

## **Kalin Cellars wines are featured in the inaugural issue of *Fine Wine***

*Fine Wine*, a new bimonthly wine magazine, has just been launched. With **Hugh Johnson** as editorial advisor and **Andrew Jefford** as contributing editor, the magazine aims to offer "an authoritative and independent view of the world's finest wines." The editor is **Neil Beckett**, who previously was with the **Harpers** industry trade publication.

**"This is the most exciting magazine launch for true wine lovers and serious collectors in the last 20 years," Johnson said in a press release. "At last there is a magazine that puts fine wine in its rightful context of elegant thoughtful living."**

*Fine Wine* will feature contributions from well-known writers that include **Michael Broadbent** MW, **David Peppercorn** MW, Andrew Jefford, **Michael Schuster** and **Michel Bettane**. Regional specialists will include **Nicolas Belfrage** MW on Barolo, and **Richard Mayson** and **Julian Jeffs** on Sherry. Additional writers from outside the world of wine include **Hugh Pearman**, architectural critic of *The Sunday Times*, and **Ghislaine Wood**, noted Art Deco author from the **Victoria and Albert Museum** in London.

The magazine's editorial board, includes **Paul Draper**, **Anne-Claude Leflaive**, Professor **Ann Noble**, **Paul Pontallier**, **Michael Prinz zu Salm-Salm**, Professor **Alain Carbonneau**, **David Elswood**, **Len Evans** and **Marchese Piero Antinori**.

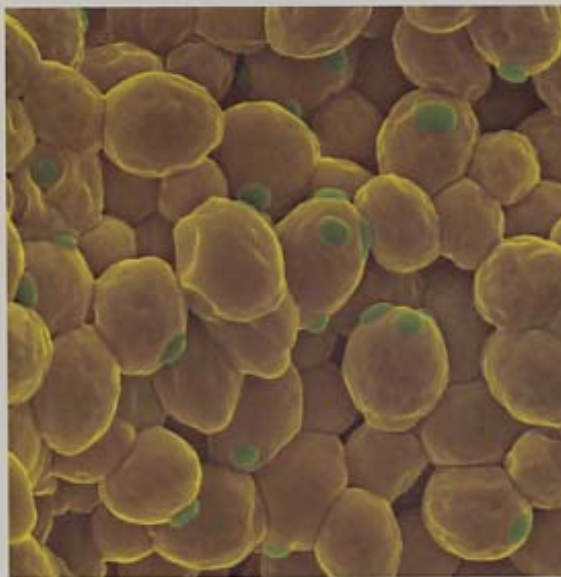
*Fine Wine* is available by subscription for US\$119/UK£69 /Euro 120 for one year (six issues). See [www.finewinemag.com](http://www.finewinemag.com).

THE WORLD OF  
**FINE WINE**



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**ISSUE I MAY / JUNE 2004** **HUGH JOHNSON** The meaning of fine wine • **BORDEAUX 2003** An extraordinary year • **NEW YORK CITY** The best fine wine restaurants • **SYMPOSIUM** Michael Broadbent MW tastes Romanée-Conti back to 1889 • **SAVOUR** Barolo 1996 and 1997 • **VINTAGE** 1929 from Latour to the Empire State Building • **CHAMPAGNE** The riots of 1911 • **SHERRY** More than the most undervalued fine wine • **TASTE** Objectivity and subjectivity in wine • **FERMENT** Olivier Humbrecht MW on biodynamics • **VIN VOYAGE** Japan



## YQUEM, YEASTS AND YESTERYEAR

At their boutique wineries in the Côte d'Or and Golden State, microbiologists Terry and Frances Leighton combine rigorous scientific research with traditional winemaking techniques and very old vines. Bruce Cass describes the highly idiosyncratic philosophy and wines of the husband-and-wife team that does most things differently

One of the California wine industry's greatest assets is a considerable number of mildly eccentric winemakers/owners who take great pride in pushing the oenological envelope. Affectionately referred to as 'the lunatic fringe', these individuals have been responsible for many significant innovations over the years. Terry and Frances Leighton are charter members. They do, however, differ from their peers in two important respects: one, they are both crackerjack scientists; and two, the bright light of publicity gives both Leightons a case of the willies.

