

George: Well, I did last year because it was the, what was it? The 40th, but 10, anything 10 would be ... Year by year it's a little bit less. It was obviously very important event in my life and it still has legs as they say.

Brian: That's very good. Did you think 41 years ago that it would really...when you were attending a tasting that it was going to be a definitive moment in your career?

George: Not really. In fact, in a lot of ways it wasn't a definitive moment in my career as a journalist because it was just kind of another story and as you know, it wasn't a long story. It was only four paragraphs long. At that time I had no ... I hate to admit this, but I had no idea it would turn out to be such a historic event.

Brian: Yeah, it's truly amazing. I went in the reverse order. I read your book first, *The Judgment of Paris*. I went back and found the original article and it's sort of amazing to me that you were able to even fit it in four paragraphs to begin with.

George: Well, what I wrote was much longer. The editors in *Time* boil down, because when you were a reporter in the field in those days and time you look at the whole story, basically everything that you had, in form that could be printed, but still longer than you could actually get in the magazine because they didn't know kind of how long the story before this, the story after this, would be, so at the time I didn't write it exactly how long it would be.

Brian: Sure, excellent. That makes a lot of sense. Yeah, I think your book is so great. I mean, you went into just so much detail in talking about not only the event itself, which is certainly compelling, but in researching and in covering sort of the backstory behind the different wineries and chateaux. Was that something you did after the fact, or did you sort of have [crosstalk 00:03:04]-

George: Yeah, what really happened was I was invited by Warren Winiarski, who I had never met, the owner of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, to come out to an event in Napa Valley for the twentieth anniversary of that group of winemakers that went to Paris, who actually took the wines into Paris.

It wasn't, exactly be the twentieth anniversary of the Paris tasting, but the event in Napa was really an anniversary for that trip.

Andre Tchelistcheff had put together the trip, and that was the, the group actually took the wines into Paris because as you remember, Steven Spurrier was very worried about the possibility of not being able to get the wines into Paris because he had had some bad experience getting British wines into Paris.

Believe it or not, the British do make wine. In fact, Steven now has a winery that he is, himself. He has a business making sparkling wines in the lower part of England. They've been making wines there since Roman days, so they wanted to be sure to get the wines

in, so that's why the organizers of the trip decided to take the wines for the tasting. Not realizing, you know, what would happen.

Brian: Sure, sure. That's pretty incredible. Yeah, it's amazing how the British wine is becoming more and more of a thing with global warming and everything else right now that there's plenty of people from the Champagne region who have interests there, so it's cool to see sort of how wine has changed, just in the short time I've been in it, but I imagine it's even more far-reaching for you, being 41 years. Speaking of that, does The Judgment of Paris, does that mark your intro into wine, or where did it really start? When did you become fascinated with wine?

George: I think it was, especially, that was one of your questions and I've thought about that, and I think it was probably when I went to Europe on a junior year abroad program. I was studying at Georgetown University, and they had a junior year abroad program in Switzerland, and that was really the first time. I'd had a few wines before that, I think.

Maybe the very first wine I had was when I was in college as a freshman and an Italian classmate of mine who lived in Washington invited me over for Thanksgiving, and I had, we had wine at that event and I remember so specifically because it was, I believe, the first time I had ever had wine. We didn't have wine growing up, but this was a typical Italian family and they had wine as a natural part of, with your meal.

When I went back to Europe and spent a year in Europe, even though we were in Switzerland, not a huge wine-making country although they do make some wine, that was where I really got the, an introduction to wine as just a staple of what you do. It's not something, it's not like drinking bourbon at night to get high, you know. It was part of life, a part of meal, part of, especially a quality meal would be a glass of wine or a bottle of wine. I think it was that junior year abroad program that really got me into wine and has kept me into wine the rest of my life, at least until now.

Brian: That's so funny that you say it was a trip to Europe, that's exactly what did it for me. I was in college as well. I was between my senior and super-senior year, and I had switched majors about halfway through just because I was, I thought I was going to be in business like my father and then I realized I couldn't work in an office for my whole life, so I switched to Spanish and then I studied abroad in Spain and stayed with a family and that, that was the transformative experience for me. Just like you said, wine on the table, it was part of life. It was a fuel for conversation and good times and it was just something that was always present. Something when it's not around I always feel a little weird or a little on edge. Especially if it-

George: Yeah, [inaudible 00:08:09] meal if it doesn't have a bottle of wine with it.

Brian: I couldn't agree more. With all these years and all this expertise that you've developed, you've written a lot of books. What do you see as the struggle for people trying to become wine experts, or? I use that term loosely, maybe you saw it was in quotes, but

for people wanting to learn more, what's the biggest hurdle? Where do you see the difficulties for them?

