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Vinaceous Correspondents:
Martin Ray's Friendships with Eminent Oenophiles

The Third Article in a Series / Ninth Section

by Barbara Marinacci

This segment continues the long article about the friendship between the compulsively articulate, now-iconic California winemaker Martin Ray and Professor Maynard A. Amerine, the renowned enologist active at UC Davis's Dept. of Viticulture & Enology between 1935 and his retirement in 1974. It foreshadows their disagreement in the spring and summer of 1955 over MR's tactics as he and his wife, Eleanor, mounted what they often referred to later as their Wine Quality, or Wine Quality Control, Fight. Documentation comes from the Rays' letters to and from Amerine; from MR's correspondence with wine consultant Louis R. Gomberg; and the Rays' communications with others at the time. Author Barbara Marinacci, who is Martin Ray's stepdaughter, thanks the staff of Special Collections at UC Davis's Shields Library, especially its archivist, John L. Skarstad, and its head, Daryl Morrison, for their gracious and generous assistance in this long-enduring writing project that utilizes abundant materials in the Martin and Eleanor Ray Papers. Valuable background information has also come from James T. Lapsley's Bottled Poetry. *She is also most grateful, as always, to editor Gail Unzelman for publishing this lengthy series. It portrays in detail a somewhat different figure—though still a dynamic one—than the romanticized and idealized MR in Eleanor Ray's memoir-biography,* Vineyards in the Sky.

PART III. MARTIN RAY AND MAYNARD AMERINE (1937-1976)

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The year 1955 had started off for Martin and Eleanor Ray with ample challenges, excitements, and dramas, and kept producing more as the weeks went by. By March the awful family turmoil during the prior holiday period, coming over Peter's recent marriage, had eased—for a while, at least, before it would swirl around other domestic issues. (MR had pushed for the nuptial, but later regretted it as Peter's reserved British bride frowned upon his excessive emoting, inevitably amplified by inebriation—a conflict described in the previous *WTQ* issue.) When MR's stress-induced ailments (high blood pressure and exhaustion, possibly even a stroke) began lifting, he could focus better on his wine-selling ventures around the San Francisco Bay area and on several trips to Southern California, with Eleanor as chauffeur and morale-booster.

MR disliked leaving his mountaintop haven to go forth into the plebeian marketplace to persuade retailers to carry his costly wines, now that he wanted and needed to increase his income. But he revved himself up and again proved his perennial skills in salesmanship, no matter what he was selling: stocks and bonds, real estate, or his 100% pure varietals. His efforts were rewarded by new outlets and orders for cases of his table wines and champagnes. At the same time, this new close contact with owners and managers of retail outlets that sold wine, especially new ones in outlying areas of big cities, provided him with fresh insights into the problems of the better

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wineries in California—which, according to the long memorandum he'd received from Louis R. Gomberg in early February—were losing out badly to the influx of inferior wines imported from Europe, bottled and marketed by a new breed of canny, dollar-hungry shippers. The stream had been steadily swelling ever since the end of World War II, ten years earlier, so that foreign table wines (especially French ones with "classic"-looking labels) were outselling American ones nearly three to one. Sold at prices that matched or were only slightly higher than the better California wines, they were either shelved next to or near them, or else grouped attractively on their sides in mid-aisle, waist-high bins. And people impressed with their affordability were buying them up as if they were bargains.

Writing to his good friend Maynard Amerine in mid-April, MR detailed a few of the many things constantly demanding his attention and energy output, and again expressed hope that Maynard could help find a satisfactory labor solution.

> I simply cannot, as yet, write you the long letter I would like, so very busy am I at all manner of things.
>
> The selling trip south was very successful. But that meant that a lot of wine on pile had to be decanted, labeled, cased and shipped. Before anything else, however, there were the about 500 new Chardonnay vines that had to be topped as the buds were swelling and it was time....This job took four days before I could get to the cellar work. But it was done just in time. It has been raining much of the time since. We have over 24 inches as of today so that insures plenty of moisture whatever else comes. [MR's mountain vineyards were always dry-farmed.] We will start to plow just as soon as we get back from the trip we are leaving on tomorrow—Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Las Vegas. We always plow on or about May 1st and there has never in all these years been a failure of rain just prior thereto. We will expect the same treatment this year!
>
> Well, anyway, there has been a stepped up number of visitors, too. But from the day we got home about the first of this month, we never lost a single day and kept to a schedule that got the shipments off yesterday. We sent out 50 cases that net us about $1600, or average $32 per case net to us. There will be other shipments that will run the months sales to $2000. Not bad considering everything. But I can't last at this pace forever, as has often been said. And we should get together and discuss the subject toward some solution. We must either get larger so as to support an organization of sorts or crawl back into the womb. But, I haven't even the time to think, there is so much to do. All I know is that sales and acceptances are improving and wines are coming along well. I like to drive my car but the fuel is running low! [4/20/55]

What Was Louis Gomberg Proposing?

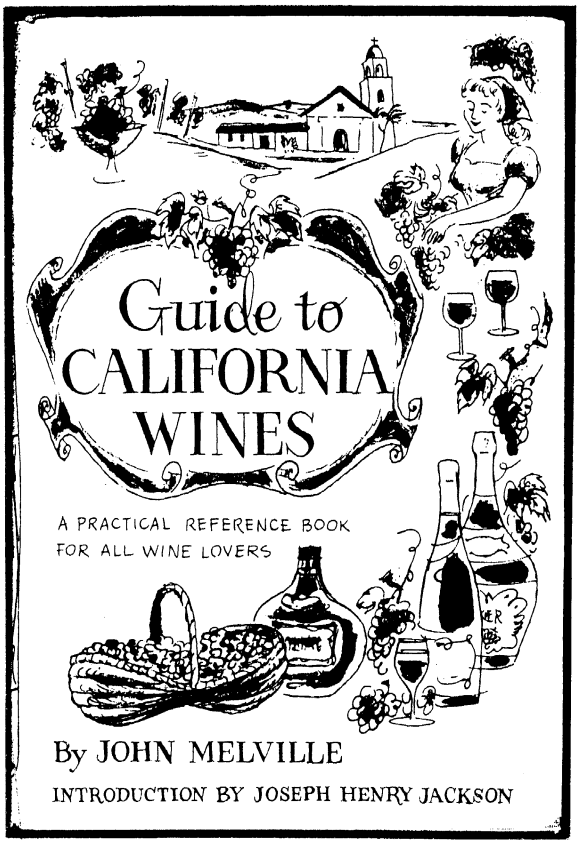
Martin Ray hadn't bothered to respond to Lou Gomberg's note; he'd been too busy. It told of a new, select group of wineries to be called the Premium Wine Producers of California (PWP), and accompanying it were a long memorandum and some survey questions asking proprietors or winery managers about specific business concerns relating to the foreign competition. Gomberg's memorandum was proposing that the premium wineries band together to launch a well-directed national publicity campaign as the essential solution to competing with wine imports —"a dynamic, aggressive program to offset the natural advantages enjoyed by the foreign product; in short a promotional program aimed to restore the rightful position of California premium wines nationally."

