

Kermit takes to the mike

18 Sep 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

Kermit Lynch is regarded with something approaching awe by American wine lovers. He has spent four decades introducing them to hand-picked wines off the beaten track via a keen grasp of commerce and newsletters lively enough to have been collated into a handsome hardback called *Inspiring Thirst*. He inspires particular respect with wine lovers for his early insistence on shipping only in temperature-controlled containers.

This weekend, however, sees him return to his initial calling as a rock singer, with the release of his very own album of soft rock, folk and blues called *Man's Temptation*. 'It was quite a thrill to get a record contract at 67. When I read it I thought, wow, I'm really something', he told me last month over a glass of nervy Kermit Lynch 2008 Côtes du Rhône Blanc on the terrace of his Provençal eyrie.

In the heady, heavy days of 1968 Berkeley (see picture), he was writing songs, singing in a band - and presumably dreaming of a record contract, whenever he was compos mentis enough to form such thoughts. 'The drug thing was pretty heavy in those years', he admitted. 'I felt jinxed about drummers. I'd been through so many, and lost them all through either drugs or not being able to play correctly.' His only source of income then was what he made from desultorily making hippie bags out of oriental rug scraps. 'Someone was crazy enough to buy the business even though there was really nothing to sell except an ancient sewing machine, but they actually gave me money for it.' The proceeds paid for Kermit's first trip to Europe, which, just as it did for his friend Alice Waters of Chez Panisse and for countless other gastronomically sensitive Americans from Julia Child to Robert Parker, lit the flame.

'So when I got back I thought I'd turn my wine hobby into a little job. But in 1972 there was a massive crisis in wine. Things were deader than they are today, which is saying something, so I borrowed some money from my girlfriend and got a shop. It was only open four days a week and five hours a day because I intended to get another band together. It wasn't because I had any vision, it just clicked straight away. People liked my stuff. So I left music behind, I really did. I didn't sing for years. I gave up song writing and just rode that wine wave.'

He introduced such producers as de Villaine, Coche-Dury and J L Chave to the United States (when I checked this list with him he added Zind Humbrecht, Hubert de Montille, Raveneau, Joguey, Clape and Vieux Télégraphe) - and most famously embedded himself into Provençal life via his friendships with the fastidious cook and writer Richard Olney and his friends the Peyrauds at Domaine Tempier in Bandol. The upshot was that from 1986 he and his growing family have spent half the year in a house up a precipitous track with a view over the wooded hills of the Var of pines, cypresses and a few terraces of ancient vines that make their way into Tempier's La Migoua bottling.

It was a particularly bibulous dinner here in 2005 with the the recording artist Boz Scaggs, who had become friendly with Lynch through his wine business, that opened the door to Kermit's new career. As Scaggs wrote in the sleeve note of a first, privately published CD *Quicksand Blues*, 'The next day Kermit seemed certain I had offered to gather some top musical talent in my recording studio in order to...guess what? You could call this the result of that well-aged nightcap we shared in Provence.' Says Lynch, 'He got me back into it all again. I loved that studio experience with real professional musicians. I got hooked on it.'

Lynch was thrilled to meet the acclaimed drummer Ricky Fataar, who performed on Lynch's recording and went on to produce this new commercial album. 'I hadn't sung in public in 35 years and didn't want to sing on that first CD, but I wasn't happy with the way the hired singers did a couple of the songs. I was kinda surprised when people hearing it didn't laugh or anything. I decided I'd go to Nashville, hire some top players - I can afford it - and sing my own vocals.' It was through someone else he met through wine that he made contact with the record company, Dualtone. He is planning several evenings with music and wine around the country to launch the CD and on 7 Oct, Lynch is flying his band in to San Francisco for an exceptional live concert to launch *Man's Temptation* in San Francisco. 'I'll see how I like it,' he says coolly.

You must be paying less attention to wine?, I suggest. 'I wish I could say that', he laughed ruefully. 'You could have said that up until the crisis hit. I quit travelling to promote my wines years ago but now I have to do it again - dinners, tastings, book signings. And you know what? I'm enjoying it. I've been through some rough spots. There were five really good liquor stores in Berkeley when I opened. None survived. It's funny, it's kind of a chance to strengthen my position

because most distributors won't buy any wine at the moment, and that's exactly what you shouldn't do in these circumstances.

