

Steven Spurrier - champion of French wines

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On Thursday morning listeners to the BBC's landmark morning news programme Today were told that France's top wine producers might be "rather rattled" by the results of the [2004 vintage](#) of native California Cabernets versus mature first growth red Bordeaux in which California unexpectedly emerged the best. "MINE?" Pure Spurrier.

In many ways the man who organised Wednesday's re-run of the famous California v France tasting in London, and the original in Paris in 1976, is more interesting than the taste-offs themselves - and ironically he could hardly be more pro-French wine.

Perhaps every area of activity has to piously under-estimated pioneer and Steven Spurrier is certainly the unsung hero of wine. He has quite exceptional wine knowledge, particularly but not exclusively of France, has fingers in almost every wine country, and has had all manner of brilliant wine ideas which other people, never him, have managed to spin into gold.

Fortunately he began life with a future, was wise enough to marry another, and seems to be happy enough to have spent his 42 years in the wine business partly frittering them away in various agreeable wine-related pursuits. Not that he is idle. For from 1976, at the Chateau's Wine Course which he set up in 1982, it is more often that not Spurrier who carries the boxes and opens the bottles. His prolific wine writing output includes three very solid books, of which only *Cheats and Spurrier's Fine Wine Guide* is still in print.

When a group of us British wine writers used to fix up our programme of visits to taste the Bordeaux premiers each spring, it is Steven who does all the hard work of writing to the châteaux and co-ordinating our split-second timetable. But when Steven counselled me to travel in 1990, the wine-based tourist attraction that opened just south of the Thames in 1988, assuming me that he was putting everything he could into it, I made a note to do the opposite and have not regretted it.

But to call him the man with the tin touch would be deeply unfair because he has enriched the wine world considerably, and played a key part in the wine education of such luminaries as France's top wine writer Michel Bettane, Tim Johnson and Mark Williamson of W&A's Wine Bar in Paris, Britain's most tedious wine importer Roy Richards of Richards Wainford, Charles Lee of Lee & Sonnerman fine wine shops around London, Paul Brower (who was so cute he was known as 'le petit brique' by Caves de la Madeline customers and went on to run Chateau's wine department) and Jerry Odson whom Spurrier met when she was on a job for the Davies family in Burgundy's Coteaux d'Auxois and, incidentally, by Spurrier, has gone on to make great wine at Ch. St-Julien in Bordeaux and La Fée in New Zealand. If he has a fault, it is a healthy one: an excess of enthusiasm about the most fabulous of wines.

Born into a Derbyshire family twice blessed financially, by a Laidlaw Motors fortune and another once dead involving a gravel pit and the M1, our unsung hero began his wine career in the mid 1960s, just LSE, in what was then charmingly known as 'the carriage trade' at Christopher's in St James's. The up-vested provincial suits and broad pink ties that he still wears surely date from this period of Sir Paul and Joan Dringman. He looks a remarkably youthful 64.

By 1976, hooked on fine wine after an extended grand tour of important cellars, and dining rooms whose doors were opened thanks to his good connections, he moved to Paris and persuaded an elderly lady to sell him her tiny wine shop in a passageway off the Rue Royale. Being run by an Englishman, Caves de la Madeline became increasingly famous and specialised in hand-picked bottles from only the finest growers. Spurrier soon took over the premises and set up to give wine classes in English at L. Rodière de Vins, a great name and then noted concept that he could have franchised very profitably. Instead, it is a case of over-enthusiasm, he set up a comparison tasting of France's greatest wines with some more pretentious from elsewhere, inviting some of France's most celebrated producers to judge them blind. They promptly, much to everyone's surprise, preferred California. In France. The son of the event - Spurrier claims he chose France's best because he intended them to show - was to generate publicity for L. Rodière but, typically, the rather modestly operated publicity machine was hijacked in his case by California wine in general.

It is characteristic that Spurrier's light-headed idea that it would simply be amusing to recreate the event 20 years later simultaneously in the UK and California plunged him into protracted, agonising negotiations and interminable strife. His plans were apparently thwarted at every turn by several notable Bordeaux envious about their reputations. (It may have to be me who organises the primus tastings next year.) And Spurrier confidently expected the French to win second time round.

In 1982, after dissolutely diversifying his wine enthusiasm, a wine bar (since capitalised), and a restaurant, Spurrier and family returned to London from where he has been variously educating, writing, judging (he is the chairman of both the Japan Wine Challenge and the Decanter World Wine Awards about which I wrote recently) and choosing wine. His wine academy concept continues without his direct involvement but with three highly successful branches in Japan and in the form of a similar operation by the Spanish Steps in Rome. He has chosen wine for Singapore Airlines since 1989 and is one of the more elegant operators on the circuit I frequent. His stammer seems only to add to the charm of his many occasions, whether it be an edge (on Chardonnay France) or in his capacity as President of the Circle of Wine Writers.

There is a certain irony in how one of the American prodigals he taught the three Bs - Bordeaux, Burgundy and balance - earned his fame. Charles F. Shaw was at the Chemical Bank in Paris in the mid 1970s when, thanks to Steven, he fell in love with wine, particularly Beaujolais, gave up his job and moved to the Napa Valley to plant the Beaujolais vine Gernsey and persuade Californians to love it. He lost that battle, and several others, but his name, sold to the Bronco Wine Company, lives on in the form of Two Buck Chuck, the brand that has famously managed to make buying a \$1.99 bottle in Trader Joe's worth a wait.

But as Spurrier himself admits caustically, "Perhaps as numerous as the prodigals who have stayed in the trade, are those who I warned off it. I received many letters from those wonderful gay year students who came via the British Embassy saying I have been offered a job with Cuvée de la Madeline, but surely would like to go into the wine trade... can you help?" "Yes, after the job."