New York's Mr Fixit

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The wine life of Peter Max (MF) Sichel of New York had always seemed to me quite interesting enough to warrant an article on these pages, but that was before we sat down to the dinner over which I was to interview him. He almost visibly licked his lips as he began, “We must start in 1960 when I had just left the CIA. I left because the CIA did things I didn’t like, such as send people into the Ukraine to work in fabricated resistance groups. They were potentially being sent to their deaths. I made a huge fuss.” This is rather more exciting than most wine trade resumés.

From top CIA positions in Berlin, Washington and Hong Kong, via building Blue Nun into a three million case brand, to being Mr Fixit in the international wine business is quite a trajectory. “Didn’t the wine world seem rather footling after the CIA?” I asked. “It was a good antidote,” he said, with his lisp, still detectable German accent and a grin that is disconcertingly boyish in an 86-year-old. “In the intelligence business people never have grown up. With the wine business, I was able to look at it from the outside. My great advantage was that I didn’t know anything about it.”

But Sichel was born with wine in his veins. He may have been educated at the English public school Stowe, but he was born in Mainz, where his great grandfather had established H Sichel Söhne as both wine producer and importer with three of his sons in 1857. The company flourished so definitively that wine Importing branches of the family firm were set up in London and Bordeaux. “My father always said that no one understood the extent to which the wine trade was revolutionised between 1870 and 1914, largely because of the steam engine and the creation of the middle class.

“We wanted a Sichel to run each of the branches but ran out of sons. A daughter married a Dane who changed his name to Sichel and looked after the business in Bordeaux. During the first world war we had representatives on both sides.” At the start of the second world war Peter Max Sichel was just starting an apprenticeship with the Bordeaux branch of the family when he found himself interned. “People would say, ‘Peter, you’re Jewish and German. No-one likes you’,” he smiled. He managed to make his way to the United States via Spain and his work running intelligence agents in Germany during the war eventually earned him a US Distinguished Intelligence Medal.

Today it is the four sons of the late Peter Allan Sichel, of the French branch, who run the highly successful Bordeaux négociant Maison Sichel in France (Peter Allan's son Allan is seen above between Peter Max and his wife when PMS was awarded the Ordre du Mérite Agricole in Bordeaux). But in 1960 in New York it was a small wine importer run by a distant cousin Charles Sichel from whom Peter Max Sichel took over. “He loved sales and had 130 different items selling a total of 25,000 cases a year, of which the Blue Nun range of eight lines represented 8,000 cases. I wasn’t interested in selling. I was interesting in marketing - I wanted to create something.

“I decided we’d never conquer the US market with a little import company. In 1960 the US wine business was extremely corrupt. There was lots of money under the table, corks bought back and so forth, so I dissolved the Sichel Import Company and did a deal with Schieffelin [one of the biggest drinks companies then]. Even my distant cousin Walter [Walter Sichel headed the British wine importers Sichel at the time] thought I was doing the wrong thing, but I still had the courage of youth then.

“What people forget is that *the* great year for the American wine business was 1959. It was a great vintage [in Bordeaux] – much easier to like than the 1961 – and, most importantly, for the first time it figured in the press. Table wine sales overtook those of fortified wine; this was the moment that Americans discovered wine. California wine didn’t figure at that time.”

So Peter Max set about refining Blue Nun into a single, perfectly positioned product, a Liebfraumilch whose blandness seemed just the ticket for the hundreds of thousands of new wine drinkers, not just in the US but also in the UK. Blue Nun was so successful that an army of imitations was to follow, all medium dry German blends based on the neutral but prolific Müller Thurgau grape aimed expressly at the export markets that grew so rapidly in the late 20th century. Sales of Blue Nun peaked in the early 1980s when wine drinkers began to seek out drier wines, typically labelled with the name of an international grape variety. Peter Max became chairman of the German company around this time (“we had to ensure we could supply the damned thing”) and engineered the sale of part of Schieffelin to LVMH, with whom he retains close

links. (I mentioned an Australian wine company that was looking for a new owner over dinner. Sichel assured me he would make the necessary enquiries within LVMH. “They’re wonderful people – not petty.”)

Exceptionally well-connected, Sichel has brokered many a deal within the international wine business, but the one that has probably brought him most personal relief was concluded in 2006 when he managed to sell the decidedly modest Bordeaux Cru Bourgeois Château Fourcas-Hosten of Listrac-Médoc, which he had acquired with some friends in 1971 (just before Bordeaux’s biggest crisis ever), to the family behind the French luxury brand Hermès. They could probably have afforded one of the many more glamorous properties on the market but, whatever his protests, I suspect Peter M F Sichel is an unparalleled salesman. “We spent many years pouring money into it,” he explained. “We had fun and I enjoyed being a grand seigneur, but one of my partners suddenly died, and we could see that Bordeaux was going to be in trouble for some time.”

The Blue Nun brand had been sold long since, in 1995, to the German firm Langguth. “Sales had stopped growing. Walter died. And I lost interest because I knew that the brand could never be recreated.”

Nowadays Peter Max, part of the fabric of the American wine business and venerated as a *Zeitzeuge* (witness to history) in Germany, concentrates on voluntary positions in good old Park Avenue tradition. “Anyone who wants to sell their wines in the US comes to Peter,” sighed Stella, his glamorous Greek wife of 47 years and a Riesling fan. A past president of the Metropolitan Opera Club, he is particularly keen on the World Monuments Fund, the private organisation devoted to preserving architectural heritage sites, of which he is a trustee. He was able to lecture me at some length on, for example, Angkor, while complaining that his squab was no fun because there were no bones. He thought the Gevrey-Chambertin pretty good though.

The majority of his honorary positions are wine-related, however. So what does he think of wine today?“There is too much snobbishness,” he declares, quick as a flash. “People drink labels rather than wine”, which is a little rich from someone whose fortune was made by selling Blue Nun.

But I know exactly what he means and have always admired his utterly unsnobbish personal demeanour. “I like offbeat wines. When I found out my kids [he has three daughters, one in the Napa Valley wine business] were paying $20-30 a bottle for wine, I was shocked. They could easily find something decent for less than $10. But Americans are too much afraid of doing the wrong thing.”