

Wine Spectator

Beaux Freres

Douglas fir and maple trees reach toward the Oregon sky as they define the boundaries of the Beaux Frères estate vineyard. Sloping toward the south, the 24 acres of biodynamically farmed vines on the region's WillaKenzie soils catch the sun's warmth all day. Goats graze in a fenced area uphill from a simple cottage, and pet pigs grunt in their sty next to the barn that was converted into the Beaux Frères winery.

The trees hide this idyllic scene from traffic on North Valley Road, the main highway connecting the town of Newberg, Ore., with the hamlet of Yamhill. The only sign is a totem log, polished to a sheen and engraved with "Beaux Frères," the work of Mike Etzel, who cut down the fir, milled the wood and created the sign.

One frosty day in early March, bouncing through the vineyards in his Volvo 4-wheel-drive vehicle, Etzel points to the trees, and says, "I like a wall of trees. I think they're a big reason we get such even ripeness without high alcohol. They protect the vines from wind, and in cold weather they absorb and radiate heat. I would only remove trees if the vineyard needed it."

Etzel's passion for the forest led him to build a small sawmill on the property, where he processes fallen trees to fashion beautifully wrought benches and sheds and where he created the sign that welcomes visitors from the highway.

Etzel's handiwork in the vineyard and winery has produced consistently elegant, precise, rich and complex Pinot Noirs from his vines. The very first commercial release rocketed Beaux Frères to the top: The 1991 bottling earned the highest rating (92 points) and asked the highest price (\$34) in my tasting report on Oregon in 1994. My review described the wine's ripe, elegant plum and black cherry flavors as "remarkably complex and concentrated," at a moment when other Oregon Pinot Noirs aimed for elegance.

When Etzel started tilling these slopes, in 1988, Oregon could claim barely five dozen bonded wineries. The number is more than 1,000 today, yet Etzel's wines still rank in the top tier in virtually every vintage.

The consistency of quality has been remarkable. Since 2002, 14 new release Pinot Noirs have earned classic ratings of 95 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale; no other Oregon label can claim more than five classically rated Pinots. In addition, the vast majority of the producer's entry-level regional blends have rated at least 90 points. Even in the weak 1997 vintage, Beaux Frères managed to make a Pinot that reached 90 points—the only winery to do so. More recently, the 2014 Beaux Frères Vineyard bottling (95 points) rose to No. 3 in *Wine Spectator's* 2016 Top 100.

At the beginning, Etzel didn't intend to bottle wine, just sell grapes to wineries who did. When that didn't pencil out, to earn a decent living he needed to bottle wine from his vineyard himself. To say that endeavor paid off would be an understatement.

Etzel built a small wine empire on bottlings from the original vineyard and a few judicious expansions. Quantities are not scant. Recent vintages have averaged 2,700 cases a year from the original estate vineyard; 1,200 cases from Etzel's adjoining property, the 9-acre Upper Terrace Vineyard; and 2,500 cases of a regional blend. A rotating roster of vineyard-designated bottlings from other sites around Willamette Valley completes the Beaux Frères portfolio. Altogether, Beaux Frères' output is about 10,000 cases a year.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought that Beaux Frères—or Oregon, for that matter—would be on the world stage as it has," Etzel reflects. "I think our focus on Pinot Noir, and only a few cuvées, helped with clean, pinpoint direction, a direction that is still the same for Beaux Frères today as it was 32 years ago."

Maisons & Domaines Henriot, a family-run business that owns the Grand Marque Champagne Henriot, Bouchard Père & Fils in Burgundy and William Fèvre in Chablis, among other brands, purchased controlling interest in Beaux Frères in 2017. Henriot bought out Etzel's partners, and Etzel retained most of his roughly one-third share. He manages the estate for Henriot.

Etzel's son Mike Jr., who goes by Mikey to the family (and by Mike D. professionally), is the winemaker for both Beaux Frères and Sequitur, the latter a separate enterprise independent of Henriot from a 12-acre vineyard adjacent to Upper Terrace. With Etzel Sr.'s wife, Carey Critchlow, also a partner in Sequitur, it's all very much a family business.

