

# 1

## THE SIXTIES, HEADWATERS OF THE AMERICAN RHÔNE

In a sense, it all begins with the sixties. The sixties give us all permission.

Before the decade of the sixties, American culture is narrowly defined, restricted by social convention, a fairly rigid Judeo-Christian moral framework, a troubled economic history. Personal expression has been underdeveloped or effectively suppressed for close to forty years, laid low by the Great Depression and by the obligations of the Second World War, after which the country clings to safe cultural models for a decade— notwithstanding incursions of fear brought on by a new nuclear reality. Americans do nurse a Bohemian culture, but it is largely a nocturnal phenomenon, limited to coffee-houses and basement stages.

In the sixties, the doors are pried open, American culture embraces possibility. Conformist models are debunked and devalued. Young people get restless, and demands for freedom of expression push into the mainstream, spurred on by student activism, opposition to the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the environmental movement, the human potential movement, feminism, and free love sentiments—all contributing to a new spirit of permissiveness, the sense that anything is possible. Psychedelic drugs and marijuana send shock waves through the population, and whether or not you partake of such substances, you can hardly avoid their influence on the culture at large. Indeed much of what was once considered deviant, subversive, or dangerous is now actively embraced.

With the seventies, alternative lifestyles beget alternative livelihoods. By the end of the decade an entire subeconomy supporting the counterculture has emerged, and as the

counterculture expands, so do businesses to support it. A generation of young laborers questions the wisdom of following their fathers into conventional commerce. They have no interest in a professional life that involves suits and ties or stultifying commutes to drab suburban centers. They want something else.

It is the era where college professors walk away from tenured positions to start organic farms, where careers in medicine are abandoned to pursue vineyard planting, where big fortunes are made selling high fidelity stereo equipment, and small ones selling hand-made purses—parlayed into the business of importing wine.

As American culture opens up to new possibilities, so do the things one can do in it. In California, one of those things is to make wine.

If there ever was a hotbed for American counterculture, it was California, particularly the communities of San Francisco and Berkeley. San Francisco might be seen as the source of many of the social changes in the state, but Berkeley provided the intellectual framework. Berkeley was home to a flagship university, home to the brightest young people in the country's most progressive state. If the sixties fomented change in this country, California was its engine, and Berkeley was its brain trust.

Visit Berkeley today, and past and present mingle on practically every block. Many of the city's more iconic institutions got their start in the sixties, whose spirit still permeates the culture. It is a place where revolution took root, settled, institutionalized, and morphed into manageable expressions—where radicalism was transformed into more personal revolutions, where the impetus for changing the world found creative, entrepreneurial, and commercial expression. And of all of these transformations, few were more enduring and vital than those which involved eating and drinking. These changes too had roots in revolutionary fervor. During the early sixties the food industry had become industrialized to such an extent that conventional food was no longer recognizable as food. It was the era that gave rise to the TV dinner, to Tater Tots and Tang, to frozen pizza and Space Food Sticks. Industrial farming techniques allowed the country's productivity to skyrocket through the use of herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides, touted as "better living" through chemicals. Activists rallied people against these practices, and they got practical themselves: coops sprung up in and around campuses, supermarkets were disdained in favor of local produce markets emphasizing the fresh, wholesome, and natural. The word "organic" entered the lexicon; though as a marketing device the term suffered in the early years, with less than pristine application, the notion itself came of age in this era.

Revolutions in food and wine culture lagged slightly behind the cultural revolution, but not by much. Part of the hippie ethos included an active mythologizing of country living, a back-to-the-land appreciation at once romantic and liberating. Communes were commonplace, and many attempted to become sustainable by growing crops—organically of course. Back-to-the-land movements changed the way we looked at food.

With an expansion of cultural consciousness came an expansion of the possibilities in food and wine, so that by the time the seventies arrive, the climate is right for a series

of seminal events that, taken together, become the antecedents of the American Rhône wine movement.

With protests and activism come community, and communities need to eat. One of the students on hand to feed and support the protesters in Berkeley was Alice Waters, a student of French culture who grew up in Chatham, New Jersey, and moved to Van Nuys, California with her family in 1961.<sup>1</sup> After studying at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Waters completed her degree at Berkeley and immediately fell in with student activists, following or supporting protests throughout the Bay Area. In 1966 Waters moved in with a young intellectual and artist named David Goines, who was actively involved in the free-speech movement. Waters couldn't help but notice with some alarm that the revolution was being fueled on peanut butter sandwiches and canned soup—institutional, industrial, non-nutritional foods.

