Vinaceous Correspondents: Martin Ray's Friendships with Eminent Oenophiles

THIRD SECTION OF THE SECOND ARTICLE IN A SERIES

by ***Barbara Marinacci***

[This segment follows three previously published pieces: the Introduction, in the April 2003 WTQ, and the first two segments covering winegrower Martin Ray's correspondence with wine authority Julian Street, in the July and October 2003 issues.]

PART II — 3. JULIAN STREET AND MARTIN RAY: 1939-1947

By late 1939, when his correspondence with Julian Street began, Martin Ray recognized that he had failed to convert the other premium-winery owners to his puristic, future-oriented vision of growing far more fine-wine grapes and from them making limited quantities of excellent 100% varietal wines. He now hoped that at least he could persuade the wine author to become a staunch ally in his campaign against the California wine industry's quality-shunning position.

Long before his correspondence with MR began, Julian Street had won popularity as a bon vivant columnist, book author, and sometime-playwright. In 1933 he became respected as a wine authority after Knopf published his amiable introductory book *Wines*, just before the advent of Repeal in December. That autumn, JS described his new situation in a note to a wine-loving friend: "My ancient interest in wines, as an amateur, has suddenly developed into a considerable asset. I have all kinds of propositions, almost daily, and some are very interesting.... Bellows & Co. has asked me to take a stock investment and go on their bord [*sic*]."

Bellows granted Street virtual veto power over all wines considered for distribution, since his vinous expertise, coming from ample exposure to many wines during travels and stays on the Continent, would be invaluable.

Already dismayed by malpractices taking place in foreign winemaking, Street soon after encountered an even more dismal phenomenon in the newly released California wines, which no true connoisseur could possibly drink with pleasure. Little attention had been given by revived or new wineries to producing quality products. The result was that recognized wine lovers like Julian Street shunned American-made wines—and publicly said so.

No wonder, then, that after opening in mid-January of 1940, his first bottle of the Paul Masson Pinot Noir 1936, JS was surprised and delighted to encounter the unmistakable bouquet and taste of properly fermented Pinot Noir grapes. He then sent off his praises via a telegram to Martin Ray, the vintner responsible for this wonder. It wasn't his first contact, though, since the correspondence between the two men had commenced two months earlier.

As their relationship deepened, MR detailed many aspects of his life. JS wrote back in a similar vein, shown in his few extant letters and MR's responses. MR often revealed facets of himself that elucidate his intense commitment to the business of winemaking:

> You have been most generous in telling me of the background which led to your present interest in and authority on wines. You have had and are continuing to have a most interesting life. It is a life and a way of living about which most people know little. That most people devote their lives to things that even they do not believe in, has caused me to ponder at length since early childhood; I guess it is why they are as they are. It thrills me to think that I know how I want to live and that I believe in the way of life that I am living. It was not always so, however. I had to make money. My father was a Methodist minister and he did not leave any for the children. So I became a Stockbroker. But when I ceased to believe I was producing a service, I had to give it up. Fortunately I did not lose money and I was able to give it up as a job to be put behind me. I have some very definite ideas about business. It is like making wine. It is possible to have a fine business today just as it was in the years long ago, but provided only that the same policies be respected that then obtained. There are no new ways to make fine wine. There are no new ways to make a fine business. It is necessary to work hard, produce better than anyone else something for which there is a demand and keep right on doing it. I have both a business and a hobby; they are both in one. Real opportunities exist, whether it is in wine making or elsewhere. [2/8/40]

MR admitted to JS that his refusal to use sulfites in winemaking went back to his early childhood; he had been terrified when locked in a shed where apricots to be dried were sulfured. In time, too, he disclosed a curious disability in a winegrower: he did

not—*could not*—really drink alcohol, even his own wines, though of course he tasted them. The condition came from the early stroke that had damaged his nervous system. (In later years, as those acquainted with him knew all too well, MR more than made up for this lost drinking time.) He recalled the years when he was an ardent imbiber; still, in many ways his loquacious nature hadn't changed much.

> In the old days when I used to be able to do a lot of drinking, I always awakened from a night of good friendship, conversation and much time spent around the festive board, with perhaps a hangover but with the feeling that the subjects of the evening before had not really been suitably covered. And twenty years ago I used to talk all night long, spining [*sic*] the stories of what I would do in the years to come, what others had done, what others were doing and what I was doing. Everything was crammed full of interest and life was very full indeed. I once had a friend who was a great man at that time and he used to tell me, as he scoffed at the idea that opportunity knocks but once at each man's door, "Opportunity knocks at my door every morning, and I jump out of my bed at dawn and pursue it." Well, that is the way I felt. The description is his, the feeling is just as much mine for it was there before I knew him. I was and still am intoxicated with life.

He added a further comment on his mental make-up that partly explains his twin obsessions: perfecting the wines he made and radically improving California's winemaking reputation:

> But I am terribly restless with delays at times and patience is only coming to me in recent years. I am not content with things as they are and I am terribly anxious to be doing something about it all the time. I am, but it is not always possible to see the proof of it. You know how it is. Well, I know it's good to be that way but I also know the price you pay for not being able to hold yourself in hand sometimes. [7/16/40]

MR wrote disarmingly and at length about his upbringing, feelings, values, and work ethic, as well as his ambitious goals in an industry that rejected his commands. JS couldn't help but admire him, and when ending one of his letters said: "Good luck to you fine, honest, high-principled wine-maker, and more power to you always—and riches, too." [3/21/40]

Distribution Matters

With their correspondence launched, Julian Street shared with special friends and associates some Masson wines MR had sent him, and also the winemaker's unique letters. One was Bradley Gaylord, a wine lover and fellow-director of Bellows & Co., the upscale distributor of alcoholic beverages. "I let him see your long letter, in which you discussed various wine problems, bottling problems, grapes, &c. The style is the man, and those letters tell more about you than they tell in words; and I knew that Gaylord would appreciate them."

