



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JERRY LUPER

Jerry Luper wine tasting in the Douro Valley of Portugal, circa 2002.

The legacy of Jerry Luper

TONY POER

In the spring of 2002, the late author and chef Anthony Bourdain traveled to Portugal's Douro Valley to shoot an episode for his first television series, "A Cook's Tour." During an evening in Oporto, he and a companion sat down to dinner at a beloved seafood restaurant in the historic city that gives Port wine its name.

They were joined by an unlikely guest, an expatriate American winemaker. Sporting a tweed jacket and glasses, the tall, gray-haired gentleman could have passed for a visiting college professor. While his reputation didn't exactly precede him in Portugal, it carried a lot of weight in California, going back to Napa Valley's groundbreaking period of the 1970s.

"I don't know s— about wine. I should not be counted on to recommend a good vintage," Bourdain narrated, the confession delivered in his famously brusque manner. "Fortunately, Jerry Luper knows everything about wine."

Over a career that spanned four decades in California and Europe — highlighted by an important connection to the Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976 — Bourdain's guest had learned as much about vines and wines as almost any vintner could aspire to. But, as Jerry

Luper described it over the phone recently from France, where he retired in 2008, he has "been under the radar for a long time."

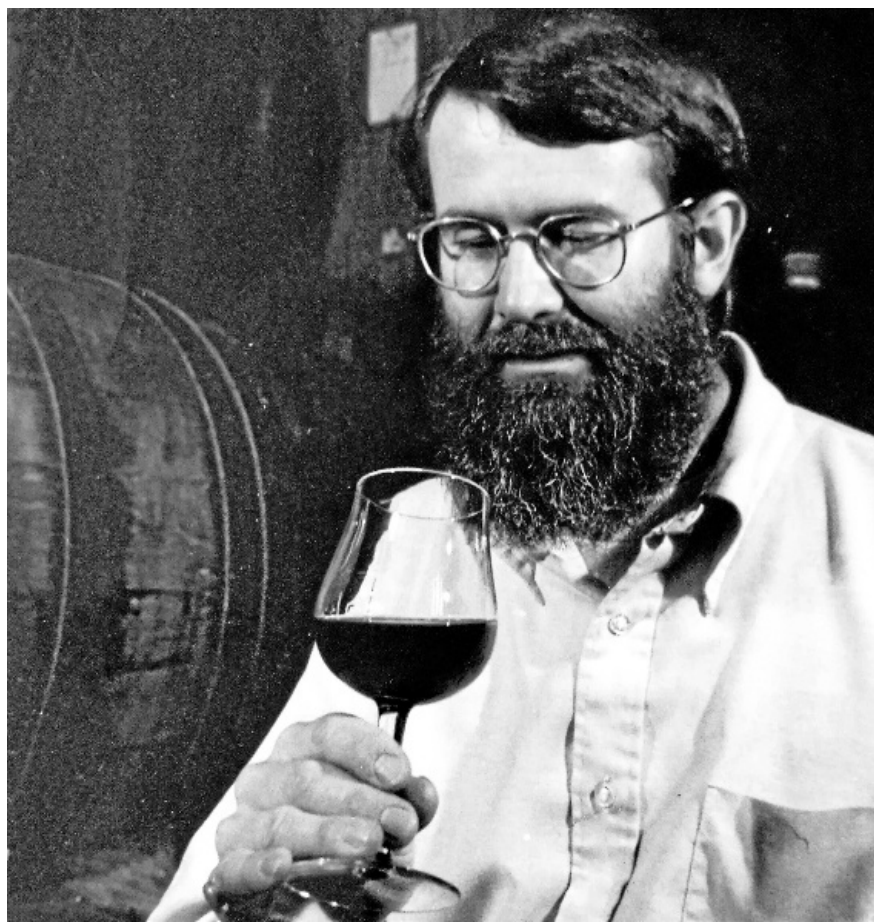
Still, with a wealth of both knowledge and experience having landed him in multiple wine history books, it's fair to say that Luper is a living legend in the Napa Valley wine industry.

Of course, every winemaker has to start somewhere. For the native of Modesto, California, he just needed a set of wheels.

"Back in 1959, part-way through my first year at junior college, I was tired of not having money to buy a car," Luper, now 81, shared during the call from his home near the French-Swiss border outside of Geneva.

He hadn't grown up in a wine-drinking family, but that didn't stop him from applying for a position at E&J Gallo, which had posted a help wanted ad for a lab technician. "The job was in the analytical laboratory. That's where I first came in contact with wine," he said.

