

Mouthfeel:  
Confessions of a Wine Slut

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## Chapter One

Robertson Cellar's tasting room was crammed when my friends and I arrived at Crush Hour, thirty minutes before closing time. The aroma of rough-hewn wood and negative ions combined with perspiration and rotting fruit, creating an earthy bouquet so thick it could be bottled. There were young golfers bantering with aging hippies, retirees talking to river rats, and barrel-chested men towering above petite, coiffed women who passed glasses to each other. Bodies were pressed three deep against the counter and when a couple turned to leave, we leaped into the space they vacated.

"Well, judging from the crowd, I guess we can conclude that their wines are good," Rebecca said with a laugh.

"Excellent observation, my dear," said Greg, affecting a Sherlock Holmes accent. "Perhaps there is a crowd to price ratio to be deduced here."

We laughed at our own pretentiousness even though we were indeed on a mission, as students of Wine Marketing 101, to observe patterns of consumption and purchasing at one of Sonoma County's oldest wineries.

But we could barely hear each other in the swirling vortex of descriptors and hokum in which we stood, where everybody around us was a critic.

"I'm getting dried raisins."

"I get warm plywood."

"I'm getting wet, hot asphalt, but in a good way."

"Are those tartrates in your glass, or just floaters?"

After flagging down the cute bartender, Greg said, "What do you gals want to start with - the zin?" He raised one satanic eyebrow and leered. "They have five different bottlings, ya' know."

Rebecca looked at me and laughed, "Oh sure, why not? It's all part of our research, right?"

Squeezed on both sides, we huddled in the two-person space as if under an umbrella and began our analysis of the Sonoma County and Russian River Zinfandels. We then proceeded through the Reserve, the Westside Vineyard and

the Rocky Range Zins. By the time we arrived at the Late Harvest, my brain was afloat.

"May I have some water, please," I asked, sliding my glass toward the bar babe. Once rehydrated, I nosed my pour of the boozy dessert wine and gazed around the room.

Alcohol fumes stung my nostrils as I watched a customer trying to sell wine to another guy. Raspberry jamminess coated my tongue while a group of retirees conspired to split a case for the quantity discount. My chest blazed as I saw the bartender high fiving a bunch of guys in ball caps.

Through my alcoholic mist, I admired the way he interacted with the crowd, and I imagined how I would look behind the counter, pouring wine. With my hair pulled back and my shirtsleeves rolled up, I'd be the picture of rustic hospitality. My banter would be witty yet informative, and occasionally I'd tell customers things they didn't already know. Quick with the bottle and never, ever spilling, I would entice people with the wine and inspire them to take home cases of it. Canny but beneficent, and always the consumer advocate, I would be worshiped like a tasting room goddess dispensing..

"Hey, Mari. Ya' wanna' go look for the head?" Rebecca said.

Instantly, I came back to myself, an unemployed single mom gripped with visions of vinicultural grandeur. The dream tasted inviting, and left a warm, appealing finish.

Wine. It's like water in Sonoma County. And it was wine that drew me here from San Francisco. Years of shooting photographs for *Wine Spectator* had exposed me to the pleasures of the grape and made me want more. Now, I could have it.

This was the first year of the Clinton presidency and change was blowing like a windstorm across a recession-struck country. My three-year studio partnership had just ended with my partner – and lover – going to the Philippines, hoping to earn enough money to pull our floundering photography business out of the red. When he didn't return after six months, I decided to trade my Hasselblad for a Macintosh, pack up my household goods, and move north to pour wine and maybe write a hemp newsletter on the side. I wanted to feel the energetic thirty-four I was instead of the depressed fifty-four I felt. I needed a change in my life and hoped wine country would give it to me.

I also knew that on the other side of the country, my twelve-year-old daughter, Stephanie, was spending the last

few weeks of vacation with her grandparents dreading her imminent transition from city girl to country girl. She'd started crying when I told her over the phone how I'd planned to move to Forestville on July 31st. Devastated at having to abandon her plans to attend a San Francisco middle school, the last thing she asked before hanging up was, "Does the new school have lockers?"

I knew how she felt. Growing up as an Air Force brat, I changed schools every two years. I knew she was upset about living an hour away from her friends and her father, yet I felt that after twelve years of claustrophobic city life, a move to the countryside would do her good. As I stepped out the front door, on that first morning in Forestville, I was convinced it would.

Here I was, suddenly ensconced in an old cottage, seventy miles from San Francisco and the milieu of my familiar. My daughter and cats were infuriated, but I was giddy. This was my own private *Green Acres* and I couldn't decide if I was Eddie Albert or Eva Gabor.

Outside our new yard lay abundant orchards, prolific vineyards and a racehorse track that encircled pastures of green and beige. The air had a pervasive scent of cooked, ripe fruit along with an earthy undertone of detritus. Walking the circular driveway, I caught aromas of sage,

oak, blackberry vines and wild grasses wafting on a bouquet of hot dust and rotting stems. Ambling along the house, I found climbing roses, wisteria and lilies perfuming the breeze. Fruit. Earth. Flowers. Wood. All the things I smelled in wine were in my new back yard.

