

To
BURGUNDY
and
BACK AGAIN



**A TALE OF WINE, FRANCE,
AND BROTHERHOOD**



ROY CLOUD

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TO DAD, WHO CAN STILL RAISE A GLASS OF
GIGONDAS WITH THE BEST OF THEM.

AND TO HELEN.



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Chapter 1



PROVIDENCE

I never did get to The Lido. I still haven't, although the idea tempts me wistfully every time I go to Paris. In November of 1997 I was charged with putting together a portfolio for an idealistic new wine importing company, and I went off to France to find suppliers. It was a heady and sobering time, and idle moments took on momentous weight. As I stood in line at the airport, the prospect of success or failure loomed. I was a rookie, really. I knew wine, but I had little experience with the intricacies of importing and distributing it. Then there was the fact that I spoke no French. How to navigate a culture without its language was an obstacle that plagued me from the first. But I had convinced myself that this venture was bigger than I was and that it did not warrant petty concerns. My employer counted on me, plus I had my own determination; such things evened the odds. With that reckoning, I filed into the Air France 747 amid the crowd and hubbub and found shelter in my seat.

It was the usual boarding: people hurriedly removing their coats, others pushing by with eyes on the numbered rows, and still others stuffing suitcases in the overhead compartments. Unsurprisingly, a vast number of these folks were French, and somehow distinctly looked it, too. They tended to be thin and dark, with angular features and strange clothing. I caught snippets of their conversation without understanding a word, a failure that tended to crumple my resolve, so I gave up eavesdropping to concentrate on the bulkhead movie screen. It was a three-by-four-foot screen, front and center, ten or so rows in front of me. On its white backdrop ran cinematic trailers promoting, among other things, the Paris nightclub Lido, whose chorus line of sequined dancers filled the screen and invited all viewers to consider the idea of flying to France a fabulous undertaking. I wanted to believe this, I really did. But my eyes drifted back to the French passengers, and my ears buzzed with more of their incomprehensible conversation. Then, suddenly, my mind froze as an American boy captured a two-second glimpse of a topless Lido dancer and helplessly exclaimed: "TITTIES!" Everyone, in that instant, stopped. I can still see the little lady stretching full tilt with a suitcase overhead, her eyes turned sharply at the sound; the fat man blocking an aisle, his brow furrowed deeply at what he was sure he'd just heard; the college student searching a bin for extra pillows, her face flush with amusement. As for the boy, I never was able to pinpoint him. By the time I looked, embarrassment had driven him

to the deck. But he made me laugh, bless his heart, and that lifted the fear from me.

My father, who was much on my mind at the time, would have leaned over and elbowed me had he been there. He had always readily embraced amusement. I wouldn't be able to tell him about the boy, but I could tell my older brother Joe, who would meet me in Paris the very next day. He would laugh, too. He was my secret weapon, my solution to the language problem, for Joe spoke French—well, too, of course, as my older brother had succeeded at all things academic. Me, I was more hit-or-miss in that department.

The new wine company had charged me with assembling a book of growers (or the French *vignerons*, if you prefer the more exotic term—and we certainly did—referring to those small farmers who made a living tending their own vines and making their own wine). I had twelve days to accomplish the goal, which was wildly optimistic. I knew this better than anyone. It accounted for the endless preparations I made during the weeks leading up to the plane ride, and it accounted for the routing bouts of terror that came like jolts of electricity and grew in duration as the days grew shorter. But I was going to get on that plane. I was going to meet those growers. I was going to do everything I could to assemble a book of them and their wines.

Those twelve days turned into a journey that changed my life.



My first insight that wine could hold the key to other worlds came while I was in college. This happened on the back veranda of a colonial farmhouse in Hadley, Massachusetts, on one of those river-humid summer evenings (we sat overlooking the Connecticut). The house was a nonprofit historical museum, and we happened to be on that veranda because my girlfriend worked in the museum as a part-time interpreter. With us were her American history professor and his wife, both twenty-some years our senior. They were there because the professor was utterly smitten by his student, but he hadn't told his wife that, and he certainly hadn't told me.

His other passion was German wine—Mosel Riesling to be exact—and he had generously brought two Kabinett-grade bottles of the stuff. He saw that I was an interested novice, so he explained how the Mosel River meandered amid these super-steep, slate-filled hillsides laced with vineyards that rose high above little villages, whose inhabitants frequently made their living making wine, as their ancestors had, century after century. He spoke of the importance of the grower and the site, and told us that Kabinett was the first grade of wine in the highest echelon of German wine. It was wine made from the first picking, the lightest and the most delicate.

