

Old-school Wine

JOE DRESSNER IS STANDING in the corner of the restaurant Cru, one of Manhattan's great monuments to wine. Dressner, cofounder and partner with his wife in the New York-based wine importing company Louis/Dressner Selections, is being honored tonight for promoting the wines of Burgundy, yet he looks uneasy. A champion of small wineries and a staunch opponent of modern techniques, he's an outsider in a global wine industry that is increasingly corporate and mechanized. Even at this friendly affair, he can't help himself from criticizing another guest's wine-making methods. Throughout the night, over the din of the crowd, his loud Queens-accented voice can be heard espousing his views.

Dressner is a devoted traditionalist who seeks out so-called natural wines made by like-minded holdouts who shun modern wine-making technology. He now imports wines from more than sixty vineyards in France, Italy, and Portugal that use arcane techniques, including hand harvesting, natural yeasts, and a minimal amount of filtering. This may seem like a quaint idea, but Dressner will defend it with the brashness and bullying of an old man on a park bench arguing about where to find the city's finest bagel.

There was a time when he wouldn't have had to. But starting in the 1970s, there was a push toward mechanization in French vineyards, which led to a major revolution in wine making. New, improved harvesting machines offered even small farmers a way to increase yields and lower costs. ("Hand harvesting is expensive in France," Dressner explains, "because France doesn't have a migrant labor population.") To make room for the machines, many vineyard owners tore out old vines and created wider rows. They replanted with varieties that, according to Dressner, weren't as flavorful. To ensure their survival and increase their yields, the farmers began to use fertilizer and herbicides, which also eliminated the need to plow the fields.

"In the old days the soil was tilled, it was alive," says Dressner. "There were weeds, there were bushes, there were walls. But everything was ripped out to maximize machinery without any concern for soil erosion or the character of the *terroir*."

In the wine world that is no idle charge. France has built its wine industry and world-famous reputation on the concept of *terroir*. According to the French, wine made in one region should not taste like wine made anywhere else in the world.

In many ways the changes in growing methods radically altered wine making, arguably creating an entirely new industry. To combat the side effects of high-yield, mechanized farming—effects resulting from less flavorful and often damaged grapes—winemakers had to come up with ever more sophisticated, and artificial, ways to ensure fine taste.

Traditionally, winemakers relied on the yeasts found naturally in the air or on the grape skins to convert the sugars in the grape juice into alcohol. With this method the length of the fermentation can vary dramatically from year to year, and the wine produced can thus taste quite different in any given year. Yet the rewards for using natural yeast are many. The wine produced has a more complex and engaging taste and smell because the wildness of the yeast comes through in the finished wine. One of Dressner's growers has a cellar that dates back to the sixteenth century. "It's like out of a horror movie," he says. But this cellar's late-night-movie appearance is key to the wine's taste. According to Dressner, "No doubt if they made their wine elsewhere the wine wouldn't be the same, because there's a bacterial population several centuries old in their cellar."

Because natural yeast fermentation is hard to control, most modern winemakers, whose high-tech cellars often look more like antiseptic laboratories, now add a formulated yeast and enzyme to the grape juice, nullifying the natural yeasts in the process and limiting the variations from one vintage to another. Plus, by choosing the yeast strain and injecting a particular enzyme into the grape juice, winemakers can make a wine that has a hint of raspberry or perhaps cherry. They can further manipulate the taste of the wine with different techniques, such as filtering, pumping oxygen through it, or even adding wood chips.

Dressner's beliefs place him in a select group of natural-wine importers, including Kermit Lynch and Neal Rosenthal.



Above: Joe Dressner enjoys a meal with two of his winemakers, Jean-Paul Brun, owner of *Domaine des Terres Dorées*, and Louis-Claude Desvignes, producer of *Morgon* wine, Beaujolais, France.

