Vinaceous Correspondents: Martin Ray's Friendships with Eminent Oenophiles

THE SECOND ARTICLE IN A SERIES

by ***Barbara Marinacci***

[This article follows the Introduction published in the April 2003 issue of The Wayward Tendrils Quarterly. The author, a book writer and editor, is the stepdaughter of winegrower Martin Ray. Her mother was his second wife, Eleanor Ray. After arranging in 1998 to donate the Martin Ray & Eleanor Ray Papers to UC Davis Special Collections at the Shields Library, she spent a year compiling them and summarizing (on her computer) many of their letters, in a chronological framework. The correspondence excerpted here, however, is not contained within that collection. Much of the quoted material comes from the Manuscript Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. It is published with permission of the Princeton University Library. Luckily, Julian Street kept the letters and telegrams Martin Ray sent him, and they were among the papers given by his widow to the university. The author is grateful to Thomas Pinney for alerting her to their existence. A few additional Street-associated letters, also quoted here, are extant withing the Ray scrapbooks.]

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

Preliminary note: This coverage of the trans-continental epistolary friendship between these two men, as well as the wine-connected circumstances initiating, surrounding, and sustaining it, was originally intended to be printed as one unit. However, as I read in detail the many long and expressive letters that Martin Ray had written to Julian Street, and then began writing about their relationship, and included excerpts from correspondence, it became apparent that I couldn't easily make the story fit into a single piece. Doing so would require omitting not only background information but also materials that might well interest wine scholars—especially those intrigued with Martin Ray's influential early role as both pure-varietal winemaker and wine-quality agitator, and possibly also with psychological factors behind his undeniable zealotry.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the period of this correspondence, Martin Ray had already taken up a combative stance vis-à-vis the California wine industry and its practitioners of all kinds—including misguided or pretentious wine consumers. Furthermore, his idiosyncratic viticultural and enological practices were well entrenched, involving traditional methods that rejected techniques developed for larger-scale, risk-reducing commercial winemaking. Most of his vehement opinions and problematic behaviors in later years—professional, financial, litigious, social, emotional—are actually foreshadowed in his letters to Street. Yet many passages in these forthright, articulate letters also reveal MR's admirable side, such as an intense dedication to his new vocation, a genuine and abiding desire to achieve perfection, a robust sense of humor, and the sheer joy he took in strenuous or painstaking work in vineyard and cellar. To present adequately the two men's friendship and correspondence, along with tales about and opinions of other wine-associated personalities and events of the times, necessitates splitting a long piece into several sections.

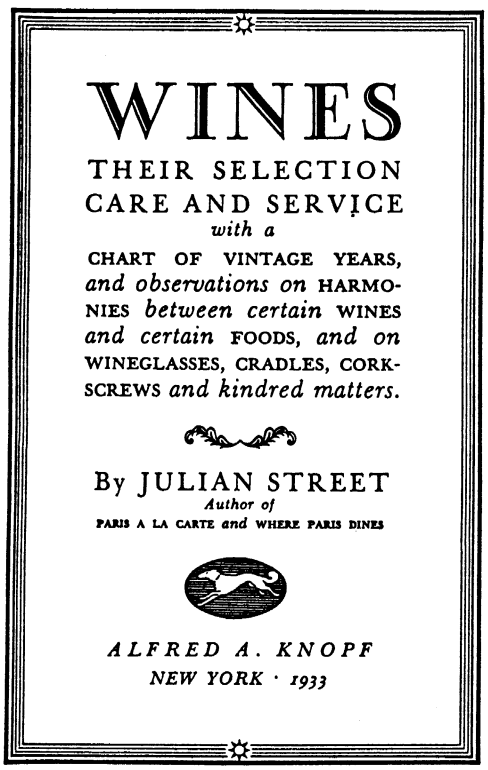
Unfortunately, most of Street's letters to MR, especially handwritten ones, are missing from the Princeton archive; the originals, so precious to Martin Ray, would have been consumed in the 1941 or 1952 fires at his two premises, except for a few preserved in scrapbooks. However, Street's letters that were typed, with carbon copies made, along with various notes made prior to his writing to MR, are more apt to be in the Princeton collection. Much of what JS wrote to MR, and the amicable tone in which they were written, must be inferred from MR's responses to the letters he received. It is regretful that most letters haven't survived, for it's evident from MR's replies that they were surely intriguing, informative, and almost as loquacious as the winemaker's. The few existing letters reveal a highly literate, congenial fellow who offered helpful advice and shared happy memories of his cosmopolitan past. He was also endearingly modest about being regarded as a supreme wine expert—and frequently protested against MR's fulsome adulation.

On the evening of January 17th, 1940, a telegram was sent from Connecticut to California winemaker Martin Ray—the proprietor, for four years now, of the Paul Masson winery and vineyards, located in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains that hovered above the town of Saratoga. The message had been composed out of its sender's impulsive enthusiasm rather than any urgency.

