

# Kermit Lynch

Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, California

The iconic importer is excited about a new generation of European winemakers.

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Paragon of terroirists, champion of unfiltered wines, patron saint of organic viticulture: You needn't adhere to any of these religions to know that Kermit Lynch has been one of the most influential figures in the wine world since he founded his revolutionary Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant as a retail store in 1972. Later, in the mid-'80s, he expanded his business into an internationally acclaimed import company.

Then there's the book: Lynch's classic *Adventures on the Wine Route*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1988 and now in its 20th printing in paperback from North Point Press. One of his greatest admirers, Winebow's Leonardo LoCascio, has described Lynch as "the most coherent example of a wine importer . . . all of us spend time with our producers, but Kermit took things one step further and went to live among them." *Adventures* chronicles Lynch's early encounters with the most staunchly traditionalist French winemakers, who were struggling to maintain the integrity of their craft amid the onslaught of technology, modern-day market demands, and the slings and arrows of outrageous critics. Since those days, Lynch and his family (wife Gail Skoff, a professional photographer, and kids Marley and Anthony, now ages 21 and 19) have split time each year between homes near Bandol, France, and in Berkeley, Calif., avoiding the harsh Provençal winters.

Accolades have been legion, as in being named a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur (2005), a Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole (1998), and the James Beard Foundation's Wine Professional of the Year (2000). In 1998, Lynch purchased the historic Domaine Les Pallières in Gigondas, where he makes wine with the help of Vieux Télégraphe's Brunier family. But among his most recent achievements, he may be proudest of his two vocal recordings—*Quicksand Blues* (2005)



and *Man's Temptation* (2009)—backed by top-notch Nashville and West Coast musicians and released by Dualtone Records. Lynch's singing voice has been described by Ed Paladino of Portland's E&R Wine Shop as "a rollick with a riff-raff of raspy Rod Stewart channeling Dylan." Bonny Doon's Randall Grahm has called Lynch "the father of the reefer" (meaning the refrigerated container, of course). Grateful Palate's Dan Philips says "there isn't a day that passes when I don't think about Kermit . . . he has been my mentor through example and study"—yet Philips has never even met the famous wine importer-turned-bluesman!

Last December, Lynch and I got together over lunch at Chez Panisse and then at his store in Berkeley. We began our conversation by revisiting some of the producers he had immortalized in *Adventures on the Wine Route*.

RANDY CAPAROSO

**W**hat changes have been brought about by new generations among the producers you wrote about more than 20 years ago?

Each winery is a different story. Sometimes, the transition will involve a son or daughter, working hard to improve the quality of their wines. Back when I started, it was usually the opposite. You would have a son or daughter who graduated from a school of viticulture or enology, but all they were interested in was making a stable, predictable wine to satisfy the market, not the soul.

At Domaine Tempier in Bandol, the most recent change in generations has meant nothing but good. Daniel Ravier took over with the 2000 vintage, following Jean-Marie Peyraud, who had taken over from his father Lucien. There are four sisters and two brothers who are still the owners of the domaine, and, of course, they make the big decisions—they're the boss. Ravier is sort of the general manager who makes all the day-to-day winemaking decisions, and Lulu Peyraud still lives at the domaine. I think the wines became considerably better almost immediately after the winemaking was turned over to Ravier, who had to come from outside the Peyraud family.

#### **Was there a skill factor involved?**

There's certainly that, but it's also because Ravier had already spent decades in the region, making wine and olive oil. He's got his feet in the soil—that makes a difference. I always think it's strange when a renowned domaine hires a renowned winemaker from outside the region, like from Bordeaux, to make their wine for them, yet it's something you see quite a bit. Part of my definition of terroir involves the tradition of winemaking—when you start playing around with that, the wine is bound to change. You almost end up, in this varietal world we live in right now, with wines that don't have that character, or "thereness," of terroir. I don't understand fruit-driven wines. Why not just buy fruit juice?