COURTESY OF POLANER SELECTIONS

But Dressner seeks to distance himself even from these colleagues. "I think on the whole my winemakers have been more extreme," he says. Recently, for example, one of his vintners decided to make a more concentrated style of wine using techniques that are too modern for Dressner's taste. Even though Louis/Dressner had been able to sell the wine easily and would have continued to sell it well, the company no longer does business with that maker. "I just wished them good luck. It's not our style," Dressner explained. "I think we take a lot of time and attention to make certain that if it carries our label, it has a certain stylistic integrity."

Ideologically, Dressner also distances himself from other natural-wine importers. "I think some of our competitors also bought into a sort of mythology that what the importer does is find the raw savage; we tell them how to make wine, how not to filter it." Dressner doesn't believe that this approach works, since the wine is better when the winemaker shares the same beliefs as the importer. "Frankly, they never do it well if they don't have conviction. What you want to find is people who share your passion and belief in real wine."

Dressner discovered his own passion for food and wine in San Francisco. In 1975 at the age of twenty-four without much money or any real job prospects, he moved west from

New York. Having been involved in the antiwar movement as a teenager, and heavily influenced by the 1968 Columbia student strike, he was interested in radical politics ("entirely legal," he says). The progressive attitudes of the Bay Area attracted him. He found a nice cheap apartment in North Beach not far from Lawrence Ferlinghetti's bookstore. Even though he was for the most part unemployed, the city at that time was cheap and offered him a smorgasbord of different foods and cuisines, among which were tastings at a local wine store. At a friend's suggestion, he bought a few cases of Stag's Leap, which had gained some notoriety for beating French wines at an international wine competition in 1976. "It was like \$5.99 a bottle, which was horrifyingly expensive."

But after five years the West Coast lifestyle began to grate on his New York sensibilities. "At one point I was at an espresso bar. This was pre-Starbucks. I'm on line, and I bump into a woman in front of me. I said, 'Excuse me.' The woman turned around, put her hand on my arm and said, 'Why are you afraid to touch another human being?' And I thought, 'Maybe I should go back to New York.'"

Dressner returned to the East Coast when he was thirty and soon thereafter entered New York University's journalism school. On the first day of class, he was seated next to a Frenchwoman named Denyse Louis. It wasn't long before the two fell in love and married. After graduation a house that had been in Denyse's family became available, and the newlyweds decided to spend five months in the Mâconnais region of France.

"I had a few thousand dollars in the bank and a rent-controlled apartment in New York. I thought, let's go, and I'll try to write a book," remembers Dressner. "And how bad could it be to be in this village?" The summer of 1985 was long and beautiful, followed by a great vintage of Burgundy wine. But Dressner's plan to write a novel never materialized. "I wound up being a tourist and sightseeing and was just fascinated by the area."

It didn't take long for Dressner to begin to feel at home. "I sort of fell in love with the landscape," he recalls. And he learned about wine in the cellars where it was made. "To this day I have difficulty going to a sit-down tasting," he says. "I need to stand when I taste wine."

The turning point in Dressner's life came when he and his wife went to a tasting with Henri Goyard, the owner of the small *Domaine de Roally* vineyard. "It was night and day compared to what I was used to drinking," remembers Dressner. "It tasted like something. It was just delicious." Goyard's fourteen-acre estate was locally well known. Unlike his neighbors in the Mâconnais village of Vire, Goyard still handpicked his grapes and used natural yeast and a minimal amount of fertilizer and chemicals. As a result of these traditional methods, each vintage tasted different and truly reflected the area's soil composition and the weather that year. "It gave my wife and me a notion of wine that was entirely different: the emperor should have no clothes."

At the time Goyard wasn't exporting his wine to America. "That really gave us the idea to do this," says Dressner. "Here's a useful market role we could perform. We started looking for other people like Goyard in France, but there aren't millions of them."

Back in New York he and his wife developed the idea for a company to import the kind of French wines they loved to drink. In 1988 they sent out a mass mailing to two hundred winemakers. Their letters brought responses even from some of the oldest and most well-known houses. But Dressner admits, "We had no idea what we were doing. We didn't know it was a regulated industry, we knew no one in the trade. We just started."

