

A Classmate's story: My Life in Wine

From Jack Goldenberg

I am in awe of H.G. Bloom! H.G. and I have been friends since we were in grade school. He has always been a leader. He has always been passionate about everything that's important to him. He has always been successful. Last month, H.G. wrote an amazing article about the great things he and Pat are doing in Africa transforming the quality of life of the Kisoro elders. The newsletter shares stories of classmates that are interesting and inspiring.

And.. then

I get an email-- Elsie asking me to write about my career in the wine and spirits industry for an upcoming newsletter.

Here goes: My career has been absolute fun but now I've been asked to write a bit about my profession to a jury of my classmates, many of whom have accomplished great things. My professional life may not be as inspiring as others' stories, but it has been wonderful for me and I think there's a lot to be said for following a passion, learning history on the way, and bringing enjoyment to others' lives.

My family business has been in *distribution* since my Grandfather stopped making cigars just after the turn of the century and started selling candy and tobacco products across northern Minnesota. Against his better judgement, my grandfather branched out into liquor distribution about three years after the repeal of Prohibition. My Dad ran the business after my Grandfather passed away, just before I was born.

It was our FAMILY BUSINESS and I always wanted to follow in my father's footsteps, so I went to work directly after graduation from college. Then, just one year later, Dad decided that someone had to get immersed in the wine business that was just beginning to explode. That would be me. So he and I consulted with a major supplier of European wines, and I was sent off to France to intern with wine producers in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Champagne. At 22 I had no idea what to expect! But – how could I turn down the chance to visit medieval history in real time! What an adventure I embarked on and oh, what I learned.

Luckily, as many of our classmates did, I had taken *Introduction to Art History* at Penn. I fell in love with Medieval European Art. And then, my Senior Seminar in English was led by Richard Hoffman, whose concentration was in Medieval English Literature. And I was luckily off to be in the perfect place I had fallen in love with during classes as an undergraduate at Penn

I arrived in Beaune, France on July 4, 1969 and found myself immersed in a wine culture that had been codified in the Middle Ages. I found myself surrounded with stories of vineyards and wines that began 1200-1500 years earlier. I was captivated by the wine, the art, and the history!

What is he talking about you ask???? Read on, and chin-chin!

Some historic background and just one story of many stories: In 632 AD, Louis, the German, gave a piece of land to the Monks of the *Abbey of Beze* so that the Monks could grow their own grapes to make their own altar wine. The monks built a wall around their new property, which became known as the *Clos de Beze*. They made great wine. 600 years later, a freedman named Bertin acquired the field

next to the *Clos de Beze*. Since Bertin knew nothing about growing grapes, he spent his life copying whatever the monks did. As it turned out, Bertin's fields and land (the terroir at Le Chambertin) produced better wine than its neighbor and soon Clos de Beze was known as *Chambertin Clos de Beze*. Time marches on: 600 years later, in the 19th century, the citizens of the town of Gevrey, where both vineyards are located, figured out that they could all make more money if they attached the name of the best vineyard to the town of Gevrey became *Gevrey-Chambertin*. So it stayed.

Another story, and a bit more history

At the end of the 8th Century, Charlemagne was living in his palace in what is now, Bingen, Germany. He noticed a field across the Rhine where, apparently, the snow melted earliest in the Spring. Charlemagne ruled that that field should be planted with grapes. Fast forward, 1000 years!

In 1815, Prince Metternich ran The Congress of Vienna, which divided up Europe after the final defeat of Napoleon. As reward for his service, the Prince was given the *Schloss Johannisberg*, the home of the finest clone of Riesling grapes. *Another historic note:* All grape vines are cloned, with vines traced back thousands of years. Grape vines were carried by soldiers and armies as they tramped across Europe, invading, and pillaging and reigning, so that rough wine could be made to purify the water the soldiers need to drink -- and perhaps, to calm the troops?

Speaking of soldiers...one wing of the *Schloss Johannisberg* was destroyed by Allied Forces in World War II because the Germans were using the hilltop site as a base for their artillery. The side of the castle that housed the artillery is now an indoor tennis court.

The end of this story, I suppose, was having the current Prince Metternich show up in my office in the late '80s. I was disappointed to discover that, while a link to a rich history, this generation was a playboy racecar driver who was picking up some income representing the estate that he had lost through....lack of interest, I think.

So I know that there is a story behind every wine. The people who made history have also made wine, or owned great estates and hired others to make the wine. And that's still true today. The stories and the wine are both fabulous. And so are many of the people who love both.

My daughters, Rachel (Col '00) and Ann (Col '03) (and I'm awfully proud that they wanted to go to school where I did) both went into the wine business. Rachel says that Ann is captivated by the vineyards and the technical aspects of winemaking, and that Dad (me) is enamored by the history of every vineyard....and she's right. She says her interest is in the sound of the "cash register" when another pallet leaves the warehouse.

So, even though wine and spirits were not going to make a multimillionaire, we have been able to travel to Chateaux and vineyards like we were the *rich & famous* – doing business in places that are dream vacations for most people but have been all in a day's work for me! It has been a great way to make a living and I have looked forward to going to work every day.

I went to Europe as a very young man and fell in love with the history and stories of every estate and of every winemaker and of every wine. As time passed, I found more stories of more estates in every wine producing country, including our own. Along the way, I found so many wonderful wines and so many wonderful flavors. It has been an adventure finding the products, figuring out how to represent

them, finding the staff to sell them, and developing strategies to move them through the channel of distribution.

Ten years ago, it became clear to me that the world of wine and liquor distribution was changing and there was little place for a family-owned operation doing business in only one state. We sold the business and I tried retirement. I flunked!

I knew that I had to do something. I also knew that my life expectancy was longer than my money would last. It was obvious to me that I didn't know how to do anything but sell beverage alcohol....and I had no interest in selling it by the drink. All that was left was to find a liquor store.

For the last seven years we have been working at resuscitating what had been a moribund wine shop on the edge of downtown Minneapolis. I miss the distribution business terribly, but that business has changed dramatically, and it doesn't look like it's as much fun as it once was. I'm not one to dwell on the past. I'd rather look forward. The retail business has its own set of challenges and its own kind of fun. We also learned that selling wine and spirits to a store was completely different from selling the same products to a bar or a restaurant.

I have a son in law in the business who understands retail better than I ever will. He has made us a destination outlet for good Bourbon. We have a brightly lit, clean store with an impeccably curated selection of wines, spirits and beers from all around the world. Don does all the heavy lifting, and I get to introduce our customers to some wonderful flavors they never knew AND share with them the wonderful backstory that goes with every product. I can ship almost anywhere that it is legal, and there are new products to road test all the time too. It's fun...and I think it keeps me young.

So, with all due credit to H.G. who is doing GREAT things, and to Art Muir, who is conquering the highest peaks, and to all of our classmates who continue to be exceptional, this is my little story of loving what I do - with praise for the way in which Penn shaped my love of wine and history, and of how I pivoted to a whole new job when most people are ready to retire. Perhaps that's because every day I get to sample! A votre-sante, my friends, with a Toast to Dear Old Penn.