The two men decided to try some Masson wines on Bellows' president, Frederick S. Wildman, "as we think it is time he was considering taking on some California wines, and it seems to me that your attitude is such that some sort of connection with Bellows & Co. in the future might be a good thing all round, unless you have other arrangements." Julian then added an insight about the man making the big decisions now at Bellows: "Wildman is going to California before long and you may see him. I have written him a little about Paul Masson. But he likes to discover things for himself.... It is one of his peculiarities that he will think more of your wines if he feels that he himself has unearthed them." [1/9/40]

MR saw that further benefit might come from his association with JS. Making a deal for Bellows to distribute Masson's still wines and champagnes at exclusive wine shops and restaurants had decided appeal. He hadn't yet arranged for any firm to market his wines nationally. After taking over the winery, he had developed relationships with various wholesalers and distributors, and with select retail outlets and restaurants, but these were mostly in California. Much of his wine was sold to local private customers at full retail prices. But he sought widespread recognition, among connoisseurs and among the press's lifestyle writers, that at Masson he was close to producing world-class wines, and so desired not just to increase publicity, but to have his wines available in a few East Coast cities where wine aficionados clustered.

Two months later JS recounted Gaylord's report on a recent sampling of some Masson wines, in which Bellows' president and several other oenophiles participated. The tasters had all been unimpressed. "I got the feeling that the wolf-pack had been in full cry," JS commented. Then he offered consolingly:

> I think it was a mistake to taste so many wines at once, and at a dinner, and with a French Champagne man. I think the whole thing was cockeyed.... These fellows are lovers of the most superb wines and they seldom drink lesser wines. They have occasionally tasted Calif. wines and have been sincerely disgusted with them. So have I. But instead of thinking about other Calif. wines in comparison with yours, they haven't enough experience of Calif. wines to realize the difference, and they compare yours with fine French wines, or at least very good ones, and feel that yours can't stand up to them. And I think that once a thing like this gets started wrong, and goes on and on, it's like the proverbial toboggan.

Then JS questioned the high retail prices of the Masson wines, from both consumers' and distributors' perspectives. Realistically, the latter couldn't easily market costly California wines, and even with a favorable discount, profits might not justify efforts expended. As Julian declared:

> I still think your prices out of line. I certainly don't mean by this that I think you ought to reduce them if you can sell at those prices, but I honestly don't think they may compete with similar wines, from similar grapes, made in France.... And I think I could get some mighty good wine for less, too.
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> After all, if a man has money to spend for a thing, whether it is wine or a watch, he is likely to shop around until he gets what he thinks is the best value for his money. That's all I mean. And I very much hope that as to basic costs you can make the wine so as to sell it for substantially less.... I realize that your costs must be a lot higher than those of most other vineyards, simply because you so obviously do everything well...
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> I try to account in my mind for your being able to sell at such prices, and I figure that a really good California wine is a sensation and that people are so astonished they want it, even if better imported wines are available at the same price, or a lower price. There may be something like that in it. [3/21/40]

MR shot back his response to the bad news about the Masson wine tasting, expressing (as he often did) a disdain for wine salesmen:

> I was sure of what the reaction would be, I have seen it so often.... Prejudice may rule the minds of the great as well as the humble... Indeed, under the circumstances, I am afraid [Wildman's and Gaylord's] opinions must be disqualified and ruled out as of no value at all, this time. For, each had already decided before tasting the wines, that they were priced too high. This stand could only be justified by finding the wines much as they have found them. The human mind works just that way....
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> It has long been my opinion that wine merchants are notoriously poor judges in tasting and buying anything new to them, or any wine fully accepted as truly great. Anything new to them, they at once depreciate; with whatever is known, they can be fooled or swindled. When I am selling my entire output, for them to say my wines are priced too high is ridiculous....
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> My wines are the finest coming out of California and that for so long as this is true, they will be priced by me (the right of the producer of the finest wines of any country). For this is the language understood by wine merchants, and it has always been so. [Bellows] will then cease to talk price and then, and then only can we deal with each other.

Despite his angry dismay, MR didn't rule out Bellows as a prospective distributor. He told JS: "I am anxiously awaiting Mr. Wildman's visit and until I have talked to him, I will make no deal with anyone else, nor do I expect to make any deal with any jobber whereby I will give them an exclusive on our wines." [3/27/40]

In the same letter MR purposely mentioned another merchant—one already eager to distribute some or all of the Paul Masson wines: "There is [Frank] Schoonmaker, he no longer talks price. It is my wines he wants. He is in California wines, and he knows he needs them. Bellows will find it so." From then on, MR's letters to JS often brought up the subject of this highly charged wine author-promoter-seller.

Soon afterwards MR received a letter from Bellows' president, Frederick Wildman, who didn't mention the recent tasting.

> Since my return from abroad the beginning of this month I have gone over your correspondence with great interest with Mr. Julian Street and have had the pleasure of enjoying your wines on several occasions. I have no hesitancy in saying that they have impressed me as being the very best American wines encountered by me since Pre-Prohibition days, and very probably better than the latter, although I will not trust memory to that degree.
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> As you may know, we have been foremost in striving for a broad distribution of honest, clean wines in this country at moderate prices. We feel that the latent market for sound inexpensive wines is far greater than the figures evidence, and it is our aim to continue our efforts in this market regardless of the source of the wines. While we have specialized in foreign wines in the past, no one would be more delighted than ourselves to find commercially available American wines worthy of our endorsement, behind which we can place the full energies of our organization. We have examined with high hopes many American wines but none of them, until yours, approached these standards. [3/28/40]

Wildman's praise was welcome, but MR would need to correct the Easterner's notion that Masson wines could be sold at "moderate prices" because they had been made in California. Honest, clean, and sound as they were, they were much better than that, and already inched competitively toward the better French and German vintages in both quality and cost. Ample sales proved that many people would pay what MR asked for—an argument he would make over the years whenever jobbers wanted him to push down his prices.

