

WINE & SPIRITS

# THREE WITH VISION

*An importer, a critic and a grower are pushing wine's limits.*

By Corie Brown, Times Staff Writer

American wine has come a long, long way. From Santa Barbara to the Willamette Valley to Long Island to the Finger Lakes, the level of quality and sophistication has risen so dramatically, and the range of varieties and styles expanded so rapidly, that the landscape is barely recognizable from what it was 20 years ago.

The American palate has kept pace; our tastes have become broader and more discerning. We've graduated from Merlot to Pinot Noir, the most difficult and misunderstood grape in winedom. That variety is now all the rage, as American vintners scramble to establish it, well, wherever they suspect it may work. Deep-pocketed oenophiles who first fell in love with Bordeaux are now looking to Burgundy, a region as complex and difficult as the grape that produces its red wine. Other wine lovers are becoming curious about choices from around the world, seeking good values as wine becomes a fixture on the dinner table.

In these dynamic times, a few personalities have emerged as forces behind the push to take wine to the next level.

The holy grail for importer Fran Kysela is a compelling bottle of wine that he can sell in stores for less than \$10.

As the dollar's falling value makes imports more expensive than they've been in recent years, today bargain hunting is the name of the wine importing game. Independents such as up-and-coming Kysela, who has two lines — Kysela Père et Fils and J and D Selections — are seeking out wines from emerging regions, places where the wines are becoming interesting but prices still reflect an inglorious past.

When he first saw the gnarly grape bushes that dot the hills and plateaus of the Calatayud region northeast of Madrid, Kysela's mouth began to water. Some of these Grenache vines were 70 years old; the youngest were a mature 30. A young French-trained vintner from Rioja convinced Kysela that an existing winery could be cleaned up and modernized with temperature controls and steel-tank fermentation. He could deliver fruit-forward wines that Kysela could sell for \$8 a bottle.

## REGIONAL DISCOVERY

Obscure Calatayud had long been dismissed as the land of government-subsidized wine cooperatives that had been on automatic pilot since Franco was in power. But now the region is starting the long process of reinventing itself, and Kysela's on top of it. "Right now it's a buyer's market. People are willing to work with you," he says. "It's also a little bit of a leap of faith."

Perhaps. But Kysela is following a proven formula for independent importers.

Back in the 1970s, Berkeley-based **Kermit Lynch** pioneered the idea of traveling the world in search of wine treasures. Lynch focused on France, which was rife with wonderful, overlooked wines. He brought Provence, the Rhône and the Languedoc to the attention of American wine drinkers and has since become a brand name commanding premium prices.

Before Lynch's emergence, it never would have occurred to most Americans to buy wines based on recognizing the name of the importer. Today, amid the overwhelming number of wines from the world on the shelves, savvy wine lovers know that seeking out German or Austrian wines imported by **Terry Thiese**, or Spanish wines imported by **Jorge Ordoñez**, or Rhônes imported by Robert

Kacher, will increase their chances of picking up something they'll love.

Kysela, who was Lynch's national sales director from 1987 to 1992, went straight to the Languedoc when he set out on his own in 1993. There, he says, "the better wines have Syrah, a Rhône Valley flavor profile without the high prices." Coteaux du Languedoc, he points out, has a cooler climate; it is from there that Picpoul de Pinet — some of his most successful wines — comes. "The wines have lift and bright fruit as well as richness and weight and a low price," he says. "Hard to beat."

These days, Kysela scouts for new wines in Spain, Italy and Australia. In France, he explains, winemakers don't feel the need to adapt to changing tastes. "It's tradition there," he says. But in Australia, even in such established regions as the Barossa, Kysela says he can actually dictate the style of the wines he'll export. "The Aussies are willing to try anything, do anything you want," he says. He asked Steve Machin, the marketing manager at Thorn-Clarke, to produce a hedonistic, ready-to-drink wine, and he's more than pleased with the mouthful-of-fruit Shiraz that resulted.