MR, who tended to distrust almost anybody's motives about almost anything, probably believed that Gomberg, though presenting himself as a consultant delegated by some of the better wineries to organize this not-yet-jelled group, might be a tool of the California Wine Institute, so would really be snooping around. (MR remembered that Gomberg had worked for that outfit in the past.) And for MR the Wine Institute had long been a bête noire. He considered it the main source of the ostracism and persecution he'd long complained about, and he blamed it for many of the industry's ills, since it was dominated by the huge bulk wineries, mostly located in the Central Valley, where nondescript vines produced colossal tonnages; they spewed out innumerable mongrel blends in jug wines and also cheap, spirits-fortified products aimed at pleasing winos. Of course they had no desire or need to encourage the planting of fine winegrapes and the production of fine table wines. Who there would ever want to launch a program for truly improving wine quality?—though they might like a California wine-promoting scheme if it didn't come out of their own budget.

Inevitably MR pondered whether all this flimflam and ballyhoo envisaged by Gomberg might effectively persuade the naïve American public—mostly so ignorant about the subject of wine, let alone fine wine—that all of the so-called "premium" wines coming from California were wonderful, and far better than any French imports. Absurd and dangerous to be promoting a "quality" that just wasn't there.

MR mostly ridiculed or was outraged by other wineries' promotions and ads. They were all bogus. And over two years, while John Melville was writing his *Guide to California Wines*, MR abundantly warned him about the deceptions and downright lies about their acclaimed varietal wines. One should never trust anything the other winery people said or wrote. Thus wine connoisseurs who read promotional literature

and really knew superb European wines were always dismayed with the California's varietals ... until they tasted *his*. MR continued talking and writing to Melville after the book's publication, which came in early June of 1955, just as the Rays' Wine Quality Fight began. For sure enough, Melville had believed and repeated everything all those winery people had told him. Thus his book, proving very popular, now made a quality- and honesty-demanding position absolutely mandatory. Someone had to come forth with all the truths! (Of course when Martin and Eleanor Ray effusively promoted their *own* pure varietal wines, they felt entitled to do so with impunity, since their high quality was always assured and beyond reproach. Anything making a wine unacceptable to a complainer was due either to the wine drinker's ignorance or something adverse that had happened to the bottle after leaving MR's pristine cellar.)



The Wine Industry's Current Situation

Sometime after receiving Gomberg's communication, MR must have asked his enologist friend Maynard Amerine what he knew and thought about this proposed new organization, as well as about the promotional tactic proposed as a way for the state's better winegrowers to increase the sales of their wines. Then there was his concern over an inevitable demand for prohibitive tariffs.

MR could have brought the whole subject up over the phone or during one of their convivial get-togethers, both resumed now Maynard was back from his yearlong sabbatical stay abroad. For instance, this PWP business could at least have been touched upon toward the end of February, when the Rays drove up to Davis to dine at Amerine's, then stay overnight, after a night of wine drinking and dancing (when Maynard, twirling Eleanor around, somehow had apparently dislocated or broken her little finger). MR may even have brought with him, to show to Amerine, Gomberg's cover note and the 5-page memorandum and survey that he'd sent out to various winery proprietors, supposedly qualified to be called "premium producers" because they marketed table wines they'd cheatingly labeled as varietals. (Later, in several of his regular columns in *Wines and Vines*, Gomberg would summarize for the magazine's readers the predicament in competing with foreign wines and this new group's plans to counteract it.)

Certainly MR expected Amerine to be dubious about PWP's intentions and outcome. For almost two decades the two of them had often discussed how to raise wine quality standards in California—not just for the sake of getting far better wines from at least a few of the long-established commercial wineries, but also proving it *could* be done by winemakers other than Martin Ray, hence demonstrating the state's potential for fine winemaking. Within the wine industry Amerine had been known for years (and not particularly liked for it) as the University of California's main proponent of improving the state's fine table wines by planting the superb winegrape varieties and vintaging them separately from inferior varieties that produced far greater yields and therefore contributed largely to a blend that still got a varietal label. Around MR he had often shared gossip and been critical and cynical about the industry's and individual wineries' PR and advertising campaigns, deriding particular examples that he'd show to his winegrower friend. For example, on January 25th he had sent a note attached to a statement made recently by a Paul Masson wine executive, saying, "Martin—thought you would be interested in this double talk. A very good example of a style of writing which is peculiarly American—saying nothing and trying to make it sound like you are saying something."

In their sociable meetings over the years, MR and MA had often sampled California wines together and critiqued them. On his own, too, MR would purchase varietals vintaged by wineries with the best reputations for excellence—earned in part by their having won medals in county and state fairs and other prominent wine-judging contests. Long before 1955, MR had given up bothering to enter his wines in them.

He (and probably Amerine, especially in the earlier years) considered most judges incompetent in rating fine table and sparkling wines. After all, they hadn't approved of his own potent, super-dry ones that strove to emulate the best French models for Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and champagnes. (If he was right, what then does a list of the award winners of long ago really tell wine historians?)

In talking about the premium winegrowers' group MR might have told Amerine that he had studied Gomberg's initial list of about a dozen prospective members, and that he'd then recalled that whenever one of them released a varietal supposedly made from a noble European grape, he had bought it—hoping that this time when he tried a wine he'd be pleasantly surprised. But almost never did he smell or taste much or even *any* of the claimed grape variety. Invariably such experiences would reactivate all his frustrations and indignities suffered for almost 20 years now while trying to reform those intractable cheaters who prided themselves on making "fine varietal wines"—but decidedly still were not. So if the so-called "better" California wineries were suffering financial losses in trying to compete with the European wines, whether good or bad ... well, they damn well deserved to! MR didn't want to have himself, his name, *or* his wines connected with them, and he'd tell Gomberg so if he came at him again.