I'd found my new roommate, Evelyn, and this little Queen Anne cottage through a Want Ad in the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*. Evelyn's old roommate was moving out and she needed to find a replacement - fast. As an artist, she worked at home, mostly in the living room, and she didn't mind Stephanie and me taking one downstairs bedroom and the entire attic as long as it meant she wouldn't have to leave. The arrangement was perfect for both of us.

Standing in the sun, I watched branches of the willow casting shadows across the cottage roof and estimated when the heat would become unbearable inside. Turning my gaze in the other direction, over rows of stubble-headed grape vines, I saw a redwood McMansion in the distance, projecting immensity. And I thought about him - my new landlord, Dave Steinberg - the guy who lived in that castle and owned the five rental units on this property.

I remembered how I felt when I first met him and the way he had flashed his green eyes at me. Was that a sign of interest, or his way of masking a marijuana hangover? After

hearing his gruff voice on the phone, I had expected a bearded mountain man. Evelyn had intimated that Dave was a rascal, but she didn't tell me he was gorgeous: strong jaw, high cheekbones, a full head of graying hair and the trim body of a twenty year-old. I took one look at him and imagined this little Hebrew could take me to the Promised Land and deliver me from evil, all in one night.

When we discussed renovations, he was receptive to my request. "Sure, I can remodel the attic when I get back from Greece," he said. "In a month."

I could wait. I knew he would do it because, like half the men in the county, Dave worked as a contractor, able to whip up a new interior with no problem. I liked men who could wield power tools with confidence and ease, and as we compared ideas on flooring, I could not stop imagining how he would feel in bed.

Then, he said, "If you don't take it, I've got another couple interested and Evelyn will have to move."

I thought, what an asshole. He said he'd known Evelyn for years. Is money all he cares about? I reminded myself then that looks aren't everything, no matter how enticing. This guy was a greedy capitalist and when he returns from his Euro jaunt, our relationship is going to be strictly

platonic. I couldn't possibly think about dating my landlord.

Or could I?

After spending my first week in Forestville, assembling furniture in my daughter's new room and coddling my traumatized cats, I put on a business skirt and some eye makeup. The time had come to take my meager wine knowledge and fool a tasting room manager into hiring me.

My first tasting room interview occurred at Hawk Valley Vineyards. The place was decorated like a Wild West saloon holding a garage sale. The gangly young tasting room manager motor-mouthed about the industry and barely paused to ask about me.

"There are so many new wineries opening up," he raved, leaning on the oak bar. "Places that make really great wine, where they charge the big bucks. That's where I'm headed." He stopped nodding long enough to say, "Oh, here, try the zin."

All I remember about that Hawk Valley Zinfandel was that it had enough oak to lay a gym floor. Its cloying, cough syrup flavors made me wonder if I could sell it and still respect myself in the morning. I thought not. Could I

work for this piece of art? No way, and I told myself as much when I got back into the car.

My second interview was at De Loach Vineyards, around the bend on Olivet Road. I liked the place, but felt dubious about their policy of hiring lots of different tasting room staffers to work only two days per month. Every other place hired a few people to work every week.

"I know it sounds strange, but this system works very well for us," the assistant manager told me. "If you're interested, you could start on the twenty-ninth of this month."

While scheduling me, she offered a valuable tip: the wine marketing class at Santa Rosa Junior College. She knew the co-instructors, Gene and Ronny, and said they made a good team. So, after leaving De Loach, I drove directly to the SRJC campus and signed up.

That wine class was the best thing I could have done at the time. Since it was essentially a marketing course, and not so much about identifying flavors, it taught me enough about the art of wine selling to get started in a tasting room. Better yet, I got to meet real industry people, the kind that brought fresh, juicy gossip to every meeting.

It was in this class that I met Rebecca, a tasting-room worker at Le Dormier winery. She was a short, round gal with big brown eyes who had been encouraged to take the class by her boss, Ronny, our co-instructor. I liked Rebecca's quick sense of humor and brassy manner, and we started going out together. Our luck with men varied wildly, but together we met people we stayed connected with for years.

We got to know Greg, a cellar worker at Sonoma Cutrer with a strong resemblance to the Underwood Deviled Ham devil. In that first class, we blind-tasted a flight of chardonnays to guess the retail price of each. Greg became teacher's pet by taking a bottle in each hand and going around the room distributing one-ounce pours. While everyone else settled for plastic cups, Greg came prepared with six crystal wine glasses with which he was able to identify his own employers' wine. Mortified by my own high rating of the cheap Glen Ellen, I watched him thinking, damn, he's good.

Although the class was less about tasting wine than pricing it, one of the first things I learned was the importance of mouthfeel: how the wine feels in the mouth.

"Everybody's into malolactic fermentation these days," Gene expounded. "That's where they convert malic acid to

lactic, in order to create wines that taste soft in the mouth and are easier to drink young.”

Looking at my scorecard, where I'd given higher prices to the softer feeling wines, I realized that I'd fallen for this malolactic mouthfeel trick. I felt so unsophisticated.

There was so much to learn about wine, how would I catch up? I knew what I liked, but not why I liked it. Despite having sat in on lunches with *Wine Spectator* writers, I could hardly describe the difference between flabby and fat, tannic and toasty. Wine had a language I needed to learn, and until I got fluent I would just have to fake it, the thought of which had a sneaky, yet sincere mouthfeel with attractive hints of upward mobility.