Frederick Wildman ended his letter by proposing a meeting: "The writer plans to be in California the major portion of the month of April ... and will most certainly look forward to seeing you and visiting your vineyards and wineries at that time." Over the

next months, the impending visit from Wildman had both correspondents discussing strategies for enlisting Bellows as distributor of the Masson still wines and champagnes—whether the entire line or selections from it. Meanwhile, Wildman was delayed, dealing with problems caused by the expanding European war, which was cutting off the imports that were Bellows' principal commodity. He wrote again in July to reassure MR of his interest in meeting him, and soon:

> We have, as I am sure you know, a devotion to the cause of good wine in this country.... We know a great deal about your wines and the true care and attention you have contributed towards producing them faithfully and properly, and feel that this is the only course by which American wines can achieve their deserved standing and public recognition.
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> We are extremely interested in exploring the possibilities of a close business association with you, as not only do we feel that we both have similar ideals and aims in the business but that each possesses the thing which can contribute greatly to the other's success. [7/9/40]

MR had already been constructing a grand future association with Bellows, so he was pleased to note that Wildman seemed to harbor a similar notion.

Looking for Mr. Right

Early in their correspondence MR introduced his quest to find the ideal partner: someone who would handle the business aspects of operating the winery, thus allowing him to devote himself to doing whatever needed to be done throughout the year in the vineyards and winery, especially after wine production got expanded.

> I like the producing end of the business. I am hoping that some day I will meet a man who will desire to merchandise to the people the finest wines possible to produce, and that he will buy a half interest in this firm and devote his personal time or the prestige of his name to merchandising such wines. Together we would do more than I can do alone. The property can be developed even beyond my own dreams and it could be done on a sound basis without additional investment in the business. If ultimately, I find such a man, I will be very happy. If I do not, I will go on as I am, for it is not necessary that I do anything in this regard soon, or even at all. For I am not over-extended financially, and I am young. But the property is too big for me alone. My investment in it is more than it really should be. As a matter of fact, I am selling half of my grapes now, rather than increase too rapidly the expense which would be incurred developing fully the inventories which are potential. I am really operating on about a fifty per cent productive basis....
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> Now I have given you a picture which you can file away in your mind. If you run on to someone who would like to do here in California, what has been done so often in France and Germany, and if you believe that he is qualified, tell him to come out and see what I have, and we can talk about it. [2/8/40]

Occasionally JS offered suggestions for possible candidates, but he was more involved in providing aesthetic and editorial advice to the winegrower. He rewrote some of MR's statements on proposed promotional literature. He also expressed misgivings about the labels that Martin Ray intended to affix to some new Paul Masson wine releases:

> As to labels, I think the one you sent, which I think is quite like the old Paul Masson label as I recall it, but has CABERNET pasted on it, is better than your Signature label, but I don't think either is a very fine label and all the Calif. labels I have seen seem to me poor, as far as I can recall them. I think you ought to have a very fine label, unless you feel that it is damaging to change. But this one is adequate for the time being. Only there are designers who can do these things beautifully—do them as well as you make your wines; and someday, when you're feeling flush, let's get labels made that are the TOPS. [3/21/40]

Additionally, JS counseled MR on how best to approach certain East Coast wine dealers, restaurateurs, and well-heeled potential retail customers whom he knew. MR repeatedly thanked him for his help. Sensitive to Street's financial need in retirement for exercising frugality in wine purchases, he often sent cases not just of Masson wines but of pricey German and French ones, and even samples of other California wineries' releases, to demonstrate his wines' superiority.

MR soon came up with an extension of his partnership notion, making a place for Street:

> It keeps going through my mind, the success which we could have, if I could handle the production, you the publicity, and a third party supply capital. If you could provide a person genuinely interested who would supply this additional capital, this could all be accomplished because your interest and mine would always remain fixed in the making of the very best wines possible and they would serve to neutralize any unknown element which would be introduced.... There are many advantages in having others associated with me in a creative endeavor. [3/28/40]

After Wildman's letter arrived, MR's business plan began including him too.

> I am anxiously waiting to see Mr. Wildman.... Any possible manner in which I may cooperate with him toward a mutually profitable alliance will be my determination. And if he is genuinely interested in producing fine wines in California we shall, I therefore assume, come to understanding even if possibly limited in scope in the beginning. My intention will be to

establish some foundation, at least, for future development of our cooperative efforts and I hope we can go further.

I must first convince him that to sell fine California wines (have them available to sell) he must interest himself in production, directly or indirectly, otherwise no one will produce them in quantities beyond their own outlets. How I wish he could take over the entire merchandising end (by joining me in proprietary interest) and you to handle the equally and important and equally difficult end of publicity. [4/17/40]

By now, MR envisaged himself as a self-appointed wine-quality czar who would supervise the growing of fine grape varieties and the winemaking activities in other vineyards and wineries enlisted in a focused effort to produce, publicize, and market excellent pure-varietal wines—putting California finally on the map of supreme winegrowing regions. MR believed it was a crucial time for improving quality. Because war launched by Germany had engulfed the European continent and now threatened Britain, in 1940 California wines were fast becoming attractive to wine merchants who previously had scorned them. Importers and wholesalers now flocked to the Masson winery, so MR began withdrawing certain wines from further sales and also imposed limits on how much could be sold to any one dealer.

Attacking "Frauds"... and Frank

MR's ambitions extended far beyond the reaches of the Paul Masson *domaine*: he clearly wished to direct the premium output of the California wine industry. This intention he shared with wine promoter and merchant/ distributor Frank Schoonmaker (FS), whose energetic and enthusiastic activities were transforming the better wineries' marketing strategies. Schoonmaker and Marvel had proposed in their 1934 *Complete Wine Book* that California wineries plant more good varietal grapes so as to produce better and fine wines—which MR was now doing at Masson.

In the late 1930s FS traveled back and forth across the states in his zeal for gathering up and selling the best of California's wines. Earlier, he had been the bête noire of the state's wine industry because his book had expressed dissatisfaction with the wines made there, and proposed major changes to improve quality. But now the proprietors of better wineries were pleased when this enterprising New Yorker chose some of their best wines for nationwide promotion and distribution. In addition to a special bottle label proclaiming varietal identity, bearing the winery's name and location, and announcing the vintage year, a banner declared it "A Frank Schoonmaker Selection"—the latter to guarantee quality and varietal authenticity. FS had persuaded wineries that the prestige conferred would enable them to charge higher prices and also improve sales.