Alice Waters believed in food. Just after arriving in Berkeley in 1965, Waters had taken a trip to France, eating her way across the country and tasting food harvested or collected just hours, or moments, before being delivered to the table. There were several seminal meals during this trip, but Waters has consistently referred to a meal in Brittany as her epiphany. It began simply enough, a plate of melon with cured ham, followed by a course of trout amandine, and finished with a dessert of fresh raspberries. But those raspberries had come from the property, and the trout had been caught in a stream she could see from the table. "It was this immediacy," she recalled, "that made these dishes so special."<sup>2</sup>

Upon her return Waters started to cook communal meals that to her were simple reflections of the lesson she'd received in France; to those eating them, they were elaborate, stunning, and evocative, worlds from even the most wholesome hippie food of the street and far simpler than the continental French style of meals enjoyed by bourgeois diners and promoted by establishment restaurants, but no less stirring or satisfying. These became the culinary starting ground for Chez Panisse.

Waters founded the restaurant in August 1971, with mismatched plates and saucers, flatware rescued from thrift stores, and an aesthetic loosely tethered to ideals of community, immediacy, and creativity; what it possessed in spirit it may have lacked in focus at the outset. But Waters immersed herself in French cuisine and culture, reading influential authors like the English food journalist Elizabeth David and the American Richard Olney; she acquainted herself with the culinary advances coming from the northern Rhône restaurant La Pyramide, in Vienne, owned by the legendary chef Fernand Point. Point's kitchen was a proving ground for some of the greatest chefs in postwar France, including Paul Bocuse, Alain Chapel, and the Troisgros brothers. Inevitably a culinary bent that had been more broadly French took a distinct turn south.

Still other factors linked Waters to the south of France. One of her lovers, Thomas Luddy, was a film scholar and promoter (he eventually founded the Pacific Film Archive) who introduced Waters to a series of films authored by Marcel Pagnol known as the Fanny Trilogy. Three films, *Marius*, *Fanny*, and *César*, were produced in the early to mid-thirties,

set on the Vieux Port of Marseilles in the heart of Provence, with stories that followed several interlinking characters from youth to middle age whose lives are centered around a café owned by César. Waters wound up naming her new restaurant Chez Panisse, after the genial, kindhearted sailmaker in the film; her only child she named Fanny.

As Waters was founding Chez Panisse, another Berkeley figure, an acknowledged ex-hippie, was developing a business that would complement Waters's culinary breakthrough.

Kermit Lynch was born into a teetotaling family in 1941, in San Luis Obispo, California. At the time this was a region better known for pastures than vineyards, and was still decades way from becoming the wine region it is today. He attended the University of California, Berkeley, and as a student, musician, and blues aficionado, Lynch developed a taste for wine that he casually cultivated as he pursued a career in music, all the while operating a small crafts business called The Berkeley Bag, wherein he transformed Asian rug scraps and bolts of fabric into women's purses. It was hardly something he saw himself doing forever, however, and in 1971, when an entrepreneur offered to buy the business, he cashed out and booked a trip to Europe to find out more about his avocation, wine.

The following year Lynch borrowed a small sum from his girlfriend and opened a wine shop in Albany, just north of Berkeley. Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant kept patrician hours, so as not to interfere with his music career. It was simple, crowded, fusty, and unkempt, "cool and dark inside," wrote Ruth Reichl in her memoir, *Tender at the Bone*, "and smelled like spilled wine. Cartons were stacked on the floor, hundreds of them, and way in the back a slight man with curly brown hair and a scruffy beard stood by a make-shift desk, watching me. I could feel his eyes on my back as I went up and down the aisles looking at the wine in the cartons and repeating the names to myself. The words were beautiful. I reached for a bottle, picked it up, and stroked the label.