Though lacking punctuation between its sentences, the wire succinctly conveyed a clear pronouncement:

> YOUR PINOT NOIR 1936 TASTED TONIGHT IS FIRST AMERICAN RED WINE I EVER DRANK WITH ENTIRE PLEASURE COLOR SUPERB BOUQUET BEAUTIFUL FLAVOR UNMISTAKABLY PINOT NOIR BIG AND FULL WINE STILL SOMEWHAT HARD WITH SLIGHTLY BITTER AFTERTASTE NEVERTHELESS REMARKABLY FINE I AM ASTOUNDED WARMEST CONGRATULATIONS.
> JULIAN STREET

Thirty-five-year-old "Rusty" Ray was overjoyed with his great good fortune, for this approval had come from the man whom many oenophiles considered America's preeminent wine authority. Six years earlier, as Prohibition ended, Alfred A. Knopf had published Julian Street's engagingly informative *Wines: Their Selection, Care, and Service*. The book came right when it was needed, for it reintroduced the nation's public to the pleasures and rituals of drinking fine wines. (In a letter to MR, Street would reveal that, under deadline pressure from the up-coming Repeal, he had written his book in a marathon stint of just eighteen days; "I lost twelve pounds or so over it, and my wife about ten. It was terribly exhausting. Sometimes we worked 18 and 20 hours at a stretch.")


WINES
THEIR SELECTION
CARE AND SERVICE
with a
CHART OF VINTAGE YEARS,
and observations on HARMONIES *between certain* WINES
and certain FOODS, *and on*
WINEGLASSES, CRADLES, CORKSCREWS *and kindred matters.*
By JULIAN STREET
Author of
PARIS A LA CARTE *and* WHERE PARIS DINES
ALFRED A. KNOPF
NEW YORK · 1933

Street, a facile author of popular stories and plays, had been a frequent traveler on the Continent as well as a connoisseur of people, food, and wine—writing about them in books and columns in periodicals. An acknowledged wine expert, he served as a director with a major alcoholic beverage distributor, Bellows & Co. He also chose the wine list for New York's stylish Hotel St. Regis—which reputedly had the nation's best selection of European vintages. Additionally, Street had designed a line of elegant goblets for serving different types of wine.

In a section of *Wines* entitled "The American Drinking Habits," Street had discussed his countrymen's historic predilection for hard liquor, which minimized most people's experience with fine wines, whether U.S-made or imported from Europe. Then he blamed the thirteen years of Prohibition for wretched experiences with ubiquitous, badly made booze—including, of course, vinegarish bootlegged or home-fermented wine, made or kept under adverse conditions. But he already saw hopeful signs of the public's improving taste, remarking: "At no time in our history has the general interest in wines been so great. Few Americans know wines, it is true, but very many want to know them." Street added an observation that would have characterized even better the period of the great American wine boom of the early 1970s, three decades later: "I do not overlook the fact that our childish love of novelty is one reason for this. Wine is something new for us to play with."

Street then drove his own trenchant nail into the coffin of Prohibition:

> But my greatest hope for the future is based on the conviction that as a nation we are genuinely ashamed of the excesses of the period just past. The Repeal vote proves that. We have been wallowing, but we are sick of it. We long to pick ourselves out of the gutter, brush off our clothes, and get back to decency again.
>
> If we succeed in doing that, the Prohibition orgy will not have been in vain.

But Street hadn't been at all pleased when he sampled the new wines currently made in America. Then, six years after the publication of *Wines*, in August of 1939, Street had received a letter from his California-living, wine-loving son-in-law, Hunt Lewis. He penciled a note to himself about this letter's contents, which had told him about—

> a Mr. Martin Ray, former San Fr. broker, bought the Paul Masson company after repeal and set out to do a real job. A common friend of Hunt & Ray brought Hunt 2 bots of Cabernet Claret from Paul Masson Vineyards, Saratoga, Calif. Ray fascinated by viticulture—retired to country (for health). Studied viticulture at U of Cal sc [short courses] —Last year (1938) first believed he had arrived at something. Hunt thinks first of the good stuff not yet on market. Find out about this.

Street was familiar with Paul Masson's fine pre-Prohibition Champagnes, but this Claret of course was a still wine. Wishing to taste and judge this new, supposedly "good stuff," he contacted a California

oenophile acquaintance in San Francisco, who in turn contacted Ray. MR regarded the relayed request as an excellent opportunity to test the caliber of his new wines—and then publicize them ... *if* Street liked them. He arranged delivery of a mixed case of selected wines to Street's home in Lakeville, Connecticut, through wine broker (and author) Frank Schoonmaker in New York City. The vintner wrote a separate introductory letter on the Paul Masson stationery:

> My dear Mr. Street:
>
> Mr. Harold Price [an officer of SF's Wine & Food Society] has very thoughtfully asked me to send you samples of a few of my wines, that you may try them. Having known you by name so long, and having had the opportunity to meet others who know you, it is now a distinct pleasure to be able to direct this letter to you, and particularly to send you the following case of twelve bottles ...

MR then listed the six wines from the 1936 vintage, of which he was providing two fifths of each. There were three Champagnes—Brut, Demi-Doux, and Still, all made from the Pinot Chardonnay grape (as it was then called); and three of MR's dry table "Signature Wines"—Cabernet, Pinot Noir, and Gamay. After mentioning the favorable reception given these Paul Masson wines by many visitors, MR said:

> You may rest assured that, any wines made at my cellars, beginning with and including the year 1936, will be found uniform in quality and type as labeled.
>
> This property was acquired by me following the 1935 Vintage, at which time the development of our inventories was undertaken.... *Having grown up on land situated at the foot of this vineyard, my efforts will be directed to the making of the finest wine that it is possible to make in California,* and any business which is not so included, will not be a part of our operations. [Emphasis added.]
>
> When you have tasted the wines, I would naturally like to know how you like them.

After receiving a friendly response from Street prior to his receipt of the wines, MR felt encouraged. Toward the end of 1939 he wrote two more letters about his still wines, explaining why they were put in Champagne bottles. He also offered winemaking opinions, explaining, "I wish to be able to describe fully to you some of the conditions in California which I am certain will interest you."