A couple of the Gallo wines — Ripple and Night Train — were somewhat infamous. "I was working the evening shift when they started the first bottling of Ripple," he laughingly boasted. "I ran



Jerry Luper at Freemark Abbey in the 1970s.

Please see **LUPER**, Page B3

ON WINE



DREAMSTIME

There are literally dozens of such choices a winemaker faces with every wine in the stable, Dan Berger writes. "But the winemaker, in most cases, isn't completely on his or her own."

Choices, choices, choices: The Winemaker's Dilemma

There are two basic types of winemakers in the United States, and the kind of businesses they work for determines to a great degree the style of wines they tend to make.

Some larger wine companies opt for the ultra-conservative: They say, "It worked last year, so let's do the same thing this year. If the fruit sources stay the same, only minor variations will occur."

This is a simplistic view of winemaking that can easily be challenged as naïve, but many winemakers do things I disagree with, yet I don't blame them. Some decisions are out of their hands. To do something other than what the owner wants comes with the risk of job security. So, some decisions that a winemaker must make may be those he or she personally opposes.

For example, filtering certain red wines before they're bottled usually removes crucial elements that the wine would

eventually need to age beautifully for a longer life. But without filtration, the winery risks producing a product that may end up having some commercial problems as a young wine.

There are literally dozens of such choices a winemaker faces with every wine in the stable, and in some cases, it is pointless to say something to the company owner because the decision may be so technically-based that likely as not the owner would never understand what's at play.

There is usually a cellar crew who works with the wines on a daily basis. Many of these people are so skilled in the tactics and strategies that the winemaker has people to bounce ideas off and finally make the proper decision.

Cellar crews can be remarkably valuable.

Some consumers may find that a major decision a winemaker made turned out to be a mistake. Or conversely a decision could have turned out to be a success. It all depends on how we define success.

Take, for instance, the case of a red

wine that has already achieved the status of icon and now sells for well over \$100 per bottle. Since the liquid in the bottle is valued at no more than \$20 at most, the wine is seen as a success. Which justifies high praise for the winemaker.

Unfortunately, I've tasted literally dozens of wines that fit the above description and yet I view them as sadly off-target. The reasons relate to historical context, structural imbalance, imprecise aromatics or other issues too disparate to summarize.

The forgoing is easy to understand when it comes to pricey Cabernets made by successful wine companies. But it has far more meaning for me when it comes to other varietal wines, most of which do not sell for as much. For some people, \$20 for a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc is already quite a commitment, so the wine should be perfect.

I could easily make a case that a \$20 wine should carry special characteristics worthy of paying that kind of money.

Please see **BERGER**, Page B3

Luper

From B1

the analysis of the first bottle of it, right off of the bottling line!”

Luper was quick to point out, however, that the winery’s Hearty Burgundy brand also figured in: the Gallo winemaker in charge of it introduced him to the 1957 Louis Martini Cabernet, which he’d picked up for Luper on a bulk wine-buying trip to Napa. “It just blew me away,” he said. “I thought, ‘this is wine, this isn’t Gallo.’ It sort of gave me the whole idea that wine is something to get interested in from a drinking and gastronomical standpoint.”

He worked at the Modesto winery for two and a half years, gaining comprehensive experience in the production of wine, from intricate lab analyses and quality controls down to the fundamentals of cork and bottle manufacture.

Meanwhile, the Vietnam War and national draft lurked in the background. To get ahead of it, Luper quit Gallo in 1962 and signed up for the Army Language School at the Presidio of Monterey. He studied Czech at the prestigious school and ended up in Germany, “stationed on top of a very large hill in a secret facility with antennas and that sort of thing, collecting radio and voice intelligence on the Czech border.”

After three years of service, an honorable discharge, and a brief return to the Gallo lab, he decided it was time to get his college degree. Wine still beckoned, so he headed down to Fresno State University in 1968. “I got my winemaking degree in a year and a half, and I also got married to my lovely wife, Carolee. We met in college, and we’re still together,” he noted with pride.

Post-graduation the following year — and coming full-circle on that eye-opening wine discovery 10 years earlier — Luper landed a harvest position at the revered Louis Martini Winery in St. Helena. “When I was working there in the crush, I asked Mr. Martini if he had any of the ’57 Cabernet lying around, because that was my first real bottle of wine. He did, and he gave me a bottle of it.”

The iconic proprietor was the first of many legends he would encounter during his career. They included vintners who attended meetings of the Napa Valley Wine Technical Group, which he was introduced into by a couple of Fresno State friends.

