

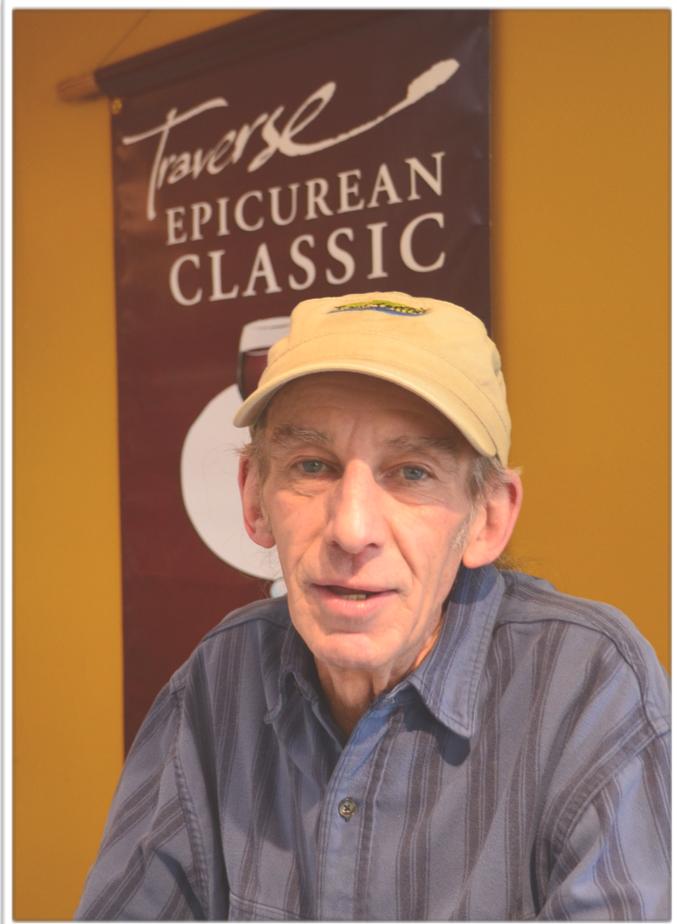
A HIDDEN JEWEL

BY MADELEINE VEDEL

"Tomorrow is Beaujolais Nouveau Day," Ric says as I walk in the door of Bon Vin wine shop. "The old wisdom was to drink it by Easter, but these days it is drink it by the New Year." He continues, his gently hooded eyes illuminated with a lifetime of curious delving into the human experience, aka wine, as he shares this nugget of evolving traditions. I follow him as he glides into his desk chair, ready to reverse directions just as smoothly should the doorbell jingle.

Ric Cerrini opened the wine shop Bon Vin in Traverse City with his business partner John Dressler in 2011. Ric seeks out great and little wines you may have never heard of, and shares the stories and individuals behind them. Expect the unexpected, the hidden jewel, such as Beaujolais producers Antonin Rodet Rose, Joseph Drouhin and Domaine Rochette.

"I like to have a wide-selection of small budget European wines here, (in addition to a good collection of New World and Southern Hemisphere wines)" he tells me. "For the most part,



Ric Cerrini

people don't know them any more, but for \$12 you can get a lovely and quite specific bottle, tied to a family, to tradition. In Europe it's a food product and treated as such. Here, it's considered a sin."

Traverse City chef and wine buyer Rose Hollander concurs. "I came to the wine shop for Mark (John Dressler's brother), whom I knew through the Epicurean Classic held at NMC. It didn't take long before Ric became my go-to guy. I love his acerbic wit. He smiles when I go in - he knows I can be talked into anything. He's always asked what I'm cooking, what the wine will go with. I've learned so much just listening. I've learned to appreciate the blends that he's introduced me to, the old world style."

Rose adds, "He's become my encyclopedia. I can talk to him about wines I've tasted from California, as well as the stories behind them. He also knows food. He'll tell me of meals he's cooked. That is something I really appreciate. We're really lucky to have him in the neighborhood."

Ric Cerrini started his career in wine when he took a break from his Ph.D. studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He already had two degrees under his belt in Psychology and Philosophy, and, he says, "that's when I decided that preparing for life was getting to me. So, I took a year off to gather my forces. I decided to work at the wine shop (Village Corner in Ann Arbor) where I'd been buying my wine for years. I left 38 years later."

The Village Corner Wine Shop, owned and run by Dick Scheer, has been an institution in Ann Arbor since it opened 48 years ago. "It was the best place to learn about wine," Ric reminisces, "Dick was dedicated to wine, and voracious. He was as good a mentor as you

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could have. We'd close the shop down and go into the back, open two to three bottles, talk about them, constantly talk about them, taste, learn. I've met a lot of significant wine writers, Robert Parker, Clive Coates, Jancis Robinson, Harry Waugh, but I've never met anyone who has an overall knowledge like he has." Under Dick's tutelage, and with a helpful dose of passion and curiosity, Ric became the wine ferret he is: knowledgeable and curious, in the worlds of food and wine, pairing, creating, and reveling in the moments shared across a table, savoring flavors and conversation.

