small house became too hot in the summertime, he would come up to write in the cool winery. His major project at that time had been finishing *The Grapes of Wrath*. (The copy he gave to the Rays was fittingly inscribed "My vintage for yours.")

MR told Street that he hoped these two writer friends might meet someday.

> [John] envies you both the great experiences which he knows you have had in a period now gone from the world, and which was filled with a certain richness which is no longer here. John's real interest is history, and whether recent or ancient, it all holds a thrill for him. He is a great man, and you will hear of him plenty in the future. At first, I thought that he would swing too far to the left, but the money which he is earning, and the friends which his success is bringing him, are, for the most part, a good influence, and I find that he is swinging constantly more to the right, although I do not think the influence of those hard years of struggle which he passed through will ever leave him. I think you will find it running all through his work in the future, as well as in the past. He is sincere and genuine, and they don't make them any better. [5/16/40

So not all celebrities who loved the Masson wines and praised them to their friends had been introduced to them by Julian Street, though his East Coast placement and durable reputation as a wine authority produced an intense interest that began affecting the bottom line: wine sales. One of MR's letters contains the words that his wife had dictated—having wished to tell Julian Street of their great gratitude (the quotation marks are his):

> "Our wines have been recognized by many people but what we have tried to point out is that they 'whispered' about them and were afraid to come out and talk about it until <u>you</u> found them good. Then they jumped on the band wagon and started shouting.
>
> "We must give due credit to Dr. Amerine, who has visited about every winery in the state and even when our 1936 wines were but a year old he told us they were the finest in the state. Through Amerine, Price became interested. However, they were afraid to talk out loud.
>
> "Steinbeck became interested in <u>how</u> we are doing things here, not that he knew much about wine but that we are making wines honestly, as they should be made. He brought Charlie Chaplin here and he left to praise. He (Chaplin) says our champagnes are the <u>only</u> completely dry wines in this country that he could enjoy as he did the dry Champagnes in France, that he had ordered them (French) in this country but when they arrived here they had always had a dosage added to them. Chaplin drinks very little but he has ordered quite a good deal of our wine which he distributes to his friends. He seems to feel that he 'found' or 'discovered' this place and our wines. Through Chaplin and his converts, W.R. Hearst came to hear of them and telephoned an order from San Simeon. Doesn't that sound like him?
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> "We have many friends but thanks to God we have you, a man who came right out in the open with his opinion. Now all the little fellows can say, 'Why, we knew it all the time—I was the first, etc., etc.' It is all so interesting."

Then MR took over the letter again:

> And now I'm back on the air with a flash—this is as you said it would be only it is already true here and will spread out to all corners of the country because of the momentum it has. You have made a difference between our wines being recognized under cover and having them recognized on the surface. You have made it possible for people to speak out. Recognition is as important as producing the wines. One without the other is not sufficient. You have saved us years.

He also added a marginal note: "Hearst has ordered again, still wines @$24 and Champagnes at list prices. I first sent him the prices." His Masson wines were now ending up on the tables and in the cellars of some rather impressive people, known for their affluence or influence, or both.

Paul Masson and Martin Ray: As Men and Legends

Martin Ray often attributed particular influences upon him as coming from Paul Masson. He first became acquainted with the Burgundian vintner during a boyhood spent mostly in Saratoga, at his grandparents' ranch at the foot of Masson's mountain. He revived the connection during later years, before buying Masson's vineyards and winery. MR afterwards claimed a close relationship with the vintner, and was amused by the rumor being circulated that he was actually Masson's out-of-wedlock son. He traced his winemaking lineage even further back in time than Masson, to two earlier vintner pioneers in the Santa Clara Valley: Charles Lefranc (Masson's father-in-law) and Etienne Thée (Lefranc's father-in-law), who had started making wine in 1852. Rusty Ray made much of this "founding" year. Commemorated by brass numerals prominently placed above the handsome doors of the old Masson winery, the date is deceptive since that structure, built a half-century later, has no connection at all with Thée.

But did the Frenchman actually teach Rusty Ray special winemaking secrets after he sold him his vineyards and winery? MR's letters make few references to things he had learned directly from Masson. Nor do they provide evidence that the two men truly had a mentor–protégé relationship, as MR construed it later. Before and after acquiring Masson's La Cresta property MR got most of his technical knowledge about vineyard care and the making and bottling of wine from other sources: a few short courses taken at the University of California (at Berkeley or Davis); available books and manuals; several former Masson employees who now worked for him; an old book of Masson's cellar notes, containing such things as a recipe for adding syrup made from rock sugar to Champagne cuvées; and particularly his experienced head vintner, Oliver Goulet, who had worked at the nearby Novitiate Winery (though apparently he knew little about vineyard care). Also, beginning in 1938—most importantly—Dr. Maynard Amerine of U.C. Davis offered knowledgeable advice and even hands-on assistance.