Several other importers bring in wines that retailers, critics and consumers like just as well, but Kysela has staked his name on matching his competition on quality while beating them on price. Maintaining his own fleet of delivery trucks at his warehouse in Winchester, Va., he says, keeps costs low.

His wines, which typically retail for \$7 to \$18, are highly regarded among sommeliers. "He's a master sommelier, someone from our side of the fence," points out Spago sommelier Kevin O'Connor, who keeps more than a dozen of Kysela's wines on Spago's list. "He's got a better palate than 99% of the guys

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out there. He often has wines that are as good as everyone else at half the price.”

To anyone tasting selections at his Winchester warehouse, his preference for wines that leave a specific impression is obvious — a mango-happy 2003 Laurent Miquel Viognier from the Languedoc-Roussillon (\$13); an ultra-fresh 2003 Valminor Albariño from Rías Baixas (\$11); a tobacco-box, peppery 2002 Corbières Col des Vents (\$8).

Next month, Kysela’s instincts will be tested when he releases the first vintage from his Calatayud project, 2003 Tres Ojos, named for the distinctive three arches of a local viaduct.

As the fortunes of Pinot Noir rise, so does the reputation — and reach — of Burghound. That’s the nom de plume of Allen Meadows, a former Los Angeles investment banker whose 4-year-old Burghound newsletter has attracted a devoted following of 1,600 Burgundy wine lovers from 38 countries.

That’s not bad for a quarterly newsletter that costs \$166 a year (\$110 online) and weighs in at 150 pages an issue. (There’s also a Burghound website.)

Meadows is a singularly authoritative voice on Burgundy, says Spago’s O’Connor. No other critic spends as much time studying the wines he writes about. (Meadows spends four months a year in the region, tracking the top 350 producers.) “He’s a terrific, neutral guy whose personality doesn’t come before the wine.”

At a time when the wine world is dominated by the personal tastes of one critic, Robert Parker, Meadows illuminates a region that’s long been inaccessible to or misunderstood by American wine lovers.

“Burghound was started because I didn’t think there was a voice that was speaking to the true Burgundy lover,” says Meadows. “The fact that a wine doesn’t blow you away through raw power or sheer size and weight is OK. It is every bit as admirable to have wine that is understated, pure, nuanced.”

It hasn’t hurt that Parker has long been criticized for misunderstanding the wines

of Burgundy.

“Parker is covering the waterfront while I am looking, essentially, at one grape, Pinot Noir, that is amazingly sensitive to any kind of manipulation,” says Meadows. “One has to be on top of what’s being done and ask the right questions. I spend a lot of time trying to connect the dots. A wine tastes like X. Now, why?”

## EXPANDED COVERAGE

The wine press has given much attention to the 2002 Burgundies just coming onto the market. But while Meadows calls them “crowd pleasers,” he recommends a number of 2001 bottles (a Chambertin-Clos de Bèze from Joseph Faiveley or a Musigny Grand Cru Comte de Vogüé, for example). “The fruit that was picked at the right time made amazing wine,” Meadows says, adding the important caveat that very few domaines hit it just right. “It’s not a consistent vintage. But the high notes were spectacular.”

As Pinot Noir emerges as the new darling grape of American wine, vintners struggling to deliver great Pinots have pestered Meadows to include it in his coverage. As a result, in his most recent newsletter, published last month, he added tasting notes for a collection of older California Pinot Noirs, a sort of baseline from which he will start tasting selections from California and Oregon in the coming editions of Burghound.

Meadows says America is still in its infancy with Pinot Noir and will need another 50 years just to learn the places that are best for it here; he notes that France has been working with the grape for 1,000 years.

“It will be fascinating to watch the discovery process,” he says. “What I can bring to the equation, by commenting on the wine, is to encourage winemakers that want to create wines of elegance, balance, purity, finesse, nuance. That’s what makes Burgundy so great at the table and Pinot Noirs, made in that style, great at the table.”

