



Diner's Journal



Notes on Eating, Drinking and Cooking

September 19, 2011, 11:58 AM

Joe Dressner, an Importer With No Use for Pretense, Dies at 60

By ERIC ASIMOV

Joe Dressner once made one of my best friends cry. Joe, an iconoclastic importer of naturally made wines, died on Saturday at the age of 60 after a three-year battle with brain cancer. (We'll have an obituary soon.) Even if he did make my friend cry, I'll miss him sorely.

He would regularly bring a crew of his vigneron from France to the United States, where they would meet members of the trade, offer consumer tastings and raise hell after hours. These visits were important to him. They helped sell wine, of course, but he also believed that it was crucial for the public and the trade to see for themselves that wine — good wine — was made by people who had a vision and philosophy as well as warts and flaws and sometimes bizarre hairstyles.

The problem was that among Joe's own flaws, he lacked tact and a sense of diplomacy. Or maybe his brusque irascibility was part of a conscious shtick, the same way he was a sentimentalist but pretended to abhor sentiment. I was never sure. In any case, the vigneron were at the Crush Wine Company in Midtown Manhattan when my friend, a doctor, made an innocent jest to Joe that drew such a harsh bark in response that her tears flowed.

But that was Joe, in part: blunt, acerbic, uncompromising and provocative, and not necessarily in control of his ridicule. Yet Joe was also principled, honest, articulate, outrageously funny, and man, did he know wine.

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how to deconstruct a wine into esoteric aromas and flavors. I never saw him try to identify a wine blind, as if that were ever a sign of useful knowledge. He had no formal training. He simply drank a lot of wine. With time he learned to distinguish between what he liked and what he didn't, and he was sufficiently curious and resolute to work out the reasons for those differences.

It turned out [that the wines he liked](#) had much in common. They were generally made by small producers who worked their own plots, who did not use chemicals in the vineyard and kept their yields small, who harvested by hand rather than by machine and who used no additives in the cellar but merely shepherded the grape juice along its journey into wine.

These were the wines he grew to love and sell, made by people whose personal histories often involved generations of dedicated grape growing. Even as these wines came to be known as "[natural wines](#)," a term he occasionally used and often disdained, and wines like these came to be a hot-button topic among the wine lovers of the world, Joe would scorn the notion that he was involved in some sort of movement.

"The natural wine movement is not a movement with a leader, credo and principles," he [wrote](#) just last year. "If you think there is a natural wine movement sweeping the world, triumphantly slaying industrial wineries and taking no hostages, then you are one delusional wine drinker. The natural wine movement thinks that you might want to lessen your alcohol consumption for a few months."

Wine for Joe was not about movements or dogma. Despite his predilections, he liked the wines he liked not because they were made according to a certain philosophy, but because he thought the wines tasted better. One of the core beliefs of his company, Louis/Dressner Selections, was that wines should be made with indigenous yeasts that were present on the grapes and in the winery, rather than inoculated with yeasts selected by the winemaker. Yet the wines of [Didier Dagueneau](#), one of the shining domains in his portfolio, are inoculated. Well, you can't argue with these wines.

Joe represented far more than simply a preferred way of making wines. Whether he would admit to it or not, he represented a culture that does not exalt wine into something overly complicated or turn it into a fetishistic object. His way of thinking did not reduce wine to scores and tasting notes, either, or strain to demystify it. To Joe, wine was a pleasure and a joy, to be shared with friends and family with great food, and, as he once said, if you wanted to drink wretched wine with awful food, who was he to object? That was his way, and everybody else could do as he wanted, so long as it did not intrude on Joe or on his business.

Of course, Joe made such intrusions easy. It was not so much his enemies who disturbed him as his friends, people he thought should know better, and yet who persisted in straying into the realm of the self-important or pretentious.

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Diner's Journal embraces news and opinion about recipes, wine, restaurants and other matters culinary. Contributors include [Eric Asimov](#), [Glenn Collins](#), [Florence Fabricant](#), [Nick Fox](#), [Jeff Gordinier](#), [Elaine Louie](#), [Julia Moskin](#), [Sam Sifton](#), [Samantha Storey](#), [Emily Weinstein](#), [Pete Wells](#) and others.

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But came the ridicule, the satire, the absurdities, and if he were on your team he would pursue with an unholy tenacity. He could make people cry. Now, he's done it again, by dying.

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East Village
September 19th,
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7:26 pm

Expertly written Eric. Joe had a lot of layers to him. Luckily, in my experiences I was only exposed to his funny and irreverent side. About a year ago, I held a Saturday afternoon wine tasting with paying customers at the restaurant where I am the sommelier. I had asked Joe to come and co-conduct the tasting with 6 of the wines he imported. To my delight and surprise he was interested in doing the tasting. As the day arrived he showed nearly 15 minutes late and refused to start the tasting until I could find a comb for him. He said his hair was a mess and couldn't begin until it was in place. I didn't know what to do so I asked nearly everyone who worked in the restaurant if they had one to spare. No one did. When I told him this he grumbled and began the tasting. He spoke beautifully and passionately about the wines we were tasting. Sometimes with the guests I have for the tastings, they can come off as shills for their wineries; with Joe it was like he was a proud uncle who marveled at the accomplishments of his imports.

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- [tim](#)
napa
September 19th,
2011
7:36 pm

Beautifully written, thanks for your insight on one of the great wine guys! Tim

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Portland, OR
September 19th,
2011
9:19 pm

were truly one of a kind. We miss you because you taught us so much; so much about wine, but more importantly about life - how to live life with vigor, purpose and relentless pursuit of what you believe is right.

Joe, you were inspiring, you were intelligent, you were witty, and you were sometimes a bit coarse. You were a whole person and an honest person in the way you lived your life and in the way you conducted your business. You were always honest and true to who you were as a person. You were always honest and true to the families whose wines you represented and defended them and their traditions with vigor.

Joe, we miss you, but you've left us with so much and you've inspired so many people in the wine world that you and your work will live on not only in the Louis/Dressner wines we drink, but in the whole idea that drinking honest wines that reflect the place they came from is inspiring.

I'll miss you, Joe.

Eric Pottmeyer

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- The Food Section
- Village Voice: Fork in the Road
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