But it was Martin Ray himself who decreed from the start that his premium wines should *never* be blends of different grape varieties—a decision that surely originated from reading Schoonmaker & Marvel's *The Complete Wine* Book (1934). The most notable legacies coming to MR from Masson were his always continuing to plant vines singly and at some distance apart, so that that the soil could be deeply plowed in both directions (not possible in trellising), and his accustomed use—rare at that time—of small oak cooperage (preferably French in origin) in aging wines prior to bottling.

In fact an MR letter to JS indicates that MR's relationship with Paul Masson was scarcely as close as the legends portray it. Realizing that Masson could be an asset if he remained associated with the winery corporation he had founded, MR asked the Frenchman to serve as nominal president of the Paul Masson Champagne Company. But the two men actually had little social or business contact. MR had learned early to keep the cantankerous, unpredictable old man at a safe distance from his former property, unless there were extraordinary reasons to invite him up there, such as posing for photographs to appear in periodicals.

MR sometimes told stories that adversely portrayed Masson. One he bitterly recounted twice to Street. When negotiating the final purchase price for the Masson premises, he needed to evaluate the wines in the cellars' inventory. Not yet trusting his own judgment, he hired the highly reputable A.R. Morrow to taste them, and all were declared superior. But the expert's palate was either superannuated, accustomed now to inferior wines, influenced by his friendship

with Masson, or—as MR later learned—entirely dependent on an assistant's opinions (and he hadn't been asked to judge the Masson wines). When MR finally tasted the wines given Morrow's great approval, he realized that he had bought a large quantity of casks and bottles filled with defective wines. All had to be thrown away or sold off to be distilled into brandy. But a costly lesson (MR said it amounted to $100,000) was learned: MR soon taught himself to become an expert wine taster. From then on he wasn't inclined to respect and trust anyone else's judgment—except Dr. Amerine's. Furthermore, he always wondered whether the sly Burgundian was fully aware that his wines were spoiled.

Knowing Street's penchant for character sketches and colorful stories, MR provided two rather humorous but revealing tales about Paul Masson:

> You will enjoy this one on old Paul Masson. He was the grand master when it came to propaganda. He carried with him for years his own wine wherever he went to dinner, not excluding the homes of other wine men. To all he said, "When you make a wine that is fit to drink, I will drink it." And to this day honest people say, "You know Paul Masson won't drink any other California wine." Then he was shipping by bottle some wine presumably intended to go east and so he started another story, and made great capital of it. The story was that the French bought Paul Masson Champagne, shipped it to France, re-labelled it as French Champagne and shipped it again as their own, in order to have the excellent quality nowhere else comparable to Paul Masson's. And the story still goes on. People ask me quietly if the French are still buying.
>
> But to even things up, I must tell you about the incident where Paul was bettered. When the old Lefranc (his father in law) place [Almadén] was sold and the new owners had made wine, he came to taste it. But these chaps were ready for him. They knew Paul Masson never found anybody else's wine fit to drink. With him there was no half-way. He sat down, got himself all ready to taste it. Then he inspected it for color. "Not bad, boys, not bad at all. Well, you have everything here in your favor, soil, climate," he said. But as he held it up to the light he decided that it was a little light. Then the bouquet was not entirely what he had expected. He was becoming alarmed. He tasted it, but as the wine touched his lips he seemed to explode. He spit it out, swore and cursed the men who made it. He demanded a glass of water to rinse his mouth and told them they were doomed to failure like all the rest of California wine men. In rage and disgust he shuffled off with his stick. It had been his own wine he had tasted, wine made by him. They had baited and caught him.

MR then concluded the report on Masson with a disclosure of some of his own troubling experiences with the irritable Burgundian.

> After my 1936 vintage here he came to taste and tried to repeat the same thing [as at Almadén] but I only laughed at him and told him of my knowledge of the former incident. This further enraged him so he turned loose all he had when we were with his old employees. He was very insulting and he roared disapproval of everything. I merely left him and after he had gone I told my brother (who was here temporarily then to help me get things in hand) to tell him he could never return. I didn't mind what he said to me but his old employees both feared and respected him and they were now my employees.
>
> My brother delivered the message and Paul said to him, "Yes, Martin is right. I don't blame him. I don't know how I could ever have done what I did. Martin has done all the things I wanted all my life to do (improvements) and it enrages me to see him have what I couldn't. But don't you ever tell him I said this. I wouldn't want him to know I said this." So Paul was kinder than it seemed on the surface. Too late to change, he preferred to have it as it is. He tells everyone the place has gone to ruin and all his fine old wines have been turned into money to finance my poor management. But I know what he really thinks and it is pathetic for he loves the place and would give everything he has to have a son doing what I am. When we pass on the road, he has his driver stop me and he asks me why I do not come to see him. Yet, before we talk long jealousy gets him and he starts to insult me. The last time we fought he had a stroke and almost died. So we are parted by a spirit that will not die in him, however poorly it may serve him. At about 88 [Masson's age is given wrong, for he would have been younger, in his early 80s] he is planting a small vineyard and making a few bottles of champagne each year which either don't ferment or break all the bottles. So he buys from me. I gave him my best Champagne first but he hated (my) vintage and demanded a replacement. So I gave him some 1927 (his old vintage—I had a few labels) and he had his secretary phone me that it was excellent. He is a dandy. But impossible to associate with. [4/19/40]