Wine was not a big part of Etzel's life growing up, but good food was. His father sold kitchen goods for Macy's in New York City when Mike was born, in 1956, and after moving the family to Maryland when Mike was 5, dad traveled the world buying for a department store chain.

"My dad connected with Graham Kerr [the "Gallopig Gourmet" of early TV cooking-show fame], and they had some collaboration over table settings," says Etzel, who occasionally uses a vintage coffee pot he inherited from his father. "We would drink Gallo Hearty Burgundy and Mateus Rosé, but we ate well."

At 13, Etzel started working at local dairy farms. He wasn't much of a scholar, but at the insistence of his father he earned a business degree in 1977 from Frostburg State University in Appalachian Maryland. "I was a pot-smoking, live day-to-day, love-life individual," he deadpans. "But my parents required that I go to school. My responsibility to the Etzel family was terminated once I graduated from college."

The only jobs available to him in rural Maryland were insurance salesman or bank teller, he recalls, so he left home for Albuquerque, N.M. Wine had already started to fascinate Etzel when a young attorney started dating, and eventually married, his older sister, Patricia. The attorney was Robert M. Parker Jr., who started a local wine newsletter and then turned it into *The Wine*

Advocate. In 1974, Bob and Pat bought the Maryland home where Etzel grew up. They still live there.

In New Mexico, Etzel got a job in a retail wineshop. "I could talk the language," he shrugs. Later, field work with Gallo took him to Colorado, and he settled into a position selling fine wine in Colorado Springs for Denver-based distributor Vintage Wines.

There he met and married his first wife, Jacqueline, who gave birth to their son Jared in 1983 and to Mikey in 1986. Jacqueline was pregnant with their child, Nathan, when they made a fateful visit to Oregon in 1987. "I'd heard the hype and tasted a 1979 Pinot Noir in a Riesling bottle from Bill Fuller [of Tualatin Vineyard] and thought, holy cow, this is something," Etzel recalls.

Relaxing on the trip after an appointment, Etzel spied a listing in a local newspaper's real-estate ads for an 88-acre pig farm in foreclosure. The list price was \$129,000, and the feds would carry the note. "We walked the property, and said to each other, this is where we want to raise our family," says Etzel.

He had zero experience growing grapes, but having worked at dairy farms as a youth he thought, "I can learn to grow grapes."

The Etzels could come up with only half of the \$20,000 down payment for the property. Pat convinced Parker to match it. "I think my sister thought, 'My baby brother needs a break,'" Etzel says. "I think Bob wanted to learn something about the production end."

Mike and Jacqueline, a respiratory specialist, quit their jobs, bundled the kids into the car, and, Etzel jokes, moved "Jed Clampett-style to Green Acres."

Already skilled with construction tools, Etzel renovated the house, started clearing ground for a vineyard and purchased enough vine cuttings of Pinot Noir to plant 5 acres in 1988. To earn money, he also poured samples at the Knudsen Erath tasting room, felled timber, worked in a welding shop and sold pigs and firewood.

He also worked harvests at Ponzi Vineyards. "A pretty hardy guy," Dick Ponzi recalls. "He came to work through rainstorms on a motorcycle, moved tanks around, ran hoses and worked long hours. He followed me everywhere. He asked good questions, and he had a good palate."

Ponzi made the first wines from the Etzel-Parker vineyard, including the lone barrel produced (for personal consumption) in 1990. "We put out the 1991 and 1992 vintages under our license," Ponzi recalls. "The wine was labeled Beaux Frères, French for 'brothers-in-law.' We liked it so much, we started buying grapes from [Etzel]."

Ponzi recognized that Etzel was not like some of the other outsiders dipping their toes into Oregon. "We always wondered if they really wanted to make better Oregon wines. Mike was one of the first of the serious people, and the quality of his wines got a lot of attention for Oregon."

Ponzi thought Etzel was crazy to price the first vintages at \$34 a bottle at a time when the best Oregon wines were less than \$20. But three weeks after sending out the offer on the 1992 wine, 70 percent of the 1,000-case production was sold as futures.

"We were on our way," Etzel smiles, "and we plowed everything back in so we never had to borrow money."

