

Q & A
By Jeff Storey

Brian Platten

Q • Your father was a distributor of Italian and French wines and even bought you a wine cellar on your 18th birthday, but he recommended that you stay out of the wine business. Why?

A: When I was 18, my father gave me a 'starter' cellar, consisting of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Rhone and Northern Italian wines. My father knew that I was interested in wine, and he wanted me to learn how to grow, and properly care for a cellar. His recommendation that I pursue a profession outside of the wine business was based on then current economic reality, since the 1970s was a terrible decade for the wine business in the United States and elsewhere.

Q: Why did you decide to become a lawyer?

A: I was attracted by the law because I knew it would discipline my thinking, it was rooted in principles of equity and logic, and because I liked to argue and persuade.

Q: Can you describe your practice?

A: My practice consists of representing entities that provide health services; entities that pay for those services; entities that develop health products, treatments, devices and therapies; entities that act as intermediaries between payers and providers; and entities that invest in all of the above. While the work is mainly transactional in nature (acquisitions, divestitures, mergers, investments, joint ventures, licenses), there is also a significant regulatory component.

Q: Do you ever regret picking the law over a career in wine?

A: I enjoy the practice of law, just as I enjoy the study, appreciation and consumption of good wine. A career in wine is quite different from

my involvement. Just as one may enjoy and study classical music, without being a first-chair musician, I study, appreciate and consume the products of great wine makers. I participate in the wine world from the perspective of a collector, and doubt that, even if I were to give it a try, I would have the knowledge and skills to qualify as a great, or even good vigneron. It is a talent that one is born with, and that is developed after years of experience and experimentation.

Q: What talents are needed to qualify as a great vigneron?

A: A deep connection with, and understanding of the 'terroir,' a passion for the art of raising the grapes and vinifying the wine, an unquantifiable ability to know when the timing is right, and a touch of luck. Terroir is a French term that does not directly translate, but generally means the ecosystem of the vineyard, i.e., the composition of the soil and sub-soil, the elevation and drainage, the orientation of the vineyard to the sun, the microclimate, and the insects that live in the vineyard.

Q: What is the attraction in becoming a wine collector?

A: I can only speak for myself, since for each collector, the answer may be different. I view wine as something organic, something that evolves. Further, I view the composition of a collection as reflective of individual tastes, and what you want to share with family and friends. For me, it was something that just happened, not as the result of calculation and planning. Perhaps the best part of being a collector is sharing, educating and being educated.

Q: You have continued to cultivate your taste for fine wine. Is 'hobby' too weak a word to describe your wine-related activities?

A: The study and appreciation of fine wine is an



BRIAN PLATTEN is a health law practitioner who has nurtured a passion for the collection and consumption of fine wine.

Platten, 54, whose father worked for a wine importer, belongs to several international wine organizations. Last month, he assumed the position of regent in the New York chapter of the Commanderie de Bordeaux in the United States, which meets regularly to enjoy, discuss and learn more about wines of France's Bordeaux region.

Officers of these societies wear robes to show rank and historic continuity. Above, Platten dons the robes of the Commanderie de Bordeaux. He wears a different set as maitre of the New York chapter of the Commanderie des Costes du Rhone.

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organic, continuing and often, humbling series of experiences. Blind tasting is humbling, since even the most accomplished tasters may occasionally miss (sometimes by a wide mark). That helps to keep one humble. Also, there is always something to learn. The enormity of the subject matter is also humbling.

For someone immersed in the wine world, the subject matter often influences your travel plans, where you choose to dine and how you spend at least part of your disposable income.

Q: How much time and money do you devote to wine?

A: My practice keeps me fairly busy, and my participation in various organizations and the occasional dinner with 'wine buddies' absorb a good deal of what would otherwise be 'free

time.' As to how much I spend, that varies from year to year, and depends, in part, on whether or not my wife will read this article.

Q: Do you meet a lot of lawyers with a passion for and/or expertise in wine?

A: There are a fair number of lawyers who collect wine and belong to wine societies. Some of these lawyers have developed a substantial knowledge base, and almost all of them are somewhere between mildly interested and very passionate. Lawyers in the wine world, however, are greatly outnumbered by people involved in financial services of some sort.

Q: You recently were installed at the French consulate as the new regent of the New York Chapter of the Commanderie de Bordeaux? What is the function of the organization? What is your own role?

