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## Robert Kacher, champion of inexpensive French wines

By Dave McIntyre

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"People do still spend \$30 or more for a bottle of wine, you know," Robert Kacher said as he poured me a taste of Pouilly-Fuisse from Christophe Cordier. He leaned close as he pushed the glass of white Burgundy across the table, as though confiding a secret.

His remark carried as much nuance as the chardonnay: a gentle rebuke at the media for fixating on cheap wines during a down economy, and irritation at his own reputation as an importer of terrific, inexpensive French wines that overshadow the higher end of his portfolio.

"There's still a wonderful demand for great French wine," he said.

Over the next few minutes as Kacher's student, I learned how the wine's grapes are farmed at low yields in order to increase ripeness, harvested by hand, pressed in whole clusters with the stems, then fermented and aged in oak barrels: one-third in new barrels, one-third in second-use barrels, the remainder in barrels soaking up their third harvest. The wine was rich and luxurious, with just enough oak to give structure without threatening to obscure the fruit.

Then he poured another wine by Cordier, made from older vines at a slightly higher elevation. It was similar yet strikingly different: more precise and focused, with an appealing delicacy and refinement.

"Same oak treatment, same vinification," Kacher said. "The difference is terroir."

Kacher, 58, is the dean of Washington area wine importers, the founder of Robert Kacher Selections. His Franco-centric portfolio has won praise from critics, including Robert M. Parker Jr., and has been embraced by retailers and consumers across the country. The French government named him a chevalier de l'Ordre du Merite Agricole. His quick success after launching his company in 1984 ignited a wave of boutique importers in this region; it is a market that thrives to this day. He helped clue in consumers to the importance of the importer when exploring foreign wines.

Washington wine lovers might recognize the Kacher treatment from store tastings or wine dinners: the earnest descriptions of wines and vintners; the hunched shoulders that suggest he's about to pull another cork or refill someone's glass; the zeal with which he approaches his work. He nurtured that enthusiasm while working retail at Continental Liquors in the District during the mid-1970s, then as the French portfolio manager for a Philadelphia importer, before starting his business.

His timing was good. Americans were discovering wine, and innovative importers such as Kermit Lynch in California and Neal Rosenthal in New York were exploring the small, family-run domaines of France.

Success did not come without controversy. Kacher is unashamedly an activist importer who advocates certain winemaking techniques, including the use of new oak barrels. That earned him criticism from champions of "terroir-driven" wines who say the wine should be allowed to make itself, with minimal intervention from humans, and that an upstart American importer shouldn't be telling a French vigneron how to do his job.

"Yes, I have bought my producers barrels," Kacher says. He also has insisted on farming without pesticides or herbicides, on cold fermentation to preserve fruit flavors in the wine, and on bottling the final product unfiltered and with minimal sulfur dioxide. Most of all, he maintains that the secret to good wine is the vigneron. Or as the French say, "C'est l'homme qui fait la difference": It's man that makes the difference.

"Look at Gevrey-Chambertin," he said, mentioning an appellation in Burgundy. "It is a terrific terroir, but there are a lot of bad wines made there. Terroir is only potential. It is nothing without man. Technology and risk-taking are necessary to express terroir."

Kacher's success has been in finding vintners who are able to express their terroir, however modest it may be: Christophe Cordier and his ability to coax that delicate precision from those old vines on a hillside in Pouilly-Fuisse. Or Yves Grassa in Gascony, whose unassuming and dirt-cheap white wine from Domaine de Pouy, made with grapes traditionally distilled into Armagnac, became an early mainstay in Kacher's portfolio and helped establish his reputation for high-quality bargain wines. (Kacher imports Grassa's Domaine du Tariquet as well.)

Today, Kacher no longer lives half of the year in France, and he has hired associates to handle much of the day-to-day business of the company. Yet he remains the company's public face, guiding palate and driving personality.

"I'm still thirsty," he said. "Thirsty for the new harvest, the new discovery. When you're no longer thirsty, then it's over."