



Michel Rolland and Kluge Estate

Michel Rolland is known internationally for his wine blending skills but his talents do not start and end there. He consults for 100 wineries and is just as much a presence in the vineyard as the blending bench. He understands that in order to have any hope of a great wine, his blending selections must be derived from the vineyard. Mr. Rolland has consulted for Kluge Estate in Charlottesville, Virginia, for three years. It is not small accomplishment to sign him up as a consultant. I was told that golf was somehow involved in retaining Mr. Rolland's services but this may be one of those stories that assume mythological status over time. Without a doubt, Mr. Rolland brings great skill and prestige to any project he chooses to associate his name with and Kluge is the only winery outside of an impressive California portfolio that includes Harlan, Araujo, Dalle Valle and Bryant.

Patricia Kluge and William Moses are the principals at Kluge Estate. Charles Gendrot is the wine maker with a background of wine making in Bordeaux and with Kendall Jackson before arriving in Virginia in 2003. Kristin Moses Murray heads up marketing and public relations. This family operation has generously devoted considerable resources to not only developing and promoting their own business but all Virginia wine. They are working closely with Piedmont Virginia Community College to develop a practical, certificate viticulture and enology program (<http://www.pvcc.edu/cftwd/viti.htm>) that will train the future professionals needed by the expanding wine industry. It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of such a program, especially given the region's historic difficulty in attracting professional talent from established wine areas (e.g. California).

The event began with a dinner featuring wines made by Mr. Rolland. A common complaint is that he is participating in the homogenization of wines around the world (see Mondovino) but I could not taste that in the wines presented to us which included a 2003 Casa Laposteolle Clos Apalta (Chile), 2000 Chateau Fontenil (his own property in Fronsac), the 2002 Kluge Estate New World Red and the 2003 Kluge Estate Albermarle Simply Red. All of the wines were distinctly different and indicative of their terroir and stylistic objectives. As he would later explain in his lecture, wines around the world have improved dramatically in the past two decades and as a result red wines have greater concentration and flavors. He certainly is not the only person trying to craft wines in this style, including wine makes in Pennsylvania. The Kluge wines displayed an elegance and refinement reminiscent of Bordeaux wines. Wine maker Charles Gendrot brings a blend of European and California experience into the cellar and has a comfortable working relationship with Mr. Rolland. Between the two of them, great wines seem almost inevitable.

Mr. Rolland comes from a wine growing family in Bordeaux. His father was a vigneron and at an early age, Michel could be found in the vineyards. It was his father's wish that he inherit the winery which he did after training in oenology at the University of Bordeaux. His wife, Dany, studied medicine but switched to oenology and together they consult, manage two Bordeaux properties (Fontenil and Chateau Le Bon-Pasteur) and run a wine laboratory business with 20 employees who process up to 80,000 samples a year. His local work is mostly on the right bank as Pomerol is his home and Merlot his true love among grapes. At an early age he learned about the importance of the grapes to wine quality. Oddly, there was a disconnect between grapes and wine in Bordeaux, especially during the high production years after the war. Grapes were grown then sold to negociants so production was preferred over quality. France's most famous enologist, Emile Peynaud, rarely ventured out into the vineyard or acknowledged the role of the grape in wine quality. But he does not fault Peynaud at all. He was simply working in the method of his times and it is never the goal of a professor to teach wine making. Their job is not to make great wine. In fact, Mr. Rolland states rather emphatically that it is not the role of the university to train wine makers but rather to perform the research needed to advance the science of enology. Enology is used to avoid problems in the wine, not to make good wine. Wine makers should learn their craft in the cellar but should support this experience with a sound enology education at a university. Spending time in the vineyard helped him to hone his senses to what happens with the vines and grapes. He compared it to looking at a painting and knowing what to look for in order to fully appreciate and understand it. He stresses to always ask questions and seek more knowledge.

Mr. Rolland stated that in the early 1980s some vigneron began to believe that they could make better wines. He noted that in the past 70 years there have been only 6-7 what are generally recognized as classic vintages in Bordeaux – 29, 47, 61, 70, 82 and . The legendary 1947 Chateau Cheval Blanc is 14.5% alcohol. The great years were warm and dry and the grapes got ripe, just what we are trying to achieve today. What about all those other years? The terroir was always there, perhaps a damaged by overuse of chemicals, but it was present in the wines. He tried to convince people to make good wines and improve their understanding of why a vintage was good or poor. With improved viticulture methods the overall quality of grapes has risen dramatically, allowing for more consistent quality, even in bad vintages. He claims we only have weak or less interesting vintages now, not truly awful ones. The same truth applies to California. How many great vintages have there been in the past 40 years? Yet even in 1974, clearly a great vintage, only a handful of wines were truly outstanding. Now, in a great vintage there are dozens of fabulous wines.

Viticulture management has a lot to do with the rise in quality and is used to exert some control over undesirable conditions like too much rain or sun. In the Mid-Atlantic, less canopy is needed (not too dense), leaf removal, green thinning, reduce cluster compaction and improve spray effectiveness will all improve wine quality. In California the problem is too much sun and they are using misters to humidify the air, not just to cool the vine but to keep physiological processes moving in the plant. In the 60s in Bordeaux vines and crops were big and disease was a big problem in many years. The great challenge is to make high quality wines consistently, even in poor vintages. Mr. Rolland explains that

there is no relationship between ripeness and sugar. His preference is to have low sugars and a perfect balance in phenolic components in reds and flavor/aromatics in whites. In reds, he is only looking at phenolics at harvest.

Mr. Rolland suggests combining scientific knowledge with experience in the field. Watch the vineyard! Wine making is the second part and will be easy if you are successful in the vineyard. Bad grapes never make good wine and a wine maker must understand the grapes, soil and climate. He defines terroir as the place where a wine is from consisting of the soil, climate, plants and what we do to them. He stresses that we need to understand the vineyard first.