George: Well, I think the biggest hurdle would be to be intimidated. I think the wine snobs are called wine snobs because they're snobbish, and they like to make it more complex and more hobby than it really is. It's just, again, it's just a product that you have with a meal, so don't be intimidated by wine. Enjoy it, I think from my experience some people are better tasters than others, and I never figured out why some people seem to be able to spot things in wine that other people don't, but I think from my experience that does happen, but enjoy it and whatever. If it gives you pleasure, and I think it probably will, have a glass of wine. Drink not to get drunk, but to enhance life and enhance the mood.

Brian: I think that's excellent advice. You alluded to the wine snobs. You also wrote a book, *A Toast to Bargain Wines*. Was that your inspiration to sort of break down the barriers that-

George: Yeah, that was exactly it. I thought, you know, there's too much, too many people out there thinking that you can only have a \$50 bottle of wine, and there are lots of very good wines out there.

As I recall the point I had for the book was \$10 or under. I think you may have to go a little higher than that now. It's been about, I can't remember how many years it's been. It's been several years now since that book was out and the wine prices have gone up a little bit since then, so, you know, but I think in that \$10-15 range there's just a lot of very good wines from all around the world.

People are always asking me, "Well, what's your favorite wine?" Well, I don't really have a favorite wine. I like them all, or just about all of them, because it's like saying, "Who's the most beautiful woman that you've ever seen?" Well, you know, I've seen a lot of beautiful women. I only married one, but I've seen a lot of attractive women, and I think that's the approach that one should have to take. It's just, it's part of life, enjoy it, but don't drink to excess because obviously if you do, you don't end up getting the benefit of it because you're drunk, you're not enjoying the wine anymore.

Brian: If you drink to excess, then suddenly every woman in the room becomes beautiful, and that's a problem too. At least you'll get to see a lot of beautiful women that way. I absolutely love that metaphor, that's so wonderful. I'm going to use that.

George: You know, [inaudible 00:11:53] thing is that, kind of how I came to write the book, it was at that, party that was called the Tchelistcheff trip of winemakers that went to Paris, led by Andre Tchelistcheff, a Russian-born, French-educated but has a career in California wine-maker, took the tour, and they had the twentieth anniversary and Warren, who I'd never met, invited me to come out and stay with him for a couple of days and attend this reunion of the Tchelistcheff group. It was as I was there at the reunion talking to all these wineries, wine-makers, and it was principally all of the leading wine-makers of California were there, in Napa were there that day, it really

struck me, because they all said basically the same thing, which was, "That was the turning point for us. It was that day that we got recognized as making good wines, it was that event in Paris." I thought, "Well gee, somebody's got to write the story of that, the book," so it was at that point that I started thinking, well, I was in the best position I thought to write the book since I had been there and I had my notes and all of the things that went into it, so why didn't I do it? Rather than letting somebody else interview me, let me interview other people, and so that's how the book came to be.

Brian: You were there, you were the only one there. The only journalist to go to the event.

George: Yeah, because I was too dumb to realize that ... All the other journalists were smart enough to know that the French wines were obviously going to win, so it was going to be what in journalistic terms they call a non-event. Nobody was going to write a story about, nobody's going to publish a story about French wines and California wines being tasted in Paris and French wines winning. That would be a non-event. It was only because of the, when I got a, and I turned it down, actually, the first time, but I got a second ...

Steven Spurrier at the last minute or, not the last minute, it was a few days before the event, he was very worried because he used to hold these events and they were very high-publicity, so just to make himself better known in Paris, and maybe even outside of Paris, events and he would do things ... He was very, he was a young guy at that point. I think he was about 34 years old, which of course now is a very young man, but he would have these events. Once, for example he did a tasting of all the first growths. At one point there were only four, there are now five, and putting them comparatively, so that people could compare the very best of the best. The French never did that, because if you did a tasting like that, you're going to have four losers and one winner, and [inaudible 00:15:31] the very best and so don't have that competition between them but Steven did that, and he did special events for the Beaujolais Nouveau when that came out, and so he had all of these things and this was just going to be another one of his events.

Then when he got there, nobody was coming, so he called me because he remembered that I had taken a course at his school, his wine school. I took his basic course, An Introduction to French Wine, it was called, and so he knew me. He thought, he told me this later, he said, "I figured, well, maybe since Taber had taken the course, I'll give him a second chance." Fortunately he did give me the second chance and that's how I also got there.