This wine was like no other that I had ever tasted. It wasn't just delicate; it was *intensely* delicate. That was what set it apart. It smelled of honeysuckle and green

apples, and tasted of the very slate itself, which intrigued me immensely. The professor said, and I understood, that only from the Mosel and its tributaries could wine like this be found. I sniffed and tasted it eagerly, even raptly. At one point I took the bottles in hand to study the labels. Condensation beaded off the glass in the summer humidity, and I realized excitedly that I could peel the labels off and save them. Then it hit me that I was drunk, and I looked up. The conversation had stopped. The professor was staring hopelessly at my girlfriend; his wife was staring coldly at the three of us. They were too old, we were too young, and wine, alas even this wine, had its limitations.

But I never forgot the wine. From that day forward, I became an avid student of the libation.

The second time wine spoke singularly to me was during a Christmas while I was in graduate school in New York City. I had come home for the holiday to Berkeley, California, where my folks had relocated. Joe was there too, having flown down from Seattle where he then lived. Because we hadn't seen each other in months, Dad opened a bottle of Ridge 1984 Geyserville Zinfandel for lunch one day. The '84 was the current release, and that wine danced right out of the bottle. It could have been the brilliantly chilly West Coast afternoon, or the fact that we were all together again (and downing vino at lunch!), but whatever the reason that zesty zin struck me as one of the most delicious wines that I had ever had up to that point. With all its luscious fruit the wine proclaimed *California!* in spades.

By that Christmas, I was a completely hooked oenophile. In New York I worked at one of the city's early wine bars while doing my graduate studies. Once I finished my degree, I moved down to Washington DC to join Helen, my future wife. Here I got a job at MacArthur Liquors. This, I knew from reading wine guru Robert Parker's newsletter, was the District's top wine store. I figured I would be paid for engaging in my passion while I went about the other more important things in my life. During the course of my tenure at MacArthur's, however, wine became the more important thing.

In one sense in the 1980s and '90s, MacArthur's was just another East Coast dump of a wine store. There was none of the lovingly varnished hardwood racks displaying bottle upon bottle of fine wine, handled by gentlemen in bow ties and cardigans who enjoyed nothing more than discussing the nuances of nature's finest bounty. Instead, there was dust—endless amounts of it. The store had a beastly ventilation system that coughed dust by the horrid lungful, where it came to settle onto the bottles lying in cheap steel cage racks and onto a ratty carpet so embedded with the stuff that the little household vacuum cleaner bought to defeat it never stood a chance.

Dust, I came to understand, was a metaphor. It stood for the seedy male liquor stores that had sprung up like mushrooms after the drought of Prohibition had ended. They were seedy because liquor was a cutthroat business and there was no real money to be made retailing it; they were particularly male because liquor had long been the

domain of men; and they were associated with the East because the West Coast was quicker to embrace wine as a lifestyle (that varnished wood phenomenon).

In that era, despite the dust, MacArthur's managed to occupy a loftier plane than the run-of-the-mill wine and spirits joints. The store had an owner astute enough to see that wine offered a way out of the desperate dark corridor of liquor sales, and savvy enough to do business direct with European merchants, particularly Bordeaux merchants, bypassing American distributors. He had gone to his great reward by the time I showed up, but not before earning his store a great reputation. For his son, I came to be the American wine buyer.

In that capacity I got to know all manner of West Coast wineries. I followed their wines year after year and met their producers. The District, a federal territory, had liberal laws that let MacArthur's buy straight from smaller wineries who had no national distribution, and I took full advantage of this. I visited the wineries, made purchases, organized the annual California Barrel Tasting the store held in Washington to sell wine futures, stocked shelves, and sold wine to customers. But increasingly I found myself drawn to France and its wine, rather than the wine I was directly responsible for. And increasingly I found myself intensely frustrated with the dust.

By this time, my parents were retiring to a farm they had bought in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. In July of 1997 they flew to France to take a biking holiday with friends. Three days later, riding too fast down a steep

road in Burgundy's countryside, my father fell headlong over the handlebars and landed in an intensive care ward in a Dijon hospital. He lay deep in a coma when I flew out days later. This was my first visit to France since hitchhiking there as a student during a year abroad in London. I got a car in Paris, drove to Dijon without mishap, and found Mom at her hotel. For a week I joined her vigil while waiting for the ambulance plane to come take Dad to a hospital in Charlottesville.