MR already hoped that the oenophile would take a valuable role in his urgent campaigns: to encourage more Americans to appreciate fine wines by purchasing and getting to know them; and to demand, as a wine authority, future adherence to wine quality standards and honest labeling from those wine producers in California who claimed they were making premium wines. As MR set down his uncompromising visions in his third letter, a six-pager dictated to and typed up by his secretary, he introduced some of the main themes of his entire winemaking career—which still stretched ahead of him for more than thirty years:

> I sincerely believe that a great burden rests upon the shoulders of you and a very few people who are capable of assisting in the re-education of American people in matters pertaining to wines and their usages. It is my wish that I may be able, in some small way, to assist in this most important educational program.
>
> Actually I see many results already coming from the efforts of such people as Harold Price and Dr. Maynard A. Amerine [of UC Davis] here in California, but there is still the tendency to classify all California wines as simply California wines. Sooner or later it must be understood that here, as elsewhere, there are ordinary wines and fine wines.... I am willing to admit that there are not very many fine wines made in California, but it is my hope and belief that with the passing of a little more time there will be others who will enter the industry and who will devote themselves to the making of the fine wines which it is possible to make here. But thus far it has been mostly conversation and it is difficult to find a single producer who does not claim to make fine wines.
>
> It has been my observation, however, that in creative undertakings those who excell [*sic*] as a result of natural ability, facilities and extensive industry do so because they can't help themselves rather than because of any program which they have set out for themselves. In other words, I think that the fine wines of the world are made by people who could not permit themselves to undertake to make wines other than the best possible for them to make and I do not believe such people are ever satisfied with their results. [12/18/39]

Aiming for greatness, Martin Ray had espoused the "classic" European method of making fine wine. It involved a great deal of skilled handwork in both vineyard and cellar, and disparaged his California peers' prevalent mass-production tactics in growing and harvesting grapes and in vintaging the wines from them.

> I know that what goes on here at our establishment [Paul Masson] is deemed by most observers to be unbusiness-like and in many instances absurd, simply because there are other methods of raising grapes and making wines which are shorter, less expensive and which may be entrusted to ordinary employed help. I know that many of the things which are done here result in extensive work and expenditures and involve the passing of a great deal of time, all of which I frequently find is difficult to justify, which causes me no end of concern and yet which I cannot do otherwise. It is very clear what decision should be made and what action should be taken all along and no concessions can be made, if it is truly fine wines that are to be made.

> But, the producer must feel this way about it, else the temptations along the way are too great and in the end he will succumb to the practices which result in the production of ordinary wines....
>
> Many of these producers of the better California wines are only a step away from making fine wines; but the trouble is the wine makers actually don't know what it is to follow the procedures necessary in the making of great wines. It is into these Cellars [of better wines] that I expect ultimately will be introduced a man here and there capable of initiating the leadership necessary to get the most out of the varieties of vines they have in their vineyards, the climatic and soil conditions.
>
> Thus far people like to use machinery, employ chemists and systems and more or less operate as factories, rather than wine cellars.

MR then brought up issues that would always dominate his attacks on other wineries: the blending in wines and fraudulent varietal labeling, as well as misidentifying grapevines, through ignorance or deliberate deception. His commentaries and accusations were already creating resentment, ire, and enmity with the other winegrowers as they were circulated along the industry's active gossip grapevine. Thus to Street he said:

> The Pinot Noir does not exist in any commercial quantities any place in California outside of our vineyard. I have visited every vineyard that I have ever heard of possessing this variety and I have found them, in its true, but not in sufficient quantities to make a commercial amount of wine. In one such vineyard I found one row of vines, possibly totaling 30 vines and yet the vineyard had the reputation of making a large amount of Pinot Noir wine, which explains why you do not find the Pinto Noir taste in the Pinot Noir wine you have drunk heretofore.
>
> There is one vineyard said to produce a very large tonnage of Pinot Noir and the man who bought those grapes this year boasted to me of having acquired them at $15 per ton, yet these grapes are not Pinot Noir. I was reared at the foot of this vineyard and I have friends who own vineyards abroad and have entertained here French vineyardists. From the education derived from these sources, I can say that I definitely know the Pinot Noir variety....
>
> Those who have fine varieties here in California have not, in many instances, made the most of them, blending them with certain other varieties and passing down the untruthful saying that blending is the true art of wine making, which of course is absurd, although it has its place....
>
> It is my personal belief that the grape does not change its character either in California, Chile or France, but soil and climatic conditions certainly alter it to an extent and under extreme conditions no doubt materially. It is carelessness and fraud which usually are responsible for your not finding a similarity through wines sold under a given label.

Apparently in a previous letter (not extant) JS had admitted that he knew little about how grapes were grown and wines made, and expressed the desire to learn much more about the production side from his new correspondent. This elicited MR's response:

> You are very modest in saying that you know nothing about the producing of wines. It is, however, certain that I have none of the knowledge [of wine connoisseurship] which you do possess, however you are to classify it, in which it is the more important knowledge so far as the world is concerned. *The world is chiefly interested in the result, not the cause.* [Emphasis added.]
>
> Should you visit here any time I would like to contribute in my small way to the great knowledge of wines which you have acquired, toward the end that you might increase your interest in the actual producing of wines....
>
> Possibly we may continue this correspondence should it be found mutually desirable to do so, in which event I have no doubt there would be some interesting letters which I would obtain from you.