"'It's not fruit,' said the man. 'You can't tell anything by squeezing it.'"<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, Lynch sold whatever was available to him—and at that moment, this was a lot. A recession had made a great many great wines available on the cheap, including the portfolio of Frank Schoonmaker, whose extraordinary stock of Grand Cru Burgundy and First Growth Bordeaux Lynch was able to purchase for as little as 20 cents on the dollar. Soon after he started making trips to France, hardly knowing the language, with only the vaguest sense of what he was after, and where to get it. Lynch's clientele grew rapidly, and within a few short years he was selling to many of the best restaurants of the day, including Narsai David's eponymous restaurant in Kensington, founded the same year (it would soon be known for having one of the finest wine lists in the country), Michael Wild's Bay Wolf, and not least, Alice Waters's Chez Panisse.

Since the inception of his business, Lynch has imported wine from all over France—he continues to carry superb Burgundies and fine-boutique Champagnes, iconic Beaujolais, as well as a stellar collection of producers he's brought to fame from the Loire, Alsace, and Languedoc.

But within a few short years of opening Lynch's reputation rested on wines from the south of France. The wines of the Rhône Valley and Provence have remained the soul of his portfolio; it was in these regions that he was able to find producers that no one had tapped; he imported wines from domaines like Gentaz, Chave, Vieux Télégraphe, Simone, Trinquedell, Grippa, Clape, Tardieu-Laurent, Jasmin, Chateau Grillet, and Ver-set, brands which had never been in the U.S. market or only spottily. By the end of his first decade as an importer, Lynch had adopted no less than two dozen producers from the south of France, including many from the Rhône Valley, Provence, and the Languedoc, importing more than a hundred wines from these regions and effectively exploding a heretofore underappreciated category.

As fledgling businesses in Berkeley's nascent food scene in the seventies, Kermit Lynch and Alice Waters were destined to meet, of course, and to do a brisk business together; Waters needed good wine for her restaurant, and Lynch needed a customer who could appreciate his unique palate.

But the synergies between Chez Panisse and Kermit Lynch Wine Merchants go well beyond a commercial relationship, even a friendly one. It's rare for two innovators of such intense conviction to find each other in the same place at the same time and have so much in common politically, philosophically, and aesthetically. Waters's ebullient menus and Lynch's ebullient wines seemed so ideally suited to one another that the connection almost bordered on myth—and that myth linked them and Berkeley to the south of France. No one who dined at Chez Panisse could fail to be influenced, not least a would-be winemaker or two.

The figure that fused their aesthetic vision was Richard Olney, the expatriate American writer living in the south of France, with whom both Lynch and Waters would develop an intimate relationship.

Olney was a painter and writer who emigrated to France as a young man, where he got to know several of the country's most talented winemakers and chefs. In the early sixties he landed a job writing about French food and wine for the influential magazine *Cuisine et Vins de France*. By 1970 he was living full time in Provence, where he'd purchased an old house in Solliès-Toucas, which he slowly refurbished, planting an elaborate garden and resurrecting a simple yet functional kitchen. Increasingly his daily life there informed his writings, and his home became a pilgrimage spot for American cooks, journalists, and restaurateurs, all of whom came away with an indelible image of a simple life, lived well, punctuated by memorable meals.

Olney published several books on French cooking, many devoted to simple country fare. His first, *The French Menu Cookbook*, was published by Simon & Schuster in 1970, just prior to the opening of Chez Panisse in 1971. Most likely Waters was familiar with the book at the time; certainly his second book, *Simple French Food*, she regarded as a bible.

Olney's books were a departure from the haute cuisine espoused by such leading resources in French culinary arts as *Larousse Gastronomique* or the writings of Georges

Auguste Escoffier. Olney's preparations were simple, his measurements inexact, his methods ad hoc, the results invariably delicious.

Waters and Olney met in California during Olney's American book tour for *Simple French Food*, in 1974; the following year Waters visited Olney in Solliès-Toucas and was introduced to the Peyraud family, who produced Provencal wines from Bandol under the name Domaine Tempier. Waters knew these wines, especially the robust, vivid rosé; the domaine had been imported to the Bay Area in minute quantities by the importer and wine writer Gerald Asher, and in fact Waters carried the wine on early wine lists. But wine tasted in the context of where it's grown and made is often transformative, and there's little doubt that Alice Waters was duly transformed.