'My strategy was that I immediately hired people instead of firing them. I keep bringing in new stock because people want something new. I've just found a good new white burgundy producer [Martelet de Cherisey] which is not easy. You gotta stimulate people to wanna buy - not just have the same stock and then reduce it more and more. But I don't take on new wines if I can't get exclusivity. It's why I don't do Bordeaux. I worked real hard for a time and found Sociando Mallet, Haut-Marbuzet, Conseillante, Dominique... and the next thing I know the importer in the next town is importing them and it comes down to price. I hate that. The way I grew was not to change my taste. I added domaines, small artisanal wineries, that I really liked myself.

I suggested that more people share his slightly quirky taste in wine than, say, 10 years ago. 'Oh, absolutely. I think we have two kinds of wine markets today. One of them is what I like to call the pop wines. I like pop music, music made to appeal to the popular taste. You've got your big oaky monsters trying to get 100 points. Then you have a winemaker trying to express his idea of what beauty is. Yeah, the pendulum has really swung back, even though the oenologists are hard to beat and say things like "if you don't sterile filter this, I wash my hands of you." But for instance, a year ago we ran a sampler case of low alcohol wine. The response was enormous. I was shocked. There's a real backlash to those oaky monsters going on.'

Although he fully acknowledges the role critic Robert Parker has played in detonating America's current love affair with wine, he is rare among US wine merchants in that he doesn't use points to help sell his wares. 'I usually hire people with no experience. I want to form them. And it's much easier to hire people now - people who love what I do.' I observed that if he spends half the year 6,000 miles from his store, he must have some very good staff. He gave me one of his impish smiles and said, 'Some people say I'm as good at picking staff as I am at picking wines'.

The hand-crafted wines that Lynch imports, retails and wholesales (a rare trick in the US wine trade) are 90% French and 10% Italian. I asked him about non-European wine. 'I have some old California Cabernets in my cellar which amaze me. A Ridge Monte Bello 1975 and 1977 for instance that were in perfect condition and just 11.7% alcohol. They were better than most Bordeaux of those years. Today in California a wine as weak as that would probably be poured down the drain, although California wineries are at last starting to talk about reducing alcohol levels.

'But I'm not just pro low alcohol. I bought Pallières in Gigondas where the wine is routinely 14-15% yet it has elegance to it. It's not a palate buster. There are times when I want a big wine. What I hate is that all wines are expected to be high alcohol. The points system can seem crazy, mind you. A lousy Montrachet is almost always in low 90s while the very best Muscadet will never be higher than then high 80s. It doesn't make any sense. But,' he shook himself, remembering his new persona, 'we're talking about wine too much.'

A third CD is already recorded, mixed and mastered, apparently. Its fate will be decided by what happens to the second. 'I guess I'd like to get to where I've sold enough to pay for them. But I'm not worrying about that. I'm doing it because I love it. Some people rent a yacht. For me it's going to Nashville and recording.' His wife the photographer Gail Skoff is apparently his biggest fan.

'When buying wine, I always had in mind, would I take a bottle of this to Richard [Olney]? He had East Coast experience with great bordeaux and burgundy and a clear aesthetic.' Olney apparently gave Kermit a hard time over his cooking. 'I'd do the shopping,' explains Lynch.

What has made him proudest? 'I think this CD. I never imagined I would come up with something I would like so much. I've received awards and things in the wine business and maybe I take it a bit for granted. But this music....Does that sound crass?

'Wait - there's another thing. I had no training in business, in fact I rarely had a job. Once I'd left home I tried to get by without working. That I made wine work as a business, that surprised me and I'm proud of that. '

In his books, which include the much-loved classic *Adventures on the Wine Route*, which even sold well in French ('it meant I got lots more samples from obscure French growers'), he makes much of his lack of facility with the French language. (His children, who are becoming increasingly interested in wine, are bilingual.) 'The best place to learn a language is on the pillow. I learned my French in cellars, where it's fine. With the plumber it's still pretty terrible.'

While waiting in the village car park for him to come and guide me up the hairpin bends to his house, I had tweeted that I was about to interview him and wondered whether anyone had any questions for him. Although a self-confessed technophobe, he was obviously tickled by this idea and went off through the beaded curtain into the house to find out from Gail their wireless password, having memorised the term. He came back worrying, 'what if there are no questions?'

He need not have worried. There were at least half a dozen including the most obvious. Where on earth did his name come from? From the most likely source possible. His father. And it's apparently a Celtic word meaning, most appropriately, free man.