

Philippe Melka on the New World

Philippe Melka's first job in the wine business was as an enologist with the Delmas family at Château Haut-Brion in Bordeaux. He later moved to the Right Bank, where he joined Christian Moueix at Etablissements JP Moueix.

At Moueix, they were most traditional in terms of the winemaking approach, with their focus completely on terroir; they'd almost never talk about winemaking techniques but nearly all discussions fell to questions about soil and microclimate. I learned the importance of respecting the tradition. If you asked, 'Why do you do it this way?' you'd get the same answer: 'It's the way we've done it for many years.' You had to come to an understanding of the answers by yourself. Learning had to be earned.

In 1991, Christian brought me over to work at Dominus. In many ways it was the opposite of France. When you're in a young winemaking country you feel like you have permission to question every action.

I was coming from the tradition that there was a nobility to wine, that the product was very civilized, that you bring to the winemaking the feeling that this has been made for hundreds of years. And when I came to the States

that feeling of civilization was no longer the only direction, but you could go in multiple directions. The wines seemed like this to me at the beginning, like an untamed horse. These were fundamentally different flavors, very different from Europe.

I will say that the one word that California brought to mind was energy. There was a huge excitement here, something I never felt when I was in France.

I remember the first great wine from California that I had was the Dalla Valle 1991 Maya [made by Heidi Peterson Barrett]. I discovered what hillsides in California could mean for wine. In Bordeaux, and at Dominus, it's flat. To taste the slope in the wine, the structure, the mouthfeel—that was something new for me, a very pure reflection of California.

Later I worked with Michel Rolland—at Quintessa and Bryant Family in 2002. Michel really started to get winemakers to push the edges in California. I liked working with

Michel because he was not afraid of everything. He pushed at every edge, with harvest timing, maceration timing, temperature of maceration; he aged wines longer in barrel.

I was looking closely at what Helen Turley and Heidi Peterson were doing, trying to understand different facets of their [consulting] businesses but also examining the type of wines they were making. Why they were so successful? Were they really talented, or were they just lucky? What were the specific winemaking techniques that made these wines different? It was always easy to see where Helen had worked in the cellar. She worked with some very good sites, but whenever she took over projects she always worked with the same equipment—the same bar-



rels, the same tank fermenters. The same protocols were in place when she left no matter where she was. She was very precise: 100 percent Taransaud barrels, special tanks for a quick maceration—open top, which was unusual for cabernet.

Heidi was very different. There was no rigidity in her thinking. I think she was much more traditional, starting with basic Davis protocols, focusing on the chemistry of the wine and its stability. But within this she could get very creative. ■

Paul Hobbs on Mondavi and Other Mentors

Paul Hobbs completed a master's thesis on white oak with Vernon Singleton at UC Davis, then worked with Robert Mondavi for seven years. He recalls Mondavi's personality, his inclusiveness, his inquisitiveness.

"Whenever we interacted it was always dynamic, open, engaging. He was interested in lifelong learning and exploring the whys of things. He was looking for a deep understanding of science as well as the art.

"Zelma Long was there at the time. She interviewed me and I begged to get a job. Mondavi was the only winery I wanted to work with, the only winery doing the research to satisfy my intellectual approach to wine. The environment was terrific, an exciting think tank. We were tasting wines from around the world once or

twice a week. These were in-depth tastings with Tim and, from time to time, Mr. Mondavi, Charles Thomas (now at Quintessa), Genevieve Janssens and others, like Helen Turley. I started the year Helen Turley started. She gave notice almost right away—and I remember the buzz it created to have her leave."

Hobbs recalls some of the research the team conducted on bungs, hoses, sulfur and on the maintenance of empty barrels; he believes the techniques developed to maintain barrels are now the industry standard worldwide.

Hobbs served for two years as consulting winemaker to Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, where, he says, "Warren Winiarski mostly wanted just to talk about stuff, to sit around the table and have theoretical conversations about phenolics, oxidation, whatever was on his mind. That was a huge high for me."

He considers David Ramey to be the most brilliant winemaker he knows. "I have a huge admiration for his approach, particularly with whites. He's refreshing and articulate." ■

