

Gary, the arch Vayniac

8 Nov 2008 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is a much longer version

Twenty-two years ago I was the first British journalist to write about an American wine critic called Robert M Parker Jr. Today I bring you a completely new American force in wine communication.

For someone so self-avowedly wedded to new media Gary Vaynerchuk was surprisingly difficult to contact. His shop window is WineLibrary TV, an online wine tasting show which splits the wine world into rabid 'Vayniacs' and disgusted detractors. I assumed that a quick email via the website would be all that was needed to work out how to meet up with him on a recent trip to New York. Not so. Like the thousand other emails he claims to receive (and respond to) each day, mine elicited an instruction to watch an online video urging me, inter alia, to "Hustle, because that's how you win."

I eventually received a reply from the 'Assistant to the Director of Operations', with an excited post script from Gary (still not giving his email address away) asking me to be on his show. This assistant and I were just working out when and how I might meet the wine evangelist of New Jersey when his personal publicist took over. Indeed it was she who witnessed our first encounter, taking careful notes of our conversation over [breakfast in Manhattan](#).

I was extremely impressed by this glamorous Australian and began to think that perhaps I should hire a personal publicist myself - until it took five email exchanges with her to work out how Gary was going to pick me up outside MoMA to drive me out to New Jersey to his 'recording studio,' a rather grubby table in the corner of his incredibly untidy office above the family wine store. Gary has ascended to the ranks of those who have others to make their calls for them via his having approached the talent agency CAA last year at the age of 31. He doubtless told them, as he told me (twice), "I'm a very interesting character" and persuaded them that, like Oprah and David Beckham, he belonged there.

"CAA pushed me to have a PR person," he explained matter of factly, adding. "They want me to be on tv, but I'm a very new media person, plus I'm very confident of my own brand building and marketing. I want to build up my fan base so if I do go into tv, it will be really big." Would any Englishman say that?

The Vaynerchuks emigrated from Belarus when Gary was three. His family, he constantly reiterates, is his guiding passion. He loves wine, but it's his entrepreneurial spirit rather than wine itself that has driven him to the current point of being watched by up to 90,000 viewers on winelibrary.tv. "It's in the DNA," he told me disarmingly as we drove through the leafy suburbs. "By the time I was six I had *franchised* lemonade stands."

His schtick, a word I have never used before and cannot imagine ever using again but one that seems utterly appropriate in this case, is to present wine and his enthusiasm for it very specifically to his generation and younger. His enthusiasm for the New York Jets plays a major part, as do tasting similes such as 'Big League Chew' (a bubblegum), 'milkshake' and 'baseball glove'. In fact if the minimum legal drinking age in the US were ever to be reduced to below 21, he would probably be the single greatest beneficiary. He also says, perhaps appealing to my maternal instinct, that his favourite emails are those that say things like 'now that I've gotten into wine with your show, I've started to form a relationship with my dad'. "You feel like you're touching people, you know?", says Vaynerchuk.

Reading the few profiles of him that there have been in the American press, I can see that he tells each interviewer what they want to hear, but I'm sure he does this purely instinctively, so innate is his salesmanship. I remarked over our breakfast, for instance, that I wished I had about one per cent of his commercial instinct - one per cent would probably be enough - to devote to my own website. He was suddenly energised and rattled off all sorts of suggestions involving ads (which for eight years I have resisted), 'monetising' and 'retail opportunities' Brash is a compliment in Gary's book - which, incidentally, he published last April. "Yeah, I leveraged new media to get it in the top 25 on Amazon." But he freely admits that the book was more for his immigrant parents. It is an audience that really turns him on.

When we met he was initially rather low key, with the same naturally morose expression as his 55 year-old father Sasha - who was signing paychecks with distaste when I met him at the liquor store he renamed The Wine Library and has handsomely rebuilt since Gary joined him in 1998. (A younger son is running an online T-shirt search business with Gary and Gary's wife Lizzie while at college in Boston.) But when over breakfast I took out my pocket video camera to record a few words, Gary perked up as though he had drunk three espressos in place of the weak tea he had taken with his bagel and lox.

He is clearly particularly thrilled that he is starting to be asked by the likes of Pepsi and Ford to advise their executives on this new Web 2.0 thingy (an opportunity that will presumably vanish soon, as his generation ascends to the boardroom). I asked him to outline what he was doing that particular day. "At 11 I have an interview with a blog. At 12 I'll tape the show, then I'll write an email to my top clients about this insane Tokaji I had two nights ago that's just \$38. No I can't remember the name. Then I have a meeting at Madison Square Garden because they want me to host some private wine events for their top clients. Sports fans who love wine – that's my real house! 6.30 is Pepsi – new media consulting. 9pm I'm at the Landmark – they have a humungous list of half bottles, by the way – with the owners of City Winery, the new custom crush facility in town. I don't know what they're going to propose to me. But I'm a very powerful brand..."

His hyperactive on-screen delivery and what he calls "that possibly obnoxious element in me" are presumably designed to liven up his potentially boring tv routine of tasting three wines from his shelves, but have earned him the scorn of some wine purists. Rival wine retailers grumble about his store's wafer-thin margins and aggressive sales tactics. Charged with the conflict of interest involved in supposedly providing objective reviews of his own store's wares, he claims that he now only discusses wines of which he has low stocks, which seems difficult to reconcile with that entrepreneurial DNA of his. "Toughest is reviewing a wine made by someone I know, or bought huge quantities of," he concedes.

When I mentioned on my website that I had accepted Gary's invitation to appear on his show (see it [here](#)) there were some howls of protest. ("The worst thing Jancis can do is legitimize this clown", said one poster on my forum.) But in fact it was hugely enjoyable. Gary's taste in wine coincides quite remarkably with my own. We both love to introduce underrated wines to independently minded wine drinkers. "The funny thing about me is that I'm so over the top personality-wise, yet on my palate...Very few people prefer Chinon to Syrah and Cab, but I do." He does admit however that his championing of, say, Tannat or Pecorino is also driven by the need for exclusive lines when you're selling on price.

"When I was 16 I was already working out how I could offer Dom Pérignon cheaper than anyone else," he said when I asked about his schooling. "I'm not the academic type. The first book I ever read was Hugh Johnson's. When I started out [on the web back in 1997 at the age of 22] I knew there'd be a lot of people who wouldn't like what I do, but I also knew that, give me a few years and this whole market will thank me, because no-one is going to create as many wine drinkers as I have." He has a point.