It took time for Street to try out all six wines sent to him. He started with the Champagnes. Then in mid January, after opening the first bottle of Pinot Noir 1936, Julian could scarcely believe that he was actually drinking a wine made in the U.S.—which is why he wired his enthusiasm (quoted above) to Martin Ray.

Delighted with Street's reaction to his Pinot Noir, MR felt like sending off a responsive telegram, but curbed the urge. Instead, he composed a grateful statement that was added to a letter already dictated to his secretary. In it MR let Mr. Street know how much he appreciated his opinions.

> Recognition of my wines is really one of the compensations for which I work. It is not enough to enjoy them myself and know about them; nor is it sufficient to sell them for money; and the friends who come here so often, and speak so favorably of them, do not help a great deal either, when I know that their authority is lacking, as is sometimes the case.
>
> It seems as though the greatest satisfaction really comes from putting forth the best efforts we possess, and knowing that our own satisfaction that we are doing our best, and then having this recognized by someone who is a great authority. You can understand then, why I keep thinking about your wire, because it makes me feel that now I must go on, each year that nature permits, making if possible a better wine, and one which you will feel justified in continually holding up to others as an example of what can be done.
>
> It is odd, that I should get my pay from someone who is not a commercial customer, but on the other hand, if wine-making is to be developed as an art, it removes it from commerce. In any case, I am indebted to you and I shall endeavor to send you our wines of which you will

think equally well, or better. [1/19/40]

When Rusty told his wife about having squelched that first impulse to send off a wire, Elsie told him he should still do it. The letter would get to Julian Street later. During their ten years of marriage, Rusty Ray had learned to trust Elsie's judgment.

Background to the Street–Ray Correspondence

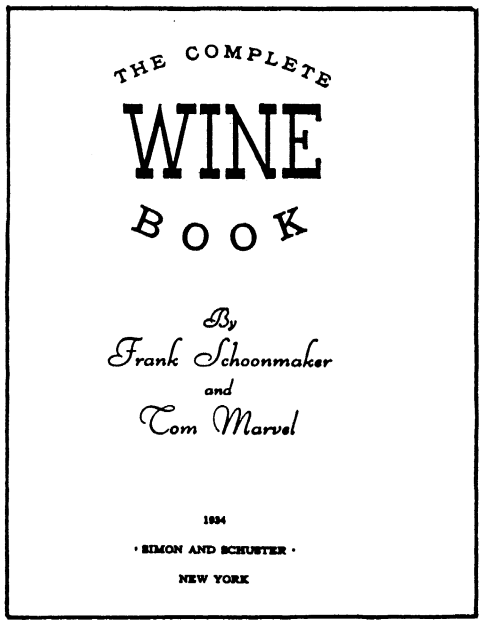
Elsie Ray was as pleased with Julian Street's opinion as her husband, for it confirmed the rightness of having radically changed their lifestyle. She had met and married Rusty when he was the high-earning owner of his own San Francisco brokerage. Several years after the Stock Market Crash of '29, with the nation deeply mired in the Depression, MR's doctor warned of his perilously high blood pressure, caused by stress. Around 1933, MR suffered what he afterwards called a nervous breakdown. However, it had all the symptoms of a major stroke: severe pain at the back of the neck, followed by collapse and coma; and when finally regaining consciousness, he was partly paralyzed and had both amnesia and aphasia.

Elsie nursed Rusty through two difficult years. Intensive sessions with a psychiatrist during the recovery period convinced them that Rusty should now live quietly out in the country. Though the brain trauma hadn't affected his intelligence, apparently it had permanently damaged his nervous system. He was advised to take up a less nerve-racking career, simplify his life, focus on only one issue at a time, and avoid conflicting opinions. He might even work outdoors. As a boy, Rusty had liked farming when living with his maternal grandparents near Saratoga. As he later told Street:

> When a fellow gets in a weakened condition, all sorts of strange things can happen. Thats [*sic*] the way it was with me. So I had to get back to this sort of life and start over again, building a life of reality, living as my people had lived always and living as people are perhaps meant to live. Or at least, living as I was trained to believe people should live.... Anyway, it is a good life. And Mrs. Ray and I could never go back to the City and its life willingly. We feel we are where we belong. [7/16/40]

MR now decided what he'd do: acquire vineyard and winery property, and become a winegrower. He always declared that all previous money-making endeavors had been done anyway to accrue assets that would enable him someday to live much as vintner Paul Masson did. During his boyhood Rusty had known the French-born winery owner and admired his way of life, which combined hard physical labor with elegant entertaining. From his grandparents' ranch he could climb up trails leading to Masson's lofty La Cresta *domaine*, and there he earned pocket money by doing odd jobs on the premises, such as trapping rabbits and gophers, and helping out in vineyards and cellar. Hanging around, he learned basic things about vines and wines, and sometimes he even talked with the Burgundian himself. All the while he had ignored his widowed mother's rigid Temperance stance.

Once MR had decided upon this new vocation, he methodically educated himself, reading books and articles on the history, aesthetics, and technical aspects of both viticulture and enology. He also took short courses in vineyard care, wine evaluation, and winemaking offered by the extension division of the University of California, whose wine-connected activities were being transferred from Berkeley to the younger campus at Davis, in agricultural land near the Central Valley.