And when describing his recent wine-selling triumphs with Amerine, MR would have told him how much he had learned, for he had been listening as well as talking a lot on these recent sales excursions, both in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Los Angeles. Going around to many liquor stores and other retail outlets such as department and gourmet food stores that carried both foreign and domestic wines, he'd spent time with their owners and managers—something the other winery proprietors never did themselves, for they were large enough to hire other people to perform that frontline duty for them. He found out that an avid new set of wine consumers was fast developing, and they often lived and therefore shopped in the postwar suburbias built for both affluent and white-collar families.

So MR had foreseen that these wine-seeking newcomers might get excited about creating opportunities for comparing one wine against another, by buying the more expensive wines—whether different varieties or vintage years, or European vs. Californian (especially his pure varietals, of course). They could read books, too, about the world's great wines, then try them out. As their tasting skills grew ever more sophisticated, they were certain to disdain both the shoddy imports *and* California's false varietal pretenders. MR realized that the outlets patronized by this new breed of wine drinkers were more apt to be located in the hinterlands, in white-collar suburbia America, than in the big cities, where in past years most connoisseurs purchased their wines at specialty stores. MR thereby was managing to stir up retailers' keen interest in stocking and selling not only his pure varietals, but also the superior and supreme French and German wines. He was cultivating his own network of supporters within an industry whose practitioners, he claimed, did not realize that an important transformation in both taste and expenditure was starting to occur—a move toward real, detectable quality, in which a wine consumer expected honesty in a bottle's label and good quality in the product therein.

MR, however, who kept aloof from most other winegrowers, seemed totally unaware that his insights into a lively new interest in wine on Americans' parts, as well as his efforts to encourage comparative wine tastings weren't uniquely his own. By the mid-1950s some of his winemaking peers, especially ones in Napa Valley (most notably Robert Mondavi at Charles Krug), were quite deliberately cultivating them, sending out newsletters to retailers and customers, encouraging visitors to sample selections of their wines. They were just the kind of wine men who would become active members of PWP; in fact, several of them (Mondavi the foremost) had started the whole idea in the first place, and then asked wine consultant Lou Gomberg to be their official organizer.

Gomberg's Phone Call Starts Something

Martin Ray surely would have told Amerine about his telephone conversation with Louis Gomberg soon after it happened. Not having received any response in two months from Martin Ray about his memorandum and survey, on April 5th Gomberg telephoned him. They had a lengthy conversation, during which MR must have responded to the survey questions, receiving LG's promise to send him the final report on responses from about a dozen and a half winery people. Gomberg urged MR to attend the first meeting, when the structure, tasks, and goals of the organization would be set up. It was still a month away, and LG hoped Martin Ray would become a member of this new, action-oriented group and contribute his own ideas, which as they talked Gomberg seemed genuinely eager to get. It was clear that he had respected MR's successful management of Paul Masson during the post-Prohibition years and his unique commitment there to making 100% varietal wines in limited vintages, which he'd taken with him to his own, much smaller operation.

This phone conversation in some ways was actually almost a reprise of the two men's encounter almost two decades earlier. (The recent discovery of a letter

continued on page 17 —

MARINACCI, continued from page 4 —
that MR wrote to Gomberg in 1970 revealed that the two men had indeed met long before 1955, but they probably hadn't seen each other since.) This had taken place when Gomberg, visiting the Paul Masson premises in Saratoga, probably in 1937, tried to persuade its new, young proprietor, Martin E. Ray, to serve as an officer in the recently created California Wine Institute, which he was representing. Gomberg had said that MR would thereby be positioned to carry out his proposals for raising the dismal reputation of California wines among wine merchants and connoisseurs. MR, however, had refused to become a W.I. member until the organization specifically endorsed the plan of introducing quality standards and controls in all wineries that considered themselves "premium" producers, and of pushing them toward planting far more fine-variety winegrape acreage.

As Gomberg enthused over the potential of the Premium Wine Producers, how much would he have told MR? A number of the better wineries had been complaining for years that the Wine Institute neglected their interests and problems because it was dominated by the huge wine producers whose monetary contributions gave them voting power. But attention was now being seriously given to this current threat of a large-scale import takeover, and so the Institute had become interested in the potential of the new winegrowers' entity. It could focus on the urgent problem of really all California wineries' having to compete with the inferior wine imports (using cheap grapes from Algeria and cheap labor). It was already being suggested that the PWP would find it easier to get financial support for its ambitious promotional campaign from the state's Wine Advisory Board if the group went under the umbrella of the well-established Wine Institute, funded by them for many years.

Gomberg himself would have agreed with MR that the better commercial wineries could improve their wines if they planted more fine winegrape varieties in their vineyards, that they should move more toward producing pure (or nearly so) varietals in their cellars, and that honesty really was desirable in both labeling and marketing varietal wines. But Gomberg would also have made it clear that, unlike MR, he needed to be both patient and diplomatic whenever suggesting desirable changes to winegrowers. He could scarcely act adamant and authoritarian in his position as the primary (and paid) spokesman for the better wineries, all of which were very much larger, in their acreages and facilities, as well as in wine gallonages and cases produced, than the miniscule Martin Ray Winery situated on top of Mt. Eden in Saratoga, which would limit its annual output to 2,000 cases, at the very most.

MR listened to Gomberg's optimistic plans for this select association of the state's better winegrowers. Should they succeed in getting major financial help from sources coming from elsewhere, not just their members' own tight budgets for publicity, they could mount an extraordinary promotional program—hiring some expert public relations firm to handle it. No costly advertising need be involved. Instead, California's fine wines and its winemakers and wineries would be widely promoted in articles specially written for national and regional publications, and in interviews, talk shows, and other kinds of programs on radio and television. Incessant and well-designed coverage in different media should convert far more Americans into becoming steady wine drinkers, as well as persuade all those wine consumers who had been buying the imported shippers' wines to instead buy and drink the good American wines, which were greatly superior to the foreign phonies that had lured them away.

Once again, though, MR declined a join-up solicitation from Gomberg. There was something undeniably genuine about the fellow! But he just didn't have time to devote to that group. After all, these problems within the California wine industry were scarcely *his* problems. He could sell all the wines he made, so why should he worry about foreign competition if many wine connoisseurs even rated some of them as good as France's best (or even better)? But his turndown didn't mean that he'd just let the matter end there.