"We had some magical moments together, unexpected and fortuitous things that will never happen again. One time, a French importer of Bordeaux wines (with a wonderful portfolio of Sauternes), organized a whirlwind tour of the US with six to eight of his producers, including Château Climens, Château Suduiraut, Château Guiraud. He was going to New York, Chicago, Washington DC. It was really chic, featuring lavish, expensive dinners geared to promote Sauterne as a wine to pair throughout a meal, not just cheese or dessert.

The guy called us saying he had a couple days between events, and would we like to organize something in Ann Arbor. It was very last minute, so Dick said he couldn't organize anything official, but we had this group who got together for weekly tastings for some 35 years, and if they came to town, we could get the gang together and do a pot luck. So they came over to the folks' house, made food, and we spoke with the wine makers, tasted their vintages, shared some of our own. A week later, the wine importer called and said that all his colleagues talked about on the trip home was the night they spent with us, how much fun it was to be in such a relaxed and informal evening with people who know and enjoy wine. These things just happen. They can't be set up."

In 2010 Ric decided to depart Ann Arbor and move to Traverse City. "I'd been coming up for years to visit my best friends in the world, who moved up 20 years ago. I had a great friend with a cottage on Lake Michigan, just north of Muskegon. He gave me my own set of keys to his cottage and I'd take the month of May off and just stay there and watch the seasons change, go morel hunting. There was an asparagus farm with a little stand and a tin can for money down the road." As the Village Corner in Ann Arbor relocated towards North Campus, Ric relocated himself Up North.

Now living in one of Michigan's key wine regions, Ric admitted that he doesn't get out tasting locally as much as he might. After the many hours in the shop, he's more likely to spend his off-time walking in the woods, hunting mushrooms or watching birds. However, that is not to say he is not interested in his vinifying colleagues, and happy to encourage them. "I'm impressed with Left Foot Charley, I've gone through the cellar with Brian (Ulbrich). Lee Lutes of Black Star Farms makes sure I taste most of what he makes. Mari Vineyards, Nathaniel Rose, I've heard good things about a lot of them. If they call me, I do my best to accommodate them."

And many do make their way to his shop. Describing his clients, Ric says, "It's a broad scope of people, of all ages: the boomers who've been drinking wine for years; and there's a lot of interest among some of the younger folks. The word of mouth gets out, good wine at reasonable prices. It's not the same stuff they see everywhere else, not tied to a grape name but to an historic property.

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The vibrancy of the local wineries, their assistants, and the restaurant workers from restaurants such as Trattoria Stella, Bistro Fougou, and The Cooks' House are a regular source of curious young wine buyers: "They come in and say, we've been learning about Italian wines, what else is there?"

Lee Lutes, manager of winery production at Black Star Farms since its inception twenty years ago, reminisces about meeting Ric back in his Village Corner days in Ann Arbor, "I always had a respect for him. He was not your typical salesman. He has a good palate. He speaks the language. There are few people working retail you can talk to as a winemaker, paint the palate verbally of what you are looking for, and they get it. Ric has always been one of those guys, extremely knowledgeable on multiple fronts, and extremely approachable. He doesn't give off airs of superiority or arrogance. And direct. I used to go into Village Corner and it'd be 'Hey Ric,' and 'Hey Lee.' 'Do you have a minute to taste?' 'Give me 5... OK go, you've got 10 minutes.' And we'd blow through whatever it was I was pouring. 'Nice here, nice there, get back to me on this later...' To the point. "

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Lee is effusive in his pleasure at Ric's decision to move Up North and open Bon Vin. "Bringing his knowledge and experience to this region will do nothing but enhance it." Lee continues to bring wines in to taste with Ric, and makes good use of his counsel when purchasing a wine from a European colleague. "When tasting together, I know Ric's comments are going to be honest, direct and relevant. There's not a lot of people I know well enough and trust well enough in their knowledge and their palates to have that kind of relationship."

The world of wine is vast, and sometimes confusing. It's a special person who can hear you describe what you're looking for and pick out just the right bottle. Now, it maybe that you had hoped to spend \$20, and end up spending \$35. Conversely, you may be most pleasantly surprised that spending a mere \$12 can get you something so lovely. Personally, I'm looking forward to becoming a regular at Ric's regular Saturday wine-tastings to discover, learn, and savor.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeleine Vedel was initiated into the world of wine by her wine-loving parents who had a prized - if small - wine cellar to be shared only with those who knew the difference. While married to a French chef in Provence she ran food and wine tours for nearly 20 years. She is currently based in Traverse City, honing her cheese and pastry skills, and happily consuming both local and international wines within her budget.

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