Beaux Frères' first wines rode the crest of Oregon Pinot Noir's second wave of modern pioneers, a group that included Panther Creek (Ken Wright's first label; founded in 1986), Argyle (1987), Domaine Drouhin Oregon (1987) and Domaine Serene (1989). Their wines had more richness and power than those of first-wave producers such as Eyrie (1965), Knudsen Erath (1967), Ponzi (1970) and Adelsheim (1971), whose Pinots beguiled wine lovers with Burgundy-like delicacy and elegance.

"Those first wines of [Etzel's] were heavier than what was typical in Oregon, which surprised me," says Ponzi. "I was amused years later when he told me he wanted to back off a bit."

Over the decades, Etzel has gradually shifted his style away from fruit flavors that push the limits of ripeness, relatively high alcohol levels and noticeable oak aromas. Vines farmed biodynamically since the early 2000s and meticulous winemaking achieved lighter texture and less alcohol, weaving in more savory character without losing ripeness or suppleness.

The original vineyard spills down the hillside above the winery and the cottage where Etzel and his young family lived when the property was acquired. It was planted from 1988 to 1994, mostly with own-rooted Pommard and Wädenswil clones, which were the backbone of Oregon's Pinot Noir viticulture, but other sections used Dijon clones on rootstock.

A forested hollow separates the 21-acre section that comprises Upper Terrace and Sequitur from the original vineyard. Upper Terrace contains six different Dijon clones. Sequitur grows 17 heritage clones, including Chalone, Swan, Calera, Rochioli and Mt. Eden from California, along with Oregon's Coury clone and some Wädenswil from David Lett's original plantings for Eyrie.

Most of the vines are planted 36 to 40 inches apart on rows separated by a 6-foot spacing, to accommodate the small tractor they use. That's a vine density of 2,200 to 2,400 per acre, slightly more than half the density common in Burgundy.

Etzel aims for yields of 3 tons per acre, a somewhat larger crop than what is considered ideal in either Burgundy or Oregon. "The vines are better balanced with a larger crop," he says. "This gets the grapes to the right ripeness at lower sugar levels, and that's what keeps alcohol levels moderate."

In the winery cellar, Mikey fetches samples from stacks of barrels. The 2018 vintage, he says, shows the effects of drought, but various tweaks in the vineyard and fermentation have produced wines of freshness and vitality. Malolactic fermentations, the effects of which can last into spring, were complete in early March, and the wines showed transparency of aromatics and flavors, without any loss of color density.

"We've moved to picking earlier," Mikey says, targeting sugar levels of 22.5 Brix, dramatically lower than the 25 Brix they harvested in the 1990s. A 2018 sample made from a vineyard block of the Pommard clone planted in 1994—a "model citizen," according to Mikey— was picked at 22.8 Brix. It glowed with purple color, and vibrant currant and violet aromas jumped out of the glass.

"We're also pressing earlier now, after 18 days instead of 22 or 23," adds Mikey. "The wine loses freshness when you have it in tank so long."

In the 1990s, the wines fermented in 1.25-ton plastic bins, "inoculated with a yeast strain that was known to produce sulfides for more complexity, but we stopped using commercial yeasts in 2002. We used to tape a heating pad to the side of the fermentor to get the fermentation going," Mikey explains. Today he lets native yeasts start fermentations, controls temperatures and pumps the fermenting wine over to moisten the cap instead of punching it down, all with the intention of producing smoother tannins and more transparent wines.

A row of three 600-liter amphorae reflects another cellar tweak. Assistant winemaker Aaron Kendall dips up a sample of Pinot Noir from one of the last blocks picked. It comes from the lower sections of Sequitur, where grapes struggle to get fully ripe in the shade of tall firs. It shows a tension between fruit and savory flavors and balances raspberry and pomegranate fruit with a hint of beef tartare on the finish that Mikey attributes to the amphorae.

Mikey's favorite sample of the day comes from Upper Terrace. All Dijon clones, it sings of raspberries with a floral edge, framed by crisp tannins, lingering on an open texture with a welcome transparency and presence. "I like the floral notes and the balance of red and black fruit, the freshness and crispness," he offers. "More like Côte de Beaune than Côte de Nuits."

Dad, on the other hand, likes "the elegance and the balance of fruit and savory flavors" from the old blocks, made from Oregon's standby Pommard clone, which is named after a Côte de Beaune village whose wines often show more blue fruit than their red-fruited neighbors.