"It is impossible for me not to love the wines of Domaine Tempier," wrote Alice Waters in Kermit Lynch's newsletter in 1978. "Once you have visited the Peyrauds in their 17th-century house surrounded by perfectly tended vines, eaten Lulu's garlicky food cooked over the coals, and drunk the wines with Lucien in his cellar, it is clear that they love wine and they love people drinking wine."

More than this, however, Waters was taken with the Peyraud family and with their way of life: "I felt as if I had walked into a Marcel Pagnol film come to life," she wrote in the foreword to Olney's book *Lulu's Provencal Table* some fifteen years later. "Lucien and Lulu's warmhearted enthusiasm for life, their love for the pleasures of the table, their deep connection to the beautiful earth of the South of France—these were things I had seen at the movies. But this was for real. I felt immediately as if I had come home to a second family."<sup>4</sup>

Kermit Lynch, meanwhile, was making more frequent trips to Europe, and as his own tastes and philosophy started to take shape, the trips became longer, devoted to small independent French growers who had broken from négociants and were trying their hand at making wine on their own. A new word was being used to describe them—artisans—and the results were revolutionary. But they were not easy to find without help. Lynch required the talents of guides who knew the lay of the land and could introduce him to producers who weren't being imported in California.

In 1976 he was about to embark on one such trip to France when at the last minute his guide and translator, Wayne Marshall, had to back out. Marshall suggested Richard Olney as a suitable replacement. Lynch was told that Olney was American, spoke French fluently, and that he knew a lot of winemakers; perhaps he might be able to help with a few discoveries.

When Lynch mentioned the prospect of traveling with Olney to Alice Waters, her eyes lit up. "Pack your bags," she said, "and get on that plane!"<sup>5</sup> Lynch did what he was told; it was one of the most momentous decisions of his career.

Meeting Olney changed entirely the nature and focus of Lynch's business. Olney's connections in the French wine industry were completely in sync with Lynch's developing aesthetic, and probably had a strong hand in shaping it. Says Lynch, for Olney

drinking wine was like breathing. “Richard had a way of tasting—there was absolutely no pomposity at all. I can hear him saying in my mind, ‘what does this wine have to say to us?’ He tried not to impose anything on the wine; he just wanted to see what it had to give.”<sup>6</sup> The wines he loved were not ceremonious, they weren’t meant to be revered, they were meant to be shared and enjoyed in a social setting.

On that first trip Olney introduced his charge to many producers in France who were not yet on the radar, and important, seminal partnerships were cemented during this trip for Lynch, including his first contact with legendary Rhône producers Gerard Chave and August Clape. But by far the most powerful and far-reaching was the kinship Lynch struck with Lucien and Lucie (Lulu) Peyraud of Domaine Tempier.

According to Olney, Bandol was their very first stop, and it was momentous. “A visit to the Peyrauds at Domaine Tempier was inevitable,” wrote Olney in his introduction to Kermit Lynch’s travelogue, *Adventures on the Wine Route*. “The instant spark of sympathy kindled between Kermit and the ebullient family of Peyrauds could be likened to spontaneous combustion.”<sup>7</sup> Just as with Waters, meeting the Peyrauds struck a deep chord with the young importer. “This was not Kermit’s first wine-tasting trip to France,” writes Olney, “but I think it may have been the real beginning of his *Adventures on the Wine Route*.”

Lynch believes he didn’t really have a chance. “It is my experience,” he writes, “that when anybody makes the acquaintance of the Peyrauds and Domaine Tempier, he or she tends to mythologize them. Everything seems so down-to-earth and wonderful and perfect. Even the names: Lucie and Lucien. And the setting contributes, too; the rugged hillsides, the sea, and the enormous blue sky create a landscape of divine dimension. And one’s glass is never empty; reverie is natural.”<sup>8</sup> To this day, Domaine Tempier is one of Lynch’s most iconic estates; in the U.S., the wines and the importer are practically synonymous.

What is it about the wines of Tempier? For one thing, they’re made from the extraordinary ancient Mourvèdre, a red grape that basks in the sun of the south and produces powerful, earthy, massive wines with a rustic power that few can match. “When young the red is not exactly a delicate wine,” writes Lynch in one of his early newsletters, introducing his customers to the variety. “It has the harshness and vigor and sunny ripeness of the south. With age it softens and develops nuances of flavor unimaginable in its youth. However, it makes good drinking youthful—rough-edged, lively, a bit *sauvage*.”