MR Said No, But ...

Some of the things that Gomberg had told Martin Ray or written in the long memorandum about the Premium Wine Producers plan really rankled. Or maybe it was what *wasn't* in it? From the start MR had apparently decided that the group's propagandizing efforts actually were intended as a smokescreen for another motive yet to be revealed: to lobby the government to impose high tariffs on these imports, thereby eliminating most of the unwelcome foreign competition. And by inevitably making the best wines made in Europe prohibitively expensive to most wine lovers, it would do a terrible disservice to American connoisseurship, so much in need of encouragement. MR knew that historically this protectionist tariff on imported wines had often been sought by vintners whenever foreign products threatened to overwhelm the state's wine industry. He seemed utterly convinced of this sinister purpose, and once MR got a notion like this in his head, it proved difficult to ever dislodge, no matter what evidence might be presented to the contrary.

And as often happened when he focused on some problematic issue, MR quickly got himself all worked

up (and consequently his wife as well) into a fever pitch of thinking, talking, and activity. Customarily, he'd vent some of the hot steam (or was it smoke?) by writing letters, alerting others to his irritable state of mind. (ER did it too, for both her and him.) Statements in a few letters that both Rays wrote after MR's talk with Gomberg showed the direction in which both were moving. This intense involvement, it must be said, came in the midst of all else going on around them, in vineyard and cellar as well as entertaining. The latter activities would soon include accommodating actor Burgess Meredith's entry into their life (as depicted in #8), and making plans to entertain royally a young visitor, Christiane Latour, the niece of Louis Latour—the French vintner who had supplied the six new French oak barrels that had arrived early in the year, as arranged for MR by Amerine (described in #7).

In his mid-April letter to Amerine, MR finished it off with a complaint about a winemaker acquaintance who had visited him the day before and stayed overnight. Then he signaled his irritable attitude toward those Premium Wine Producers whom Gomberg was representing.

> I never knew just how big a bore old W_____ is until I sat all night listening to nothing. As a matter of fact, he is completely ignorant of French or German wines and cant stay in conversation beyond his own vineyard. Too bad, that is the way with all of them, about which I will have more to say as soon as I get some letters off my chest to blast these damned ignorant growers who are trying to keep out good imports. [4/20/55]

Later that very day, two weeks after his phone talk with him, MR would write to Louis Gomberg. Apparently he'd decided at first to temper his usual blasts at all those winegrowing peers who had failed to carry through the quality-ensuring measures he'd recommended, or actually demanded, starting almost two decades earlier. Why? He was now viewing this PWP formation as an opportunity to start once again verbalizing, in places where his words might have some effect, his perennial insistence that the better California wineries make the best possible wines. After all, it could be done by them in an unaccustomed smaller scale, just as he had been doing it for many years in his isolated way.

During the next week alone three letters, two from MR and one from Gomberg in between them, traveled rapidly between Saratoga and San Francisco. Then toward the end of April, when Amerine drove to Saratoga in his brand-new convertible, expecting to have a relaxed springtime lunch with the Rays at their Mt. Eden home, he found copies of these three letters waiting there for his scrutiny—and, his hosts must have assumed, his admiring approval.

These extant documents display MR's determination that the creation of the Premium Wine Producers group would serve his wine-improving purpose somehow: either by their members' agreeing to some sort of preliminary plan for quality control, or else by being portrayed by him in an adversarial role if the owners or managers of the wineries refused to accept MR's proposal for their betterment.

For here MR had spotted a wonderful opportunity to corral the owners of the most prestigious wineries in California and prod them into accepting real quality standards. And the field was wide open, since nobody else was demanding, as he had always done, a transformative revolution in the planting and vintaging of fine grape varieties. (As was presented in sections of the earlier article in *WTQ* about MR's friendship with Julian Street: Frank Schoonmaker, who had started out doing this in 1934 in his and Tom Marvel's *The Complete Wine Book*, was despised by post-Repeal California vintners until, according to MR, he got greedy a few years later. He began ignoring obvious over-blending and mislabeling practices when he started his own wine-distributing business and then became ensconced with Almaden. Yet, ironically, wine writers unaware of Martin Ray's long-lived and far more puristic intransigence usually name Schoonmaker as the major activist in promoting better wine quality over the years.)

MR's First Letter to Gomberg

The three-page letter that MR had sent to Gomberg, which was shown later to Amerine, was a carbon copy, done routinely with all the Rays' typed and even handwritten communications. After reiterating to "My dear Lou" his decision not to join the PWP, MR had explained why he was now writing to him:

> It is my hope ... that under your leadership a more constructive program may be initiated and carried through to some lasting satisfaction. Toward this end I will make a definite proposal. And I respectfully request that you discuss this suggestion with your group after you have laid this letter before them for discussion.

After mentioning some aspects of Gomberg's original memo sent to him in February, MR then projected the futility of programs that the PWP intended to introduce.

> You state, "At the suggestion of a number of California premium wine producers I am enclosing a copy of a memorandum which outlines the problem of foreign wine competition and how that competition might be successfully combated." In this memorandum you outline the growth in sale of table wines imported for consumption in the United States from something over 500,000 gallons in 1948 to over 3,000,000 gallons in 1954. You comment that at this growth rate the foreign table wine sales will reach the almost astronomical level of

nearly 12,000,000 gallons by 1960. Now, what I want to tell your people is, that by 1970 some of them aren't going to be here if they don't go about their problem by making better wines. You can no more build their sales by suppressing importation of finer wines than you can keep down truth by suppressing facts from the press.

MR took issue with what he saw as PWP's ultimate goal, beyond launching a big wine-promoting campaign: to make it economically difficult for foreign-made wines to enter the country, thereby protecting American-made wines and California ones in particular. MR believed the best resolution lay in a fair international competition over quality, in which California wines, if the group's member-wineries subscribed to and followed his plan, would eventually be able to easily surpass and overcome any of the shippers' mediocre products. It would also involve educating consumers far better about how fine wines tasted.