It's a telling difference. Mikey, now 33, grew up while his father transitioned to a less opulent style, toward wines of vigor and transparency. He internalized it, and pushed it further. Dad approves. Over lunch, the elder Etzel muses, "Would I be able to do what he's doing? Probably not. I wouldn't be cutting edge."

Mikey's older brother, Jared, resisted a career in wine at first, a natural reaction to drudging hours in the family vineyard under an exacting parent. "I think it aggravated [my father] when my brothers and I worked haphazardly," Jared says. "I got fired a lot."

But then, as a freshman taking only core classes at Oregon State University, he jumped at a chance to go to Spain when his father and Uncle Bob lined up a harvest job for him at Artadi, in Rioja. Owner Juan Carlos López de Lacalle, and his choice vineyard, Viña El Pisón, wowed the college kid.

"It was one of the most incredible wines I'd ever had at that point, with the aromatics of a *grand cru* Burgundy and the depth and power of a first-growth Bordeaux," Jared says. "And I saw the same super focus on the vineyard that I grew up with."

Jared declared a major in viticulture and enology and worked the next year's harvest at Clos Erasmus in Priorat. It dawned on Jared that "dad's viticulture was the equal of any of the great producers I had visited, then or since. And he has the same commitment to nature that they do, too."

After college he worked in Sonoma at Fisher Vineyards and in Napa Valley at Kapcsàndy. "I wanted to stay in Oregon, but I knew I could not work at Beaux Frères. My dad and I are too similar. We would have butted heads constantly."

Then Jared got a call from Marc-André Roy, the son of Beaux Frères partner Robert Roy, who had invested in Beaux Frères when the label needed capital to convert the barn to a winery. Would Jared be interested in coming back to Willamette Valley to work with him on a new project? "Only if I can find the right *terroir*," Jared responded.

He found a site on Worden Road in the Dundee Hills AVA, and Domaine Roy & Fils was born. The first vintages—2015, 2016 and 2017—have been critical successes, earning *Wine Spectator* ratings in the mid-90s.

More recently, Jared and equal partners purchased two vineyards in Dundee Hills—a 10-acre former plum orchard at 1,000 feet elevation, and a steep rocky slope with 3 plantable acres. Both are growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and Jared preserved 46 trees on the steep hillside site, each growing a different fruit. He intends to share the trees' harvest with vineyard workers. And when the site across the street from Domaine Roy, planted in the 1970s, sold to Washington, D.C.-based investor Giorgio Furioso, Jared signed on as consulting vineyardist.

Nathan, the youngest of the Etzel brothers, an electrical engineer who specializes in gaming technology, is also an amateur brewer of impressive beers. And he is a partner in Coattails, a brand Etzel created in 2007 so that the next generation could flex its winemaking muscles. The label image, designed by Big Table Farm proprietor Clare Carver, is a silhouette of Etzel and his sons.

The name was chosen to suggest that the sons were riding dad's coattails. Now, Etzel says, "they're coming out with a cuvée called Freeloader because they've used equipment and taken advantage of the [Beaux Frères] facility." Since 2017, the Coattails wines have been made at Domaine Roy.

As teenagers, all the Etzel boys worked in the estate vineyard and had summertime jobs at wineries including Cristom and Brick House. Jared drove tractors, mowed between the vines and helped in the winery, says Doug Tunnell, who arrived on Ribbon Ridge two years after Etzel and started planting his Brick House vineyard in 1990. "They knew what they were doing, and they were good help," he says.

Tunnell considers himself responsible for disrupting Etzel's laser focus on Pinot Noir. The morning after pressing off the 2019 Brick House Chardonnay, Tunnell discovered a half bin of unpressed grapes, not enough to fill the press. He loaded it into a pickup and delivered it to Etzel.

"That's Chardonnay," Etzel responded. "I don't want it."

But Grant Coulter, Etzel's assistant winemaker recently arrived from California, missed making white wines. Like a kid wanting a gift puppy, he pleaded to keep it. Etzel relented and combined Tunnell's grapes with the rogue Chardonnay vines scattered around Beaux Frères' vineyard. Etzel had made a barrel from those scattered vines in 1992, liked the wine, but missed the mark in '93 and '94, and stopped after that.