Frank Schoonmaker
SELECTION

Rusty Ray, however, had doubts about getting involved with FS in any wine-representing deal, let alone in some exclusive national distributorship or, beyond that, partnership. In some wine-connected circles Schoonmaker already had a rather will-o'-the-wisp reputation. As MR observed back in February:

Frank Schoonmaker wants to buy an interest [in Masson], but he has no money and anyway, I find that he is more of a wine buyer and a wine seller than he is a producer, for he desires to make money in order to leave the business. With him it is a means to an end rather than an end. [2/10/40]

Several days later MR said more:

The firm of Frank Schoonmaker & Co. has been trying for a year now to obtain our entire output for distribution to the consumer at our prices. We have a written offer from them to take our entire output of Cabernet, Pinot Noir, Gamay, Pinot Blanc Vrai, Pinot Chardonnay and Folle Blanche. Frank Schoonmaker has recently written to me twice, proposing that he visit me this month again, at which time he wishes to renew negotiations, to obtain from us all of the wines which we can make from our hundred acres of vineyard. There is in fact a lively competition for them. I know of no better manner of determining prices than what commercial firms are willing to pay.

You will recall, I am thus far selling nearly half my grapes, preferring to build more slowly and handle my own sales until such time as the right connection can be made and which I do not deem Schoonmaker to be. But based upon the continued increase in business, I have since last writing you, decided to sell no more grapes. I feel I must so prepare for the years to come, and will this year commence operations at full capacity for the first time. I am as yet selling direct from our cellars our entire annual release, without the aid of any jobber. I believe you will understand when I say that Frank Schoonmaker Co. wants our wines at our prices, I mean that they would be sold to their customers at our prices, just as we are now selling them, but that firm would be entitled to the regular trade discount. [2/12/40]

When out West to court the owners of the better California wineries, Schoonmaker usually went to Saratoga to spend time with Rusty Ray, and together they tasted and talked about wines. MR found that FS was usually a good judge of wines,

though his palate was not infallible—especially with a wine Frank was promoting. Several times at least Julian in effect warned MR to proceed with caution when dealing with Schoonmaker. "By the way, I'm not sure how good Frank's taste is. When he began I went to a tasting to celebrate his book, and I thought the wines a poor lot. He's young and has much larnin'—and he must have tasted a lot, but while I've tasted some excellent wines of his, I've also tasted some I thought very poor." [3/21/40]

Not surprisingly, FS ranked high among the personalities the two correspondents gossiped about. According to MR, at some point Street disclosed that this flamboyant, peripatetic wine writer and broker —who now outshone him in the press's and the public's view as America's greatest wine authority—had once worked as his assistant at a time late in Prohibition, when Street was furnishing imported wines to private clients. Frank had impressed his boss with his zeal for work; but suddenly he quit his job—purportedly after copying, virtually stealing, JS's valued customer list. (If true, perhaps he also took away some of Julian's opinions about ways to rescue the benighted American wine industry, claiming them thereafter as his own.)

MR began carping about the caliber of the Schoonmaker Selections, which were now widely announced and publicized in publications likely to be read by East Coast wine-oriented readers, such as The New Yorker. MR sometimes relayed news indicating FS's business problems, and seemed almost pleased to report this situation.

> Schoonmaker is not doing well in California. One of the firms who sold to him was here in the person of one of their men yesterday. He told me of their troubles. For one thing, California is not accepting the Schoonmaker label, under which he sells all his California wines. It is foolish to try to sell California wines to Californians under his unknown name when Californians know well all the producers' names. [4/19/40]

MR also commented on the absence-of-quality factor—for instance, concerning the difference between what he called "natural" wines (his) and "unnatural" ones (other wineries' products) that had been tampered with: blended, pasteurized, sulfured, heated, frozen, filtered, fined, treated with chemicals.

> I have written you already about Schoonmaker's pasteurized wines. He would not know if they were pasteurized or not, and I am not sure that he would even want to know. Why should he want to know if he has to merchandise them and he suspects that he cannot get wines which are not pasteurized, and if he is unable himself to make or inspire the making of natural wines? I do not recall that he ever asked me if my wines were pasteurized. [5/16/40]

MR routinely pored over Department of Agriculture statistics on the state's acreages in fine-varietal and ordinary grapes; he also visited other winegrowers' vineyards to identify and count grapevines. Most important was the privileged time he spent (as his letters to JS reveal) with several UC Davis wine scientists—viticulturists Winkler and Olmo, and enologist Amerine. Because of their survey work throughout California, they knew exactly which varietal plantings were where, how much, and their likely yields. A 1935 law covering varieties in vintage wines required wineries to use at least 51 percent of that particular grape—which thus permitted 49 percent of anything else. MR concluded (as apparently the scientists did) that there weren't enough grapes even to provide that bare-majority percentage in new higher-priced, varietally labeled wines, including the Schoonmaker Selections. When sampling these so-called varietal wines, he found that the dominant flavor and bouquet were rarely that of the named variety, but of lesser, cheaper, and far more abundant grapes. Therefore these wines being marketed as varietals were mongrelized blends—often even misnamed as well. MR declared them downright fraudulent. As an example, he reported to JS:

> I am not selling Frank any of my wines as yet. He is after them but I have held back, as per my other words to you. He had his San Francisco manager here last week, also his California wine sales manager. They brought copies of magazine publicity and assured me that Frank would be out to see me.... They mentioned that they had a wonderful Pinot Noir from Fountain Grove and so after they asked my opinion I merely said, "It is not a Pinot Noir," on which statement I stand. [6/7/40]

A week after mentioning this possibly bogus wine that Schoonmaker was offering as a varietal, MR had much more to say. He had bought two bottles and sampled wine from one of them (saving the other for Street).

> It is interesting to note the colossal frauds perpetrated by bottles both here and abroad.... In that "Pinot Noir" I do not believe there is any Pinot Noir. Nor is it more than a sound, well made, ordinary wine. It is vintaged as 1934, yet standing three days in a glass, it made a tartar deposit. Since wines drop their tartar in their first and possibly second year, it is fantastic to think of it continuing into the 6th year. I judge this wine to be of the year 1938. Its aroma is to me that of the Durif [aka Petite Sirah] grape. Dr. Winkler was here Friday and he told me that the old Japanese originally in charge of the Fountain Grove vineyard knew that there were no Pinot Noir grapes there. I asked him about Durif and he said they had that variety. We must not quote Winkler on this as he is an

employee of the state and the state might not think such comments from him proper. But the State Pure Food Dept. will get around to these things in time... First, someone must learn to know the varieties; second, influential people within the industry must desire truthful label practices. You may know, Fountain Grove doesn't sell this wine as "Pinot Noir." Their label for this wine is California Burgundy. Frank Schoonmaker is the one whose label reads "Pinot Noir."