It didn't hurt that Denyse was French. She owned a share of her family's four-hectare vineyard that was rented

out to a farmer. So when the vintners asked if Joe and Denyse had any special qualifications, she told them her family owned a vineyard in the Mâconnais. "It was like open sesame," Dressner remembers.

Nevertheless, the first few years weren't easy. Dressner kept his job doing PR for nonprofit groups and also did some computer consulting. He took the summers off to work on *Louis/Dressner*. Slowly, business picked up, and by 1991 the company was profitable enough for him to quit his other jobs and focus completely on wine. Over the years the company has been able to focus on importing only wines that represent their noninterventionist philosophy. "He's a niche importer, and his niche works," says David Lillie, co-owner of New York's *Chambers Street Wines*. "There are certain places around the country where Joe is doing relatively well, and it's because people are seeking out this kind of wine."

Louis/Dressner now has five employees, including another partner, and the company works with over sixty wineries in France, Italy, and Portugal. The wines start at about ten dollars a bottle, retail. "The philosophical aspect is one thing," says Arnaud Erhart, owner of restaurant 360 in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, who buys about half of his wine list from Dressner. "But neither Joe nor I would sell these wines if we didn't believe that the quality was there. To me the proof is in the pudding. We drink these wines because they're good."

Because of the nature of production, *Louis/Dressner* imports a varying number of cases each year. "Sometimes someone is making great wine and there are only twenty-five cases available for America. Still, we're happy to bring it in," Dressner says. The stores that sell the wine, however, are sometimes less happy about the small quantities. One of New York's larger wine retailers featured a Dressner wine in its catalog. But only two hundred cases of the wine were allotted for America, and the store quickly sold out its stock. "They were furious that it ran out," Dressner recalled. "The buyer for the store called me up and said, 'Dressner, I don't understand. Why do you bother? It's a region where you could find people making tens of thousands of cases, why are you bothering?' I said, 'Well, because if we don't do it, no one else will.'"

Running a business dependent on such limited and variable vintages presents many challenges. Dressner spends much of his time promoting his wines, crisscrossing the country conducting tastings. "People don't say '2002 Kendall-Jackson, well, let me taste it first, I'm a little hesitant.' They just order it. It's like stocking Coca-Cola." By contrast, Dressner's wines, which are limited in quantity and vary from vintage to vintage, don't benefit from the same type of brand momentum.

Still, Dressner believes that the benefits outweigh the struggles. Since the wines come from small producers, he has been able to build close relationships with his winemakers. "They are often these wildly intense characters who against all odds are trying to make great wine. When I see a bottle of wine, I see the people who made it and their vineyards."

The winemakers' stories can be found on the Louis/Dressner Web site. Brief articles on each winemaker transcend the customary tasting notes. For instance, there's a piece on Silvio and Catalina Messana, the owners of the Azienda Agricola Montesecondo winery that produces Dressner's Chianti Classico and Toscana Rosso. The Messanas moved in the late 1990s from New York to their family farm in Tuscany and started producing a small amount of wine in their "garage" using traditional methods. But because their Chianti didn't have a deep red color, the local wine authority refused to give it the higher seal of approval with a DOC Chianti Classico classification. The Messanas were told that if they added a coloring agent to make the wine redder they would get the better designation. The winery declined the offer and chose to bottle the lighter-colored wine. After reading the Messanas' story, it's hard not to want to taste their wine.

Winemakers like the Messanas are the industry exception. Dressner estimates that 99 percent of the wines on the market are made with modern wine-making techniques. Although these wines are always drinkable and consistent, Dressner calls them "horrible industrial stuff. But," he says, "if people want to drink Yellow Tail, all power to 'em." Dressner is pragmatic enough to realize that just as the number of vineyards using traditional methods is finite, so is the number of people who will drink his wines.

In fact, Dressner is surprisingly down to earth. He has no illusions that he is the man behind the fine wines he imports. "Everyone has to know their limits," he says. "I'm good at finding niche wines and working with the growers. I'm not looking to become a winemaker." And besides, what makes a good wine is beyond human control. "It's the weather that decides everything," Dressner concludes. "Just as it did two hundred years ago." ●