Vigorous, rough-edged, earthy, rustic, openhearted—is it any wonder that these wines were the perfect complement to the cuisine at Chez Panisse? To this day, Tempier’s Mourvèdre-based rosés and earthy reds are a fixture on the wine list, where they have been served, more or less without interruption, every vintage since. In fact, the restaurant poured Tempier Rosé by the glass for the first *thirty years* of its existence.

For an incredible decade, 1974 to 1984, the axis of Olney, Tempier, Lynch, and Waters (aided by Chez Panisse’s gifted chef Jeremiah Tower) were routinely conjoined upon the pinewood tables of Chez Panisse, both in meals and in spirit. Not only did the restaurant

go through cases and cases of rosé and red wine (they still do), but many of the restaurant's specially themed dinners featured Domaine Tempier on the menu; for M.F.K. Fisher in 1976 on the occasion of her seventieth birthday, for Julia Child, Diana Kennedy, Judy Rodgers, and Patricia Wells. Olney himself made several visits, as chef and honored guest, culminating in a series of dinners in 1984 in honor of Lulu and Lucien Peyraud, with menus designed by Olney and executed by Tower in the Chez Panisse kitchen.

Within a few years Chez Panisse had made Berkeley a culinary destination, and people started referring to the blocks in and around Shattuck Avenue as the Gourmet Ghetto. The world's cheeses could be found at the Cheese Board across the street; exquisite artisanal chocolates were being made at Cocolat by Alice Medrich, a former patissier at Chez Panisse; a stern Dutchman with ties to the European coffee and tea markets founded an eponymous coffee shop called Peet's where, somewhat obsessively, the beans were roasted fresh daily; and you could buy charcuterie at Pig-by-the-Tail.

Other restaurants riffed on the Chez Panisse aesthetic; these included Bay Wolf in Oakland, Zuni Café in San Francisco, Lalime's in Albany. Kitchen alumni Mark Miller, Suzanne Goin, and Mark Peel opened restaurants across the American West, initiating a diaspora which, with Wolfgang Puck and Thomas Keller, virtually defines the California food movement to this day—a movement that emphasizes immediacy, generous flavors, a life-giving aesthetic in need of wines as generous and robust to complete it.

After all, what was a Gourmet Ghetto without wine? The heightened cultural environment proved to be a very fertile one for its appreciation. Curious, learned, and well-traveled college professors and other professionals affiliated with the university amounted to a built-in consumer base for good wine—faculty and campus parties were famously lubricated with wine (you couldn't very well have a wine and cheese party without it).

Wine got an immeasurable boost in the American public consciousness in 1976, when a young British wine merchant named Steven Spurrier decided to throw a tasting of American and French wines in Paris, placed together and tasted blind by a number of French critics. In a stunning victory, the American wines trounced their French counterparts, in what came to be known as the "Judgment of Paris." That result, and the chance attendance by *Time* magazine reporter George Taber, resulted in an explosion of interest in American viticulture. Berkeley and San Francisco, with its proximity to the wine regions in Sonoma, Napa, Santa Cruz, and elsewhere, amounted to an instant market.

Outside of Kermit Lynch's wine shop a number of important wine retailers catered to this new aesthetic in wine as well, selling the "little wines" of Kermit Lynch as well as American Zinfandel and Rhône-variety producers.

One of these was Trumpetvine, which Stan Hock and partners opened in 1979 on Shattuck Avenue, just a few blocks from the campus gates. It quickly became a favorite source of wine for college professors and students alike; eventually would-be winemakers flocked to the place to stock up on domestic Zinfandel and Cabernet. By the early eighties, Rhône winemakers like Randall Grahm and Bob Lindquist were coming through the door, and Hock started to promote the wines in his newsletters, espousing his share of



Berkeley's countercultural zeitgeist in his enthusiasm for newly minted Syrahs from Bonny Doon and Joseph Phelps:

Our total grasp of reality leads to the inevitable conclusion that there is a world wide conspiracy to deny the noble Syrah of its rightful place on the grape pantheon with Cabernet and Pinot Noir . . . mention Bordeaux and Burgundy, and the common wine buff thinks of first growths, elegant meals, and nobility. Mention a Rhône, and the association is with rustic, crude, alcoholic wines, swilled by peasants in the company of their livestock.<sup>9</sup>