"Grant did a great job of it," Tunnell says. "That was my contribution to the Beaux Frères Chardonnay program." (It's not much of a "program," amounting to a few rows in Upper Terrace and now Sequitur.)

Coulter was assistant winemaker from 2007 to 2016, until Mikey was ready to step in as the family's own winemaker. "I knew that Beaux Frères would always be Mike and the family," Coulter says. "I also knew I was lucky to be there."

Though Etzel prohibited Coulter from making his own wine while he worked at Beaux Frères, Etzel sold him grapes from the Sequitur vineyard when Coulter left to start his own label.

"Hundred Suns is the wines I couldn't make at Beaux Frères," Coulter says, "because I respected what Beaux Frères had to be." The vineyard-designated Sequitur bottling is Coulter's best wine.

Coulter thinks of Etzel as a mentor who instilled in him the importance of vineyard. "He also taught me what it is to fix mistakes, watching the way he handled ferments that weren't working right in the real world," Coulter says. "Also how successful marketing works at this level."

Both Coulter and Stephen Goff, assistant winemaker before Coulter, discovered that Etzel was as interested in them as people as he was in their winemaking skills. Interviewing for their jobs, they both brought along their fiancées, who later became their wives. "Laura and I spent the weekend cooking and talking with Mike and Jackie," Goff recalls. "By Monday it was a done deal."

"For [Etzel] it was about what kind of person I was," Coulter says. "Renée hitting it off with Jackie is what did it, but he also asked me to write an essay about someone I admired. I wrote about my dad, who was a veterinarian. Mike actually called him. Dad told me [Etzel] was an interesting character. Yes, he called him 'a character.'"

Goff also realized that he would never climb the ladder in this family winery. In 2006 he accepted the winemaking job at the brand-new Colene Clemens Vineyards. That worked out well. His 2015 Dopp Creek Pinot Noir scored 95 points and rose to No. 7 on *Wine Spectator's* Top 100 of 2018.

"Beaux Frères was an education," Goff says. "I learned so much about grapegrowing, pruning, soil management, cropping, how critical timing is for everything. It reminded me of those old kung fu films, where the apprentice keeps trying until he gets it right. It also exposed me to a lot of great Burgundy. Mike was generous about opening some incredible wines, and I developed an aesthetic, not looking just at how a wine makes you feel."

By 2017, Etzel's original partners, Parker and Roy, were in their 70s and ready to cash out their investment. Etzel, 63, was not ready to walk away, but he couldn't afford to buy them out. "I felt somewhat betrayed," Etzel admits. "All they invested was money. For me it was all the work I put in, and that it was our family business."

He began to put out feelers. Suitors, according to Etzel, included big-name California companies such as Silver Oak and Gallo, along with international corporations such as Constellation Brands. "But I was afraid they might only exploit Beaux Frères," Etzel says. "I didn't want what happened to Chalone." (Absorbed by drinks giant Diageo in 2005, Chalone expanded beyond its estate-oriented identity.)

Henriot agreed to buy Beaux Frères well before the company felt that it was ready to acquire a New World property. That's only appropriate given how impulsively Etzel himself had dived into buying the property that became Beaux Frères.

Gilles de Larouzière, an eighth-generation member of the Henriot family, had recently taken over, in 2015. "I wanted to understand the company first," de Larouzière says. "I was looking to 2020 before thinking about acquisitions." But de Larouzière's staff told him it was worth pursuing Beaux Frères.

"When I came to visit, the first thing I wanted to do was stand at the vineyard," de Larouzière recalls. "I talked with Mike about biodynamics, about vineyard management, winemaking. We tasted the wines and other Oregon wines. This was a well-managed estate, and something with deep connections to what we do."

Back in France, he told his board of directors, "We can have a second family story to go with ours. For me, the key was to keep Mike and Mikey. It could not be the same without them."

It was the family aspect that convinced Etzel as well. "I wanted it to be not just a business partner but a company that understands what our family wanted to do."

A bit of history made Henriot sensitive to this aspect. When Joseph Henriot split from a 10-year joint venture with Veuve Clicquot in 1995 over conflicting views of what the company should be, he used the windfall from selling his share to acquire Bouchard Père et Fils, a once glorious Burgundy négociant and domaine that had lost its luster.