Brian: That's so wild. I mean, it's so funny too because so much of wine, just wine itself as the bottle is story, and like you said, sharing it over a meal there's the story there, and then you had this story of wine and all these little sub-stories. It's so fascinating to hear these details that all these things sort of fell into place to make the event that it was. That's really, really fascinating. Yeah, so in your-

George: I was lucky, as I said. I was lucky.

Brian: Yeah. Well, you know, you've got to put yourself in the position to be lucky. What led you to Paris in the first place?

George: Well, I had been a staff reporter for Time magazine at that point for about four or five years, and you know, Paris was just an assignment. I was sent to Paris because I spoke French, and not every reporter working for Time magazine in those days spoke French, so it was a natural ... I was the junior reporter in the office. Time was, they were amazing, I still can't imagine this although I know it's true, that Time had lots and lots of reporters but not that many who spoke English, or who spoke French, so that's why I was sent to Paris.

Brian: Sure.

George: The fact that I was the only reporter there that day, but I was the number two person in the bureau.

Brian: Very cool. Looking back on your career in wine, if you were to start over again, is there anything you'd do differently?

George: I don't think so. I think the best thing for one's career in wine is to drink what you can. I urge people to, don't get in a rut. Don't say, "Okay, I'm only going to have Haut-Brion wine every day I live." Figure out what you can afford to buy but then get a variety of things, because, and today it's one of the wonderful things of wine, as I said, I'm pretty sure I said it in the book, this is the golden age of wine because wine-makers ... Look, the Paris tasting had a great impact on French wines, on California wines, without a doubt, but it also had a great impact on wine-makers around the world because of the same reason. It broke the myth that only in France could you make great wines, and so wine-makers in Italy and Spain and Australia and South Africa, who maybe thought, "Hey, we're third-class producers and we'll always be third-class producers," it inspired them to say, "Hey, look at it. If the Californians can do it, maybe we can do it here in South Africa." South Africa's a long ways from France, but why not?

I only discovered this, that's why I was so lucky that I wrote the book 20 years after the event, because you would only see this kind of impact 20 years after, and this wasn't my idea. I can't remember who it was that gave me this concept of it, but in Napa, several people told me, said after the Paris tasting they were just flooded with people, largely French at the beginning, wanting to see what was going on in California. The French, big French wine producers started sending their young children, not children, their young adults, the youngsters in the family that were going to be working in the wine business, to California to see what was going on there because, they said, "Hey, look at this. Something's going on here. Let's see what they're doing." Wine-makers around the world starting doing the same things, and so they all lifted up the game, as it were, because of the Paris tasting. I'm not trying to brag because it was anything I had to do with this, it was just the fact of life.

Brian: Yeah, absolutely. I think that makes a lot of sense, and the 20 year buffer between the original article and the book certainly gave you perspective, which is something you wouldn't have had as you tried to create that story at the time.

One of the things I wanted to know is, you've made a career out of writing, and you've written several wine books. If someone wanted to do what you do, write about wine, what path would you recommend they take?

George: I think today if you really wanted to specialize in wine, the wine business is interesting and is unlike an awful lot of other businesses. I'm always tempted to say it's unique but there must be other fields that are similar to it, but they have periods in the year when they need a lot of help. The harvest period. They don't need a thousand workers in a winery for most of the year, but when the harvest comes in, you've got to have a lot more extra help, so they look for that extra help and I think if you really wanted to make a career out of wine, no matter where in the career you wanted to do, you wanted to be a sommelier or you wanted to be a wine writer or whatever it is, and I did not have this kind of experience myself, I would recommend that somebody else might, if they had the time and the money and interest to do it, would be just to harvest wine. Work for a period in the vineyard seeing the process as it develops.

I think you, I can't be certain because I haven't done it, but I think you'd learn an awful lot. That it would be a lifetime of education that you would get from just one harvest. Harvest lasts a month or two, and just how they harvest, when they harvest, how they go about going from grapes to wine. I think that would be a very, and you'd also, I think you'd get some tasting expertise because you'd be around people who are tasting it at that point.

If you have the time and money and interest, go work in a winery for a harvest.

Brian: Good. Noted. I will do that. I will put it on my list.

George: Okay. It wouldn't be hard because they need help, you know.

Brian: Sure.

George: It's not like you're going to be, you know, thousands and thousands of people knocking on their door to get in. I mean obviously the higher the, the more famous the winery the more difficult it'd be the get in, but you know, give it a try if you're really interested in-

Brian: Would you say that going attending a harvest, really, and helping out in a harvest, that's maybe the best-kept secret for people wanting to learn more about wine, is just go do it?

George: I think they are, I think a lot of people don't realize that, you know. They don't, it's not explained, like I had to explain it to you. Nobody has ever said, "Oh gee, well then, never

thought of that," but I think that is the fact. That they just had never thought that, you know, the cycle of the wine here and-

There is a need for people and so it's not something that you have to take four years in college in order to then take a summer working in the vineyards.

