'Wine porn of the highest order'

11 Feb 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

At the beginning of the year, DrVino.com, one of America's more renowned wine blogs asked its 65,000 monthly visitors to vote for Wine Person of the Decade, 'the wine person who most epitomizes the noughties'. In second place was hyperactive online marketeer Gary Vaynerchuk, profiled here in 2008. But in first place was self-deprecating Eric LeVine of Seattle, a self-confessed geek. It is no overstatement to say that his online cellar management system CellarTracker has revolutionised the worlds of wine communication and appreciation.

Today CellarTracker has 500,000 visitors a month in peak wine drinking periods and 47,000 active users, of whom 11,000 made a voluntary annual donation averaging $40 last year.These users add details of their own wine collections to CellarTracker's vast inventory of wines and tasting notes in cyberspace. The millionth wine review was added last August and this new toy for wine lovers continues to expand exponentially, providing an unparalleled database of consumer opinion about hundreds of thousands of different wines.Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of this 'deep, powerful, sticky tool' (Eric's words, not mine) is that the entire system and its users are managed exclusively by this 40 year-old obsessive and the hefty Dell that accompanies him everywhere.

I caught up with him just after he'd arrived on his first trip to London since he seized the Princess Elizabeth Challenge Cup, as cox, from Hampton School at Henley in 1987. I could virtually chart what he had done since landing by monitoring his responses to users' queries on CellarTracker that morning. As he waited for me in the lobby of the Marriott in which his Microsoft wife's conference was taking place, he was busy writing code for the new version of his site he is launching at the end of this month.As he admits about the novel source of oenophilic fun he has created, 'I'm a database functionality guy. When I'm awake I'm largely working on it.'

He has had a keyboard at his fingertips ever since 1984 when he spent his bar mitzvah money on one of the original Macintoshes, explaining, 'it was the only thing I could ever do endlessly that felt like play, not work.' He grew up near Boston and graduated from Harvard with a degree in history in 1991. His Phi Beta Kappa father was mortified that his only son, the last one carrying the family name in which a forebear had so presciently capitalised the V, preferred technology to law, investment banking or business school, although 'he finally got it in the '90s', according to Eric. Latterly he suffered from speech aphasia and one of the last things his son heard him ever breathe, in January 2007, was '27,000'. Eric worked out later that this was a reference to the number of CellarTracker users there were at the time. LeVine Senior died last year, on the same day that the millionth wine review was logged.

By early 1992 LeVine had moved to Seattle and signed up to the gospel according to Microsoft. He married a fellow employee and for a good 10-year stretch admits that he was teased for 'having a three-track mind: Microsoft, mountain biking and Suzi. I was always very driven.'

It was the biking that led, indirectly, to that huge communal cellar in cyberspace. (He claims to feel rather ashamed of the size of his own extensive personal physical collection of 23,000 bottles, kept in carefully designed and maintained cellars. [Late extra: Eric tells me that I misheard and in fact his collection is only 3,000 bottles. My apologies.])

In 1999, before their two children were born, Eric and Suzi took a biking trip around Tuscany and on their second night a local wine merchant led a tasting that was to change the course of wine history. It was designed to illustrate the difference between Chianti Classico, Chianti Classico Riserva, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, and Brunello di Montalcino – same grape, different wines. Eric, until then a wine agnostic thoroughly intimidated by the subject's apparent complexity, was 'blown away'.

Back home he became more and more besotted by the subject and its many attributes, some sensory and sensual, but many of them intellectual and – joy of joys - quantifiable and sortable. By 2003 he had amassed the beginnings of his wine collection and wanted to keep track of it. By that stage a wide range of wine software was already available, typically for desktops and PDAs, but much of it had been designed by geeks without enough wine knowledge, or wine lovers unaware of many current and, just as important, forthcoming technological possibilities.

Eric was the perfect person at the perfect time, just as Americans were falling in love with fine wine. One of the first things he did during an eight-week sabbatical in early 2003 was create a rudimentary cellar-management system for himself. As

someone who, because of his work, had to juggle between five different computers, he says ‘I knew it was right to make it web-based’ so that it could be accessed anywhere, anytime and, he came to realise, by anyone.

Almost by chance, he showed the fruits of his labours to two friends with a much more serious wine collecting habit than his own and was amazed when they said they too wanted to use his system. But it took them a full year to enter all their wines because they had no system in the first place. Then he showed it to another two friends who already had their wine collections entered on Excel spreadsheets. ‘I got them on to my site in a couple days. We found we were glued to what the others had taken out of their cellar the night before and what tasting notes they had written about the wines. It quickly became apparent that if three people could get something out of this, so could 300, 3,000 or three million. The community aspect of it took me by surprise.’