#### **Domaine Tempier has also been long associated with the avoidance of sulfur dioxide. Have there been changes there in that respect?**

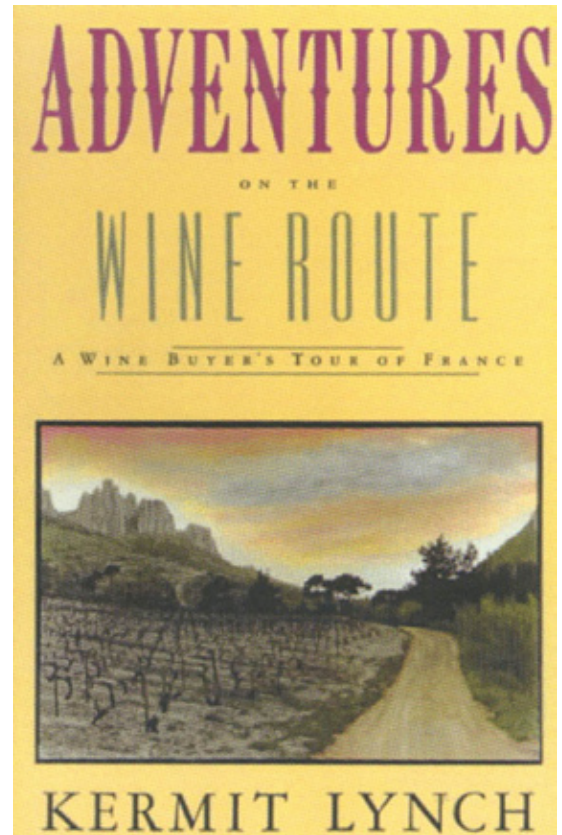
Lucien Peyraud, who originally made Bandol what it is today, actually did give his wines sulfur dioxide. Because of the way the wine was raised, it would get reduced, and SO<sub>2</sub> would have protected it from reduction; you could also rack

it. But there would be problems with the wines, especially when Jean-Marie began making them, because he often did not rack enough. So you had wines that some people thought were refermenting in the bottle, but this was actually caused by residual gas *carbonique* because the wines were not racked enough. The problem disappeared after the wine-making was taken over by Ravier, who is more of a perfectionist. It's been the same at Domaine Joguet in recent vintages.

#### **How has the change in ownership gone at Domaine Joguet in the Loire Valley?**

Charles Joguet was a big transition because he had no kids. So he sold the domaine about 12 years ago, and his team stayed on. He lives there, and wine continues to be made under his name. I visit, I have lunch with him from time to time, but I don't know what his day-to-day role is. When Joguet ran his domaine, he was not just a trailblazer—bringing Chinon up to the stature it has today—but he was also a gambler. Yet Charles tells me that the wines have been more consistent in recent years, and I have to agree.

You know, since I've started going to France, there have been big changes. There are a lot more people trying to make natural, unfiltered wine these days. When I first went over, the issue was all these squeaky-clean wines with no character—with, of course, the exceptions like Domaine Tempier and Vieux Télégraphe. But you also need to consider that before, Henri Brunier would only bottle one out of every two or three vintages. His sons have the talent, and they've been able to make good wine practically every vintage. The only recent vintage that wasn't released was 2002. Things are better than ever. It's also global warming; it's not just talent and improved winemaking these days.



Randy Caparoso is a career wine professional, longtime journalist, and restaurant wine consultant (Wine List Consulting Unlimited, [www.winelistconsulting.com](http://www.winelistconsulting.com)). As a founding partner and former vice president and corporate wine director of the Roy's Restaurant Group, he was Santé's first Restaurant Wine & Spirits Professional of the Year in 1998; in 1992 and 1999, he was Restaurant Wine's Wine Marketer of the Year.

### **What about in Savennières, at Château d'Epiré?**

There have been many changes there. Their story has always been about the same family, the Bizards, but with three different winemakers, hired from outside the family, since I started going there around 1977. One of the winemakers was not very successful, and during that period, I let them know how I felt. I don't know how much I had to do with it, but the changes eventually turned out for the better, and the quality during the past five or six years has been as great as ever.

It's an interesting story. When the father, with whom I started working in the '70s, died in 1985, the kids immediately began to replace the old *demi-muids* (the large oval casks) with stainless-steel tanks. With old Monsieur Bizard, I was always allowed to come in and create my own blends, but suddenly, I was being offered choices strictly from stainless steel. I told them that for the Cuvée Spéciale that I imported, which always came from the oldest vines, I needed the wine to come from *demi-muids* rather than the sterile tanks. Eventually, they came around, and I still go back to make my blends. I prefer the traditional style of Savennières from *demi-muids*, but sometimes, I'll add some wine from stainless steel if it helps to make a better wine—there are no rules when it comes to this.

### **You have the reputation of being a strict traditionalist.**

I think that's one of the mistakes that people make about me. They read my book, and they see what I think about filtration, and based upon that, they say something that I've never said: that Kermit Lynch imports only unfiltered wines. That's not true at all. If I think a winemaker's

talented enough to pull it off, I prefer an unfiltered wine. But you have to start with the idea that a wine is going to be unfiltered and take care of it in a different way. In the best of all possible worlds, all my wines would be unfiltered, but some producers are better off filtering.