MR then continued:

Frank also has a very pleasant little wine made by a Mr. Vallient [Valliant] of down Hollister way and which is sold under the latter's label as a California Johannisberg (not er) Riesling. I tasted this wine the other day, also, and found no trace of Johannisberger Riesling in it. I know Mr. Vallient and also the former owners of his (leased) vineyard, which is the old Palmtag vineyard, and I am told there are no Johannisberger Riesling grapes in that vineyard. Dr. Winkler says he doesn't think Mr. Vallient is guilty of falsification knowingly, it being Winkler's idea that some one has told Mr. Vallient he has the variety.... It is the facts we are concerned with. And likewise we are concerned with the practice of Frank marketing, all over, these California wines under labels that permit people to judge California wines unfairly. I can't say right now if I am to have any dealings or not with Frank in the future.

MR now pondered what position to take regarding protesting the veracity of these and other varietal wines' claims:

I will, no doubt, decide either to concern myself exclusively with my own wines and their labels or else I will deem it my right and concern as to how others label their wines, also. The former policy is my natural reaction. But so is conversation (growing out of genuine interest) just like this. And the latter activity leads to the latter policy, if continued. What do you think? Do you believe I should interest myself in the labels of other peoples wines beyond confidential talk like this? I know it must be done by some one and I know it is to the best and selfish interest of all in the end. But the question is, should I say anything to others or should I look to the state to deal with the problem? [6/15/40]

With or without JS's advice, MR apparently took action, for soon after this letter he surely wrote to Schoonmaker and accused him of fostering fraudulent wine labeling. Although he often sent JS carbon copies of his letters to others, also originals or retyped copies of theirs to him, unfortunately the Princeton collection contains neither his letter nor Schoonmaker's reply. (There is no known archive for Schoonmaker's Papers.) However, one can surmise what MR had said from his summary of Schoonmaker's response:

[This] is going to interest you because it clearly shows how California wines have gotten the reputations they have, and why it is continued. This is a good example, for Frank, through his connections, can "establish" facts that are not facts, and this he is doing, just as others have done, until the public has acquired a whole knowledge of wines that is in fact completely wrong. I hasten to add, I shall not answer Frank's letter—it has gone far enough (for me to pursue the useless chase).

But you will note from his letter:

1. He challenges but does not deny my suggestion of his frauds.
2. He endeavors to shift the burden of proof to me, thus indicating his unwillingness to have the truth (or have it established).
3. He hides behind a declaration that he has exactly the assurance which I suggest he obtain, while ignoring the fact of my suggested assurance included establishing proof the varieties exist in the vineyards. He refers only to having the assurance of the producer in "writing," whereas I suggested an affidavit and a report from the School of Viticulture (Dr. Winkler or Olmo). So, in fact he has not the assurances I proposed.
4. That they [Fountain Grove] have 25 acres of Pinot Noir in production is absurd and untrue. When last I was there they had not even cultivated their vineyard and it was not being developed but exploited. That was under present ownership. They had no champagne two years ago, but they have been selling it "naturally fermented" for over a year now.
5. And at last Frank falls back on that "old reliable," that never fails a man in a corner. He says so far as taste is concerned, the "Pinot taste" depends to a very large extent upon soil and methods of fermentation. [7/25/40]

A week later, MR continued the harangue. But finally he told JS in a more charitable tone toward FS and various wineries claiming varietals:

And this is enough today on poor little Frank. He needs a rest and I hope he gets it. He is a salesman

before he is a wine man and to reverse the interests is to misjudge the man—and that covers it. What is said here in confidence is to illustrate what I might never otherwise be able to demonstrate clearly to you. I do not intend to injure Frank or these other producers. I merely want you to know why I believe as I do—and why others believe as they do. There must be reasons. I give you these reasons as I see them, hoping you may see them, too. [7/31/40]

MR greatly resented the varietal-label situation, claiming that the attention and high prices the Masson wines were earning so impressed the better wineries that, whether encouraged by Schoonmaker or not, they now changed previously generic labels on their best wines and gave them varietal names: e.g., Pinot Noir, Pinot Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon. Schoonmaker must have known that probably none of the so-called varietal wines he "selected" had been made totally from a single named varietal grape; after all, this wasn't illegal. But the impurity outraged MR as a wine fundamentalist. He prided himself on Masson's making and selling only 100% varietals—how it should be, in his rulebook. Blending fine varieties with inferior grapes was akin to sacrilege, as it would further damage the reputation of California wines. Therefore, people who perpetrated such frauds should be exposed and shamed.

Eventually this feud with FS simmered down. MR couldn't help but admire Frank's superb selling skills, and finally agreed to make 2500 gallons of Folle Blanche from the 1940 vintage into a Schoonmaker Selection. (He had been paid in advance for the grapes.) Thus he could say to JS:

Yes, Frank is slow pay, or so we have found him. I have checked his credit pretty closely but nothing available shows his real ability than his actual dealings. But success is more often founded upon strained financial conditions than the opposite, strange as it may seem. Of course I speak only of <u>success</u>, I do not say extended finances produce success. I am willing to go along with him on the basis under which we are making wine <u>for</u> him because he <u>has</u> advanced that money and we cannot therefore lose. [9/29/40]

Lately MR felt readier than ever to turn the marketing responsibilities over to somebody else who shared his ideals and goals and whom he could trust. He couldn't devote sufficient time and effort to the business side of operating a winery while engaged in growing the best possible fine-varietal grapes and from them making extraordinary wines. Now that the Masson business he had bought in 1936 had finally turned the corner in 1940 and was becoming profitable, he and Elsie wanted to recoup some of the over $200,000 they had paid out in personal investments beyond the initial purchase price—to make improvements on the property, build up a wine inventory, and establish a viable enterprise. They had also bought up shares from other Masson shareholders.