In August, back in Washington and with no change in Dad's condition, I met with the sales director of a California winery. I had done business with him for several years, and we enjoyed a good relationship. He had penciled out a scheme to start an import company, and he needed a buyer. The District was something of a hotbed of importers, and he figured that I was well connected, so months earlier he had asked me to set up interviews with potential candidates. This I did, and accompanied him to make the introductions. The meetings went nowhere, however—nobody wanted to take a chance on a new importing company—and so in the end I threw the dice. I asked him why he didn't just offer me the job.

He thought that was a pretty good idea.

It wasn't, not really. I was deemed to have a good palate and had plenty of experience as a buyer. But I was, as I said, the American wine buyer, and while my passion for wine had certainly gravitated toward European wine, and French wine above all, over the years, I had no contacts in France. I had never done business there. I had

no experience importing wine. And then there was the language problem.

But I didn't dwell on these things. I had just come back from France and lived to tell the tale. That became my rock. Anything was possible—*it had to be*. No one knew if Dad would survive, and if he did emerge from his coma, there was, among the doctors, no confidence whatsoever that he would ever be the same. That was the deal; that was what I was facing. In light of that, taking a leap of faith on a new job, however laden it might be with responsibility, didn't seem so difficult.

Such bravado bespoke how raw I felt at the time. But taking that leap did create its own momentum, and it pulled me out of my professional rut, to borrow from W. H. Murray. Murray's words were framed on a wall at home, and they resonated keenly with me during those days. Of all things, he was a Scottish mountain climber. In 1951 he wrote in his book, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*:

... but when I said that nothing had been done I erred in one important matter. We had definitely committed ourselves and were halfway out of our ruts. We had put down our passage money—booked a sailing to Bombay. This may sound too simple, but is great in consequence. Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills

countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets:

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

My new company's management ignored my deficits as willingly as I did. Thus I went off to France with shreds of high school French under my belt and a few faxed appointments in hand. What saved me was Joe—providence, it seems, tapped *him* on the shoulder. Long ago Joe had spent a year at France's University of Besançon to learn the language. He saw immediately that, deaf and dumb, I stood to perish in the wilderness, and he announced his wish to come and lend a verbal hand. Ostensibly, he saw this as too good an adventure to pass up (it was). But behind the adventure, I imagine that he also wanted to pay homage to Dad, and going to France to help his kid brother would do that and at the same time give a measure of hope to Mom. Moreover, I think he had to do something, anything. The same forces that compelled me worked their discord on him. My job had lost its meaning during the same time that his marriage had crumbled, and now our father's life lay in limbo.

I let the sales director of the winery in on the secret of Joe's presence, and he elected to keep this matter to himself. Joe was a phantom passenger who shared my car and hotel room, and who (justly) never showed up on my expense account or (unjustly) in my reports.

Chapter 2



SANCERRE

A brisk autumn morning found us driving down a *route nationale* amid pockets of fog on our first full day in France. Back then the A-77 autoroute to the upper Loire Valley was being built, so south of Paris we had to take a more intimate secondary road. This was a fine thing so far as we were concerned, for we were all eyes at this new world. (Later I would learn that this road, the N-7, had been *the* route for Parisians to the Côte d'Azur during the summer holidays until the advent of the modern autoroutes, and had as much a place in history for the French as Route 66 had for Americans.) The road gave us time to take in the feel of the landscape, one that gained gentle folds and rolls as we came into the upper Loire Valley. The vast agricultural fields and orderly woodlands that lay south of Paris gave way to hedge-rowed pastures and compact stone villages. To a green American with imagination, these villages appeared out of the fog with a surreal quality, framing a rural way of life that had seemingly changed little since the days of Joan of Arc. The air

was chilled. Wood smoke mingled with the moist smell of fallen leaves and wet earth. This was land that was at once enchanting, forbidding, and fecund.

"Je sens la France!" Joe announced upon filling his lungs with a mighty draft. He sat in the passenger seat, his arms raised in a halfhearted burst of energy. He let them fall into his lap. He rubbed his eyes. *"Sentir,"* he explained, "to smell. It also means to be conscious of something. It's related to our words 'sense' and 'sentimentality.' It's a great verb." He yawned hugely. "French," he added as an afterthought, "is all about nuance."

Joe's head was full of such detail. He was the repository of knowledge in the family. He crossed his hands over his stomach, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. He inhaled again deeply. *"Je sens un champ de merde,"* he said.