THE COMPLETE
WINE
BOOK
By
Frank Schoonmaker
and
Tom Marvel
1934
· SIMON AND SCHUSTER ·
NEW YORK

Schoonmaker and Marvel

Surely a potent influence—though MR would *never* have willingly acknowledged it in after-years—came from reading Frank Schoonmaker and Tom Marvel's recently published *The Complete Wine Book*. Schoonmaker aimed to make a good living by selling fine wine, both imported and domestic. Wishing to become known as a wine expert, he had enlisted Marvel's help in writing this book. The chapter on American wines had several pages (pp 44-46) criticizing the misleading and ill-advised ways in which the motley blended-varietal wines from California were being marketed, using French and German wine-region names and European-looking labels. According to the authors, a wine label should be truthful and simple, and should clearly state:

> The wine's name, identified by the particular locality it comes from.
> The wine's year.
> Grower's, or proprietor's name (address if necessary).

> The grape variety from which the wine is made.... [*Note that* variety *is singular here, indicating that blending wasn't recommended.*]
> By means of the honest label, the dozens of vineyard districts in California would soon become identified all over the country with their distinctive and characteristic wines....

Schoonmaker and Marvel then asserted that the current dishonesty in the making, labeling, and marketing of American wines would persist if consumers themselves didn't educate themselves and start demanding from wineries better ways to produce and sell their wares. They declared:

> As with the Pinot vine of Burgundy, so it is with the Cabernet of Bordeaux and the Riesling of the Rhine. Planted in favorable locations in California, they produce excellent wines, perfectly able to stand up on their own merits under honest, local names. But until these finer wines of California, as well as their ordinary cousins, abandon European names to which they have no right, they must, no matter how fine, remain self-confessed imitations and subject to all the implications of inferiority which that word implies.
> And they will not abandon their false names so long as we Americans continue to "drink labels."

The 1934 Schoonmaker–Marvel book had annoyed California grape growers and winery owners, who resented its criticisms of their wines as well as its advocacy of the superior European ones. They knew the huge costs and efforts entailed in the book's rigorous proposals for transforming the grape-growing landscape, winery procedures, and marketing tactics. In this mid-Depression period, precarious for rebuilding near-defunct wineries or launching new ones, it was difficult enough to persuade Americans to drink wine at all—let alone *fine wine*! At least one reader, though, thought the book's arguments made good sense. As his course of action proved, Martin Ray took its proposals to heart and intended to apply them. (More will be said in a later article about MR's subsequent seesaw business dealings with Schoonmaker, as reported to Street.)

In early 1935 aspiring winegrower Martin Ray heard that Paul Masson wanted to sell his winery business and mountain vineyard property. By this time the Frenchman was elderly, in his mid-seventies. The long dry period of Prohibition had exhausted him, even though his enterprise had managed to survive. During those thirteen years he could legally make Champagne, sold as a prescriptive medicine for pregnant women and people with dyspepsia. He also had earned good money after replanting many acres to shippers' grapes, especially Salvatore—a grape yielding an inky red fluid that home winemakers and bootleggers added to white grape juice, or even to sugared water, to produce ample red wine. After Repeal finally came, though, Masson's company faced a bottomed-out national economy. His Champagne was considered a luxury—and was taxed accordingly. He also struggled to compete with a flock of both new and revived wineries. Some old ones, unlike his, had capital which enabled them to update and expand their facilities.

Moreover, the Frenchman had no son to succeed him—only a daughter who took no interest in her father's company. But when Masson's former "protégé," Rusty Ray, now grown up, approached him as a prospective buyer, he was refused. Purportedly Masson advised him not to buy an aging vineyard property and winery that needed costly new equipment and renovations. MR, however, knew the value of a long-established, well-respected business name. And he had loved La Cresta since his boyhood. Intent upon his objective, he created an investment company with a small group of shareholders; having retained control, he made himself president. Using a third-party representative, in the fall of 1935 MR at last succeeded in purchasing the Masson property. Masson was furious when he learned that Martin was behind the deal. (In letters to Street MR would describe his uneasy connection with his crusty "mentor," Masson.)

By the spring of 1936 Martin and Elsie Ray were making their home in the small hilltop *château*, which Masson had used for midday naps, cleaning up, entertaining customers, and (it was rumored) extramarital trysts. Only about a hundred feet away stood the four-story winery building that Masson had begun constructing in the early 1900s, adding a Romanesque façade, which had originally come from Europe around the Horn to front St. Patrick's Church in San Jose. After that building collapsed in the 1906 earthquake, Masson hauled the medieval sandstone pieces up to La Cresta and reassembled them to adorn his winery. (The historic structure is familiar to contemporary summer concertgoers at the Mountain Winery's amphitheater.)

Adjoining the town of Saratoga, on the west side of the Santa Clara Valley and near the city of San Jose, the Masson winery property that MR now owned was on a mountainside. It was reached by driving up a long, winding, dirt road with daunting drop-offs and only a single car's width in most places. Visitors were asked to telephone before coming up, to make sure nobody else would be driving down.

In an early letter to Julian Street MR eloquently described the unique place chosen and developed by Paul Masson almost a half-century earlier. This was the special region he would later call *Chaîne d'Or* (but attributing the picturesque naming of this "golden chain" to Masson)—claiming that nowhere else in California (or even the world) were conditions so

favorable for winegrowing.

High in the foothills of Saratoga, overlooking the Santa Clara Valley, is situated what would be a peninsula running north and south, were the sea level a thousand feet higher. This long mountain actually rises to an altitude of two thousand feet at its peak. The eastern slope supports our vineyards in a position both unique and practical. For, during the months of Spring and early Summer, it is often that the Valley below is filled with fogs, come in from the San Francisco Bay, into which the Valley opens, and at such times, we have here on our slopes, the bright warm sunshine which, in the later months of the year, turns hot. But by mid-day or afternoon, the rays that do the damage are behind the hill or strike only at an angle.