Until he retired in 2002, Dr Terrence Leighton was a tenured microbiology professor at the University of California in Berkeley, one of America's top research and teaching institutions. His wife Frances is also a microbiologist. Moreover, she is the one who does most of the physical work producing Kalin wines. They are a team, and it is a mistake to underestimate Mrs Leighton's contribution based on the fact that Terry most frequently acts as their spokesperson. Terry is more diplomatic than I am,' Frances points out.

The Leightons do many things differently from most wineries, but there is a progression of logic to each explanation. Part of the reason they are so publicity averse – for 25 years Terry has declined to let people take his photograph – is they simply do not trust most people to care about complex explanations. They obviously follow scientific wine research, and conscientiously cite references when talking about it, but even modern analytic devices lead to what they call 'a focus on pieces'. Terry describes it as 'employing a

microscope to navigate around New York City'. The Leightons prefer to let their wines stand on their own. To them, the logic, the science, the history and their personalities are all threads woven together in a fabric, then presented as a garment. In this analogy, the garment and its style, or fashion, would be the service of their wine with a dish in a meal. The Leightons would rather you looked at the garment, and drew your own conclusions, than have you deconstruct the total package by trying to tease apart the fibres for individual evaluation. The Leightons are passionate about taste and smell combinations. They feel any emphasis on authors' antics detracts from the impact and legitimacy of the work.

In a way that's a shame, because the Leightons are a great show. A discussion of their wines with various food combinations will follow at the end of this piece. And the wines are fantastic. But failure to describe the intellectual satisfaction a true oenophile takes away from dinner with Terry and Frances Leighton would be to overlook an elephant in the bedroom. Terry Leighton is a teacher – a really good teacher. His explanations of complex, controversial technical topics are pieces of pristine beauty. They are at once clear and colourful. They are succinct, yet thorough. He has a definite air of authority, but it just seems to derive naturally from experience – not from title nor from celebrity. In person, he never shuts down rebuttal. Dr Leighton has a researcher's comfort level with experimentation and mistakes. In dinner conversation that attitude is the polar opposite to sitting with a politician, or with a salesman.



Opposite: The Leightons have evaluated more than a thousand strains of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* yeast. Above left: sourcing from ancient vineyards, above right: spicy crab served with Kalin Semillon.

#### 'Science in the service of art'

Perhaps the best place to begin an explanation of the Kalin wines is with the concept of *umami*. From a writer's standpoint that jumping-off point is akin to diving off the Golden Gate Bridge, but sophisticated readers will be able to make do with the highlights. *Umami* is a fifth taste. In 1908, Japanese researcher Kikunae Ikeda isolated and identified one element of the *umami* taste – the amino acid glutamate. Objection to treating this sensation as a basic taste diminished significantly in 2000, when Nirupa Chaudhari and co-workers at the University of Miami School of Medicine isolated and characterised a specific taste receptor for *umami*. Descriptions of the *umami* sensation are 'savoury, pungent' and 'meaty'.

Glutamates help to pique other flavours. Glutamates are more common in aged cheeses, aged beef and in bottle-aged wines, particularly in wines that have been aged *sur lie* – the dead yeast acting as a source of amino acids. The Leightons like to think of the wines they construct for long ageing as catalysts to bring out additional flavours in the foods with which they may be paired. 'The wine makes sauce with the cuisine,' is a phrase that Frances uses.

In fact, there are more than 2,000 known compounds in wine that may interact with each other or with the many additional compounds in a dish. Most of those chemical equations in the wine are very far from equilibrium at the end of fermentation. One reasonable question is what differences would be created in a wine by driving the equations in a reductive direction (that is, removing oxygen molecules) rather than in an oxidative direction (adding oxygen). Terry Leighton believes reductive reactions are the most interesting ones.