"What?" I asked.

"I smell a field of shit," he said. He pointed to a pasture of cows on his side of the road. He guffawed blearily, sitting back up. "Coffee, Roy," he said. "We need coffee."

We had arrived the morning before. Joe had flown from Seattle, I had flown from the District, and neither of us had slept on the planes. We didn't sleep much overnight in Paris either. This journey to meet growers would prove to be about many things, but rarely would it be about rest.

No matter. We were doing the journey together. In spite of all my trepidation about going to France, my brother made this journey an adventure, and that changed everything. Had I been alone, this time could have been

all too grim, something I understood innately without having put words to it. By myself, I may well have not even bothered to stop and honor the first milestone. But with Joe, I parked the car, and we walked out onto a little country bridge to lean against its railing. With a certain gravitas, we looked upon the great Loire River. I had crossed the river on that hitchhiking trip from England to Spain during my college year abroad, but my memory of it had long since fallen by the wayside.

The Loire is France's longest river, beginning deep in the Massif Central where it flows north out of the mountains and then, at Orléans, turns a corner for the Atlantic. It runs for 630 miles. It is commonly considered to mark the ancient frontier between southerners who spoke the *langue d'oc* and northerners who spoke the *langue d'oïl*. (Both translate as *tongue/language of yes*: the former is Occitan, the latter Gallo-Roman, and the Gallo-Roman dialect won the day to become modern French. As for the Loire being the border, it turns out that the more accurate line lay farther south, but that's of no consequence here.) It was a central highway for the Gauls, the Romans, the Visigoths, and the Franks. Its valley was the stage on which century upon century of French history played out and gave birth to the nation. That valley is France's heartland.

It was also, on this overcast, jet-lagged morning, just a lazy, languid river flowing down a broad, languid valley. We stood on that bridge quietly, the car parked back on land to the side of the road. After a moment, Joe asked, "How do you say 'bottle' again?"

Inwardly, I sighed. “Bo-tay,” I said.

“*Boo*-tay!” he corrected.

“Boo-tay,” I repeated. “Boo-tay. *La* boo-tay.”

“Right. Feminine. Good job.”

He looked at the river. I looked at the river. As brothers, we were barely more than a year and a half apart, because in her early days our mother had been a practicing Catholic until our father, after a handful of kids in rapid succession, thought it the better part of valor to get himself a vasectomy and have the family join a Unitarian congregation (his life was writ large with such bold strokes). We were the middle two siblings; a sister stood on either side of us. Physically, Joe was bigger than I was. He had our grandfather’s stocky build where I had our father’s slight frame. He had a beard and a thick head of brown hair where I was clean-shaven and had fine sandy hair.

“You know,” I said, “I expected something grander.”

“Yeah?” Joe asked. “I don’t know. Look at this river—look at those floodplains. Look at the width. Did you know that this is the only big river in France that’s never been dammed? This thing must be a mother after a big snowpack melt or after some serious rain.”

When it came to nature, Joe was passionate. He observed it closely and took many a cue from it. Nature grounded him.

“The only thing they’ve done to this waterway,” he added, “was to build these big-assed dikes along its banks farther down in the central part of the valley to contain

the water. For a country this old, they could have done a lot worse in the way of heavy-handed engineering.”

“Okay,” I said. “Fair enough. Did you know there’s something like sixty different wine appellations along this river?”

He considered that. He rubbed his beard. “Sixty?” he asked.

“Sixty-seven,” I said.

“That’s a lot of wine,” he allowed.

I looked down at the little silt islands in the water and the vast sandbars. The river had high banks with scrubby flatlands below and floodplains above. It probably *was* a mother in a flood. “All right,” I said, stepping back from the railing. “Let’s get to Sancerre and have that coffee before we have to start tasting.”

“Coffee?” Joe said. “Heck, maybe we ought to be men about it and go right to the wine. Sixty-seven appellations? We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us!”

We laughed, heading for the Renault. We both remembered Renaults back in the ’70s and when they were imported to the States. They were terrible cars in those days (then again, most cars were). But this new Renault rental was a fine vehicle. It took us confidently across the Loire and toward the hills. The fog lifted; the day brightened. We drove through the riverside village of St. Satur, over which stood a startlingly high railroad bridge. The bridge probably dated from the turn of the nineteenth century, but it was built in the manner of Roman aqueducts, with grand stone arches and stone pillars, and it