Paul Masson died on October 23, 1940, a half-year after this letter was written. It appears that MR didn't even mention his death to Julian Street; however, it's possible that a note or letter about it wasn't kept and filed, so hasn't survived. The breach between the two men, then, was apparently never truly healed prior to Masson's death. This epistolary evidence contradicts Eleanor Ray's fictionalized, endearing depiction in *Vineyards in the Sky* of their rapport toward the end of Masson's life.

Rusty Ray's early admiration of Masson, though, was permanently embedded. Especially as he grew older he felt entitled to mimic many of Paul's attitudes and behaviors since these marked characteristics suited him just as well: a prideful willfulness

that made it impossible ever to admit, perhaps even to himself, that he had ever made an inferior, let alone defective wine; a jealously authoritarian inability to appreciate, and to refrain from savaging, most wines made by other California vintners; a stubborn and shortsighted resistance to consider doing something in vineyard or cellar that differed from (and possibly improved upon) any procedure already firmly set by him as the *only* way to get optimal results; and a tyrannical tendency to precipitously order people "down the mountain" after they did or said something that had offended him, such as interrupt, contradict, or argue with him, or even offer gratuitous advice.

Educating the Connoisseur

Since not long after their correspondence commenced Street ingenuously admitted that he—like many wine devotees then and now—knew little indeed about the physical processes of growing wine grapes and from them producing delectable wine, he often asked his vintner correspondent to clarify a number of puzzlements. MR usually responded at considerable length, as with this passage concerning nature vs. nurture.

> I have promised to write you further about vines, and the story which you have told me about the Burgundy vines moved to Bordeaux ultimately producing grapes which made wine indistinguishable from the local Claret has been bothering me and I cannot dismiss it from my mind.
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> It does not bother me because I think that there could be any factual basis for such a story, but rather because the story exists, and may be accepted here and there....
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> You have no doubt long enjoyed many of the romantic tales associated with wines and vines. It seems the subject has no end of appeal to people possessed of both vision and imagination and the facts and fancy left behind them have often been confused.
>
> May I urge that you consider if it is not true that vines are products of heredity and environment. If, then, such be true, do you think that it could be possible for an environment to completely eradicate the effects of heredity in a mere matter of a few years? [1/24/40]

MR then offered Street examples from his own vineyard experience at Masson:

> My Pinot Noir vines are now forty years old, and the visitors I have had here who are natives of Burgundy see no difference in either the vines or the fruit from those growing in Burgundy, unless it be that in this richer and more virgin soil they are sometimes inclined to give out more foliage and to have the appearance almost of being healthier vines, certainly more vigorous. The Marquis de Lur-Saluces told me, on the occasion of his visit with me here last summer, that the life of a vine in the Bordeaux District was fifteen to twenty years, possibly twenty-five years, and he marveled at the fact that our vines are still going strong and are, in fact, at their best now when forty years of age....
>
> It was my explanation and his belief that it was due entirely to the fact that our soil has only been worked for the approximate life of the vines which grow in it and in no case for more than one hundred years, whereas the soil of the Bordeaux District has, as you know, been worked for hundreds of years, as has been that of Burgundy.
>
> There are many explanations for the story.... But, first I will ask you if you have not at times heard it said that the wine produced by a given vineyard is no longer comparable to what it was in earlier vintages, say twenty or thirty years earlier. I refer to the character of the wine, not its quality.