More often, the valley is not filled in the morning with actual fog, but just sort of a haze, or the small particles of moisture rising from the still damp earth, and to be about in the valley, you would think only of it being yet a bit early or not as bright as it might be. But up here, looking down on it, the sun's rays reflect upon it, making it look sometimes as if the sea level in fact, had risen a thousand feet during the night. At such times, it is quite apparent why in the vineyards below, they produce results quite unlike those we expect here. I have never known our grapes to be burned by the sun nor suffer from the fogs that permit so much mildew below. When the fogs rise, they are drawn into the big valley inland (San Joaquin) if it is summer time, for it is always hotter there than here. If the movement is not away from our location and into the big valley, it is most likely south, into the warmer Salinas Valley.

At times, the fog does move upward, and the atmosphere seems to absorb it near the vineyard levels, and it never but rarely remains. When you have seen this, year after year, and when you have seen snow in the vineyard, and frost all about, but without damage here, you come to appreciate what nature has done for these acres. Cool breezes that never touch the lands below, pass through our vineyards every day when it is very hot, on their way to the hotter big valley. There is an opening in the higher mountains between us and the Coast, and it is from this pass that these breezes come in Summer to cool us, and it provides in the coldest weather an air movement that guards the vines from freezing; especially is this air movement important in the early Spring when frosts often nip the new shoots of the vines below us. [2/8/40]

MR's letter also provided a glimpse of Elsie Ray, his co-equal partner in both marriage and the winery proprietorship:

From the highway below, we have a private road that is a mile and a half long that brings you up rather sharply to this elevation. It is not everyone who would like to live here, certainly not everyone who has known another sort of life. But my wife loves it. She likes to think of herself as a country girl, and she did grow up in what was then country, and has since become a part of San Jose, only a few miles away. But we lived in the City for many years and know both lifes [*sic*]. During the Vintage season, sometimes I do not leave the cellars for hours at a time, and she has sometimes set up a card table and served there a dinner, all the while as interested in the new wine being made as though she were the Head Vintner. To operate a place like this requires a lot of sacrifice from my wife, but she has accepted them as opportunities and loves it all. When your letter came the other morning, I brought it over to the house and after she had read it with full enthusiasm and appreciation, she came down stairs and stood in front of the fireplace while we talked. I have the feeling that my wife thinks more of me because of the way we are operating this place, and I know that it is the way she would do it. So you see, we are running it together, for she loves to share in what is being planned for the future.

MR's emotional dependency on his first wife was deeply rooted, and it belied other characteristics. A male chauvinist who disapproved of women's ever wearing pants or espousing feminist ideas, he prided himself on ruling his roost. Yet he seemingly worshipped Elsie—relying upon her strength of character and always paying close attention to her gently uttered directives. Knowing well his many virtues, she was also aware of his various vulnerabilities, and tried to protect him, as much as possible, from overextending himself.

The Wine Perfectionist

The fledgling winemaker at Paul Masson was an idealistic maverick from the start. Martin Ray aimed simply to make the best wines in America, and ultimately to match their French models. He determined to grow wine grapes with excellent pedigrees. His plan was to establish a "brand name" for his best wines, to reflect the winery's new management. His "Signature" labels would identify the varietal grape that went into each wine made on the premises. MR also intended to pursue what he called the classic approach to winemaking, as undertaken in Europe's small estate vineyards. Making strictly limited vintages to maintain high quality standards required painstaking handwork. It avoided the mechanization in farming and harvesting and the quick mass processing that typified the production of grapes and wine at the other established wineries, which aimed for increasing volume and quantity and continuously amplified sales.

Before his first vintage season in 1936, MR had set his modus operandi, which he regarded as commandments for all first-class vintners. First: have available a vineyard with grapevines that bore fine varietal grapes—either French or German in origin—or else graft over or replant to them; or start a new vineyard

having only one or several of the recognized supreme varieties (and these were very few in number). Second: *never* combine different varieties when crushing grapes or, later, when making finished wine. Such blending was a commonplace practice among winemakers, who merged the juice or fermented wine from superior wine grapes with those from inferior, abundant varieties, considerably expanding the amount of wine. Also, blending mellowed the reds, making them market-ready quickly, bypassing prolonged cask- or bottle-aging that traditionally subdued harsh tannins and sharp acids, which were especially off-putting to novice wine imbibers, who wanted something pleasant and somewhat sweet. But over time the organoleptic factors resulted in the complex flavors and aromas that appealed to true wine lovers.

Moreover, MR intended to make totally "natural" wines that contained living cells (beneficent yeasts and desirable bacteria)—as he would detail at length in letters to Street. He refused to use metabisulphite to chemically sterilize the grape must after crushing, or to pasteurize it by heating, or even to filter or fine the young wines. Success, he declared, required using perfect grapes, free of damage, rot, dirt, and microbic contaminants; using immaculately clean equipment at all stages; avoiding undue exposure to air; and maintaining constant vigilance over the developing wine.

When Martin Ray made his first vintage at Masson in the autumn of 1936 he focused his main attention on several of the fine winegrape varieties he found among the jumbled assortment grown in the 60-odd acres of Masson's developed vineyards. He had identified the desirable grapevines with help from old Masson workers and from studying ampelographies. He went out among the blocks of vines and checked depictions and descriptions against growth habits, leaves, inflorescences, grape clusters, and the ripening grapes' hues, shapes, and dimensions. Near them or even in their midst were many lesser varieties—often there because they had been prolific sources of grapes during Prohibition. Grapes that MR chose not to make into wine, or wines he made but did not want to keep, were profitably sold to other wineries. Certainly he would *not* do as the other commercial wineries did in these years following Repeal: make mongrelized products that combined the fermented juice of premier winegrapes with the far more abundant lesser kinds, then give the bottled results deceptive French- or German-looking names.