MR longed to spend most of his waking hours in the vineyards, entrusting much of the wine cellar supervision to Goulet. Sometimes when he wrote to Julian he seemed exhausted, in great need of respite, even discouraged:

This place has been a terriffic [sic] struggle from the point of actual physical labor. I have been completely fatigued for months on end. I have done much of the work with my own hands, working with the men. And there is no job outside or in I have not done and cannot do. So, when I get upset about something, good or bad, I react like a tired person. But I am still here, and I should have gotten away from it in these last few weeks. But I did not. Your advice is very sound and much appreciated. We will not overlook what we have even in a moment of weakness, we will stay on. We have done all the really hard work now. There remains the more important and yet less difficult work of planning, directing, realizing what has been undertaken. At first there was the rebuilding of the cellars, the replanting of much of the vineyards, building of roads, the hard labor. It was increased by the strain of waiting for the inventories to mature, to learn if the methods would produce the results I was so sure they would. [7/31/40]

Frederick Wildman's Visit

In early August of 1940 the head of Bellows & Co. finally arrived in California to make favorable distribution arrangements with one or more of the better wineries. Coming to Paul Masson to talk with Martin Ray, he got a tour of the vineyards and wine cellars. MR was decidedly disgruntled when he reported to JS on the visit. (His long letter was composed over a succession of days.)

Mr. Wildman has now come and is supposed to return today. He phoned me last night that he would be here this afternoon and would fly this evening at seven, from San Francisco. We were asleep when he phoned, were very glad to get his message but nevertheless, the thought came to me that he was probably about to set [*sic*] down to dinner someplace in the City and it served to illustrate to my satisfaction the vast differences existing between growers and wine merchants. How can the two be expected to find a meeting of minds on a subject they are both interested in from such extremely different approaches, for their very lives are so different. I assumed Mr. Wildman was about to have a dinner and possibly discuss wines at an hour when I was asleep from the fatigue of actually making wines.... What wine merchants want is not necessarily what wine growers want. As long as all goes

well, we appear to be almost the same organization. But it is clear enough to me now, the responsibilities of developing this property, financing it, making its wines great, are our responsibility. And in order to take hold of and maintain this responsibility, independence of all other interests must be maintained.

MR tried to look rationally at the circumstance, despite his apparent disappointment over the much-anticipated meeting: "We cannot expect Bellows and Company to think of our problems as they appear to us. If we can maintain a friendship relationship with the firm and extend to them the courtesies due them and the respect due the leader in their field, it will be a successful relationship."

Wildman, though, didn't come back to Masson as initially intended, so an irritable MR continued his long letter of complaint. During his visit the Bellows president had asked to inspect the winery's records, and MR grew incensed just thinking about it:

So far as our system of records goes, I am certain from what I know first hand that there is not another cellar anywhere that has a more complete, accurate and efficient one. I know at all times personally exactly what wines I have, all about them and for what they are intended and why they were made as they were. In addition to this, we have the system of records which records a complete historical record of each individual small cask, going back to the very section of the vineyard from which the grapes came, even the daily record of their picking, care, etc.... I answered all the questions he asked but I could hardly open up to him a complete disclosure of our entire system of operations when he was only here a few hours and could not find time to return.... He is an odd chap, he seems to think his business is the only successful one and that our[s] is not. He couldn't seem to get it through his head that we are perfectly able to sell all our wines and make money doing so.

Then MR deliberately contrasted Wildman with his rival, Frank Schoonmaker—sounding as if he now felt inclined toward linking up with the latter in various ways:

In tasting wines with [Wildman], I found him just like Frank Schoonmaker was a year ago. He is interested first in getting young wines cheap, into the bottle and sold at a profit to him at an early date. Why, he doesn't know when our wines should be bottled. It is absurd for him to think they are in the wood too long. Frank wanted the same thing a year ago, and to hell with the reputation of the producer. Believe me, I have been over this before. Wine merchants are all the same. If they ran the vineyards and cellars there would be no great wines, and more of very nice little wines. This is one reason I would not sell to Frank last year, he wanted just what Wildman wants now. Frank has lifted his horizon now and has developed some vision. He is actually way ahead of Mr. Wildman this year, in his plans, his execution, his vision.... [Wildman] just wants to buy cheap and he will have to get over that if he is going to deal with me, just like Frank has done. The illusion that I must have his distribution is poisoning his sight and vision. I don't have to have him....

Frank and I have had no basis for cooperative efforts in the past. Now he has adopted methods that look good to me and I am going for the methods, just like I will for those that Wildman will have to in time adopt. But the personalities of the men remain the same. They are wine merchants, both of them. Frank has learned some things Wildman has not. Therefore I can deal pleasantly and profitably with Frank. I am prepared for Mr. Wildman to pass through that same school of experience. It is just a bit humorous, to think of Wildman coming out here with the idea he can tell us how to run our business. He knows nothing of it. His business is selling wines. We make them. And yet, we do sell our wines in a manner that is successful. We can make a substantial profit this year and we can chose [*sic*] our own outlets. [7/31/40–8/9/40]

Furthermore, MR tried to stir up an internecine conflict by saying that Wildman had spoken dismissively about Julian's wine judgment. JS responded to news of this put-down in a gently sardonic, philosophical tone:

I was amused when you mentioned the way Wildman tried to mark me down. So was my wife. We both knew it would be like that. He is a prima donna. He wanted me terribly on his board to begin with, but having me there, and having people talk to him occasionally about such reputation as I may have in wine circles, bothers him because he likes to be <u>the</u> Big Boy. It is pretty funny when you think of it. If I'm an ornament on his board you'd think he would [be] delighted, wouldn't you? It all helps the business. But it somehow nags him.... I really don't give a damn whether he tries to build himself up by talking me down a bit, or not. Wine is his business. It is just a sideline with me. He is young and I am getting old. He is eaten up with ambition. I just want a peaceful, tranquil, interesting life while it lasts. I know him like a book, never fear. Once in a while he annoys me. Mostly I find him funny as hell in his relationship with me. The trouble is that he wants to own the center of the stage and sing the high notes with the spotlight on him, but now and then somebody in the audience wants to hear a chirp from me. Wildman wants me in the chorus, lined up behind him, singing tra-la-la, and if something comes momentarily to push me forward from that place, he feels it interferes with his grandeur.