Another was Solano Cellars, founded in March 1978 by Bill Easton, in Albany just west of Berkeley. From the beginning, Easton had in mind “a people’s store,” selling inexpensive wines for the community. But the industry was changing dramatically, and Solano Cellars, like Trumpetvine, became a haven for off-the-beaten-path wines and winemakers, and for alternative wines, including Rhône-variety wines, which clearly had an influence on the owner. Less than a decade later Easton sold his shop, left the retail business, and moved to the Sierra foothills to found his own Rhône-variety winery, *Domaine de la Terre Rouge*.

Several of the early Rhône-variety wine producers report on the powerful draw of *Chez Panisse*, Kermit Lynch’s retail shop, and the whole of Berkeley’s food and wine scene. John Buechsenstein, Randall Grahm, Bob Lindquist (and his non-Rhône oriented colleague Jim Clendenen), Steve Edmunds, Adam Tolmach, and Bill Easton, all spent formative years living in or visiting Berkeley, making regular visits to Waters’s restaurant and Lynch’s wine shop, collecting mixed cases of southern French wines, dreaming of making their own wines one day.

As the Rhône movement started to take shape, *Chez Panisse* and *Chez Panisse Café* were eager and generous supporters of its early efforts. *Panisse* was one of the first restaurants to sell the wines of Joseph Phelps, including its Syrah, and was an early supporter of the wines of Qupé. In fact Steve Edmunds, by now a friend of Kermit Lynch, had his first taste of an American Rhône wine, Qupé’s Central Coast Syrah, at *Chez Panisse*—it was this very wine that proved to him that Rhône varieties were worth a taking a chance on in California—he founded his winery the following year.

Lynch meanwhile, became a sideline cheerleader for domestic versions of the varieties and blends he’d introduced into the American market. Bob Lindquist recalls an early encounter with Lynch and his friend and drinking buddy, the winemaker Joseph Swan, who was waiting for Lynch to close up shop so they could go to dinner at *Chez Panisse*. Lindquist remembers Lynch practically cornering him, fervently holding forth on the virtues of these as yet untested Rhône varieties. Lynch regularly set up meetings with his producers and these fledgling winemakers during the formative years, either in France on their home turf or when his producers made sales visits to the states.

As for Mourvèdre, it got its star turn at table at Chez Panisse as well. Old Mourvèdre vineyards were revived in Oakley, on the San Joaquin river delta east of San Francisco, on the strength of demand from new producers, which saved them from being ripped out. Waters noted this in her foreword to Olney's 1994 cookbook, chronicle, and memoir, *Lulu's Provencal Table*:

Because of his enthusiastic promotion of Bandol and the influence of its flavors, a new generation of talented wine makers in California has planted many new vineyards of Mourvèdre (the grape that is the essence of Bandol) and are also happily harvesting fruit from recently rediscovered venerably plantings of Mataro (the state's legal name for Mourvèdre). I think this is as exciting a change in direction for California wine making as the shift to Cabernet and Chardonnay was a generation ago, and not only because these wines go so well with the kind of simple, garlicky food I love to cook at Chez Panisse.<sup>10</sup>

In 1987, Kermit Lynch arranged a meeting between newly bonded Rhône-variety producer (and Berkeley resident) Steve Edmunds, of Edmunds St. John Winery, and Francois Peyraud, son of Lucien and Lulu and winemaker at Domaine Tempier. Edmunds had made some older-vine Mourvèdre from Brandlin Ranch that he was really happy with and wanted Peyraud to try. Peyraud tasted a number of wines before the Mourvèdre and Edmunds remembers him politely tasting his wines but not betraying much excitement—until he was poured the Mourvèdre.

“When he got to the Mourvèdre,” says Edmunds, “he stuck his nose in the glass, and he absolutely just stopped and stood there, for about two minutes. And then very slowly he lowered the glass and his head came up and his eyes rolled back and he took this deep breath and he said, “La terre parle.”<sup>11</sup>

One could hardly imagine a more heartfelt or meaningful validation for an American producer. And it meant that the Rhône movement, guided by broader influences that reached across oceans to France and traced back decades, was on an unstoppable path.