That investment helped to turn around Bouchard's fortunes. In 1998 Henriot acquired Domaine Fèvre, a Chablis specialist, and in 2010 Leger, known for its Cassis liqueur, in part because Henriot could ride its strong ties with Japan to increase its market share there.

Acquiring an Oregon wine company made sense to de Larouzière because Henriot already had a sales structure in the U.S. to sell its French products. And it didn't hurt that other French wine companies already had ties to Oregon as well, including Drouhin (Domaine Drouhin), Jadot (Résonance), Liger-Belair (Chapter 24) and Nicolas Méo (Nicolas-Jay).

Though not expanding vineyards or multiplying production, Henriot is investing in infrastructure. No trees will be cut down to make way for more vineyard, but excess underbrush and a few tree limbs are being trimmed to make the vineyards more picturesque. Etzel recently cut a walking trail through the trees, connecting the two vineyard sections.

Etzel also purchased an old dairy farm wedged between both properties, financing it by selling 20 percent of his share in Beaux Frères to Henriot. Of the farm's 54 acres, the 30 acres that lie across the highway will be returned to wetlands. A concrete and timber barn will be rebuilt into a 14,000-square-foot winery—one section will be used to make the Sequitur wines, another part will be leased to Henriot to take some of the pressure off the overloaded winery at Beaux Frères, and the remaining space will be rented to up-and-coming wineries.

The Beaux Frères winery grew haphazardly, with Etzel tweaking the building, adding on to it, streamlining and fixing failed ideas as needed. The new winery, he says, can play into "everything I learned that I should have done, but didn't."

Two years into his five-year contract with Henriot to manage Beaux Frères, Etzel is happy. "I see my job as passing it on to my son," he says. "I'm very happy that Henriot wants to preserve the integrity of Beaux Frères and improve the quality."

At the contract's end in 2022, Etzel would like to keep working. "I'm passionate about growing grapes and helping young people and improving the environmental value of this little valley here."

No doubt Critchlow will have a say in that. After Jacqueline's death from cancer in 2010, Etzel soldiered on, but after a year of grieving he met Carey, then chief attorney for Oregon Health & Science University in Portland. The omens were good on their first date, a day skiing Mt. Hood, and they ended the day sharing oysters and wine. Critchlow has three grown daughters, a neat parallel to Etzel's three sons. She makes ceramics. He makes practical art from logs.

Critchlow retired from OHSU and married Etzel in May 2016. The ceremony was by the pond adjacent to the home they designed and built together. The site came with the purchase of the land that became Upper Terrace and Sequitur. Critchlow has the title of CEO of Sequitur, where she installed beehives she had started in her Portland home 15 years ago. The Beaux Frères tasting room sells the honey.

"I'll be 68 when the contract ends," Etzel concedes, "and we want to spend more time with each other."

SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM ETZEL FAMILY PROJECTS

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BEAUX FRÈRES

Maisons & Domaines Henriot is majority owner; Michael G. Etzel is minority owner and manager

Score	Wine	Price	Cases
96	Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge The Upper Terrace 2017	\$110	1,850
95	Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge The Beaux Frères Vineyard 2017	\$95	3,600
94	Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge Belles Soeurs Cuvée 2017	\$95	850
93	Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Zena Crown 2016	\$75	236
93	Pinot Noir Willamette Valley 2017	\$60	2,040

DOMAINE ROY & FILS

Founded by Robert Roy, Marc-André Roy and Jared Etzel

Score	Wine	Price	Cases
94	Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Iron Filbert Vineyard 2017	\$120	269
94	Pinot Noir Yamhill-Carlton Quartz Acorn Vineyard 2017	\$120	244
93	Chardonnay Dundee Hills Incline 2017	\$49	425
93	Chardonnay Dundee Hills Iron Filbert Vineyard 2017	\$120	66

SEQUITUR

A partnership of Michael G. Etzel, Carey Critchlow and Michael D. Etzel

Score	Wine	Price	Cases
95	Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge Amphora 2017	\$100	25
93	Pinot Noir Ribbon Ridge 2017	\$100	475

Note: Wines from the Coattails label, owned by Jared, Michael D. and Nathan Etzel, have not been rated by Wine Spectator.