

## L I V E S

**R**obert Haas set off for Europe 50 years ago, armed with halting French and a modest knowledge of wine, thereby launching himself on an illustrious career as perhaps America's most influential postwar wine merchant.

The stage was set for Haas when his father, a Brooklynite who owned a Manhattan grocery, stepped in line behind Macy's and Bloomingdale's to obtain one of the first retail sales permits for alcoholic beverages issued after Prohibition. Sidney Haas subsequently transformed his food shop, M. Lehmann, Inc., into one of New York's premier wine and spirits retailers. (In 1965, Lehmann's merged with the Sherry Wine and Spirits Co., becoming part of Sherry-Lehmann, still one of Manhattan's most prestigious wine and spirits dealers.) Although his father "didn't encourage it", the store became young Bob Haas's first employer after he graduated from Yale, in 1950, with a degree in history, politics and economics. The list of partners, clients, suppliers, and friends Haas has acquired since then is a veritable who's who of the modern fine-wine trade.

The business was different and dramatically smaller in the 1950s, recalls Haas, now 77. Lehmann's principal commerce was in whiskeys and other distilled spirits in those days. Wine accounted for but a fifth of its sales, and prices were ruinously low: Château Lafite-Rothschild sold for less than \$50 a case, Cos d'Estournel for under \$20. "The classified growths of Bordeaux were so cheap," Haas says, "there was no room for anything else." He tells a tale of one customer's buying several cases of high-quality Bordeaux, then asking for some sauternes to cook with – and taking home Château d'Yquem.

Lehmann's also offered a small but impressive selection of burgundies and reds and whites from the Loire and, later, rhônes and even bottlings from Bandol and Banyuls. The store got these

wines through Raymond Baudouin, who founded France's most influential wine magazine, the *Revue du Vin de France*. Baudouin "owned" the wine lists at such respected restaurants as Taillevent in Paris and La Pyramide in Vienne – in fact, his office printed them – and also brokered high-end imports for American retailers including Frank Schoonmaker and his then associate Alexis Lichine.

It was Baudouin's death, in 1953, that started Haas's career. Tasked by his father to find a new broker, he sailed for Europe in the spring of 1954. Trekking the cellars of Baudouin's suppliers, he met a remarkable cast of characters – some genial and others, like the famously gruff Henri "Papa" Gouges in Nuits-St-Georges, terrifying. ("I suppose you are here to buy wine," Gouges barked at the young man when they met.) By the trip's end, Haas had discovered the truth about terroir and the power of personality in a world where handshakes constituted contracts. He'd found no broker to fill Baudouin's big shoes but was scarcely disappointed. "I decided," he says, "that no one was going to do this job but me."

For the rest of the 1950s and all of the '60s, Haas plied his trade first with M. Lehmann, Inc., then with his family's independent import business. Early in the '70s, he struck out on his own, leaving New York to move to Vermont, where he created his own

importing company, Vineyard Brands. By that time, he had chalked up an impressive record of firsts. At Lehmann's, over his father's objections, he had organized America's first wine "futures" sale, during which consumers snapped up 1,500 cases of first- and second-growth 1952 bordeaux in less than three weeks – about six months before they would take delivery of the merchandise. He had introduced Château Pétrus to the American market and was the first to import the wares of dozens of other top producers too, including René Dauvissat in Chablis and Domaine Weinbach in Alsace. (Colette Faller, that estate's matriarch, who came to know Haas in 1980, calls him a "perfection-

## WINE SELLER

*For half a century, Robert Haas  
has brought great wines to America*

BY JOHN WINTHROP HAEGER



Robert Haas, tasting at his Tablas Creek Vineyard last year.

## Tasting Notes

Tablas Creek nationally distributes three whites (one a 100 percent roussanne, which wasn't available for our tasting) plus two reds and a rose. All are highly recommended.

**Côtes de Tablas Blanc 2002** (\$22). Viognier, marsanne, grenache blanc, and a touch of roussanne, adding up to a purely pleasurable wine, lively, aromatic, full of peaches and apricots and acacia, with a sunny brightness that makes it irresistibly drinkable.

**Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc 2002** (\$35). Mostly roussanne, with some grenache blanc and a little viognier; more complex than the Côtes de Tablas, with a honeysuckle summer-night bouquet and wildflower honey, anise, and maybe thyme on the palate.

**Rosé 2003** (\$27). Mourvèdre, grenache, and some counoise, producing a rose full of character, with fruit flavors that seem to include strawberry, raspberry, peach and pomegranate.

**Côtes de Tablas 2002** (\$22). Almost half grenache, plus syrah, mourvèdre, and counoise; an elegant big boy -- spicy, juicy, tannic, and dense, but not muddy as wines like this can be.

**Esprit de Beaucastel 2002** (\$40). The same grapes as in the Côtes de Tablas, with mourvèdre predominating; a ripe, grapey nose, then lots of spice, fruit, and tannin. Very elegant. --THE EDITORS

ist"). He was, for a time, the world's largest buyer of Lafite-Rothschild, at one point purchasing 40 percent of the annual production. He introduced many of California's first boutique wineries to the national market, among them Kistler, Freemark Abbey, Clos du Val, and Joseph Phelps. He also built several wine "brands" into successes, most notably Marqués de Cáceres in Rioja and La Vieille Ferme in the Rhône.

Haas's connection with the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, forged in 1967, spawned his capstone project. In 1990, Haas and the Perrins bought a 120-acre property in the Santa Lucia foothills west of Paso Robles, California, and founded Tablas Creek Vineyard, dedicated to producing Châteauneuf-style blends. "There was a big hole," Haas explains. "Almost nobody in America was blending reds and whites the way it's done in the southern Rhône." Haas and Jean-Pierre and François Perrin, sons of the family patriarch, Jacques Perrin, mimicked Beaucastel, seeking limestone-based soil in a Mediterranean climate. They planted the same overall vine density and farmed organically, importing many of Châteauneuf's



Tablas Creek wines, above. Top right, Haas (left) tasting with future partner François Perrin at Chateau de Beaucastel in 1981.

famous 13 permitted varieties from France legally for the first time, among them grenache blanc and counoise, and reimporting syrah, mourvèdre, and grenache noir, although these were already amply available in California, to avoid having to use inferior clones.

Winemakers flocked to Tablas Creek to see for themselves what choices one of Châteauneuf's most respected producers had made in California, and some asked for the estate's imported vines when they got there. Haas and Perrin established a secondary business selling vine cuttings and grafted vines, although some winemakers



who were once mesmerized have since expressed second thoughts (the Tablas clones perform well but are not necessarily cuttings from Beaucastel's mother vines). The first finished wines, though, made in 1997 and released in 1999, won positive reviews – and successive vintages have, in Robert Parker's phrase, gone "from strength to strength".

Haas sees good and bad in the revolutions that have swept the wine world in the past half century. The enormous escalation in prices since the 1970s has restored profitability and created space for categories (think Chilean wines) that could never have competed when the best wines were cheap. But, he says, "image pricing" is now so exaggerated that "people think only the most expensive wine are any good", and

restaurant lists are laden with overpriced offerings. Worse, Haas observes, the American market has driven whole appellations to make wines in "an oaky, low-acid style that marries badly with food". The demand for "immediate gratification", he adds, means that Bordeaux today is commonly harvested to late from overproductive vineyards in the hope of obtaining high alcoholic content – whereas traditionally, intensity was the natural result of low production. "We may never again see classic bordeaux," Haas laments. He is, however, encouraged by the continuity of quality in burgundy and sancerre and by glimmers of evidence that Americans are learning to appreciate balance over brashness. No oaky, monster wines, in any case, will be coming forth from Tablas Creek.

Today, two years into "retirement", Haas divides his year between California and Vermont and travels endlessly to pour Tablas wines for retailers and restaurateurs. And the family connection with wine continues: his younger son, Jason, 31, is director of marketing for Tablas Creek, and the older one, Daniel, 50, visits his father's old haunts in Europe, buying from the sons, the daughters, even the grandchildren, of producers Haas met on his first trip, in 1954.

## Haas sees good and bad in the wine trends of the past 50 years