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A Writer, Importer and Gentleman Spy

Frank Schoonmaker's influence can still be tasted in the drinkable 2007 Burgundy vintage

By [JAY MCINERNEY](#)

The 2007 vintage in Burgundy hasn't generated the kind of advance excitement as the 2005 or 2002 vintages, which benefited from more favorable weather. But a recent tasting of a very select group of '07 reds and whites had many New York wine professionals buzzing with admiration—perhaps proving the axiom that in Burgundy, the maker is more important than the vintage. These were some of the top names in Burgundy—a group selected more than 50 years ago by Frank Schoonmaker, a writer, importer and gentleman spy who did as much to educate American wine drinkers as anyone before or since.

Son of a Columbia University classics professor and a prominent feminist, Mr. Schoonmaker arrived at Princeton in 1923, not long after Scott Fitzgerald departed, and dropped out after two years. He roamed through Europe for several years, eventually distilling his travels into several guide books, including "Through Europe on \$2 a day" and "Come With Me Through France." Mr. Schoonmaker's passion for wine was fueled by his friendship with Raymond Baudoin, editor of *La Revue du Vin de France*, then as now the most influential French wine publication. The young American traveled to wine regions throughout France with Mr. Baudoin, tasting and learning, making contacts which would ultimately serve him well as an importer when Prohibition ended. Burgundy became his special passion.

Unlike Bordeaux, a region of vast estates owned by wealthy families and corporations, the typical Burgundian wine grower, then as now, owned a few acres of vines. Thanks to marriage and inheritance, the typical family's holdings were scattered among different vineyards. Most growers sold their young wine in casks to big *négociants* in the Burgundian town of Beaune, who would blend and bottle under their own labels. Messrs. Baudoin and Schoonmaker encouraged their favorite growers to bottle their own wines, a relatively radical concept at the time.

In the mid-1930s, after the Volstead Act was finally repealed and Prohibition ended in the U.S., Mr. Schoonmaker moved to New York and launched Frank Schoonmaker Selections. The glitch in his business plan was that after 14 years of Prohibition, few Americans knew anything about French or any other kind of wines. To help rectify this situation, he published a book called "The Complete Wine Book," based in part on a series of articles he'd written for the *New Yorker*.

Early on Mr. Schoonmaker hired a loquacious young Russian émigré named Alexis Lichine, who'd recently dropped out of Penn, as his national sales manager. Together they traveled to California to scout domestic wines for their portfolio. At the time it was the practice in California to slap French regional names like Chablis and Burgundy on the local bottlings, but Messrs. Schoonmaker and Lichine persuaded several California estates to label their wines according to grape variety, a practice which has become universal in California and the New

World in the years since. Their first success was with Wente Vineyards, which changed the name of its white wine from Graves (a region of Bordeaux) to Sauvignon Blanc—the name of the grape from which it was made—and watched sales soar.

The Second World War interrupted their partnership; after Pearl Harbor Mr. Schoonmaker joined the OSS, the CIA precursor created by "Wild Bill" Donovan that drew its ranks from the Ivy League and the Social Register, while Mr. Lichine joined Army Intelligence. Under cover of his wine business, Mr. Schoonmaker went to Madrid. "It was a source of some pride to him," according to his obit in the Daytona Beach Morning Post, "that the then-United States ambassador to Spain complained about how vigorously he pursued some of his underground activities in that country." He made frequent forays into France to aid the resistance, until, according to his friend Frank E. Johnson, "the Spanish police caught on to what was happening. Schoonmaker was arrested brought back to Madrid and had his head shaved to identify him as a marked man." Mr. Schoonmaker subsequently slipped out of Spain and attached himself to the U.S. Seventh Army, which invaded southern France in September of 1944. Not far from Lyon, he was hospitalized after his jeep hit a land mine, but later managed to visit some of his growers in Burgundy and the Rhône. He was ultimately discharged with the rank of colonel, and to this day he is still referred to as Le Colonel by Burgundian old timers.

Mr. Lichine had also distinguished himself in the war and retired as a major, but when he demanded full partnership in the business, he and Mr. Schoonmaker parted ways. Mr. Lichine made a name for himself as a wine writer and as the owner of Château Prieuré-Lichine and Château Lascombes in Bordeaux. In the years after the war, Mr. Schoonmaker continued to educate the American drinker with a series of lively and erudite articles about wine in *Gourmet* magazine (you can find them in the archives at Gourmet.com) and eventually published "The Encyclopedia of Wine," for many years a definitive reference.

In a 1947 *Gourmet* piece about red Burgundy, he makes clear his preference for the wines of that region over Bordeaux. "Heartwarming and *joyeux*, heady, big of body, magnificent and Rabelesian, this is Burgundy," he writes. (I might question "big of body," but this is his story.) He continues: "The most celebrated poet of Bordeaux, Biarnes, wrote of the châteaux and the wines so dear to his heart in cool and measured Alexandrines reminiscent of Racine. Burgundy is celebrated in bawdy tavern songs." No doubt where the man's heart lies. In fact he seems to be saying that Bordeaux has no heart, that it's all head. Of course, he was selling Burgundy. The piece goes on to take us on a detailed tour of the region, which remains useful to this day, while referencing Thackeray, Alexandre Dumas, Petrarch, Phillip the Bold and many others.

Mr. Schoonmaker seems to have had more taste than business acumen. At the age of 67 he sold his business to Pillsbury, staying on as part of a new wine division. The union was not a happy one. After his death in 1976, Seagram took over Mr. Schoonmaker's Burgundy portfolio, which was then purchased by in 2001 by Diageo. Some 75 years after Mr. Schoonmaker started his company, the domains represented at Diageo's recent Manhattan tasting are still among the most revered in Burgundy. Ramonet, Niellon, Matrot, D'Angerville, De Courcel, Gelin, Grivot and Roumier are some of the most consistently excellent producers in the region, as they have proven with their 2007 wines. Several growers admitted it was a challenging vintage, given the cool summer, but many of these wines, especially the reds, were surprisingly accessible and attractive at this early stage, unlike, say, the big but backward 2005s, which will require cellar time to mellow out. It was probably a stronger year for the whites but the reds are more precocious. The words "pretty" and "charming" kept coming up among growers and tasters with regard to the reds. The '07s are generally being released at lower prices than the '05s and even the unsung '06s. For those unfamiliar with the fleshy, earthy pleasure of good Burgundy, the 2007s could be a good place to start. Tell your wine merchant, or sommelier, that Frank sent you.

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