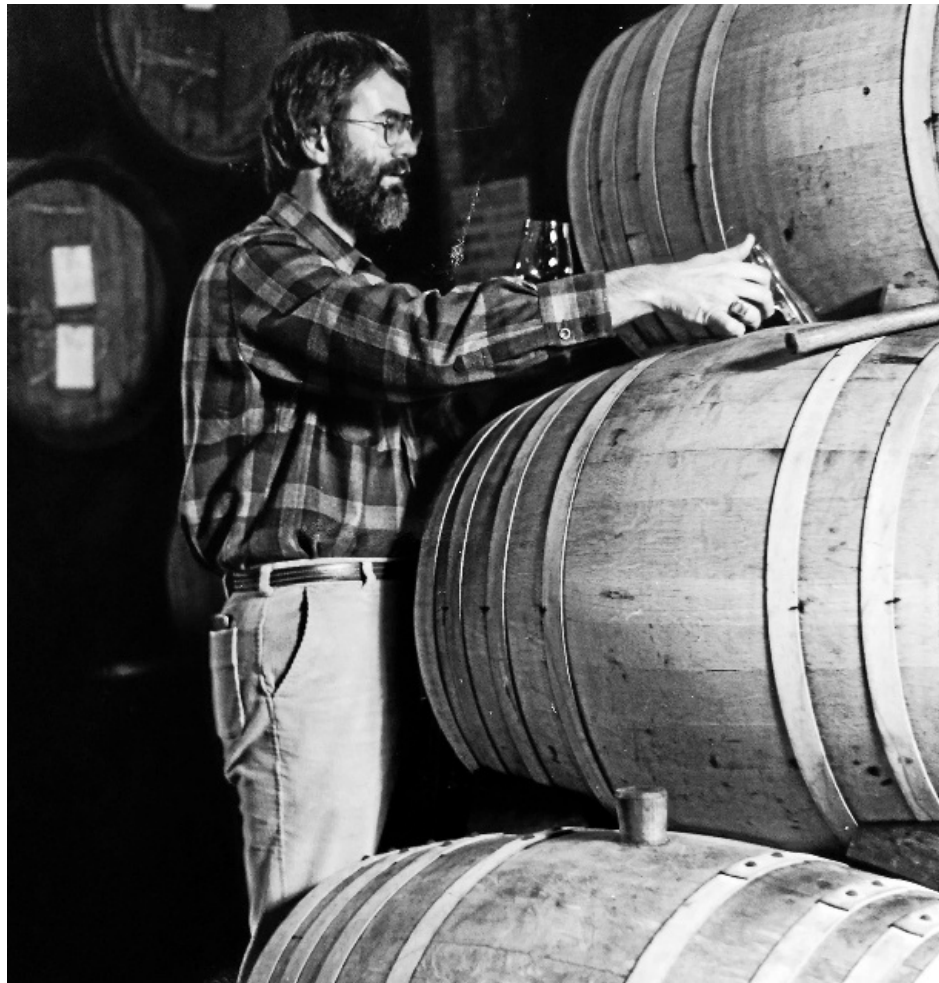
“They all went to those monthly gatherings,” Luper recalled. “Everybody from Bob Mondavi to Joe Heitz to Louis Martini; and André Tchelistcheff, Brother Justin [Meyer], Brother Timothy [Diener], Jim Nichelini, the McCreas who owned Stony Hill. All those people were there regularly, and I got to meet them all, got to know them, and they got to know me. It was just a heck of a wonderful time!”

At one of the meetings before Christmas of 1969, he met Brad Webb, the winemaker-partner at another historic St. Helena winery, Freemark Abbey. Word came around that Webb and his business partners were looking to hire an associate winemaker. Luper arranged to be interviewed by Webb and one of the partners, Chuck Carpy, and was soon offered the job.

He started in January of 1970 and eventually took over from Webb as head winemaker. Through his involvement in six harvests, he brought attention and respect to Freemark Abbey.

“Their aim is by no means mass production, but a small quantity of really first class quality [wines],” the respected British wine writer Harry Waugh wrote about Webb, Carpy, and their “young, bearded winemaker” in his 1973 book, “Winetaster’s Choice.” “and it is quite evident they are achieving this ambition.”

The spotlight shone by Waugh on both Freemark Abbey and Napa Valley caught



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JERRY LUPER

Winemaker Jerry Luper at Freemark Abbey in the 1970s.



Bill Jaeger and Jerry Luper at Rutherford Hill Winery.

the attention of an enterprising, British wine merchant in Paris named Steven Spurrier and his American sidekick, Patricia Gallagher. Almost exactly the same age as Luper, Spurrier arrived unannounced at the Freemark Abbey cellar door in the early spring of 1976 to meet and taste with the winemaker.