MR gave an example of two Masson wines vintaged from the same grape variety grown in a particular vineyard section: one made in the early years of the century by a former cellar man, now the aged vineyard manager, and the other of recent vintage. The first was "certainly not like any wine which is today made from that block and it is even possible to tell that the two would never be alike." He had then learned from the old man that many of the original vines had been replaced over time. So he concluded that although replacements might resemble their predecessors, they could be from a "different stock" (i.e., clone) of the same varietal grapevine, so that the new wine to which they contributed grapes would differ considerably from the older one. MR went on to the important influences of both environmental variables and heredity upon the making of great wines:

> As for environment, the environment here is not greatly unlike that of some of the vineyards in Burgundy, either as to soil or climate. Understand, I do not claim them to be alike, but merely that they are more alike than might be the case. Certain it is, that the heredity is the same in our vines as those now growing in Burgundy, since these very vines were brought here originally from Burgundy direct to this vineyard.
>
> I believe that of the hundreds of different vine varieties there are only a very few which are capable of producing the finest wines. It has been demonstrated that only a limited number of varieties possessed of certain specific hereditary characteristics have produced fine wines. It remains, then, only to discover under what conditions of environment these hereditary qualities are at their best. I believe that we can say in the beginning that we have learned what certain of the requirements are with reference to both soil and climate, but beyond this, "discovery" must be made of the little sections of the world where these favored varieties will produce the finest wines....
>
> It is my conclusion, then, that both heredity and environment are important and that their influences are

in this vineyard not antagonistic, but the opposite.... The wines I will produce here from Pinot Noir grapes will certainly be different from those produced in Burgundy from the same variety, but they will at the same time be definitely related in a way that it is possible to trace to the variety of the grape, as you have found in tasting my Pinot Noir.

MR ended this impromptu essay with a look toward the future and the posterity who would come after the two of them—whether in the making of various wines, the judging of them, or scientifically investigating their characteristics and nuances.

I conclude with the declaration that if forty years environment has not destroyed the influence of heredity it is not likely that another forty years will dissipate the character of the vine. As a matter of fact, we might pursue this sort of thing indefinitely, for the climate is never the same one year as another, either here or in France, and it is most certain that the soil is continually changing. If we want to look far enough ahead, I am willing to admit that great changes may come to the wines produced in Burgundy as well as those produced in my vineyard, but there will no longer be any record and if there be, the words which we set down now will not have the same meaning that they will have in the distant future when others study them.

When considering these remarks, it must be remembered that when Martin Ray was the master at Masson many fundamental issues about winegrowing were only beginning to be investigated scientifically. The era was a challenging one for vintners. Although viticulturists had long been studying the different grape species and varieties and producing ampelographies for distinguishing them—notably among the Vinifera, of course—little as yet had been proven, beyond speculation, about the origins of and connections among the particular varieties. The DNA evidence was still six decades away. Research, however, had actively begun in European and American universities and institutes about the influence of such variables as *terroir*, macro- and micro-climates, and soil additives, along with vine age, spacing, pruning, and trellising methods, upon winegrape growing and the ultimate product: wine. Equally as many issues in cellar practices were being investigated by enologists, to await answers that eventually would come from close observation, laboratory work, and much painstaking experimentation.

In the Masson Wine Cellars with Martin Ray

As might be expected, MR provided his East Coast wine connoisseur pen pal with a plenitude of commentary about what he did to produce, from the varietal grapes grown on the Masson property or occasionally purchased from other vineyards, the wines he had made beginning in 1936, was making right now, or intended to make in the coming years. He let it be known that he did not do as the other vintners did; he was already a diehard purist.

Of course we eliminated the bacteria in the beginning by sorting the grapes, in picking out all the discolored or unhealthy berries, and crushing only the healthy ones. The usual practice is to add metabisulphite to the grapes as they are crushed, and again to the wine when it is first racked, at which time the wine is filtered, and at which time tannic acid, citric acid and even tartaric acid is added artificially. Beyond this, there is the treatment of both heat and freezing, and additional filtration. One of the men in California who is generally regarded the most outstanding producer of fine wines says that it is impossible to keep his white wines clear even after filtering without adding sulphur. And so it goes.

But in our cellars, each year we have made steps forward by concentrating on individual varieties until today, all of our varieties may be made and matured without resort to the usual practice[s]. And I am happy to say that this year, the last of the white varieties to be perfected, and the most difficult one of all to ferment has already become brilliantly clear of itself....

When wines do not clear up by themselves, we sell them to others in bulk. If a wine does not clear up by itself, I do not want to [intercede] because something is wrong and if that something cannot be found by microscopic inspection, it is certainly chemically out of balance and I am not interested in wines which must be artificially balanced by the addition of the things which they have not naturally. To be having to make all of these additions and subtractions would be like running a reformatory for children, and if I am to get pleasure and satisfaction from my work, I cannot devote my time to such efforts. [2/8/40]

When Street mentioned that for ordinary purposes he preferred drinking the Masson Gamay '36 to the Pinot Noir '36—the MR-vintaged wine that had bowled him over—MR understood, since he knew the Pinot needed more bottle-aging time. Yet he felt it necessary to generalize about some aspects of winegrowing probably unknown to most wine drinkers:

Normally the history of a wine, so far as the consumer is concerned, begins when it is bottled, or includes only a brief part of reference to its childhood, much the same as it is with individuals; their history includes so little of childhood, which has been lost with the passing of the parents, but is of great importance. When I think of the Gamay '36 and the Pinot Noir '36, I think of the weather which preceded and was a part of that year's vintage. I think even of the way the vines were pruned, months before, and I think of how the grapes were harvested, how hot they were when they went in the fermenter, how

> they fermented in the tank, at what temperature and at what sugar the free run juice was drawn off from the pommice [sic], how the fermentation finished up. Then, too, there is the manner of how the wine cleared up, its chemical analysis, its analysis by taste and inspection, every three months thereafter. As a matter of fact, we keep a record of the different puncheons to which each wine is racked and each individual puncheon actually changes the personality of the wine, for in the end, no puncheon is identical, although they are all virtually the same fine varietal. You will understand, then, that I cannot go through all these steps with you. I would like to, if we talked together. [2/8/40]

Because the Paul Masson Champagne Co. had been best known for its sparkling wines, MR couldn't neglect giving attention to creating new products in that area to demonstrate his own high standards. He wanted to improve upon those made by the firm's founder and his predecessor. Also, despite his touting the traditional or "classic" winemaking, he intended his new Champagnes to be different from—and surpassing—those made in France, which provided the models for vintners everywhere. MR, seemingly unawed by the famous foreign sparklers, wasn't averse to experimenting on his own, aiming for a more "natural" product. Here again MR persisted in staking his claim on the future. For instance, he detailed to Street why his new Champagnes could eventually outshine those from France:

> You said that old Mr. Knight thought a touch of brandy might aid my 1937 Brut. I understand him fully. The taste of Champagne in France has that taste in it and he quite naturally looked for it; they add it because they have to, not because they want to. You have not heard of adding any brandy to white Burgundies to improve their taste. French Champagnes need something they don't have. The dosage is the answer—sugar and brandy cover a multitude of sins. I add a dosage to my Champagne if it can't stand on its own feet, too. It is no different there, in the matter. But I have here a climate far more suitable to grape growing (of Pinots) than the Champagne district. You no doubt recall, they had trouble in the beginning raising grapes there. It was not until they learned to make their artificial Champagne which they build from whatever they get naturally that the district really became important. We have now become accustomed to the taste of the product they produce and I admit is good enough because it has its points and it is uniform. All French Champagnes are very much alike and because they are made, not grown. And, as I say, we have become accustomed to them. But that does not mean they would have more appeal than the wine I make, and I believe the opposite is true. My Champagne will taste like wine, the grape. Their Champagne does not taste like wine.

Moreover, MR projected a similar outcome for his table wines further ahead, while also acknowledging that the great French wines were indeed the models he emulated: "I claim I can make a better, natural and more delicious Champagne than France. I claim I can ultimately make still wines as good as the best French. I know now how to do the former now. The latter I shall learn to do."

Then, too, a Martin Ray letter expressed his notoriously adamant proscription against *ever* combining varietal grapes in making wine or subsequently blending together the wines made from them:

> Blending has never appealed to me and I do not believe it ever improved a naturally great wine to blend it with another like wine of another district or a great wine of another variety. Well, the practice is so wide of blending wines that I have never found anyone to agree with me but I have never found any real basis for believing blending improves any wine, whereas the opposite I have proved repeatedly. They would blend in France out of necessity. The free-run juice of a Pinot Noir is so little they could not afford to make Champagne out of it straight as a regular thing. The white grapes give more juice because they can be pressed. Sometimes, they press the Pinot Noir fully to get all the juice and then discolor the juice which is done with charcoal but that alters the wine, too. The French use this practice a lot more than is realized.... But when you have a truly great Burgundy, it is unblended. The finest red Bordeaux is unblended. [Note that MR was already maintaining that only Cabernet Sauvignon was worth using when making a fine Claret.] The finest Rieslings are unblended, and right down the line, if the wines are great, they are unblended. When you get into Champagne as made in France, it is not even close to being a natural wine....
> You must taste the bottle of 1939 [Still Champagne] soon as I want you to see it now while it is new. It is a case of a completely natural wine, to which nothing was added, nothing taken from it. [4/30/40]

MR adamantly resisted the growing tendency among vintners to view winemaking primarily as applied chemistry and microbiology. (His rowdy dispute with Beaulieu's new "wine chemist" André Tchelistcheff, recalled for Street's entertainment, will be presented in a future piece.) Sometimes, inevitably, unfortunate consequences resulted in his wines from his usual refusal to utilize modern science as knowledgeably and fully as he might have done. Like his Methodist minister father, Rusty Ray had an inherent fundamentalist streak, but his had gotten applied to winemaking.