A: The Commanderie de Bordeaux is the premier Bordeaux wine organization in the world. The New York chapter is the oldest and largest in the United States, and may be the oldest and largest chapter outside of France. The organization is fraternal, and its primary function is to promote and further the enjoyment of the wines, cuisine and culture of Bordeaux, with particular emphasis on the wines. The New York chapter organizes and hosts between 10 and 12 events per season. Our season runs between early to mid-September and early June, and our events include certain recurring events and dinners in honor of visiting vigneron from Bordeaux. My role as regent is to act in the place and stead of our maitre (master or head) when he is otherwise engaged, and to be in charge of the planning and execution of our events.

Q: What other wine-related organizations do you belong to?

A: I am the maitre of the New York chapter of the Commanderie des Costes du Rhone. This organization creates events around the wines, culture and cuisine of the Rhone Valley in France. We hold five or six dinners per season. As maitre, I am in charge of the organization.

I am a Chevalier du Tastevin. The Confrerie des Chevaliers du Tastevin is a worldwide Burgundy wine organization, founded in 1703, and headquartered at the Clos de Vougeot in Burgundy. I attend several of the dinners per year, and am an active Burgundy enthusiast.

I am a member of the Commanderie du Bon-temps de Medoc et des Graves Sauternes et Barsac, which is the French organization for the left bank of Bordeaux. Each year I try and attend the Fete de la Fleur in Bordeaux, which

is an annual dinner organized and sponsored by the Commanderie, and held alternatively at a chateau on the left bank, and in the city of Bordeaux.

This past June, I was inducted into the Jurade de St. Emilion, which is the French organization for the appellation of Saint Emilion within the right bank of Bordeaux. The Jurade is the oldest wine organization in the world, dating back to the Middle Ages (a charter from 1199 signed by King John), and holds a number of events each year within Saint Emilion.

Q: Was it difficult to be admitted to these organizations? How does one qualify for membership?

A: The answer varies from organization to organization. Generally, the process is difficult in that it takes time, and there is often a long wait, as there are usually many more candidates than there are places. Also, you need to have a sponsor and a second. There is a written application and often a test.

Q: Have you gained any clients from people you have met in these organizations?

A: As mentioned, the purpose of these organizations is fraternal. Business solicitation of any sort is highly discouraged and frowned upon. From time to time, over the years, I have been asked to assist certain friends who happen to be members of one or more wine organizations. However, the origin of these requests is based on fraternity, friendship, trust and confidence and not business solicitation.

Q: Do these organizations ever take a position on issues important to the wine industry, e.g., the recent proposal by the United States to allow the sale of some of its wines in the European Union with a 'chateau' or 'clos' label.

A: For the most part, the organizations are apolitical, and accordingly, do not become involved in legal and regulatory issues. However, certain organizations, such as the Tastevin, have affiliated foundations that seek to promote wine education.

Q: What legal issues are faced by those who produce and/or distribute wine?

A: These may include simple issues such as obtaining an importer's license or a wholesale and distribution license, and more complex issues, such as the sale of wine over the Internet, Internet-based auctions, transfer pricing issues, and confronting the challenges of the three-tier system that exists in many states [governing the distribution of wine to producers, distributors,

and retailers].

Q: Have you represented any wine businesses?

A: Yes. I have represented producers, importers, distributors and restaurants.

Q: How big is your wine collection?

A: I prefer not to describe collections in terms of a number of bottles. Rather, I am more interested in the content. My collection is primarily focused on Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhone Valley, but I also have wines from Spain, Italy, California, the Loire Valley, Australia, and other wine producing regions.

Q: What is your favorite wine?

A: The next great wine that I have not yet tried. I always tell people that the best wine in the world is the one that you like. I have been fortunate enough to have had, thanks to my own efforts, the generosity of family and friends, and the terrific wine organizations of which I am a member, many great wines, too many to recount. Some wines 'speak' to me as a sensory experience, others may not, but are great, and I appreciate them on an intellectual level. Each wine has its own personality, and each is different from all others. That is one of the many things that I love about wine. So, while I have many favorites, I do not have a favorite. I hope that makes sense.

Q: What advice would you offer someone who knows little about wine but is eager to become a connoisseur?

A: The best wine in the world is the one that you like. Also, wine is an experience-based endeavor. If you find something that you like, delve into why you like it, investigate further the elements that appeal to you, and try other wines that may also contain one or more of those elements. Read and taste, but mainly, taste. Share your experiences, observations and opinions with friends. The beauty of wine is that there is always something to learn.

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