The best producers are always changing. It is a mistake to think that tradition means staying in one place. At both Tempier and Vieux Télégraphe, for years and years, there would be a "cuvée unfiltered" made for me and something else for the rest of the world. Neither one of them was completely behind

unfiltered wine at the beginning. It was only after about a dozen years for the Peyrauds—the Bruniers took a little bit longer at Vieux Télégraphe—that they came around, and today, neither of them filters any of their reds.

This thing about filtration is not something based upon some philosophical idea—it comes from tasting and observing wines as they age. No one can talk about filtration unless they've had the chance to taste exactly the same cuvées, filtered and unfiltered, over a period of time. Only then do you understand what filtration takes out. Then you find that in almost all instances, the filtered wines lose their color and their aroma, and the unfiltered wines don't—99% of the time. Unfiltered wines, both white and red, retain so much more flesh, so much more flavor.

### **What do you think your impact has been on Burgundian winemakers?**

Most of my reds from Burgundy are unfiltered, and most of the winemakers I know have been excited about it. This idea of filtering originally came from somebody telling the winemakers that the market won't accept wines that are bottled with some little speck of something or other. But these days, when I tell winemakers that I want my wine unfiltered, they say, "Yeah, great, I wish everybody were like you!"

In the past, the story was different: owners who would say, "It's just had light filtration." Then I would have to ask, "What do you mean by 'light'?" And they would talk about using cardboard or diatomaceous earth. One of them started off by telling me he only did "light" filtrations and explained how he filtered a wine with a filter pad No. 3, which is pretty wide and takes out the flies and stuff, and then how he filtered it with a No. 7, which takes out just about everything. After that, he did a *sterile* filtration. I asked him why, and he said, "Well, my wine is so dense that it won't go through the sterile filter if I don't do the other filtrations." What's amazing is that you're tasting his new vintage, which is black and so delicious, coming right out of the *cuvée*. Then he pours his wine from last year, which has already been bottled and filtered like hell, and it looks more like rosé!

### **Can you talk about your experience in Beaujolais, which, it seems, has become more popular after a long period of relative dormancy?**

For my producers, that's been very true—we're selling more great Beaujolais than ever before. Restaurants are eating them up, probably



Photo by Randy Caparoso

because people are catching on to how versatile wines made from Gamay are with food—certainly a refreshing antidote to many of the overpriced reds you see these days. But overall, the Beaujolais region is suffering. It is the quality producers—like Jean Foillard, Marcel Lapierre, Jean-Paul Thévenet, and Guy Breton—who are doing great. Others in the region are seeing the trucks coming by, picking up all the wines the good producers can make. There's going to be a pendulum shift toward wines that are the opposite of what you mostly see in Beaujolais, from vineyards in which there has been no real cultivation other than for huge production of weak wines with heavy use of herbicides and pesticides. In these vineyards, there is nothing growing between the vines—just bare earth, no life. That's going to change, and the pioneers like Lapierre and the “Gang of Four” have been leading those changes.

**Will they be able to make this new style work economically?**

They're succeeding because they get a lot more money for their wines, of course, and in recent years, there have been more like them. I saw a Morgon recently in New York—I believe it was a Duboeuf—that was on a shelf for \$12 a bottle. Lapierre is up around \$26-27, and we can hardly keep it on the shelf. Other winemakers in Beaujolais are seeing this, and they're saying, “I'm going to change.” Just like Côte-Rôtie was transformed by Guigal. Côte-Rôtie used to be a gem of a Syrah, with natural, exotic aromas, and now it's not; it has become more about tannin and oak.

**What are you currently working on in the Northern Rhône?**

I've got a very interesting new Côte-Rôtie coming out under my own label this coming year, something I put together, showing what I think Côte-Rôtie is about. Of course, the two that I already bring in, from Philippe Faury and Patrick Jasmin, I like very much—they've always been known for finesse, and I've been working with them for a long time. Especially Faury, because he has always let me do my own blends, and it's not done in an oakier style.

**So if a producer, from Côte-Rôtie or elsewhere, decided to change to a less finesseful, oakier style, is it safe to say he would no longer find a place in the Kermit Lynch portfolio?**

He wouldn't, but he'd find another importer

real quick! Then again, most people think Côte-Rôtie is a heavy, oaky, alcoholic wine. That's not what it always was if you read the literature from the past.