What is needed, then, is some sort of self-imposed control over quality. With all of the efforts of the federal government nothing is even attempted by them in this direction, nor could it be done successfully. But these growers who are so worried about the increased sales of fine European growths could sit down at a single organizational meeting and delegate power, either to an individual or a board, so that Cabernet Sauvignon when sold would not be a blend of Cabernet and Zinfandel, Pinot Noir would not be Pinot St. George, Chardonnay would not be Chenin Blanc—in short, they could set up an organization which would insure honest labeling. This in turn would automatically raise to a degree the standards of quality. Beyond this they could agree amongst them that they would encourage free competition of all wine. Such competition would require that their quality standards be raised. To be a quality grower it is not enough just to claim quality—you must be quality. Look at the Appellation Controlée in France—if it finds quality claims are false they are ruled out.

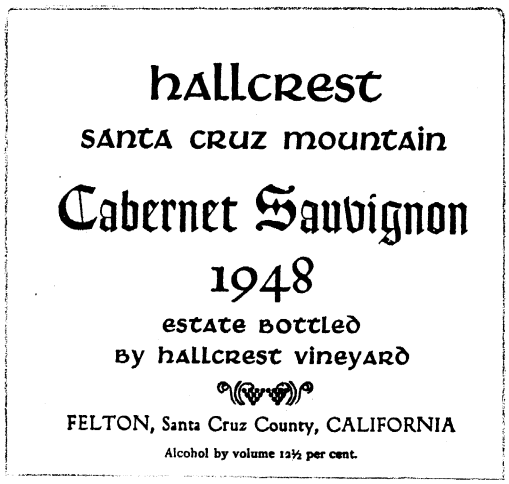
It is not true that foreign wines enjoy any favorable trade conditions over our own, as claimed. If California wines were up to standard, growers here would have every advantage. But they have persisted in ignoring all fine wine practices. This is what took place in the years immediately following Repeal: Every one of your group then in business told us [when MR was the proprietor of Paul Masson, beginning in 1936] we could never mature and market an unblended Cabernet-Sauvignon.... These same people told us we could never make successfully an unblended Pinot Noir and market it profitably. Yet we did then and continue to do so, as do the best European growers. By the time war in Europe threatened to shut out imports the quality of the wines of these growers had reached an all-time high for them. It followed naturally that with imports finally shut out by the war that their production doubled, then multiplied to as many as ten times their pre-war production, and their standards dropped. Now geared to operate on a larger sales volume and faced with the growing demand for finer wines than they produce they wish to suppress their competition rather than meet it.

MR then had said he would like to tell the wine growers "what we have done along this line, and it has worked." At Paul Masson in the late 1930s, and certainly with Maynard Amerine's advice and encouragement, MR had begun creating the model for what would later become well known as the small "boutique" winery, which limited its production of winegrapes and wine types in order to focus on achieving a few high-caliber products.

As MR explained his modus operandi to Gomberg:

Our production is now entirely limited to varietal table wines and champagnes. It is conducted now on approximately the same volume as it was almost twenty years ago. We have merely eliminated the lower priced non-varietal wines with the passing of years. All of our wines are straight unblended varietals, and all save one are vintaged, the exception designating a lesser wine that is ultimately to be closed out. We receive for our Pinot Noir $48 per case; for our Cabernet-Sauvignon $36 per case; for our champagnes $100 and $120 per case [Multiply each figure by 8 to arrive at today's equivalents.]. These are consumer prices, which we discount one-third [to retailers]. We have a total of ten wines. They are carried by virtually every first-class package store and club in California, and are available at Antoine's in New Orleans and at Sherry Wine & Spirits in New York. We sell all we can produce.

By the mid-1950s, though, this purist and artisan winemaking approach was being pursued by a few other small-winery operations where work was mainly done by their owners. Most notable were Chaffee Hall at Hallcrest, in the Santa Cruz Mountains—near MR and one of the few vintners he ever really approved of;



and by the McCreas at Stony Hill and Lee Stewart at

Souverain in Napa County. There were also the Taylors, with their Mayacamas winery on Mt. Veeder—their premises and activities derided by both Rays after visiting there in 1954. And MR dismissed James Zellerbach's high-toned, money-buoyed wine aspirations at Hanzell in Sonoma, as well as "Freddy" Bartholomew's attempt to revive Harazsthy's Buena Vista vineyards and winery. None as yet had gained MR's name recognition among East Coast connoisseurs or his ability to command and get high prices for his wines.

Early on, MR had declared his intention to circulate copies of this very letter he was writing to other people besides Gomberg, its primary recipient:

> I should tell you that I am going to send a carbon copy of this letter to each of the growers you mentioned who was in business in the years immediately following Repeal, for a similar situation arose then, which was properly met and successfully so. This was by improving the quality of California wines rather than through any effort to cut off the fine growths of the old world, for they represented then as now the standards by which quality is judged.
>
> I will also send a carbon copy of this letter to each of our retail outlets toward the end that sufficient interest in the subject be aroused to cut short this proposed effort to stifle competition, when instead a concerted effort should be made to improve quality and then these growers could meet foreign competition.

Later along, the letter contained another statement that revealed the extent to which MR was determined to be widely heard at last when making his attack upon the wine industry's status quo.

> Just today I have suggested to an established writer that he do an article for a slick publication on what you are proposing, for you are striking at the heart of future California winegrowing rather than protecting it. [4/20/55]

Quite probably Maynard Amerine became especially discomfited when reading of these intentions of MR's to break out of a private discussion with Gomberg and start pushing his own program for bringing on wine quality control.

But what had Gomberg himself thought—and said?

Two Responses

At the Rays', Maynard Amerine went on to read a second letter, this one the original. "My dear Martin," Gomberg's friendly but businesslike reply began.

> Your letter of April 20th represented, in my opinion, a distinct service and contribution to the California wine industry. You may be sure that it will be brought to the attention of the prestige wine producers when they assemble to consider organization next month.
>
> Lest there be any misunderstanding concerning the thinking behind the project on which I am working, allow me to call your attention to the following:
>
> I note from a re-reading of my memorandum that it gave two erroneous impressions:
>
> a. That all table wine imports pose a threat to producers of California prestige wines; and
>
> b. That such imports ought to be "suppressed."
>
> Neither of these is correct, as will be clarified in the study Report now in preparation.
>
> I know of no one in the industry—least of all myself—who opposes the importation of the truly fine wines you mention, or any others of genuinely fine quality. On the contrary, the increased importation of such wines is to be encouraged. They not only are a credit to the wine industry of the world, they offer—as you point out—a challenge to California to produce wines of ever higher quality.
>
> The wines that concern me and the prestige producers are the cheap, inferior imports that have flooded the American market in recent years. These wines, masquerading under fancy-looking labels, are being pawned off on an unsuspecting public as the real thing. Even the legitimate producers and shippers in Europe are concerned about them because they discredit all imports.
>
> But undesirable as such competition may be, there is not the slightest intention of suppressing it, or attempting to do so. The whole basic idea back of the project now receiving my attention is to heighten public awareness of the fine wines of California through a carefully planned and executed public relations program. At no time, under any circumstances, will this program attack or otherwise seek to injure any imports.
>
> You no doubt are aware of the highly effective, subtle propaganda campaign the French and Italian folks have been staging over the past several years, particularly. Not only wines, but women's fashions, tours and other things these folks have to sell. Well, that's what I have in mind for California prestige wines. See pages 4 and 5 of the memorandum and this point will become clear.