Julian could also balance any resentment with the consolation of rich memories of the multitude of wonderful places, and wines, he had once known:

Of course, too, when we are importing all sorts of

wines, or when he is abroad buying them, he tastes a lot, and so he is more au courant with wines of the moment than I am. He knows all the little ins and outs, and there are many things on which I can now listen to him—just as he listened to me at first, when he felt a desperate need of somebody with my background. But his current knowledge now enables him to feel superior to me. He can take the stand that I'm an old guy living in the past. Well, the fact is that a pretty long past has been a great advantage to me in tasting wines. My palate seems to remember a good deal out of the long ago, and I am glad it does.

Julian couldn't resist including a few slight digs at Schoonmaker as well:

I have tasted wines that Frank touted that I thought quite poor. It makes me feel that his palate is not very exacting, though he certainly has a busy little head on him for wines. I think it is good to be old in wines. So when Freddy [Wildman] or somebody else tells me that some wine I don't like is excellent, I just go ahead with my own opinion and am amused....

I think you ought to have some market in a few choice places in the East, just as I thought before, but that is your business ... but you can perhaps see that it kind of gripes me to be boosting you all the time and playing right into Frank's hand when I do it, when I am on the board at Bellows, and more particularly when Frank has performed in certain instances in a way I don't like. [8/30/40]

Sour Grapes (Non-Varietals)

Wildman's trip to California proved satisfactory enough for Bellows, if not for Martin Ray. After visiting various winery proprietors, he made a distribution arrangement with Inglenook, in Napa Valley. After MR heard about it, he began delivering a bevy of opinions to JS, including dire predictions. (Such negativism usually characterized his appraisals of other wineries' property, personnel, and products, then and later). His first long letter was followed by a series of epistolary diatribes regarding Inglenook and then spreading out to other wineries as well. The accusations in these letters to JS, first about some of Schoonmaker's Selections and then as reactions to his annoyance over the Bellows–Inglenook deal, may have value to contemporary wine historians who perhaps tend to accept at face (or label) value those historic "varietal" wines coming out of California in the late 1930s and early '40s. MR's frequent citing of the private opinions of Drs. Winkler and Amerine, if accurate, add weight to his charges.

Surely you will understand I could in no way be jealous of Inglenook or John Daniel because the deal which he made with Bellows was first offered to me and you clearly understand while I think it is a fine thing for Bellows, I think that it is a very poor deal for a producer. If you could know first hand the two properties and if you could understand that John Daniel is not a wine man, is merely an owner of the property, it would serve as a guarantee of my sincerity which I pledge to you in this statement that there is no jealousy in me as I write this letter. But we must keep our sense of values and we must be realists. The fact that John Daniel is a nice young man, honest, sincere and willing does not make him other than just that. There is going to be lots of pressure on you now to let you look upon John Daniel and Inglenook as something they are not and it is concerning this that I am writing you....

First of all I will say to you that they will never produce great wines at Inglenook. I know this. Just yesterday I talked with Dr. Amerine about it and he did not even give consideration to the possibilities of their so doing for he too knows it. Second, I can tell you that their wines are poorer today than they were four years ago and when I say that it is because I know it and because anyone else who has followed their wines knows it to be true. Third, I want you to realize that to a very great extent the varietal labels under which they merchandise their wines are misleading and amount to fraud in this sense....

I have now come to the part of your letter that you say, out of all the common place wines made in California some few, notably Paul Masson and Inglenook so far, are going to emerge as tops. Now this is the sort of thing that I do not want to come about with you. [9/23/40]

MR was particularly galled after JS said that he had recently received a friendly letter from Mr. John Daniel. Full of vitriol, MR began detailing "fraudulent" varietal wines now on the market. As he explained himself:

I am becoming impatient with the ignorance and fraud of producers. After all, it doesn't require a lifetime to identify the variety of the vines growing in a single vineyard, and when they deliberately refuse identifications of experts or themselves renamed their grapes to comply with trade advantages, it is time that innocent bystanders seek refuge from what is sure to ultimately ensue.

With the good of the industry at heart, I have been more "general" than specific, in discussing these things with you at times in the past but now I must tell you my opinion, just as herein above expressed. You have often wondered why, in California, the great varieties do not appear to produce wines true to varietal character, as suggested by wines claimed to have been made from such varieties. The answer is, they are <u>not</u> made from such varieties.

In the same letter MR reported on a recent talk with a man named Andy Hewitt who was connected

with the Wine Institute.

It is with him the old story. They want me to associate our name with those of half-a-dozen others in the industry and to cease saying we are the only ones in the industry who are making wines by the classic methods responsible for our 1936 and subsequent vintages. I answered with a blast that I hope he remembers, for it is plain he has not seen fit to remember all I have told him heretofore. Briefly, my reply was, when any of these others actually start to do the things they have talked of doing so long I shall gladly associate our name with theirs in whatever way and extent their results and success justifies. Beauleau [*sic*] is supposed now to be using the "classic methods," Andy tells me. Well, that is the last straw. I told Andy if he'd bring their wine-maker down here I'd get a "confession" from him soon enough to end their talk. For Beauleau doesn't even know what is meant by "classic methods." Just because the owner [Georges de Latour], now deceased, was a Frenchman, means nothing. His business was cleaning out wine casks, for the cream of tartar so reclaimed in wine he made money during prohibition. Fine wine, he never made. [10/17/40]

Still Dreaming Big

Despite his unhappiness over Wildman's alliance with Inglenook, MR still dreamed of a Bellows-Street-Masson/Ray combo that could transform the form and caliber of winemaking in the U.S.

[Wildman] will be a great and strong business friend if I can ever draw him into line where he is willing to cooperate. It is an effort worth the undertaking, as I proceed. Unfortunately, he wants to run the show all by himself....