Just weeks later, in late May, labels from a number of Napa wineries, including Chateau Montelena, Ridge Vineyards, Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, and, of course, Freemark Abbey, would end up in Spurrier and Gallagher’s momentous Judgment of Paris — a comparative, blind tasting of Chardonnays and Cabernets from France and California, held at the InterContinental Hotel in Paris and judged by an all-French panel of wine experts. Famously, the California wines ruled the day.

It was an event that, while only briefly reported on in Time Magazine by George Taber, would blow up the California wine scene in the imaginations of American wine drinkers, from casual consumers to dedicated collectors.

Luper shared that it’s always been a point of pride for him that Freemark Abbey was the only winery at the tasting with both a

red and a white wine represented. But, he emphasized, “it’s something that, to me, is very important: in the first place it gave us — and I’m not talking about Freemark or Montelena, I’m talking about Napa Valley and a bunch of young winemakers we were — it gave us reason to be proud of what we’d been working hard to try to do for five or six years.

“And then,” he added, “in terms of reputation, the word spread around about it to the trade. So what it did was open doors to be able to sell more wine. It’s as simple as that, really just a distillation of a phenomenon that was happening all around the country from consumers’ standpoint: wine drinkers, who were interested enough to hear about that tasting and who had drunk French wine all their lives, decided to start trying California wine. You know, the ripple effect was really, really amazing.”

Just two months after the tasting in Paris, Luper departed from Freemark Abbey. He and Carolee took their four children on a sabbatical trip to France for several months, spending much of the time in Aix-en-Provence. While living there, they met up with a friend of Spurrier’s, another young Brit named Tim Johnston, who befriended

the Lupers over a shared passion for wine.

Recalling that time in a recent email, Johnston, who would go onto his own 40-year career as a respected Paris wine merchant and restaurateur, confessed that in 1976, he’d never heard of Napa Valley and “naively thought St. Helena was an island somewhere where the British had finally sent Napoleon.”

Two years later, Johnston had the opportunity to fix his geography when he and his wife, Stephanie, crossed the U.S. by motorcycle and ended up as guests of the Lupers. After returning from France the previous year, Jerry Luper had begun working as head winemaker at Chateau Montelena and got his friend a position at the Calistoga winery for the ’78 harvest.

“It was a very exciting time to be in California with so much going on,” Johnston wrote. “People were just beginning to understand the importance of the work in the vineyard and there were lots of eager, energetic young people coming into the business. I felt very privileged to be part of this movement.”

Luper spent five years at Chateau Montelena, then switched winemaking gears in the early ’80s and moved south to the cool-climate Carneros District and Bouchaine Vineyards. During that tenure, one of the young people who interned under him for a harvest was Heidi Peterson — later Heidi Barrett, whose future husband, Bo, worked under Luper at Chateau Montelena, which his family owned.

“Jerry was one of my favorite mentors, and I learned so much from him,” the famous and highly accomplished winemaker wrote in an email. “He was good at solid fundamentals, traditional and effective methods I still use to this day.”

“And,” Barrett added, “he was just plain fun to work with and delightful to be around. I loved his upbeat personality and humor.”

Luper rounded out his Napa Valley career at the picturesque, Freemark Abbey-affiliated Rutherford Hill Winery. Then, seeking a new adventure in 1993, he and Carolee relocated to Europe. A false start on a consulting project in Slovakia was followed by a successful landing in Portugal. They spent their first four years in Lisbon, where he worked at a large brandy operation, Carvalho Ribeiro e Ferreira; then from 1997 to 2008 at Oporto’s oldest wine company, Real Companhia Velha, until his retirement to France in 2008.

“If you look at his CV of the wines he made and consider the man’s achievement, Jerry has to be one of the foremost winemakers of his generation and one of those winemakers who really made a difference,” Tim Johnston wrote in his email. “He taught me a lot about California and has always been there to give advice, or his impressions on the many changes that we have seen over the years.”

The Lupers lived in the small, southern Burgundy city of Cluny for eight years, enjoying its proximity to some of France’s greatest vineyards. Most recently, they traded grapes for grandchildren to be near their youngest child, her husband, and their two daughters outside of Geneva. But, to this day, Luper’s engagement with wine has never receded too far into the background.

Back in 2002, Anthony Bourdain’s Oporto dining companion pointed out the longevity of the restaurant where they and their American guest were shooting the TV program. “They’ve been doing this for 40, 50 years at least,” he said. “It’s very, very hard to do something as well as they do.”

With Luper sitting next to him, the famous chef agreed. “This is an operation where they’ve figured out what it is they wanted to do, figured out what they do well, and they’ve been doing it relentlessly for years.”