MR's Early Battles with the Wine Establishment

Early in their correspondence Martin Ray began trying to enlist Street as a major standard-bearer in his campaign to induce the better California wineries to produce, as he was already doing, pure varietal wines made wholly from fine wine grapes. The first step was to persuade all premium-aiming wineries to recognize the necessity of using *only* the supreme or superior varietal grapes in making their best wines.

MR had good reason to believe that he was already impacting the California wine industry. His new pure-varietal table wines, as well as various Champagnes—dry, still, and pink—made to carry on the Masson tradition, were sold at the highest prices for American wines. Also, MR's winery became the first in the U.S. to institute the European practice of barrel tasting, which enabled advance ordering by both distributors and select customers. MR introduced this new "Paul Masson System" in an article written for the December 1940 issue of *Wines and Vines*. He had published several other magazine articles in the same period; one described the classic methods in making wine, another discussed Champagne. They demonstrated his intention to educate both people in the wine trade and consumers about fine wines.

It initially appeared as if Martin Ray intended to assume leadership of the premium end of California winemaking. This role, if successfully undertaken, would require a willingness to work actively, diplomatically, and cooperatively with owners and vintners within a small group of wineries that wished to produce and market a better class of wines. But by 1940, as his letters to Street show, MR had already taken an impatient and even belligerent stance that inevitably alienated him from most other winegrowers. MR detailed to JS many problems experienced in his relations with other wineries and vintners, as well as their main trade organization, the Wine Institute.

After taking over Paul Masson, he had declined —"on principle" as he put it—to become a member of the Wine Institute (WI), created in 1934 to represent the various interests of the state's wineries, such as trying to ease burdensome taxation and regulation issues, and promoting consumption of California wines around the nation. Its pragmatic goals and large-group-focused means scarcely matched the rarefied ones that MR intended to advance at Paul Masson. And though he could hope for a change in the WI's emphasis over time so that it would encourage the development of premium wines, he did not realistically expect it. The bulk wineries—with their cheap jug wines and sweet fortified wines, and their large and rapidly expanding facilities mostly located in the Central Valley—had very different aims and methods than those of the better, and much smaller, commercial wineries. If the latter did aspire to make quality wines, they couldn't expect much help from the Institute, since they had no real clout there, where they constituted a minority of its membership. The dues they paid, based on annual sales, were considerably less than those of the big firms. Bulk producers weren't seeking a reputation for making fine wines, either for themselves or California; they were only interested in high-volume sales, earning large net profits, and outdoing their competitors.

Although MR resented the dominating power and influence of the big wineries on the WI's policies, even while remaining critical he could see usefulness in some of its functions. Perhaps Masson and MR might even benefit from the increased national publicity and advertising of California wines in general now being carried out by its associated promotional organization, the Wine Advisory Board. As he commented to JS:

> Membership in the Institute permits many things objectionable, some very obviously beneficial. I will join when other[s] raise their standards, which is indefinite, and probably I will actually never join. They are beginning to help me anyway. Their personal [*sic*] is however, not good, and their directors are a rough lot, hardly interested in what is best for our interests. [4/19/40]

For a while MR made efforts to get along with the organization's people, especially in situations advantageous to him, or when receiving wine writers whom the WI had sent to the Masson premises. It was as if he were operating a picturesque showcase for high-caliber California wines. "The Institute crowd keep bringing their visitors here, and I make it very easy for them to continue doing so," he told Street.

After JS asked MR to provide candid opinions about wine people, generally and specifically, the vintner began a response by saying rather tactfully (for him):

> I have written you a letter about personalities who are our leaders in the industry in California but I cannot send it. What is in it you either know or will know in time and much of it you no doubt suspect already. The reason I cannot tell you about them is, they are perhaps doing their best, aren't we all? I'll have to tell you about it gradually, as indeed I am, and in such a way that I will not appear to tear them down. After all, many of them are my friends and some of them have done many things to help me, and others have tried. Their mistakes are in

a sense my mistakes for, after all, I am one of them. And I can do more good by working with them than against them. Here and there one will turn against me and that will identify his interest and it may gradually bring about a division of these people which would be good. It is foolish to expect bulk producers and members of the Wine & Food Society to have common interests. And here and there some of these people may be eliminated, and that will improve the general atmosphere and make room for those new-comers that must come. This will be a far more dignified way than a destructive attack from within. [4/13/40]

Then in the same letter MR, in spite of his intention to be circumspect, went on to vent various grievances. Seeming even less tolerant and forgiving of the current generation of winery owners than he was of the Wine Institute that represented them, he expressed the radical's urge to demolish the status quo, along with a sense of profound isolation, since his winemaking aims and methods were at such variance from those of his fellow vintners.