Gomberg then took up the matter of MR's implicit threat of going public with his misgivings about the PWP's promotional plans, and also of continuing on with his objections to a tariff, which just wasn't in the offing.

> To avoid the obvious injury that would occur were any writer to do a story based on the misapprehensions mentioned on the previous page, please show this letter to your writer friend should he decide to write such a story. As a former newspaperman, the real story, as I see it, is that California fine-wine producers are considering taking a leaf from their European friends and putting on a public relations program to make the American people conscious of the fact that we, too, have good wines. In a word, we may not yet have produced a Rolls Royce but we've got a pretty good car in our Cadillac.

With this clarification, I hope you will now have a better understanding of just what this program is all about and that I may have the pleasure of seeing you at the organizational meeting in May. [4/23/55]

Amerine would have heard from MR, of course, that he had no desire to attend the PWP meeting on May 5th, let alone become a member. Still, it was apparent that MR was eager to share with Gomberg, and with at least a few other winery proprietors, insights into both marketing and buying wines, from the sellers' and consumers' perspectives, some of which he only recently gained through his selling experiences. So he had written back to Gomberg almost at once after receiving his letter.

I am glad to note that as a result of my letter you now plan to clarify to your growers ... between the finer imports and the trash that is being merchandised by foreign shipping firms.

So you will understand my position in regards to this approach. I will quote you from a letter I wrote recently to a retailer who had never sold any of the finer European wines. As a result of this letter and my personal contact work he has stocked some fifteen of the finest French and German wines and four of our finest wines, all of which are segregated from his other stock and displayed together. The wines are all moving. Their retail prices range from $3 to $11 a bottle. Moreover, he has closed out all foreign shippers' wines.

"There are many shipping firms located in all the wine districts of the world. It is their business to buy up wines, usually in bulk, which have been rejected by the first-class growers or which are grown especially for firms that blend or bottle under labels other than the best. There are some better shipping firms that actually own all or part of some very good vineyards which may make limited quantities of exceptional wines occasionally available to them, but this does not alter the rule, that only wines bottled by the estates where grown should ever be purchased.... I do wish to point out, however, that you will be discouraged by salesmen who are primarily interested in selling shippers' wines. The country is being flooded with such wines, and it is possible to go into many retail stores that are actually specializing in imported wines and yet find there only the shippers' wines, which in some cases are selling way out of line. These retailers actually believe they have the finest wines, yet their line is all secondary, much of it even undrinkable. So my advice is to beware of all shippers' wines, and confine yourself to the above mentioned, relying upon the accepted California growers for (all) wines ranging up to $2 a bottle. There is something about drinking the wines of the great vineyards that appeals to everyone, and especially when such wines are presented to supplement those good sound (California) wines purchased for everyday use."

After demonstrating his style of educating retailers about how to upgrade their wine offerings, MR went back to his belief from the start that the PWP, allied with the Wine Institute, would succeed in getting a high tariff imposed on all imported wines.

As to the problem of your group, from your last letter and my expression here we would seem to be in complete agreement. But as to the solution of their problem I still believe that the methods proposed by you are wrong, will be injurious to the industry if undertaken, and are doomed to fail.

To begin with, you cannot discriminate against all of these shippers' wines by the tariff approach without discriminating against the growers' wines coming into this country from some of the greatest vineyards in the world. You may be sure that any increased tariff can always be absorbed by the costs which these shippers put into whatever they are preparing for this market. As I have said, you'll be striking at the finer wines while trying to keep out the poor ones. And you'll find there will be poor wines so long as there is a market in which they can be sold. It is the market, then, you must set your sights on, particularly when it is easy to capture.

For you representing California growers to strike at all imported wines does not impress a retailer favorably who is engaged in merchandising for profit wines without regard to their origin. But for you to recognize what they already know (that Europe's finest growths are the standard of quality) and actually welcome in our market Europe's greatest wines will establish with retailers the sincerity of your approach to the real problem, which should be the presentation to retailers of wines on a basis of their quality merits. By educating the retailers as to what are the best wines of the world you can educate the buying public. And in so doing you can actually trade on the good will of Europe's renowned top wines while driving from our markets the cheap shippers' wines that are your real concern. The reason these shippers' imports are selling is not because of their labels, what the wines taste like, or even because many of them sell at a low price—for they aren't cheap at any price. They sell because the retailers sell them. *And the retailers sell them because they make money easier than by selling the wines of the same price made by your group.* [Emphasis added.] What is needed is a plan to alter the present position of the retailer.

I have perfected a method of operation which works successfully so long as there is a free market for fine wines, because I can compete with them. What I am doing is offering this same system to your group, provided they really want to make fine wines. Some of them are making some damn fine wines now.

But now MR started playing brinkmanship with a few of his winegrowing peers—those who would soon see this letter of his because he'd be sending out copies to them.

I don't hesitate to single out Beaulieu's Pinot Noir as the

finest red coming out of Napa Valley, and it's a mighty good wine. But I would have to be ignorant to believe it is an authentic unblended Pinot Noir. Inglenook's Chardonnay is not an authentic unblended Chardonnay, nor is that old Pinot Noir of theirs authentic, the one put out as such a treasure. It has done them far more harm than they can imagine, and such is the case with the others. Let me hasten to add that I realize these growers are making far better wines than any of the others, and yet it is more the pity that they should hide behind the ignorance of the law that cannot define varieties and enforce true labeling. Blending 50% in the case of any of these is enough to completely lose all varietal characteristics. [For varietal-labeled wines, from 1936 until 1983, at least 51% of the named varietal was required to come from that grape variety, which allowed blending of almost half, or 49%, from other varieties. The legal minimum is now 75%.] In the case of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay it is generally accepted by them that they can use Pinot St. George (which is no Pinot at all) and Chenin Blanc which is just as fraudulent. I want you to discuss this matter fully with your group. They should face it, and not feel that I am maliciously striking at them. None of them have had the courage to make the proper approach, and that's why they are in trouble. That's why, too, I intend to fight through the retailers and the press any action they might take that would injure our standards of quality. If on the other hand they will listen to a plan that will work and which I have demonstrated, I will be only too glad to assist them.