Berger

From B1

Whether it is a Syrah, Barbera, Pinot Gris, or Pinot Noir, there’s usually sufficient profit in such wines to make certain that there is a decent value at that price.

Winemakers face a series of choices, some of which relate to how his or her particular wine company has always made certain wines.

For example, is the winery’s Sauvignon Blanc always so subtle in herbal varietal character that it’s almost nonexistent? If so, is this because the vineyard was farmed in such a way as to discourage any distinctiveness? If so, would the winemaker like to make a wine with a bit more varietal precision? If so, the winemaker then should coordinate with the owner about making adjustments in the vineyard.

If the owner is reluctant, the SB remains in the same style year after year because the winemaker knows that alterations could lead to slower sales, which could endanger his or her employment.

Now let’s look at another type of winemaker, one who is completely self-dependent without a (benign and wealthy) dictator overseeing the expenditures. These are usually small operations that are typically under-

funded and run by people who have particular wine philosophies. They’re usually unhindered by owners worried about bank loans, mortgages, car payments or other financial issues. Thus funds can be scarce.

Such independent operators are solely responsible for the products they make. As such they must pay for all of the incidentals out of pocket, including grapes, licenses, insurance, production costs, glass bottles, labels and dozens of other things. It adds up.

Such independents usually live vintage to vintage.

The only way making wine at tiny wineries makes any economic sense is through the concept of sweat equity — which means doing almost everything yourself. This can include driving a forklift, transferring liquids from tanks to barrels and endless cleanup. It’s exhausting work and finding cellar workers to assist is a crucial element.

Such work can be overwhelmingly stressful when disaster strikes, such as illness or injury. Or mechanical malfunctions.

With grapes costing more and more, wineries run by independent winemakers call for strong relationships with vineyard managers. Coordination is crucial. Fruit must conform to the winemaker’s needs. A poor harvest purchase could be a disaster.

These operations can be successful, but mainly in an artisanal sense. Quality is often high. Although some of the resulting wines can be truly exciting, many offer consumers a challenge to the notion of mainstream-ness. Occasionally these wines show a little bit more of the rustic, a little bit less of the silkiness.

When a decision has to be made in the independent winery and time is of the essence, the skill of the winemaker is confronted “on the fly,” much the way a basketball guard has to think instantly in handling a fast-break.

Split-second decision-making is demanded. In some cases, it’s not possible to put crucial decisions off until tomorrow, allowing the winemaker to sleep on the decision and choose the best option. Sometimes the dilemma is so crucial something must be done now.

Similar decisions occur around the wine world, wherever wine is made. The decisions from one wine to the next can differ radically, even if the exact same grape variety is being utilized. In Chablis, for instance every house in that French district makes just one wine, using Chardonnay grapes from roughly the same soils and climate. There are no red wines.

But what the winemakers at

François Raveneau face as dilemmas may radically differ from what the winemakers at Jean-Marc Brocard confront. Every fine Chablis house must aim for each wine to be crafted as close, style-wise, to what it has always done — adhering to a house style for each designation.

However, with most European producers that make a limited number of wines, the house style usually is critical. It calls for avoiding Mother Nature’s quirks and foibles from year to year. Vintage variation can be nasty or beneficial.

When a vintage turns out to be excellent, winemakers’ happiness still has a dark side, relating to how best to allocate the rewards. It’s all well and good to make a fabulous 2020, but if 2021 later turns out to be somewhat of a washout, the winemaker runs the risk of experts comparing the two vintages and saying something’s wrong with the latter wine.

Decades ago, I was privy to a curious conversation at a very small, exclusive Napa Valley Cabernet producer. While one exceptional vintage was still aging in the barrel, the next year turned out to be a complete bust. I tasted the wines in side-by-side glasses and it was clear that the slightly older wine was spectacular and the slightly younger one was kaput. It was thin and terrible.

The winemaker asked me for a suggestion. I had none. A few months later, I happened by the winery again and asked what the owner had done to salvage the younger one. The washout ended up with 40% of the older wine, which ended up with 60% of the younger.

Time went by and as both wines aged, both seemed to benefit from the solution! (Yes, what the winemaker did was completely illegal, but old saying goes, it’s only illegal if you’re caught!)

Wine of the Week: 2019 Kukeri Cabernet Sauvignon, Stag’s Leap (\$85) — I’m normally not enamored of Cabernets that contain 15% alcohol and have a pH above 3.7, but after trying this wine that has actual subregional character I decided to see if it would improve in the decanter. Many hours later, it had and the structure was appropriate for the flavors it delivered. Info, kukeriwines.com/product/2019-kukeri-stags-leap-district-cabernet-sauvignon/

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