[As for] a description of all our so called leaders of the wine industry here. They are not "leaders" at all, they are "followers." Add to these that group dominated by the big producers of vin ordinaire and you have them all in two lines which you can size up readily....

I keep trying to explain to you why it is necessary that new men come into this industry. Those here are neither capable or willing. But I have feared you would think me angered at the whole lot, bitter or prejudiced. I am none of this. I am merely observant and I see proof of my conclusions all about me. If I have now been so fortunate as to establish myself with you to the point where I may tear down all these old structures. We can then get about rebuilding new and better ones that will be enduring. Upon this assumption I shall, then, write you very shortly of the personalities who never should be possessed of such authority.

Until then, I can only think of gain, and say there is not in the entire industry one man who has vision, industry and spirit and who is able to employ these things so necessary to progress. I get mighty lonesome at times for one man to talk to about wines and I tell you they are so damned shallow I am profoundly depressed whenever I undertake such a discussion.

Then MR mentioned briefly an incident which he later magnified into an iconic event: "Mr. [Joseph] Concannon came to see me a year or so ago to ask me to take some leadership among the wine men but it was an army I didn't care to lead and a war which I preferred to fight on the opposite side.... The right kind of personel [sic] is necessary."

Apparently this actual event involving Concannon was less dramatic than the story MR often recounted in later years. He would tell how a delegation of vintners visited him one day at Masson. Their desire to produce better-quality wines, they said, had put them in a difficult position with most other Wine Institute members. Thus they were forming their own special group. Not only did they urge Martin Ray to join them, but they also wanted him to serve as an officer—and therefore a principal spokesman.

As MR's oft-told tale had it, instead of graciously accepting this proffered leadership position, he asked his visitors whether members of the fledging group would go "on record" by publicly declaring themselves ready to change how they made and labeled their best wines. If so, he would join them and offer guidance. This commitment would, of course, involve replanting their existing vineyards and getting their grape suppliers to do it too, so as to be able to vintage far more fine winegrapes—and from them making wholly unblended wines. This was the *only* way, MR informed them, for California to achieve superior, even supreme wines. It would then become widely acknowledged at last that the state was indeed a great winegrowing region, and its prevailing reputation for producing imperfect or deceptive wines would be cast aside. But as MR later told it, the vintners declined to submit to these demands, citing the prohibitive costs involved and also how long such a changeover would take. To add to MR's disgust, when he served them some of his pure (and very dry) varietal wines, they acted unimpressed, thereby revealing their real ignorance of excellent table wines. It was a hopeless situation.

Unlike his comparable winemaking peers in the other "better" wineries, MR did things on a small scale. Operating what virtually amounted to an early boutique-type winery, he usually made only 3,000 cases altogether of still wines of his six best varietals —500 each of Pinot Noir, Cabernet-Sauvignon (he usually hyphenated it), and Gamay [Beaujolais], as his reds; and Pinot Blanc ("Vrai"), Pinot Chardonnay (as it was called then), and Folle Blanche, as his whites. (The latter, crisp and refreshingly tart, indicated to him the potential in this underrated secondary variety.) His several different Champagnes, made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, were produced in similarly small quantities. Though MR sold to other wineries most of the undesirable miscellaneous grapes he harvested from the Masson vineyards (these plantings dated back to Prohibition or earlier times), he did produce some batches of unpretentious *vins ordinaires* for local people, mainly French and Italian, who bought them at the winery.

During the uncertain period when California's wine industry was being resurrected, did Martin Ray's insistence upon maverick and elitist-appealing winemaking ideas actually make good business sense? The other proprietors of self-declared premium wineries

believed they could ill afford to do things as he demanded that they soon be done. How would they stay afloat financially? Wineries were only now beginning to emerge from the disastrous effects of Prohibition, and to complicate things the Depression was lingering on. Still, a few wineries were beginning to pay more attention to achieving quality. After 1935 they could legally label and market wines as varietals even though they might legally contain only 51% of the named varietal grape. They found they could charge, and earn, appreciably more for them. Rarely if ever, however, were they 100% "pure," as the Paul Masson wines were—and as Martin Ray insisted that others' varietals also be. But after all, winery managers could rationalize, only a miniscule population of Americans were true wine connoisseurs who could tell the difference between pure and blended Cabernet Sauvignons or Pinot Noirs ... and really care about it.

As their often voluminous letters crisscrossed the continent in 1940, the two men came to regard each other as close friends—making confessions, exchanging gifts, and even swapping their wives' recipes. Apart from many back-and-forth discussions about wines and the wine industry, they wrote about books as well as the authors each of them knew, reported on their social lives, fretted over the American political scene, and commented on the ominous world events certain soon to engulf the U.S. From time to time Martin revealed to Julian a gentler, more introspective and philosophical side of himself than he displayed to the wine industry, where his relations were becoming increasingly acrimonious.