Enter the microbiology component. Kalin Winery was founded in 1977. Over the years, the Leightons have evaluated a thousand strains of yeast (all *S. cerevisiae*, incidentally) in order to choose the few that meet specific criteria. They are quick to point out that all this development was classic breeding techniques, not any form of recombinant genetic manipulation.

'One of the great advantages of working with yeast', Terry explains, 'is the opportunity to see hundreds of generational results in a year. Experiments with vines only allow four or five fully expressed results for each human generation.'

One feature the Leightons seek in their chosen yeast strains is the development of secondary metabolites that will make a contribution to texture. They also want strains deficient in a certain amino acid that plays a role in the creation of  $H_2S$  whenever a scavenging pathway is activated by lack of available nitrogen. Their selections are hard to grow, hence slow fermenters, and they don't dry well. They are not convenient. Frances starts her white-wine fermentations (individually in the barrel) with a very low volume of inoculum. Temperatures rarely go over 65°F (18.3°C). The important upshot of these procedures is that fermentations at Kalin Winery often go on for seven or eight months in barrel. That's eight months gradually generating  $CO_2$  in the barrel. Eight months of anaerobic conditions that favour reductive reactions.

Wines made in this manner are not ready for a debutante ball on their first birthday. Nor on their second. 'Our wines taste bland for about five years,' Frances says. 'The Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc are even very white in colour.' Kalin wines need to be aged, and they reward the effort. The Leightons have made wines of this type from the beginning. They acquired an early reputation by sourcing from ancient vineyards – not unlike their compatriots (friends, more or less contemporaries, all started as neighbours in the East Bay, similar attitudes, similar business models) Ravenswood and Rosenblum. But at the end of the 1970s, and into the early '80s, fine-wine drinkers in America were fewer, and more savvy about cellaring wines. That changed. Not only did the marketplace become dominated by buyers unwilling to defer gratification, but in 1986 US tax law governing investments to produce a product was altered so that those business deductions could not be realised until the product was sold. Today the incentives in the American wine business are squarely on-side with



Kobe rib-eye with  
Kalin Merlot

To the Leightons, the logic, the science, the history and their personalities are all threads woven together in a fabric, then presented as a garment. They would rather you looked at the garment, and drew your own conclusions, than have you deconstruct the total package by trying to tease apart the fibres for individual evaluation

making, selling and consuming wines quickly. 'Fast wines to go with fast food,' in the Leightons' parlance.

Terry and Frances didn't want to change their artisanal wine-making practices. They use basket presses. They neither fine nor filter. It is certainly not that they are slaves to tradition, and they don't buy a lot of the superstition that passes for theory in many winemaking communities, but 'when you only get to make wine once a year, it makes sense to pay attention to the guys who have had 500 such experiments', is the way Dr Leighton puts it. 'Folklore usually contains a science if you can see the synthesis with modern understanding.' So in the late 1980s, Kalin Winery started holding back its inventory. Today everything it offers is a 'library wine'. 'It's not about money,' Frances says. 'It is science in the service of art.' It most surely cannot be about the money. Kalin carries ten times as much inventory today as it did before taking this decision and makes only half as much wine.

#### Remarkable, late-released, long-lived wines

Kalin's current release Semillon is the 1994. It is made from a very old vineyard in Livermore Valley. The original cuttings were brought from Château d'Yquem in the 1880s. Wentz owns the vineyard but has given up trying to sell Semillon to Americans. The Leightons barrel ferment the Semillon (plus 20% Sauvignon Blanc) after pressing the grapes in the last Rolex basket press made in Italy. Fermentation goes on for ten months. The wine is remarkable... today. The colour is barely beginning to take on golden tints. If someone told you it was a ten-year-old wine, from looking at it you would naturally assume it to be a German Riesling. On the nose there are some hazelnut nuances, but overall it is not the slightest bit aldehydic. The texture is mouth-filling yet supple.