"Let me be specific," MR went on in his urge to force the better California wineries to make far better wines, or at least to label their wines properly—so that eventually their businesses could be financially rescued.

The correct approach is first to bind the growers who would be "premium growers" to definite standards, and get them to delegate real authority to an individual or board to enforce the standards agreed upon. The next step is to train salesmen properly so they can sell with intelligence of their subject. They can drive the shippers' wine from the field with ease, if properly trained, and if they know that the growers they represent are making wines which are honestly labeled and which can stand above the shippers' wines. I have had no difficulty doing this myself, working quite alone, and in my relatively small field. But the trouble is, everyone in the trade knows that all of these growers you represent blend and use varietal names as they wish. And the salesmen selling their wines to California retailers cannot discuss them intelligently. My retailers are always asking me why these people don't get someone to sell their wines who knows what he is talking about.

And now MR was ready to wind up his argument by showing support of Gomberg's good intentions, if not the wine-promoting program, and to offer additional specific directives.

It is a waste of money to go into national TV, radio, all that expensive approach. What you want first is improved standards of quality, and a method of enforcement. Then, well-trained salesmen and a good publicity man. Again I call to your attention the Appellation Controlée idea adapted to fit the California situation. And while at it I propose that one of the first rules to be adopted would be that no wine merchandised under the label of any of your group could be wine purchased from others. Some of your group have greatly expanded their sales by buying distressed wines and merchandising them without respect for either laws or labeling. You see, Lou, you've got a big job on your hands, but if you can see it through it's quite possible to do a very great service for certain of your group, and for the industry in general. Those really sincere in wanting to make and merchandise fine wines should not permit others who are merely masquerading as such to infiltrate your group and thus destroy all chances of success.

I'll send a copy of this to Beaulieu, Inglenook, Krug, and Wente.... I don't see how the methods of some of the others differ greatly from the foreign shippers they would attack. After all, merely claiming to make fine wines isn't sufficient.

Again, MR expressed his intention to share his letters, now specifically naming four wineries that dated back, solidly, not just to the Repeal period, when he had owned Masson, but to before Prohibition, and were producing decent enough wines that carried varietal names, even though, by his standards, they weren't quite what the labels said they were.

So MR was even willing to become involved with PWP and help it out ... but only if its members truly wanted to change their ways and were open to considering his proposals.

I am quite prepared to talk to any or all of these people, and will join any interested in a plan to set up and enforce standards of quality and merchandise wines so protected in the market now largely dominated by the foreign shippers. I can personally assure the success of such a plan. [4/26/55]

Cautionary Counseling

After reading MR's two letters, which he obviously was proud of, Amerine probably urged MR to be more circumspect and exercise discretion in moving ahead. First of all, he wouldn't have thought it politic to send out copies of these two letters to the proprietors of the four wineries named as recipients. They would be Hélène (Marquise) de Pins—the deceased de Latours' daughter—at Beaulieu; John Daniel, Jr. at Inglenook; the Mondavi family at Krug; and Herman Wente at the Wente Brothers in Livermore. Either already in the wine business when MR first owned Masson (1936-43), or

like Cesare Mondavi's sons, Peter and Robert, preparing to do so, Amerine knew they'd object to this outsider's newest push in demanding new quality standards in the making and selling of fine varietal wines. And they would resent, or at least find ludicrous, his claim of knowing far better than they about both making and selling wines, even though his tiny operation differed almost totally from their sizable ones. Generally considered the top producers of high-quality wines, they weren't apt to react timidly to MR's strong criticism or to his offer to be their mentor, even leader, should they accede to the demands he'd stated to Gomberg.

Another intention of MR's surely bothered Amerine even more, as it was bound to stir up more trouble: MR's announcement that he'd send his two letters out to retailers on his list (he claimed about 200 of them) and also to a few influential wine people. (MR would have named André Simon and Alfred Knopf as two of the latter.) All energized, he then talked excitedly of his determination, if the winegrowers involved with Gomberg's PWP turned down his quality control plan, he'd have a lot more to say in an industry-damaging way in interviews for the article he hoped to get written and then published in a popular magazine, to be read by many thousands of wine-buying and -consuming Americans.

Amerine knew that winery proprietors wouldn't like to have themselves and their wines presented in the deleterious, even muckraking ways that MR wanted if his ideas were blackballed by the PWP group. They would need to defend their practices if they didn't all subscribe to MR's master plan for improving the quality and authenticity of the best-rated California wines. It all had undeniably the look of a blackmail threat.

And what was MR's overall "plan"? Using only winegrape varieties considered "fine" and minimizing any blending so that the wines would be as close as possible to 100% pure; naming the geographic origins of the grapes; adhering to "honest" labeling that would reveal the proportion of the actual varietal contents so that consumers would no longer be misled; and operating a tough inspection system from vineyard to cellar to bottles ready for the market, which would impose stiff penalties for infractions. These and other rules and restrictions would come about by "self"-imposing a strict quality control system, to be designed and regulated by the winery people themselves, as MR envisaged it. And if they didn't start doing it themselves, the government eventually would make them do it.

Whatever qualms Amerine may have expressed to the Rays after reading the letters, his efforts would have been ineffectual. MR's battle plan was already set to go fast-forward. The Rays were in contact with several writers who knew wine, and they'd also talked with editors at a few magazines, notably *Life*. The letters to Gomberg were being mimeographed, so several hundred of them would soon go out to retailers and people who bought Martin Ray wines and were bound to be interested in what he had to say about the whole quality situation, along with competition coming from the shippers' wines.