The most prominent and persistent facet of their correspondence, though, concerned MR's continuous quest to secure a partnership with a suitable national distributor for his premium wines, and naturally he hoped Julian Street would help him accomplish this.

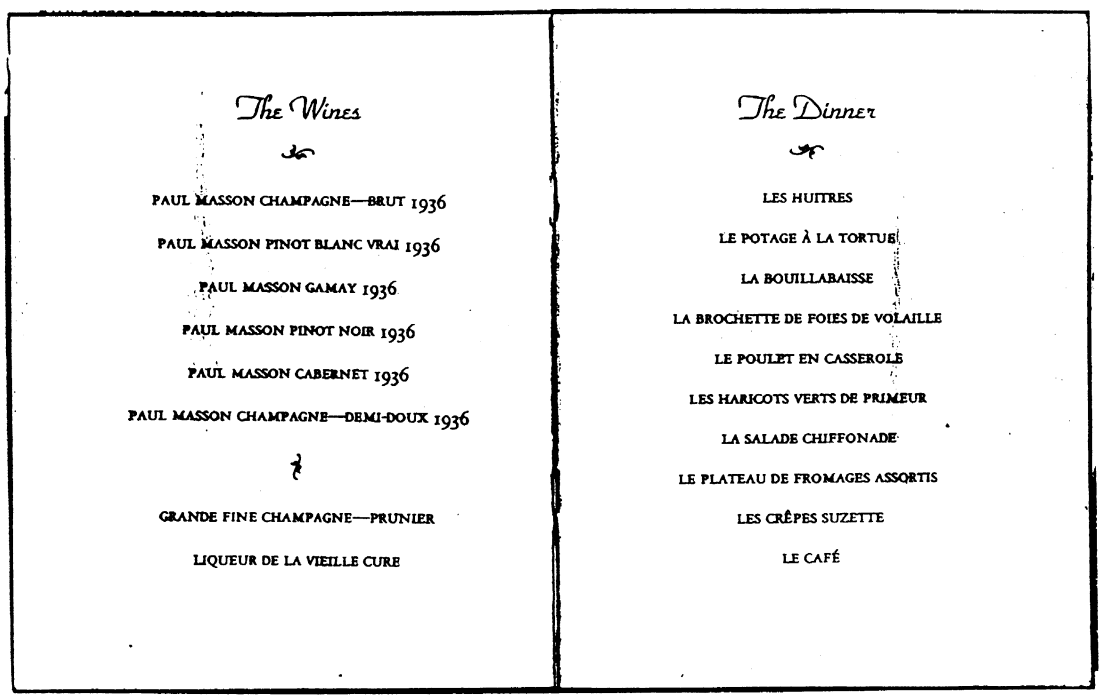
[The third segment of this coverage of the Ray–Street correspondence will be published in the next issue.]

BOOKS & BOTTLES, ***cont'd from*** **p.13 —**

advice..." and *The World of Wines* (New York: Macmillan, 1964; revised 1974, 1980), an "all-inclusive guide designed for easy and practical reference."

The Bottles: Here is the best wine, from each of the above regions, that my tasting panel has pondered recently. The ratings: 80 is good; 90 is unforgettable.

Alsace: Trimbach Frederic Emile Riesling, 1999. 85pts
Chablis: Michel Picard, 2001. 82pts.
Burgundy: Domaine Des Perdrix Nuits-Saint-Georges, 2000. 93pts.
Beaujolais: Ch. De la Chaize Brouilly, 2000. 88pts.
Rhône Valley: Paul Jaboulet Parallèle 45, 1999. 83pts.
Bordeaux: Rothschild Mouton Cadet, 2001. 89pts.
Loire: B & G Tradition Vouvray, 2001. 83pts.
Champagne: Lanson Brut Gold Label, 1996. 88pts.



The Wines

PAUL MASSON CHAMPAGNE—BRUT 1936
PAUL MASSON PINOT BLANC VRAI 1936
PAUL MASSON GAMAY 1936
PAUL MASSON PINOT NOIR 1936
PAUL MASSON CABERNET 1936
PAUL MASSON CHAMPAGNE—DEMI-DOUX 1936

GRANDE FINE CHAMPAGNE—PRUNIER
LIQUEUR DE LA VIEILLE CURE

The Dinner

LES HUITRES
LE POTAGE À LA TORTUE
LA BOUILLABAISSE
LA BROCHETTE DE FOIES DE VOLAILLE
LE POULET EN CASSEROLE
LES HARICOTS VERTS DE PRIMEUR
LA SALADE CHIFFONADE
LE PLATEAU DE FROMAGES ASSORTIS
LES CRÊPES SUZETTE
LE CAFÉ