

BOOK NOOK

The American Emperor

If someone told you the most important man in the wine world is a lawyer who lives near Baltimore, you might think your source had partaken too much of the grape. But the story of **Robert Parker**, a country kid raised on Coca-Cola who became the world's most powerful wine critic, is true. And Elin McCoy recounts it well in *The Emperor of Wine: The Rise of Robert M. Parker, Jr. and the Reign of American Taste*.

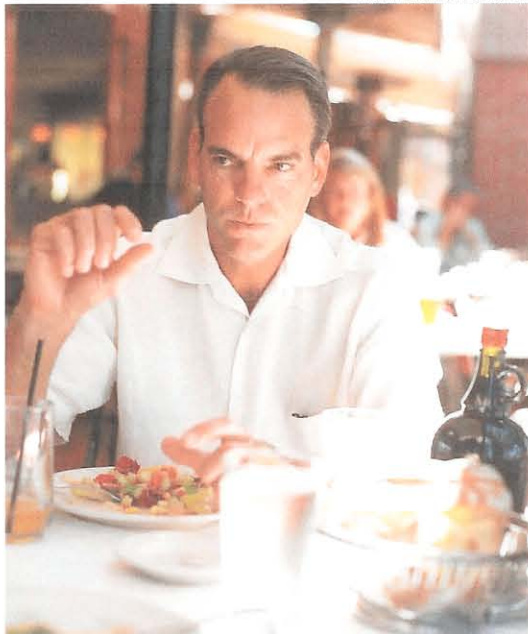
Starting in college, Parker, now 58, became obsessed with rating wines. His palate is legendary: He says he remembers almost every wine he has tasted. Inspired by consumer advocate Ralph Nader, he launched *The Wine Advocate* in 1978.

Parker's revolutionary 100-point scale noted wine bargains and exposed overpriced bottles, giving Americans an easy guide to the arcane hierarchy of French wine. Yet the newsletter sputtered along until Parker championed the 1982 vintage in Bordeaux, propelling him into the elite of wine critics.

The sheer power of American wine consumers, many of whom continue to consider his ratings divine revelations, sent him well beyond his peers. Now, with Parker's particular taste in mind—he's a sucker for super-ripe fruit bombs—some vineyards are changing the way they make wine specifically to appeal to him. They have been, say critics, "Parkerized." —*Matthew Benjamin*



LESLIE WILLIAMSON FOR USN&WR



GRABBING A BITE

Jug-gernaut

Courtney Benham doesn't order wine with lunch. "I'm not as hard-core as some of these other guys in the business," says Benham, 46, owner of Martin Ray Winery in Sonoma County, home of Angeline, the fastest-growing major brand in California last year. "If I have anything right now, I'll be asleep in an hour."

Don't get Benham wrong, though. He may eat light, ordering the risotto with chicken and mushrooms, and he may look the very model of the unruffled Marin County businessman—a former tennis pro who jumped into wine in 1990 when he stumbled across a forgotten stash of aged

Martin Ray library wines in a warehouse and bought the label.

What sells. But there is another side to this easygoing Californian. No yeoman farmer or vintner artiste, his background is in sales and marketing. And as he watches prices compress, he is the latest to acknowledge that even in the wine business—or especially in the wine business—packaging is everything.

Enter Red, Benham's newest brand, a blend including cabernet franc, merlot, and cabernet sauvignon. In a market flooded with wine cubes and juice boxes, Benham says,

"we wanted to try something different." Released this summer, Red comes in a 1-liter jug with a screw cap that looks as if it could be filled with maple syrup. This is no bargain-basement wine, though. The glass comes from Italy; the label is silk-screened in Canada. High-quality wine, affordable prices—"that's where all the action is," Benham says. Younger drinkers and women, especially, seem hooked. After selling through three vintages and 40,000 cases, Red, which goes for \$15 a jug, is primed to go national at Cost-Plus this holiday season.

With marketing gimmicks, Benham knows, comes vulnerability to fickle consumer trends. "It's the kind of thing that could be gone in two years," he says, "then the next trendy thing will take over." So be it, he shrugs. "I'm in it now!"

—*Justin Ewers*

WISH LIST

No cave: A pyramid-shaped waterfall system is designed to maintain the ideal humidity for maturing fine wine in this cellar. Systems start at \$7,295 and are available at vineyardwinecellars.com.