**Are your Beaujolais producers having issues with the stability of unsulfured wines?**

It may come as a surprise to many people to know that I don't believe that unsulfured wines are necessarily the purest. I've been working with all my producers on this, in all the regions. In Beaujolais, we have seen too many wines gone wrong, but I haven't had a problem with instability since I began talking to my producers about this, going back at least the past two vintages. And they all knew there were problems in the bottle, and so they are now using the small amounts of sulfur we are asking them to: minimal doses, but at least 15 grams. I want to continue working with unsulfured wines with Lapierre because we taste together so often, sharing ideas like if you want to bottle without sulfur, do you bottle early or do you bottle late, do you do it in stainless or do you do it in wood, in barrel, or in *foudre*? With Lapierre, I want to see how stable a wine we can make without sulfur, and I think he is good enough to do it.

The first significant Beaujolais that I imported, back in 1979, was by Jules Chauvet, the original instigator behind the Gang of Four. Chauvet was also a microbiologist, and I never had stability problems with his wines. I only imported three vintages before he died, but those wines had aromas that I call “cornucopian”—so much in there to entice you. Yet these were not grand cru, just Beaujolais Villages. Chauvet was that good.

My thinking about unsulfured wines that prove unstable in the bottle is that it's not fair to the customer and it's not fair to the wine. How many great wines have I seen that were bottled without sulfur, but somewhere along the line—a month or six months or two years later—



2009 Domaine Dupeuble Beaujolais Nouveau (above); Lionel and Philippe Faury (bottom).



became undrinkable? What is the virtue of that? I do feel a little responsible for being part of this almost religious fervor for non-SO<sub>2</sub> wines. Based upon good experience, from 1979 until about two years ago—you're talking about almost 30 years of experimentation—I've made the decision that if it's done well, sulfur is a great gift.

***A sommelier recently told me how much he enjoyed a 5-year-old bottling of your Beaujolais Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), formerly under the Kermit Lynch label and now Domaine Dupeuble. He found it to be perfectly fresh, in immaculate shape.***

Here again, Dupeuble is always bottled unfiltered, so I'm not surprised to hear that. One year, we found a case of Dupeuble's Beaujolais Nouveau that had been buried in the warehouse for almost two years—long past the usual expiration date. We pulled a bottle and opened it, and here it was: being unfiltered and unsulfured, it had a deposit more than an inch deep, and it was unbelievably fresh. That deposit may have had something to do with nourishing the wine and keeping it alive. I love everything about Beaujolais Nouveau, and that's why we celebrate it each year. But most of them are pasteurized, cold-stabilized, sterile-filtered, and sulfured, yet they're supposed to be drunk right then and there. It's unbelievable—there's no reason to do this to a wine you drink immediately. You taste Dupeuble's Nouveau, and what do you get? *Ba-bammm!* Being unfiltered and unsulfured makes all the difference in the world.

***Some of your most quoted passages in Adventures concern wines that are made to attain high scores instead of pairing with food. How have things changed in that regard?***

Unfortunately, today, wine is made to score points, even though wine was originally made to go with food or just to make you feel good. You end up with winemakers in places like Muscadet putting their wines in new oak to make it taste more like Montrachet, because they think they're going to get higher points. I don't get that, because first of all, you can't ask Muscadet to be Montrachet. It stands to reason that the most perfect Muscadet in the world deserves a score of 99 or 100 as much as a Montrachet. The "good"

Muscadets you see around are tagged with scores like 88 or 89. Regardless of the score, a perfect Muscadet has its function, and it's never going to be the same as a Montrachet. But you have to understand that most people in this country think that "I can't trust my wine merchant," or "I can never trust Kermit Lynch, because he's trying to sell me *his* wine." They never stop to think that it is the *critic* who is trying to sell his journal or his magazine. It's a little twisted, but that's the mess scores make of everything. They all do it—everyone is peddling their scores, so many of them that the message has become hopelessly diluted, and now we've even got critics and magazines in France doing the same.

***Presuming sommeliers are not as gullible as consumers, what advice would you give them?***

It's one of the bright spots in the wine world that I see so many sommeliers, and so many wine lists, who aren't paying attention to scores. They're not paying attention to fame; they're trying to buy wines that they think are interesting. Early in my career, I got the reputation of bringing in esoteric wines, but when I go to some restaurants now, I have to ask, "What's this—where's this from?" Sommeliers these days are much more daring, and it's fabulous.

But for advice, here's something a little more specific: I've been traveling quite a bit lately—something I haven't done in a long time—to places like Boston and Portland. Of course, I've been traveling mostly to promote my CD, *Man's Temptation*, and pouring a little wine on the side. In restaurants, just like at home, I've always liked a good white Burgundy. What I noticed, in New York and a little bit in the Bay Area as well, is that when you go to a wine list and locate the Burgundy section, and you look for a Chablis AOC, you cannot believe the crap—I'm sorry, I can't find a better word—that you end up finding. It's all shippers' wines! You go to look at sections for other regions, and you see these really good wines from great growers. I don't get it, because there are so many great growers' wines made at the AOC level, from Chablis as well as Mâcon and Vézelay, and they're so cheap, why settle for something from a *négociant*?