The “Rolland Method” if there is such a definable thing (we never heard him refer to it as such) is much of what we all of us already know but perhaps do not do as well as we can or should. It involves coaxing the quality from the grape, whether it is for a \$10 bottle of wine or a \$100 bottle. But a grape grown for the former cannot be coaxed in the cellar to make the latter. Generally, he says, great wines cannot be made from high yield grapes – good wines, yes, great, no. Yields should be measure in fruit production per vine and low density wines can be very good if yields are concomitantly low.

In Bordeaux SO4 was the rootstock of choice when production viticulture was the goal. Now many new vineyards are using lower vigor rootstocks such as Riparia Gloire but even 101-14 and Fercal (if excess lime is in the soil) are used. He emphasized that we need to study closely which rootstocks are best suited for our soils. The same applies to clones. Along with SO4 clones were selected for greater production and disease resistance, not quality fruit. The search for quality clones is only 15 years old and far from over.

His consulting career started as he and his wife stumbled over each other in the cellar and he sought to get out of her way. His first client in the U.S. was Zelma Long at Simi in Sonoma. Through his consulting jobs he was able to taste a lot of wines, eventually all around the world and use this experience to become a great wine maker. His early clients always just asked for a technical analysis of the wine and not a sensory analysis but he soon discovered that a wine may have fine numbers but could taste terrible. He continued to taste for experience and skill. Blending is the great skill of Michel Rolland. It starts in the field, indeed even before the vines are planted as variety, clones and rootstock selections are made. In a new area like Virginia it is necessary to guess what may be the correct balance. He states that his palate is not that much better than some of the great wine makers he works with. He compares it to the runners in a 100m race. There may be less than a one second difference between first and last. But who can explain or attribute the difference between the first place finisher and the last? He relies a lot on instinct and a vast accumulation of experience to guide him.

Mr. Rolland emphasized that Virginia must create its own viticultural history and reputation. Wine growers must imagine world class wines and figure out how to achieve them. He is working with Kluge Estate with that sole purpose in mind. If 8-10 wineries can achieve great wines then a space on the world wine map is assured. He cited Chile as an example. Prior to 1995 no wines from Chile were rated over 90 by Parker or the Wine

Spectator. Now, seven or eight wineries consistently score in the 90s, a very significant improvement in 10 years and one that has vaulted Chilean wines to a respected position in the world of wines. He envisions more red wines than white wines doing well in Virginia and does not see world class white wines in the Virginia's future. In fact, around the globe, it is more difficult to attain the bench mark standards in white wines, like Chardonnay in Burgundy or Riesling in Germany, than with reds which tend to be more malleable and adaptable. He favors Cabernet franc for Virginia and believes that Virginia can make wines in the Bordeaux-style, fine and not full of alcohol. Blending Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon will be an important part of the successful wines. With all grapes the vineyard must be managed extremely well and yields must be kept low.

While Mr. Rolland is a very grounded wine maker, relying on experience and instinct, he doesn't deny the role of technology in wine making. For him, every new gadget is in play. If it works, fine, if not, it should be discarded. Oak chips improve average wines but not great wines and the same applies to filtration. Again, the technique is applied to the particular wine style. His "recipe" for success in the winery is to show great respect for the grapes. Handle them gently at all stages of production. Sort the grapes both in the field and rigorously before they reach the destemmer.

The garagistes continue to be an influential sector of the Bordeaux wine scene. They tend to push the envelope on new practices and technology, for example, making multiple thinning passes or double barreling wines. At first it may seem silly, but then you realize it makes sense and works. Because of the small production it is more like a hobby than a business and at first they were not credible but now garagistes are successful and selling wine for expensive prices.

Organic wine growing in Virginia will be tricky. In some years, like 2005, it can be done because the disease pressure is lower and there have been a lot of improvements. In dry areas, like Chile and California it is much easier. But the production can be lost if the grower is not careful and this is undesirable.

What are the take-home lessons of his visit? I walked away thinking that we know most of the viticulture that he talked about it. It is nothing new and well within our grasp to grow grapes capable of producing very fine wines. These practices should be adopted and done as well as possible. We need to learn more about how to cope with our inconsistent weather conditions to bring consistent quality to our wines. I learned that while having a lot of money to make wine isn't necessary it certainly helps because it makes it possible to integrate a person like Mr. Rolland into the wine making process. The quality in the grapes alone may take you 90% of the way to a great wine but Mr. Rolland's palate may be the last piece of the puzzle needed reach the objective.

Mr. Rolland brings with him to the Eastern U.S. a solid reputation as one of the best wine makers in the world. He has taken a lot of flak in the popular press as does any person who reaches the pinnacle of his or her chosen field, yet I was completely impressed with his knowledge, his grace, self-effacing humor (but backed by incredible confidence) and a generous spirit, patience and willingness to share his knowledge. His presence at Kluge

Estate will help them to make better wines and will attract more positive attention from the wine press, restaurateurs, retailers and wine consumers to the region. I am personally grateful to Patricia Kluge and William Moses for making this possible and, on this occasion, for sharing their guest's considerable talents with others. You can visit Kluge Estate at <http://www.klugeestateonline.com/>. If you are ever in Charlottesville, I would encourage you to visit them and nearby Monticello.

If you want to learn more about Michel Rolland, you can read an article about him in The Wine Spectator titled "Top Gun: Consulting enologist Michel Rolland makes some of the world's best wines", by James Suckling in the June 30, 2006 issue. You can also view a film by Jonathan Nossiter called "Mondovino" that purports to examine the globalization of wine. Mr. Rolland is a central character in the film. I found it rather annoying but you can judge for yourself.

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