Brian: Yeah, and not a bad way to spend a couple weeks. In a vineyard, in a beautiful area of these country or some other country. It could be a great work vacation so to speak because it's certainly hard work, that's for sure. Is there anything ... You mentioned-

George: I mean, that's why they call them cellar rats. That's the phrase that's often used for those people that come in for the harvest. They call it cellar rats.

Brian: You mentioned you fell in love with wine and sort of had this appreciation when you studied abroad and then you took one of the classes at Steve Spurrier's wine school. Is there something you wish someone told you when you were starting out on wine? Was there like an "aha" moment along the way that you were like, "Oh, why didn't someone mention this to me sooner?" Is there any one of those things that sticks out to you?

George: Let me think, because nothing jumps out at me for sure. No, I think it was a slow realization. I mean, I can remember a lot of "aha" moments, one of the "aha" moments for example that I remember very well was the, when I went on my junior year abroad program, before we went to the, actually the university where we were going to be studying, Georgetown requirements, you had to go for a, it was either a two-week or maybe it was a full month, program in tour of France to get your French up to quality.

We were taking courses at the university there but also living with a family, and the very first night I arrived in tour after having spent a week in Paris, we were about to sit down to have dinner and the wife of the guy whose house I was staying at ... I was staying alone with this family, there was six or seven of us, and that was good because in my stumbling French in those days, you had to speak to the people you were living with, to have breakfast and dinner if nothing else, but before the first night when we were there, the wife of the house, [inaudible 00:29:36] kind of as a celebration had a special wine that she brought out. We talked a little bit as far as I could stumble through, about, she was welcoming us, and they had about a six-year-old son. After she'd poured a glass of wine for all of us, the other family and myself, she poured into a regular drinking glass a little bit, maybe a quarter of a glass of wine, and then she poured some water into the wine, and I thought, "Gee, that's kind of a unique thing to do." It was for the six-year-old boy.

That's the amount of wine, that's how wine was given to him, and I always remember that event because it was so unlike anything that I'd ever seen in American life, this very small boy having a glass wine. Even if it was watered down. There were a lot of "aha" moments like that after.

Brian: Wonderful.

- George: That's all part of just the education of wine. To this day, now I drink, I have a glass of wine every night for dinner.
- Brian: Oh, excellent. What have you been drinking lately? Anything striking you r fancy? I know you said you like to rotate, but what was maybe the last great glass or bottle you had?
- George: I drink, I don't drink just this wine, but I drink a certain amount, maybe a quarter of the wine that I drink, are box wines because again, I like to try everything, and you know, those are very good value. That allows you to drink wine every night without breaking your budget, and you know. People like to look their nose down at box wines because they figure that anything that's inexpensive can't be very good, but I don't think that's the case at all. It's different. A glass of bottled wine is, a glass of a first growth wine is obviously very different from a glass of box wine, but it's not that one is bad. They're just different.
- Brian: For sure, that's totally true. I know, I say sometimes that, in the store. I'll say, "Sometimes wine just needs to be wine." That's it. It doesn't have to be a transformative experience. It just needs to accompany a meal. Sometimes something else is the star.
- George: Yeah. That is so true. I think too many people get intimidated by all the hoopla, whatever they call it, all that goes around wine. The wine snobs tend to make it or try to make it complex and difficult for people to enjoy. It's not, it's just an experience. Some experiences are better than others, but there are not many that are very bad. I mean, I can't think of ... I have had a bad wine, I was about to say, "I can't remember ever having a bad wine," but you know. The number of bad bottles I've had, it's no more than 12-15.
- Brian: Sure. Excellent. Yeah, I think that's the great place to end.
- All right George, thank you so much again for your time, thanks for writing about wine, sharing your passion with all of us. I know The Judgment of Paris is one of those books that I highly recommend to people who are getting into wine and people who really like story, because I think you just did a masterful job of weaving in story and wine facts. It's a really beautiful book.
- George: Yeah, the book has had legs. I mean, it still sells very well. I haven't bothered to go and do a, updating it, because it's still selling so well. In fact, why, you've got something that's continuing to interest people so why, why blow that?
- Brian: Yeah, if it ain't broke.
- George: Yeah, exactly.
- Brian: All right George, well thank you so much.
- George: Okay.

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Brian: Really appreciate it again.

George: Good. Okay, great, thanks. Great to talk to you. Okay.

Brian: It was great talking to you George. Thank you, have a great day.

George: Sure, bye.

Brian: Bye.