But the biggest surprise is the way the wine reacts with a dish the Leightons have chosen. 'You really need to challenge good Semillon,' Terry says. Their choice: a spicy Dungeness crab preparation called Da Chian Crab. Over the years, the Leightons have evolved an informal alliance with a very good Cantonese restaurant, Uncle Yu's on Crow Canyon Road in San Ramon is one of the best Chinese restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area (no idle boast), and certainly the one with the most sophisticated wine programme. Many hours of experimentation with sommelier Nick Liang have yielded Terry and Frances a wonderful progression of unusual dishes with which to pair their wines. The spicy crab is done in the south-Asian style, with a coating of sauce on crab legs in the shell. That means the slow heat eventually gets all over any enthusiastic diner's lips. The effect on the wine, when it is added to this assemblage, is to spark a fruitiness in the mid-palate and a dramatic persistence on the finish. The wine is nice by itself, but it is great with well-prepared spicy crab. 'We like it with Sichuan noodles too,' Frances comments. One is inclined to take her word on such matters.

Perhaps less unusual, the various models of Kalin Chardonnay are often the items most recognised by international commentators. Serena Sutcliffe MW compares the Cuvée W to 'the classiest of Meursaults', and Steve Tanzer, who equates the dining experience with the Leightons at Uncle Yu's to a meal at Tan Dinh in Paris, says of the Cuvée LX: 'The developed flavours somehow remain fresh and brisk, finishing with sneaky length.' The currently released vintage of Kalin Cuvée LV Chardonnay (from Long Vineyard in northern Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley) is the 1994. It is a sensuous wine. Sweaty really – that is, in the sense of being naughty; not athletic. Think mousing in front of the fireplace, mildly aware that someone inappropriate might wake up. The Leightons serve their Chardonnay with steamed lobster. Many people would prefer it with a fully mature, soft-ripened cheese.

Speaking of naughty, Pinot Noir has been a mainstay of the Kalin line forever. Interestingly, for the last ten years the Leightons have commuted to Burgundy to look after two vineyards they've purchased in the Côte de Beaune: Beaune Premier Cru Les Chouacheux and *lieu-dit* Les Pierres Blanches. They don't own any vineyards in California, but they own two of them in Burgundy. 'Kalin Bourgogne is kind of like gardening,' is Frances's explanation. Les Chouacheux consists of seven rows of Pinot Noir near Les Clos des Mouches and Les Epenotes. Total production is about 50 cases a year.

For illustration at Uncle Yu's, the Leightons pour their '97 Les Chouacheux with Peking duck, and their '94 Cuvée DD Pinot Noir, from David Demosthenes's old vines in Sonoma County, with tea-smoked duck. Both, by the way, are the current releases. There is an elegance, a cleanliness to both wines, just as there is a refinement, a subtlety to both duck preparations. But they are not the same by any stretch of the imagination. The French wine (if an American may be so bold as to call it that) is more incisive, more cherry scented, and beautifully refreshing with the rich crackling's nature of the crisp duck skin. Plum sauce is not a bad summary for both of them. By contrast, the tea-smoked duck is chewier, more flavourful, and so is the Leightons' California Pinot Noir. Both components in this second pair draw on tea-like olfactory nuances, but it is their similar muscularity that creates the more lasting impression.

Terry and Frances Leighton do all the work at their 6,000-case winery (wineries) themselves. It is all hand labour. Then they bottle-age the wines for seven to ten years before release so American consumers who are unaccustomed to the joys of fully mature, long-lived wines might get an eye-opening experience. Surely they must command three figures for these treasures...? No! Most Kalin wines are available for \$30 to \$50 from the winery or in the few selected retail stores sophisticated enough to acquire them (including Bibendum in London and Burgundy Wine Company in New York). Like Frances says, 'It's not about the money.' ■