By April 2004 he decided to ‘throw it out on the web for everyone and see what happened. It soon got to the point that two nights a week I was staying up all night writing code. At Microsoft I was more on the management side so it was fun for me to roll up my sleeves and do it all myself.’ Eric at this stage was an active poster on America’s most visited wine bulletin board, that of erobertparker.com, which helped attract the attention of wine lovers to this new tool. And the fact that members’ donations are voluntary (today a minimum of $10 a year is suggested and people tend to donate according to the size of their wine collections) helped numbers of users to grow rapidly.

Fans love it. Tobias Treppenhauer, 34, a wine blogger in advertising in Germany observes, ‘since CellarTracker is community-driven, it amalgamates the knowledge and passion of thousands of wine aficionados. This just wouldn't have been possible in pre-web times. Another very positive thing is that a lot of younger people are attracted by these kind of web tools. Since wine still has a rather old and stodgy image (at least in Germany), I think CT does a lot to change this image for the better. Younger people learn that wine is not just something to drink with your grandpa in front of a fireplace, or simply alcohol to get drunk.’

And as London lawyer François Feuillat points out, ‘First of all, it is like an old-fashioned cellar book, only more user-friendly. Secondly, you can enter drinking windows (when you think the wine will become drinkable, and the date by which you think you need to have finished it before it goes off). So you can get the system to tell you what wine you really need to drink before it's over the hill.’

In November 2004 an ex-banker Steve Bachmann gathered enough backing to found Vinfolio in San Francisco, one of whose many functions is a cellar-management system along the lines of CellarTracker called VinCellar. VinCellar is much more beautiful than CellarTracker (no-one could accuse LeVine of having wasted too much time on aesthetics when building CellarTracker) but originally cost $20 a month. VinCellar is now free, and includes some auction data, which users have to pay for on CellarTracker, and yet the unadorned but super-functional CellarTracker has enjoyed seven to 10 times the take-up of VinCellar.

These two very different outfits have since been joined by the likes of Snooth.com, another highly capitalised venture that is better at search engine optimisation and structure than meaty content; Cork’d, acquired by Gary Vaynerchuk in 2007; the technically interesting Adegga based in Portugal; and myriad others including desktop-based systems and those requiring their own hardware, of which Cellar! is probably the most successful. But CellarTracker is way out in front in terms of popularity and influence. Perhaps many wine collectors have already entered their wine data on CellarTracker and are unwilling to undertake the not inconsiderable task of entering all those bottles into another database. What distinguishes Eric LeVine is his level of consumer service. He answers all queries himself and is always anxious to stress that CellarTracker is not about him, but about its devoted community of users. He admits, however, that he has enjoyed the huge advantage of being the first into this field.

Wine enthusiasts the world over now have access to a bank of wine reviews written by fellow wine lovers which completely bypasses the opinions of professional wine commentators such as Robert Parker (and me) that were once handed down from on high but now merely complement the arguably more democratic, if less disciplined, views of consumers. And of course systems such as CellarTracker allow collectors infinite opportunities to rate, value, plan, categorise and reorganise their virtual cellars. ’People really get addicted to it', Eric observes, with delight but not a little surprise.

Thomas De Waen, 31, a London-based wine enthusiast who works in private equity, admits ‘I log in to the site every day, just to check whether there are any new community tasting notes of wines I own. This is wine-porn of the highest order. It allows me to congratulate myself every day on my impeccable taste (I only look at positive notes) and, also, to feel excited about drinking the wine in the future! It also keeps you posted on how the wines are evolving, which is a real plus.’

But you don't have to have much of a cellar to get a kick out of tracking it. American 'retired airline pilot and aspiring wine geek' Dennis Callahan, 61, told me, 'CellarTracker has been a game changing discovery for me. Prior to using it I had a cellar of around 20 bottles and felt somewhat lost trying to make both buying and drinking decisions. Using CellarTracker my cellar has grown to over 700 bottles and I feel much surer in choosing which wines to buy and determining appropriate drinking windows. The huge database of wines and tasters and integrated professional reviews make for a resource without peer. Eric has also been extremely fair in pricing. Wine lovers just starting out can get free tracking until they feel they need some of the more advanced tools available or their cellar becomes big enough to need the added benefits of a paid subscription.'

Last year, CellarTracker and Vinfolio, the two very different and competing West Coast outfits, announced an alliance that took the wine world by surprise. Marketplace is an online trading platform whereby Cellartracker's and VinCellar's members can trade wine between themselves, the transactions being administered by Vinfolio and a commission taken by whichever of the cellar management systems is involved.According to Eric however, his major income stream comes from the voluntary donations rather than Marketplace commissions. They have apparently been particularly important to him over the last year. He was a Madoff victim.

Any minute now he is about to launch an entirely new design that, at last, does not look like a Microsoft employee's tool kit, but has soft user-friendly edges, a raft of new capabilities, and even a new name, GrapeStories. He intends to run the two sites in parallel for the months it will take to iron out the glitches. As an observer of the tech scene, he has seen too many operators fall flat on their interfaces by triumphalist but over-optimistic product launches.