With the reds, he selected for special vintaging that year Pinot Noir, Gamay [Beaujolais], and Cabernet [Sauvignon]. With the whites, Pinot Blanc ("Vrai"), Pinot Chardonnay (as it was then called), and Folle Blanche. (He asserted that the latter grape, grown in France as a component of cognac, ripened much more fully in California and made a refreshingly tart wine.) Not surprisingly, these six MR-favored varieties had been developed long ago in France. Five had been propagated at La Cresta from grafts of cuttings brought back by Masson after visits to his native Burgundy. The grapes for MR's Cabernet, however, at first came from Almadén's vineyards, since Paul Masson, as a Burgundian, had been prejudiced against growing any Bordeaux varieties. After taking over, MR began investigating the best source for superior Cabernet Sauvignon budwood to use in starting his own vineyards.

MR also continued Masson's predilection for producing Champagnes. His first three, in 1936, had been made from Chardonnay, but he was already eyeing his Pinot Noir grapes as a new source for Champagne material. (Masson had used it in his celebrated pink champagne, Oeil de Perdrix [eye of the partridge], but blended it with white varieties.) And he was becoming convinced he could make a better "natural" (undosaged) Champagne than was possible in France.

For providing practical winemaking knowledge and hands-on help, MR had hired as his "Head Vintner"—as named on the Masson letterhead—young Oliver Goulet (renowned later as Almadén's longtime winemaker). As a Brother at the nearby Novitiate in Los Gatos he had worked for some years in their sacramental wine-producing facility, before leaving to marry. Probably MR initially learned much from working closely with Goulet in the wine cellar. Also, MR often asked him to investigate other wineries' facilities and vineyards for him, and even had him represent the winery at special events. The two men often talked intensely far into the night about technical issues (MR preferred Champagne dry, Goulet *doux*), as well as MR's lofty aims for the Paul Masson line of wines, both still and sparkling.

Correspondence Begun

Toward the close of 1939, after three years of Martin Ray's waiting, tasting, and testing, his new Masson wines traveled out more widely among wine connoisseurs. That was when Julian Street first heard of them, and then arranged to get samples. After the initial exchange of telegrams and letters between them, the two men began what became a frequent and intimate correspondence. Never before, and seldom again, would Martin Ray enjoy such a sustained opportunity to express himself to a wine-knowledgeable person—especially one who admired his fixation on achieving the highest possible wine quality.

Enthralled over this new epistolary connection, MR sent off letters, sometimes long ones, every few days. The letters streamed out of him in the early months of 1940. Between January 15 and April 27, a period of about four months, there were no less than 26

communications from MR to JS: 11 typed letters, 11 handwritten ones, and three telegrams. Some of his letters went on for many pages—notably the ones that he handwrote, in large, rounded, easily legible script, usually on legal-size lined paper, in the evening instead of dictating during the day for his secretary to type up. The longest runs to 31 pages; two others are 16 and 18 pages in length. Much of the time he ignored any need to create paragraphs or use apostrophes in contractions.

The letters range from mostly technical discussions about vineyard care and winemaking, to being emotionally revealing, eloquent, chatty, or speculative, to portions that ranted about the sorry condition of the California wine industry and the ignorance or malice of most of its practitioners. He also described how farm properties in Santa Clara Valley (now "Silicon") had badly deteriorated since his boyhood; no longer practicing sustainable agriculture but growing single "money" crops, owners had no pride in land stewardship. Then, as later, MR expressed a nostalgic attachment to the past and its threatened or lost lifestyle "quality" values.

Street's enthusiasm for the new Masson wines made an important endorsement and validated the direction MR had decided in 1936 to take in winemaking: to adhere to the standards followed in the great (but small in output) European wine producers, and limiting the production of each wine type to 500 cases. He would crush for his premium vintaged wines *only* 100% fine varietal grapes; and upon releasing them several years later he'd label his bottled wines as pure varietals, marketing them at a price considerably higher than his competitors dared to impose on their best wines. This was two to four dollars a bottle retail, or twenty to forty dollars a case—shockingly pricey at the time. (The current dollar equivalents would be about $16-$32, and $160-$320.) When JS criticized these high prices, MR told him they were justified because of the far greater handwork and attention they had required. Moreover, the wines were selling well—directly to consumers, as well as to retailers and distributors. Whenever demand for a wine increased, so did the price, so as to protect the limited supply. (Already, too, MR was archiving a portion of his best wines.)

And while the winemaker revealed and explained to Street his own vineyard and cellar practices, or exchanged opinions about French and German wines, he also informed this sometimes naïve connoisseur about the California wine industry's often nefarious winemaking and business tactics. Encouraged by the enterprising Schoonmaker's wine brokering, the better wineries now marketed their own varietal wines, too—and had raised their prices accordingly. But MR declared these wines all blends, and "dead," with no life remaining in them.

And what was Julian Street's reaction to this deluge of letters from his deferential, opinionated, and verbose California correspondent? He expressed it in a long letter sent on March 20, 1940: "You are a great fellow. I am proud to know you. I can't tell you how much I want you to realize your dreams." And the copy of *Wines* he sent was inscribed "For Martin E. Ray—with admiration, warm regard and the highest expectations for the products of his vines."

