

Château California

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By Nicholas Lander

As the waiter cleared away an excellent first course of house cured salt cod with oyster tartare at Piperade restaurant in San Francisco, Gerald Hirigoyen, its Basque chef/proprietor, walked across from the bar to talk to my guest, Martine Saunier.

“Look, Martine,” he said, “there’s a bottle of your wine going to the next table where those three young women are sitting. And there’s another one on the table just behind you.”

For the past 30 years, Saunier, president of Martine’s Wines Inc, based just across the bay in San Rafael, has been responsible for introducing American restaurant-goers to some of the best French wines.

Born in Paris, Saunier first came to California in 1963, while working in public relations. She met and fell in love with a Californian radiologist, returning the next year to marry him and settle in Mill Valley. But she missed her beloved Burgundy wines.

She explained that, as a girl, “we spent every summer with my aunt in Burgundy and in those days the children were allowed to help as much as they liked in the vineyards. I adored everything about the winemaking process.”

Disappointed by the Pinot Noirs being made in California, Saunier went to Napa to consult the late André Tchelistcheff, then the doyen of winemakers.

“He told me that if I really wanted to enjoy these wines I had to go back to France and bring them over myself. That was the impetus to start my new career,” she said.

After a couple of false starts in business – and the end of her marriage – Saunier decided to go it alone, using her house as collateral for a bank loan.

She hired a VW in Amsterdam and began a tour of the French vineyards from Alsace southwards.



Martine Saunier at Piperade in San Francisco

At lunch in a small café in Provence, the waitress directed her to the Châteauneuf du Pape property, Château Rayas. Saunier waited patiently while the proprietor finished his siesta and then at 4pm was taken into the cellars and given a taste of the 1959 and 1961 vintages. “To this day I cannot forget the taste of these wines.”

It is easy to see why Saunier charmed so many French winemakers. She combines a joie de vivre with a steely determination and an innate sense of what is correct, whether in a dish, a bottle of wine or how to conduct business.

In selling her wines, Saunier cannily chose to concentrate on the restaurant business. This differentiated her from her competitors, particularly those selling California wines, but also made the restaurants become the medium through which she became better known. “I never advertise. The only thing I have done is to design the strip label which goes on the back of all my wines, which is an M with a W on the top and the necessary details. But diners in the restaurants see the label and then want to know where they can get the wines. “I think that many now know that I would never put a wine on the market that I wouldn’t drink myself.”

The combination of this back label and the growing number of exclusive (and highly priced) wines that her company represents in the US has led to several meetings with an organisation Saunier never expected to encounter: the FBI.

Over the past decade there have been several incidents where wines purporting to be from one of her growers – particularly the late Burgundian Henri Mayer – and carrying her strip label, have been revealed as frauds. In light of this, Saunier has gone out of her way to ensure her suppliers and customers are completely protected.

With offices in Chicago, Dallas and New York, she is well-placed to comment on how American drinking habits are responding to the economic downturn.

“Obviously, the sales of my more expensive wines are down, with the notable exception of Rayas, but white wine sales are still strong because the bars in the restaurants, where people now meet for a glass of wine before their tables are ready, are still busy.

“And what many tables of two now order is a half bottle of champagne at the table and then a half bottle of red wine with their meal. I have never had so many cases of half bottles in stock as we have at the moment,” she said.

This new demand has brought her into contact with two less well-known French wine growers, Louis Coquillet from Champagne Saint-Chamant in Epernay and Rémy Gresser, a biodynamic grower in Alsace, of which she is very proud. In Saunier’s scrupulous hands, neither is likely to remain unnoticed for long.

www.mwines.com/saunier.asp
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nicholas.lander@ft.com