Let us speak freely. If you and Wildman and I can be brought together, our relationship sealed by mutual respect and trust, in a business relationship devoted to the making, publicizing, and merchandising of California wines and thereunder you handle publicity, Wildman merchandising, and I wine-making, we shall have something.... We could control all the best wines coming out of California and build a great business with little required in the beginning beyond ourselves and our firms. By contract, all the best grapes could be guaranteed.... Without any one of us, this thing can't be done properly. Who else can write of wines and vineyards and cellars, the romantic and appealing way? Who can sell better than Wildman? I have the thing necessary to production. We could even form a producing company, if need be, and into it could be put permanently two or three properties capable of producing the entire requirement of Bellows.... Wildman needs you, he needs me, we need him. The only preventing influence is Wildman's apparent present will to run everything himself.... It is a virgin field, the production in California of fine wines, sound ordinary wines, correctly made, publicized and merchandized. Many people are feeling this same urge, some have already approached me. But I can't work with them.... We should <u>not</u> divide our interests. We should move in together now in a permanent association. We have together the solution to problems not otherwise possible to solve either as readily or as happily. Your reaction will be awaited with great interest and anticipation. [10/17/40]

By now Julian was surely weary of the barrage of MR's verbiage concerning Wildman and Bellows, Inglenook and other wineries—and more than ready to call a moratorium on it all. Perhaps he felt surprised at MR's latest proposal to invite Bellows back into his scheme to establish control over the high end of the California wine business. JS advised MR to hold off any further pushing for a while.

Wildman is thoroughly tired, I am sure, of my harping on your wines. I'm going to pipe down. He'd have liked to get some if it had been commercially workable, I am sure.... If we let Wildman alone for a while he may come round after a while to thinking of it as "new business," Wildman-initiated business, and that will make it seem better to him. [10/31/40]

Not long afterwards, JS apparently admonished MR for acting pugilistic with his peers in the wine industry. MR replied: "I am not the scrappingest feller, I merely insist, as you do yourself, that things of vital interest to us be respected and that people not use our name to elevate themselves to positions to which they are not entitled while at the same time injuring us." [11/20/40]

Still Searching for the Perfect Match

When 1941 arrived, MR still hoped to secure a partnership with a like-minded individual or company with sufficient assets to invest and a keen ability to promote and sell fine wines. He had given up on Bellows. Wildman and MR were both autocrats by nature, and with each of two partners intending to run the show—making all important decisions, and perhaps also taking major credit for successes—a business association wouldn't last long.

Yet MR, though becoming more and more of a loner in word and deed, could envisage and offer himself as part of a productive, creative, and money-generating team:

The "all for one and one for all" spirit is a great thing. Once I had a little group of business associates who practised this, openly and successfully and with a great deal of satisfaction to all. With the passing of time it broke down, but for the years that it lasted it was something which I have ever since been trying to re-establish, and I think that in time I will succeed, but

BOOKS & BOTTLES
by
Fred McMillin

[Fred McMillin, our indefatigable wineman—researcher, taster, teacher, and writer— has provided his "Books and Bottles" column since our first issue in 1991. In Vol.4 No.2 (April 1994), Fred pulled numerous books from his library shelves to review the Petite Syrah–Petite Sirah nomenclature and lineage, "Que Syrah, Sirrah, Sirah?" Today he adds a footnote. — Ed.]

A PETITE MYSTERY?

The Books

We all know botanist Dr. Durif developed the Durif grape variety (alias Petite Sirah) in the 1880s in southeastern France. What we didn't know is Dr. Durif's first name . . . at least the Petite Sirah fan club didn't. They checked about fifty references and conferred with a U.C. Davis authority. No luck. So they phoned me for help. Thanks to guidance by our editor, Gail Unzelman, I have an extensive collection of wine books . . . and when I cracked open Roy Andries de Groot's ***The Wines of California, the Pacific Northwest, and New York*** (New York: Summit Books, 1982), there it was on page 155: Francois Durif!

A second question was posed: "Could you tell us which California winery produced the first varietal Petite Sirah? More than one claim the honor, from the 1960 vintage."

Back to the library. ***The University of California/Sotheby Book of California Wine*** (Berkeley /London: U.C. Press/Sotheby, 1984), edited by the illustrious team of Doris Muscatine, Maynard A. Amerine, and Bob Thompson, says that while the varietal Petite first appeared in the mid-1960s, the first bottles were produced by Napa Valley's Larkmead and Louis M. Martini wineries in the 1940s, but they labeled it Duriff [sic].

All of this brings to mind what the fine wine historian Ruth Teiser once told me about her discipline: "Being first is very, very important . . . to very, very few people."

The Bottles

Here are the best Petite Sirahs my picky panel has swirled and sipped recently. Francois would like 'em all!

1st — Silkwood, Howell Mountain, 1999. $39.
2nd — Guenoc, North Coast, 2000. $20.
3rd — Guenoc, Serpentine Meadow, 1999. $39.
4th — Foppiano, Bacigalupi Vineyards, 2000. $17.
5th — Bogle, California Appellation, 2000. $10.

MARINACCI, *cont'd.* —

> not with any material with which I am now associated. When such a thing is functioning correctly, it is one of the finest things in life and I might say I am quite hungry for it. [1/22/41]

To demonstrate his continuing search for the still-elusive partner, MR sent JS a copy of a letter sent on New Year's Eve of 1940 to the Manhattan-based financial company, M. Lehmann, Inc. After summarizing the goals, assets, and investments involved in the Paul Masson corporation, and mentioning that numerous people had approached him with partnership propositions, MR said:

> Our interest is in wine-making and the life we live which insures the continuation of wine-making and the kind of wines that result therefrom. We would like to turn over the entire merchandising end of the business to someone else but we would never do this unless the party taking over this responsibility or someone associated with him first acquire a financial interest in the business which would insure the success of such a plan. If we could see the property in strong financial hands devoted to the continuation of the policies which we have heretofore outlined to you and if we could then devote our entire energies to the growing of these wines we would consider this perfection. But nothing which we may do short of this realization will in any sense alter the continuation of precisely what we have been doing for five years. [12/31/40]

Nothing came of this outreach effort. Meanwhile, Frank Schoonmaker, in spite of MR's variable past experiences with him, seemed more and more the best candidate for a business alliance. In the early months of 1941 the two wine men, Martin Ray and Frank Schoonmaker, began some serious talking. ■

[To be continued in the April 2004 issue.]

> Never lend books—nobody ever returns them; the only books I have in my library are those which people have lent me. — ANATOLE FRANCE