Beyond hopes to influence American winemakers, Meadows’ existing reach in the marketplace is clear. “He’s the man,” says Paul Wasserman, the Burgundy wine expert at Woodland Hills Wine Co.

“His ascension has been amazing. I don’t need anyone else’s recommendation to sell Burgundy. And he’s the only place you can go to learn about inexpensive Burgundies.”

## A NATURAL TRANSITION

**Jim FETZER** didn’t grow up thinking about a revolution. He spent his 1960s boyhood toiling in his family’s vineyards, digging up the weeds that flourish in Mendocino’s rich alluvial soils — backbreaking work that made him glad to see the advent of chemical weed killers.

It was the day Fetzer noticed that the birds had stopped singing in his Redwood Valley vineyard that radical thoughts first crossed his mind. “There were no more weeds, but there were no more meadowlarks, no snakes, no spiders. The quiet was eerie,” he recalls.

By the time he sold the family company to spirits giant Brown-Forman Corp. in 1992 for \$90 million, Fetzer Vineyards had become an outspoken proponent of organic grape growing, leading other growers into organics.

Since then, Fetzer has turned his full attention to developing a more radical form of organic agriculture, biodynamic farming. It’s a movement that is rapidly gaining traction throughout the wine world, not just in California but in Burgundy, the Loire Valley and Alsace as well.

With the notion that it would be easier to evangelize a skeptical wine industry if he had something to show people and a place to teach them, Fetzer is putting the finishing touches on a biodynamic farming showplace and conference center, **Ceago Del Lago** on Clear Lake in Lake County. With only 60 acres out of 270 planted in vineyards — the 2- and 3-year-old vines stretch along the base of the lakeside hills — he has planted an olive grove, fig trees and a lavender field. Almond trees and fruit orchards are planned. All of it, of course, will be cultivated using biodynamic principles.

“Biodynamics makes sense,” say the 52-year-old Fetzer, sitting on a porch watching flocks of swallows swoop along

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the top of Clear Lake and back into the button willows, cottonwoods and valley oaks lining the shore. Blue herons, white egrets and hawks are everywhere during the day. The owls and bats fill the night skies.

“But you have to make it visual,” he says. “Joe Blow off the street can understand what we are doing when he comes here.”

Based on the 1920s teachings of Rudolf Steiner, a German philosopher and armchair farmer, biodynamic practices include farming according to the phases of the moon and the zodiac. The idea is that every piece of land is a living organism. Chemical pesticides and herbicides suck the life out of that organism, but organic compost prepared with herbs and oak bark can restore that life. Flowers and fruit trees attract the swarms of insects and birds needed to keep unwanted pests under control. Metaphysical rituals involving cow manure and quartz potions play a key role.

Fetzer, who began experimenting with biodynamics in 1987, found that they improved the taste of his organic fruits and vegetables. He took those ideas into his vineyards in 1994 and soon established himself on the forefront of the American biodynamic movement.

Vintners who were buying Fetzer’s biodynamically grown grapes — Mike Benziger, Robert Sinskey and Joseph Phelps — quickly became converts, renovating their own vineyards using biodynamic principles. These influential winemakers have since spawned still more biodynamic acolytes. The point is better wine, says Fetzer.

French vintners, most importantly some of the leading names in Burgundy, including Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, are turning to biodynamics for the same reason.

Fetzer is gambling that Lake County, which has never been known for producing California’s best wines, will prove to be a hidden jewel. “We’ll see what the grapes will give us, see what the land will give us,” he says, in the particular passive voice of a biodynamic farmer.

“We’re a little bit ahead of things here,”

he says as he gives a tour of **Ceago Del Lago’s** spacious meeting center, where Fetzer is building demonstration kitchens and conference rooms big enough to handle hundreds of visitors at a time.

As Fetzer points out where he plans to build guest cottages along the lake, a slight, subversive grin lights his face. “I sense in my gut, if we build it, they will come.”