Meanwhile, Street was working pleasurably on finishing up the case of Masson wines that he had received (and more was on the way). On March 11 he had written emphatically and effusively about the wines to Harold Price, the San Francisco oenophile who had set up the connection:

> I am still thrilled when I think of them, not only because of what they are, but because of what they prove California can do if it ever gets around to it. I don't have to wonder any more. I jolly well <u>know</u> that California <u>can</u> make admirable, pure, unadulterated, uncooked, unfooled-with wines of excellent quality—wines that a critical person can truly enjoy.
>
> Ray has already set California growers a mark to shoot at, and I predict that within a very few years quite a number of them will be greatly improving their products; for the question whether it is worthwhile to follow the best practice of the finest European vineyards is no longer debatable. Ray has done away with any doubt on that subject.

On the following day Street sent out yet another appreciative letter to his son-in-law, who had indirectly brought the Paul Masson proprietor and his wines into his Eastern sphere of influence:

> I feel much indebted to you for putting me in touch with Martin Ray, a man I admire and respect in the same way I admire and respect any other artist seeking perfection in his particular field. I have been fortunate, in the course of a life that now covers more than sixty years, in knowing a fair number of such men, and they are the salt of the earth and the hope of the world. I have never seen Ray, but I hope to see him some day and really know him, for I firmly believe that he has made the best wines that have ever been made in the United States.

Of course MR cherished the opportunity to get close to this influential wine expert and to voice his aims for the great wines he would make in future years, surpassing the ones in which Street had tasted such promise. Equally enticing was the chance to discuss with someone with a sensitive and knowing palate the inferior and deceptive varietals that the other California wineries were turning out and calling *fine*. Street might then stress, in print and in other places where his words might have good effect, that to achieve high quality vintners should vintage only the pure fine varietals in the small-scale, classic way—just

as the purist MR was doing.

There was another aspect to MR's attachment to Julian Street. His elder by twenty-five years, Julian was the sort of intelligent, articulate, and urbane fellow Rusty Ray would have loved to have as a father. Having lost his minister father to diabetes when he was a young boy, while growing up and then as a young man he had sought mentors and role models—men he emulated, all the while trying to impress them with his aspirations and accomplishments.

MR's continuing compliments about Street's wine wisdom and fame often took an over-the-top, worshipful tone. Noting how their connection chanced to come from a mutual friend of his and Street's son-in-law who had been impressed with his wine, he rhapsodized:

> I see that lake into which a pebble has been cast. Every bottle that goes out starts the ripples, in theory. But in fact, only when it reaches the hands of someone who both knows wines and cares. That is why what you do and say is so important. By comparison, you are a giant and you heave a mighty stone into the ocean which is caused to boil.... It is not possible to estimate the full importance of your word. People who know nothing about you whatsoever, or even that you write about wines, know you as an authority on wines, and I have never heard of you other than as the greatest American authority. [2/8/40]

Meanwhile, Street discounted his great wine authority reputation that MR insisted upon. Mostly stranded for several years in a town in the northwest corner of Connecticut, a trip of many hours to or from Manhattan, Julian no longer felt in the mainstream of anything; he was virtually superannuated. A heart condition, angina, had forced this retreat from leading an active professional and social life in New York City. It also restricted his consumption of wine. Moreover, he regretted that financial constraints prevented his reciprocating MR's generosity with wine gifts, including choice European vintages. But he obviously appreciated all the attention and compliments MR lavished upon him. Above all, he relished receiving Martin Ray's informative letters, and he responded in kind.

The two men had a symbiotic need for each other's epistolary company—and their mutual admiration society thrived.

[The next two segments will continue exploring the MR-JS friendship, through the prism of their correspondence providing more information about MR's winegrowing practices, tales of interactions with notable personalities and disputes with the wine industry's establishment, self-insights into his psyche, the coming of WWII, and why MR sold Masson and started his own eponymous winery.]

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Story of Bacchus & Centennial Souvenir* (see page 3)

Betty Proper of Joslin Hall Rare Books (Concord, MA) graciously sent me their Catalog 146 description of the book:

Payne, Brigham. *The Story of Bacchus and Centennial Souvenir*. Hartford, CT: A.E. Brooks, 1876. 6" x 8", 34 pages, 2 lithographed plates.

The "Bacchus" statue was a carved pine figure of a singularly plump and dissipated youth seated atop a cask, holding a basket of fruit (grapes?). It was carved in 1776 by a quartet of imprisoned English seamen as a way of thanking a tavern-keeping widow who had treated them kindly during their stay in the Windham, Connecticut, jail. Shortly after presenting her with this gift, the four contrived to escape and three of them were drowned while crossing the bay in a small boat during a storm. The Bacchus figure, part folk-art, part prisoner-of-war carving, remained as their last work. Touching. Mr. Payne treats the whole episode with the sort of breathless wonderment the Centennial tended to engender in Victorian amateur historians, but the facts that the tale rest on seem sturdy enough.

This copy is evidently a separate offprint of another book by the same name, noted by Gabler [*Wine into Words*] as having 111 pages. The present copy contains simply the portion relating to the Bacchus carving, and does not include the unrelated Revolutionary War battle story or the Centennial Celebration survey. A clue to the reason behind this abridgment is contained in a tipped-in note which states that this edition is being sent to descendants of "the three persons mentioned that they may learn more of their ancestors' final history."

Our sincere thanks to Betty for this bibliographical bounty!

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