Furthermore, Eleanor was already hard at work doing the research and writing needed in producing an essay to summarize for both prospective publishers and writers the important background facts on the history and present predicament of the state's wine industry. It would emphasize the winegrowers' perpetually recalcitrant and self-protective attitudes, which amounted to ignorance that hurt them, California's wine market, and wine consumers. So ER now asked Maynard to help her by supplying some strong statements made in the 1880s and '90s by Professor Eugene W. Hilgard of the University of California in Berkeley (then the only state university campus). He had earned the bitter enmity of most wine producers through his sustained public criticism of their vineyard and winery practices as well as marketing tactics.

The Rays must have expected that Maynard Amerine would see the value of what they were doing. They would have hoped, too, that he, now in his mid-40s, would gain sufficient courage and outspokenness to become virtually the 20th century's Hilgard. After all, he was positioned as the major wine expert on the faculty at UC Davis, now the large university system's center for both enological and viticultural research and educational training. Here in the battle that MR was mounting against the wine industry's premium wine-producing Establishment a golden opportunity was opening up for Amerine, as MR's comrade in arms, to move into an effective quality control-demanding position.

Amerine's obvious lack of approval that day for the strategies that the Rays had expressed for dealing with the Gomberg–PWP matter would have disappointed them. But apart from that, the luncheon ended on a note that was quite "gay" (an adjective that both MR and ER frequently used in talk and letters to describe a delightful occasion, a lively mood, or some charmingly ebullient person—before it began acquiring a different use and meaning altogether). Amerine wrote the Rays soon afterwards: "Back safely to Davis, a little late but whole. Thanks very much for the nice luncheon—very relaxing after a week of pushing...."

And then MA expressed his perplexity, if not exactly downright disapproval, of what MR had been doing, and doubtless would continue to do when deliberately stirring up grievances with other winery

owners. Apparently he was acquainted with the strong and abiding ego need in MR, lurking behind the noble QC cause, that propelled him to castigate, and to "expose" as ignoramuses, cheaters, and liars, those people whom he usually regarded as his bitter adversaries. Almost certainly attacks on other vintners' practices, if he persisted in them, were bound to backfire disagreeably.

> I am a little mystified at your campaign against the big producers. I don't think their program will get off the ground, and even if it does I don't think it will do any good. And don't you think that they will soon see your motive? Anyway I couldn't be less interested. These things go in cycles and they will eventually see the error of their ways, or the error of their ways will make it financially unprofitable to continue. Furthermore, the personalities directing the show have their motives too, and they may have no relation to their programs!! And even if you get the free advertising that you desire will you like the mass of ill will that you will possibly create? [5/1/55]

At the top of this letter ER wrote sometime later, as if to pinpoint the first indication of what was yet to come: "Quality Fight—Amerine's out of it."

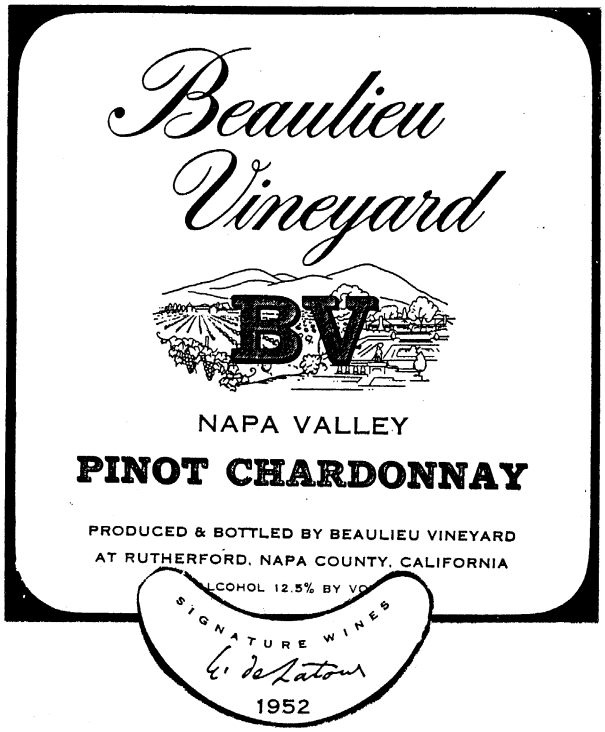
The remainder of Maynard's note was chattier. He also promised to send the Hilgard material to Eleanor, if he could find it in his office.

Several days later, on May 3rd, MR did just as he had announced he'd do, even if Amerine advised him otherwise. His two letters to Gomberg had been duplicated by ER's typing a master for mimeograph duplication, so they had plenty of them to mail to the retailers and others who'd take interest in their contents. He wrote notes to the proprietors of the four wineries, to be sent out with the letter copies.

Martin Ray had hoped, of course, to engage Amerine's help in his calculated plan to persuade—or force, if necessary—the membership of the upcoming Premium Wine Producers group to impose quality control regulations on themselves and each other. But Maynard had balked at becoming involved. Yet by doing what he did, even without Amerine's compliance, MR would be putting his longtime friend in an untenable position, since most winegrowers were quite aware of their longtime, intimate association. MA had been as staunch and verbal an advocate as MR of quality standards in winegrowing and wine marketing, in markedly different ways and places. But he was earning his living, after all, as a wine researcher and enologist in a state university department that secured a sizable part of its operating funds from the commercial winemaking business. Therefore, he was expected to serve the interests of the California wine industry, whether or not he agreed with whatever its prominent practitioners were doing.

Amerine, too, was increasingly under scrutiny and stress because of his frequent work and reputation as a wine-tasting guru. (It didn't help his peace of mind, either, when periodically MR would report to him on gatherings where people savagely attacked his skills as a wine authority.) No wonder he could write sympathetically about the internationally acclaimed wine connoisseur, judge, and author, Alexis Lichine, whom MR sometimes put down. Far better acquainted than MR with the plight of a professional wine arbiter, Maynard asked him,

> How would you like to go to all of those dinners always smiling, always posing as the world's great wine expert, and always "acting"? It must get tiresome and Lichine is now on his 2 or 3rd ulcer. There is a limit to how many of those you can have! Quiet and simplicity is my motto. [3/1/55]

To Amerine—for he often declared to the Rays that achieving simplicity in life was his primary desire—it seemed wrong and futile for Martin to expend such time and deplete his energy on this latest quixotic venture. This Wine Quality Fight of his doubtless would end in defeat and more aggravation. Surely Martin would be far better off just quietly growing healthy winegrapes and making superb wines on his Mt. Eden mountaintop, and only now and then going off on selling trips or spending time with a few close friends.

[*To be continued in the January 2007 issue*]