Although nearly 70% of CellarTracker's active members are based in the US, 5% in Canada, and 4% in the UK, Eric has noticed that the number of tasting notes written in languages other than English is rising rapidly. He realises that he will have to start tagging the languages, and admits to being 'driven nuts' by users clamouring for valuations in currencies other than US dollars. 'That'll be done some time in the second half of this year and the last area to flesh out the site will be to have local languages. A little deeper tech work will be needed to enable that.' He looks curiously excited at the prospect of yet more coding. He really does love the tech work. He and Suzi apparently dine with their computers on the table. Their four-year-old daughter already has a Barbie laptop.

It sounds as though he will never run out of fine-tuning opportunities. Christian Zeitler, a private wine collector from Geneva, believes, 'There is a lot of room for improvement, although the software is fine for my needs as it is now. In the future, the geek in me would maybe add a tool to throw up wines that need to be drunk now, calculate the need of new purchases based on my previous consumption patterns, suggest websites where I can buy said wines, etc, etc. The web 2.0 provides countless "new ways" to make use of my data that I put into CellarTracker.'

As I know to my cost, these sort of refinements would be much more painful financially for us non-geek professional wine writers. And besides, even Eric admits that fitting something as fluid as wine and the pleasure it gives into such a rigid matrix as a cellar management system is not for everyone.He admits, 'it appeals only to a subset of collectors. Some people like surprising themselves with what they find in their cellars.'But I realised some time ago that I am probably in a minority (the great majority of visitors to all wine websites are male). Many of the members of my own website are clearly enthralled by CellarTracker so, late last year, I gave in to Eric's and Steve's blandishments and, without any money changing hands, integrated JancisRobinson.com's database of more than 40,000 tasting notes with those of CellarTracker, and VinCellar, as announced here, so that our mutual members can now see my reviews alongside all the others on a particular wine that have been written by 'the community'.

Other professional wine writers had already made this leap, among them such high-profile American wine writers as Stephen Tanzer and Allen Meadows (Burghound), but LeVine and Bachmann would really, really like to see the two most powerful sources of American wine punditry, Robert Parker and *Wine Spectator*, follow in our footsteps. LeVine at least has had many a meeting with Parker's techno-team and one with the *Spectator*'s publisher Marvin Shanken, who grilled him in apparently impressive detail (even though the *Spectator* is yet to make a single reference of its own to CellarTracker), but he has yet to hook either of these big fish.

'The whole topic frustrates me', he sighed. 'Integration would be a really simple thing that we could do in a couple of weeks that would benefit both our sets of customers. I could be a useful on-ramp, exposing people to these professionals' wine reviews.'

Instead, Parker has excited the ire of some of his subscribers by promising his own cellar-management system, My Wines, since 2006 but is yet to launch it. I get the impression that LeVine knows the software development pitfalls so well that he is convinced that this sort of thing should be left to the specialists: him or his Vinfolio counterpart, which, until recently anyway, comprised quite a considerable team.

Last month, the dramatic contrast between LeVine's one-man band and Vinfolio's substantial, venture-capitalised crew

came to a head. On Sunday 17 Jan, soon after the brother of American wine writer Michael Steinberger reported on the erobertparker bulletin board that a MarketPlace cheque from Vinfolio had bounced, Steve Bachmann had to announce that Vinfolio had run out of money. New funding is currently being sought for Vinfolio.

So, are we professional wine commentators redundant? Clearly, I do not believe so. We can offer context and probably more experience than the average CellarTracker user. As Mike Convey, Hong Kong wine importer, puts it, ‘‘I take the user-contributed reviews with a pinch of salt’. Christian Zeitler thinks ‘Critics still have a role (especially en primeur), but overall their power will come down which should be a good thing.’

Certainly the fact that wine buyers now have access to many more opinions, will, with any luck, iron out the more dramatic peaks in demand that we have seen over the last 20 years.There is already a CellarTracker I-phone app, Cor.kz, but the sheer number of opinions amassed on it makes it seem unlikely that we will see the sort of acquisition fever that has characterised the era of the wine guru.

Meanwhile, Eric LeVine continues to delight his users with the detail of what he offers. Does he really not want to hire or sell? He claims ‘it would be nice to have a couple of employees and then I could turn off for a couple of weeks and take a vacation', but I sense he is no hurry. He admits, ’most people start with a business plan but I’m more of a product guy. I seem to have backed my way into having built this company. People are always asking me about my exit strategy, and I’ve been approached a few times, but I always freaked out in the end.

'I’m certainly aware there is potentially significant value to what I’ve built, but when I think about it, it gets me into a weird space. I find the more I focus on the users the happier I am.’

Others have built similar consumer-focused review sites. VacationSpot was taken over by Expedia. Amazon acquired the Digital Photography Review site from the couple who set it up, and Google would dearly love to get their hands on the much more substantial Yelp. But Eric really does seem reluctant to let go. It must be the wine.