

Sommeliers move from table to tank

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A few months ago I was introduced to the new wine label, Evening Land Vineyards (see tasting notes and more background [here](#)), which produces some particularly impressive wines from Oregon and California as well as some blends of the two. The owners had taken the precaution of getting Dominique Lafon of the world-famous Domaine des Comtes Lafon in Meursault to oversee the Oregon wines, which has done no harm at all in terms of getting media coverage. But what really impressed me about the launch of Evening Land, yet another new producer with tiny volumes and the desire to create a disproportionate amount of noise, is that right from the start they deliberately courted the upper echelons of the restaurant business.

After all, the wine lists of top restaurants are the best showcase of all for ambitious new labels, and what could be better for an unknown wine than a personal commitment from key restaurateurs and their sommeliers?

Eric Lilavois, COO of the Thomas Keller empire (French Laundry, Per Se, etc), is involved, as is Danny 'Union Square Cafe' Meyer. And, covering European bases, Mark Williamson of Willi's Wine Bar and Maceo in Paris provided a small part of the 'strategic capital' for Evening Land and is already selling one of the wines. When it came to launching the wines in the US, the obvious location was the three-star Per Se, which must have cut down the usually shocking number of trade tasting no-shows quite a bit.

But before this, even more cunningly, the company signed up some of America's most respected sommeliers such as Larry Stone of Rubicon in California (now making wine at Francis Ford Coppola's Napa Valley estate) and Daniel Johnnes (pictured) of restaurant Daniel in New York, who presumably made the introduction to his friend Lafon. Through them and the Keller connection, Evening Land invited such respected sommeliers as Raj Parr of Michael Mina, Bernie Sun of Jean-Georges (Vongerichten) of New York and Paul Roberts, then of The French Laundry, to develop their own exclusive bottlings of Evening Land wines to sell in their restaurants. As Evening Land's head honcho Mark Tarlov puts it, "How do you cut through the noise? If you have these wines hand-sold in environments that people have learnt to trust for wine, you're going to be much better off. These sommelier bottlings are definitely a key part of our program."

It works well from all points of view. Customers feel they are getting something special from the inside track. The producer gets publicity rather than the flak of the "you should have dropped more crop/picked earlier/bought Taransaud" variety that sommeliers are apparently increasingly handing out. "We also get information from them about what people like to drink", reports Tarlov.

The sommeliers themselves have more control and more fun, even if by California law they are not allowed to profit from these special selections. "That didn't seem to bother them", Tarlov assured me. The different cuvées chosen or shaped by the various sommeliers are, intriguingly, quite different. Bernie Sun, for example, chose particularly light, floral Cabernet Franc to go with Jean-Georges' distinctive cuisine. A comparison of Parr's and Johnnes' 2007 Whole Cluster Cuvées from Oregon's Seven Springs Vineyard Pinot Noir is fascinating. Both were overseen by Dominique Lafon and have his obvious lightness of touch, but Daniel Johnnes' is much sweeter and more obviously perfumed whereas there is more tension in the Parr cuvée. A human override on the terroir effect? Or perhaps just fruit from different parcels in the same vineyard?

It seems to me that not just here but all round the world, the line between serving wine and making or selling wine is becoming increasingly blurred. More and more sommeliers are getting into the wine business. Indeed, winning a sommelier competition seems to have become a licence to set up a wine business. Consider, as a mere taste of some of the more obvious examples, Frenchman Philippe Fauré-Brac, German Markus Del Monego, Italian Enrico Bernardo, and a host of leading Japanese sommeliers.

When we landed in California at the end of last June, everyone we saw was falling over themselves to tell us the hot news, that Paul Roberts was leaving the Keller food empire for the Harlan wine empire, to look after the allocation of Harlan's Bond wines, effectively doing what Don Weaver has been doing for years for The Harlan Estate. This move from solid to liquid was, we were told, all the rage in California.

The anti-social hours involved in the restaurant business may well be a factor in this drift of course. In Spain, where diners arguably linger longer than anywhere else, it can seem as though virtually all sommeliers with a certain reputation have gone into the wine business. Javier Gila, former sommelier at Madrid's Ritz, is now one of Lavinia's top buyers. Agustí Peris left El Bulli to become a roving consultant winemaker. César Cánovas, twice Spain's champion sommelier, is

running the new Monvònic wine showcase in Barcelona. Josep 'Pitu' Roca of Can Roca in Girona imports Germany's finest wines into Spain; doyen Custodio López-Zamarra of Zalacaín in Madrid is a partner in Todovino; Manel Pla, sommelier-owner of El Jardí de Granja Pla at Igualada near Barcelona, runs Spain's importer of growers' champagnes; while Alberto Fernández of Asturianos in Madrid not only imports Portuguese wines, he also makes Canopy Wines in the Méntrida DO west of Toledo. (I am indebted to my colleague and purple pager Víctor de la Serna for all these details, and accents.)

In Australia there is of course one very obvious example of this trend. Until recently Matt Skinner was probably the best-known sommelier in Britain thanks to his role as Jamie Oliver's 'wine man' at his restaurant Fifteen, countless tv appearances and a swelling literary output. But when Matt decamped back to his native Melbourne with his young family, what did he most want to do? Learn to make wine, and accordingly asked Phil Sexton of Giant Steps in the Yarra Valley if he would take him on. Sexton was sterner than expected about the need for total commitment apparently but still Skinner is engaged in making the leap from pouring wine into glasses to hosing it into tanks.

And of the new Sommeliers Australia organisation, Sophie Otten is already wine buyer for Melbourne's European Group, as well as being a wine writer and educator – a bit like Gérard Basset, award-winning sommelier and Master of Wine in Britain.

For us wine lovers, sommeliers can be our best friends. The best of them are on the front line. They know exactly who has just moved from one winery or domaine to another, acquired a particularly promising piece of land, invested in a new technique or technology. The very best have something to teach even those of us who spend our days immersed in wine. We owe them a lot, and must celebrate the fact that they are becoming increasingly skilled – just so long as they leave enough well-trained, equally knowledgeable and helpful successors in the restaurants they desert as they plunge into their new careers.