

Stories from My Wine Travels

One of the benefits of having traveled extensively to vineyards throughout the world is meeting some very interesting people and gathering up some very fond memories and fun stories. One of my closest friends (who has heard all these stories) suggested I relay a few for others' enjoyment. Lest I forget, anyone who missed my homage to Len Evans in the November/December issue of *QUINTESSENTIAL BARRINGTON* should reference that article about the wine person who most impacted me.

Another of my fondest memories dates back to 1977. A friend and I had spent several days in Napa Valley, and we decided to visit Caymus vineyards at the end of our last day. Alas, we arrived too late, and the winery door was locked. But on our drive out, we saw a man walking along the driveway carrying two 12-bottle containers. I asked him if he was Charlie Wagoner (owner of Caymus), and he said he reckoned he was.

He asked if we wanted to taste and invited us onto his porch, where we promptly proceeded to taste each of his 24 wines. Charlie talked about each and asked for feedback. He made us get involved with him. Although neither my friend nor I remembered much of the day after our visit, Charlie was my Napa "fixture" until his death a few years ago. Caymus's Cabernet Sauvignon Special Selection has been one of the highest award-winning wines in California since 1980. Charlie came to Chicago to do a wine tasting for me in 1986. According to Charlie's son, Chuck, this was the only non-California tasting he ever did (and he rarely did one in-state, either).

We drank magnums of 1975 Special Selection. My father-in-law made one into a lamp, and my son went through medical school and residency with Charlie's light. During my last visit, shortly before his death, he sold me an imperial (eight bottles in one) of his 1980 Special Selection. According to Charlie, he gave four to his immediate family members, one to his wine maker (Randy Dunn), one to himself, and one to me. The final bottle was to go into his casket. When I drink my own, I'll have many fond memories of my Napa

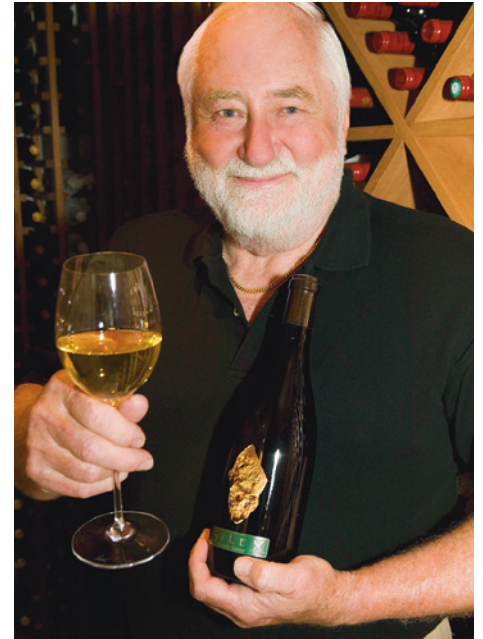
hero. He was a gruff old farmer who transformed his walnut grove to produce one of America's (if not the world's) best wines. I miss him sorely.

For those who have heard the expression that timing is everything, I'll give a data point. Many years ago (in the early 1970s) I was able to arrange a lunch and visit at David Bruce's winery in the Santa Cruz mountains. I received the invitation for the three-hour lunch only because the wine editor of Tokyo's main newspaper was delayed due to a flight problem. We spent a very enjoyable day in and around his house and winery and learned that David was in fact Dr. David Bruce, a dermatologist in Los Gatos.

Years earlier, he had volunteered to be part of a manhunt for a small boy who was thought to be lost in the Santa Cruz mountains. In his search, David found some very old vines that had been abandoned many years previously. After finding the boy unharmed, he returned a little later, located the vines, found the owner, and bought the property. It wasn't long afterward that he gave up his medical practice, and to this day he continues to produce beautiful wines, especially Pinot Noir.

As many of my closest friends know, I am especially fond of Premier and Grand Cru Chablis. A decade ago I bought many bottles from a great producer, Guy Robin. While visiting Chablis, I stayed and had dinner at the most famous hotel and restaurant in town. At dinner, I spent a long time with the wine list and could find nothing that I thought would be better than a 1996 Les Clos (Grand Cru Chablis) from Guy Robin. When I ordered it, the sommelier told me that the wine was past its prime, and in fact, he said, almost all of Guy's wines had seemed to be past their prime through to and including the 2001. Since I knew from drinking these wines from my cellar that the 1995s and 1996s were holding up well, I ordered a 1996 Les Clos Grand Cru. It was fabulous.

The next day I located Guy Robin's small wine facility and dropped in on him unannounced. He was running his small bottling line by himself. With only a perfunctory introduction, I set to work helping him for an hour or so. After we



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finished labeling all the wine, he invited me to his dirt-floored cellar, where he and I tasted all of his Premier and Grand Cru Chablis going back to 1995. Interestingly, the later vintages of Guy's wines, which according to the sommelier were "over the hill," had not yet been bottled. Guy loved my story.

One takeaway from this experience is to do your homework. Drink a lot of wine and trust your gut! Obviously wine "experts" can be wrong or have a bias. You can imagine my disgust when I returned home and told my wine importer about this experience; he informed me that due to the dirt floor and non-antiseptic cellar conditions, he had already decided to no longer import Guy's wines. Yet Guy's wines remain to this day some of the absolutely finest Chablis I've ever had.

Santé. 🍷