Somebody told me that if a restaurant wants a special cuvée from an importer, then you make a deal—you can get the wine if you sell a few cases of this other wine, by the glass or whatever. OK, but sommeliers today also have the chance to do something special. Before, you know how Americans were: they used to say, "I won't drink



a Meursault, I have to have a premier cru Meursault.” Now, people are hesitating at the price of cru Meursault, so here’s the chance for sommeliers to turn people on to all the exciting AOC Meursault—or AOC Chablis, Mâcon, and don’t forget Rully—that are out there. That’s an area a smart sommelier can concentrate on and make a lot of people happy.

**Today, of course, there is also a lot of consumer interest in biodynamic growers, and you have a few of them.**

Domaine Ostertag is a certified Biodynamic producer in Alsace, as is Kuentz-Bas. Then there’s Lapierre, Domaine Breton in the Loire, the Cairanne that I import by Domaine Catherine le Goeuil, and several more who are organic. It may not be a coincidence that producers I like happen to be organic, but it’s never something I ask when I speak to producers—whether they are organic or biodynamic.

Of course, I can talk about Les Pallières, which I own with the Bruniers. We grow organic, and we have the soil to prove to people that we do. But to get the certificate, you have to endure another layer of bureaucrats coming through your cellar, and then you have to pay for that privilege. Like many others, we don’t want somebody to tell us how to make the wine or what we should do in the vineyard, not knowing who exactly is getting that money. I know many of my growers could never pay for certifications, which can run you in the thousands.

**You mentioned having a reputation for “esoteric wines.” What’s esoteric for Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant these days?**

I’m bringing in a lot of Vermentino, sometimes blended, but sometimes pure, from Liguria. Our Punta Crena Vermentino just blows you away. Also from Liguria, there is a new Pigato by Fèipu dei Massaretti. The Pigato grape makes a beautiful white wine, similar to Vermentino, but contrary to what’s been told, it is not the same grape as Vermentino. These wines are sort of like Pinot Noir in the way that they’re so impressionable or transparent. What’s growing around the vineyard affects the way it smells—the minerality, or the salt from the sea, comes right through it. This is the stuff that turns me on.

**Do you get the quality of garrigue?**

Well, in the Vermentino whites from Provence, and in Pigato from Liguria, we get the qualities of garrigue. But in the Vermentino

from Corsica, we get the spicy, herbal qualities of *maquis*, which comes from the scrubland unique to Corsica. I’ve just brought in a new producer from Cap Corse, at the northern tip where it juts out into the Mediterranean. Cap Corse is where I started in Corsica in 1981, with the producer Clos Nicrosi, but there was a change of ownership and I had to quit working with them. Just recently, we had a staff tasting of our new ’07 Raveneau Chablis, and lined up beside them we had this rosé and Vermentino Cap Corse from our new guy, Domaine de Gioielli. Our staff knows full well the style of Vermentino from Patrimonio, by Yves Leccia and Antonio Arena, which grows in limestone and tends to make very full-bodied, fleshy wines. Cap Corse Vermentino comes from higher altitudes and from different, schist-type soils, and we couldn’t help but notice, “My god, this is like Chablis is to Meursault” when comparing Cap Corse to Patrimonio, even though the two appellations are adjacent to each other. I’m not sure if the wines will prove to have the same magic we always found in Luigi Nicrosi’s, but we’re excited.

Sometimes I think when I retire, I’ll write a book called *The Ones That Got Away*, because there’s so much in the stories about what came between us and the producers we used to work with—like Clos Nicrosi and Domaine de Coujan, where we did three vintages of that beautiful, Rolle-based white wine from Coteaux de Murviel in the Languedoc.

**Then again, there are the Bruniers at Vieux Télégraphe and Clos Sainte-Magdeleine in Cassis, who are also celebrated in your book—producers you’ve stuck with from the beginning.**

For Magdeleine, it’s been since 1976. Why? Their Cassis Blanc just keeps getting better and better. I still work with François Sack, although just this year, his two sons have started assisting him—two kids so beautiful, I’m surprised they aren’t movie stars.

**Let’s hope the Bruniers and Sacks never make it into that book on the ones that got away.**

No, I suspect they never will! ☹



Domaine Les Pallières vineyard in Gigondas.

