

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY JOEL M. FISHER



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Every once in a while in life you encounter somebody you cannot believe you hadn't met before. This has been the case with Mike Miller, whom I may not have met officially until recently but who over the years has been at a string of the same wine events as I was. We even belonged to the same wine group for a while, but our paths never crossed.

Mike and I finally connected while working on a wine list for a Hollywood restaurant. Mike, along with Alden Marin and Alan Starke, was presenting some of the wines his [Golden State Wine Company](#) represented. His selection was excellent, and the restaurant bought a significant amount for its wine list. Over a second meeting that featured a selection of colder wines, we had a chance to talk a bit about his family. They all work in some capacity of the wine business, and as we chatted I quickly realized that this unique family had built a vertical wine organization. A week later I found myself in Van Nuys to meet the entire family and to get a sense of their operation.

Mike Miller is the family patriarch who came from the former Yugoslavia on July 4, 1974. He started off as a bartender at the **Chronicle Restaurant**, first in Pasadena and later Santa Monica, before working his way up to assistant manager. After a couple years he moved on to work for a San Francisco-based importer for **Kristal**. From there he jumped to the wine business in 1978 by joining [Martin Weiner](#) as sales manager.

In 1982, he started his own business, Golden State Wine Company. He markets [Flora Springs](#) and represents some very good wines. Domestically, these include my long-adored [Long Vineyards](#) in Napa Valley, [Scott Paul](#) in Oregon, and [Peralta Winery](#) in Santa Barbara. His list of French wineries include the attractive grand cru **Chateau Saint Lo**, from Saint Emilion in Bordeaux, **Languedoc-Roussillon** in the Rhone, and **Fronsac**, **L'Aude Rouge**, and **Cotes de Gascogne** in the southern region. I was quite captured by Mike's Spanish selections, such as the awesome **Bodegas Vega Sicilia** from Ribera del Duero and **Clos Mogador** from the Priorat. Interesting choices from Rioja and Rias Baixas are also to be had. For the areas I don't often mention, Mike carries [Tokaji](#) from Hungary, wines from the Douro region of Portugal and [Te Mata Estate](#) from New Zealand's Hawkes Bay.

As I mentioned, wine is very much a Miller family business. Milka Miller (*Mrs Mike*) is president of **ABX Inc. Wine Distribution Service,**) which over the past four years has

seen its top-line revenues increase over 70%. Steady customer growth meant that ABX faced a storage space crunch, which the company recently remedied with a new 24,000 square-foot warehouse space in Van Nuys. . Nearly 100 wineries, importers, brokers and distributors – working with a significant number of ultra high-end wines – now use the company’s services. The company’s fleet of trucks delivers an average of 150 orders (totaling 75,000 to 80,000 cases) per day between San Diego and Santa Barbara. Deliveries spike during holidays.

Mike’s son Alex Mijailovic (a.k.a. Alex Miller) is a managing partner, co-founder and chief financial officer of Golden State Wine Co. Alex has a Bachelors in Architecture and an MBA from the University of Southern California, and is experienced in real-estate development and wet design (like the Bellagio Fountain in Las Vegas) throughout the U.S. and Asia. In addition to his duties at the parent company, Alex also took on the roll of managing partner of [Terminal 55](#), an 11,000-square-foot modern wine-storage facility *in the same building as his parents in Van Nuys.*. The attractive facility boasts cellars of various sizes, with the most popular being a smaller space geared to new collectors. These economy units can accommodate up to 60 cases. The facility is currently taking space reservations. I hope Alex’s project succeeds. We need knowledgeable, sophisticated entrepreneurs handling these kinds of niches in the wine industry.

I found myself lingering, not wanting my visit to end, so was happy to discover that the Millers had a surprise up their sleeve: a young Bill Davies) , scion of the [Schramsberg Sparkling Wine](#) family, and an equally young Tom Gamble – from the Proctor & Gamble family (who had known each other since their first day of nursery school) – had some wines of their own making for me to sample. These two young gentlemen have been friends since those early days . We tasted their **Origin 2001Napa Sauvignon Blanc**, which I thought a stunning example of the varietal. Gourmet Magazine (I guess that means Gerald Asher) also loved the wine. I’ll have to further investigate what these two young winemakers are up to.

At the end of the tasting I jokingly asked where the Miller family label was. To my enormous astonishment **Mike** ducked away and quickly returned with a bottle of *2001 Alexander Merlot Lake County!* Named after son Alex and made by [Flora Springs](#), 350 cases are made each vintage. Mike Miller really is a gentleman after my own heart: We tasted the wine, which demonstrated good color and balance, was smooth and had lovely spices on the nose.

Recently my colleagues at the Los Angeles chapter of the **Society of Wine Educators** held a seminar on wine and cheese pairings. I thought Dave Kegaries and Ralph Amy, who both have served on the national board of the SWE, did a terrific job with this program. I liked some of the pairings so much that with modifications I made them part of an event Sean Ryan and I led in Santa Monica in early April. (Remember, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery!) The SWE seminar did such pairing as *a 2002 Zenato, delle Venezie (\$8-9_* Pinot Grigio with Monterey Jack, which proved not bad but a bit sweet. A [Veramonte](#) *2003 Sauvignon Blanc (\$7-8)* coupled with a French goat cheese also had a sweet finish but was a more evenly balanced and thus better match. A [J. Lohr](#) *2002*

Chardonnay (\$14) – which had apple and butterscotch flavors – was greatly enhanced by white cheddar, which toned down the wine’s sugar while boosting the cheese’s nuttiness. One of my favorite pairings was a terrific **Dr. Loosen 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Kabinett Riesling** (a bargain at \$16) and a mini gouda. This is a dry Riesling with floral on the nose and classic fruit on the palate.

Next was a **Gabbiano 2001 Chianti Classico** (\$10) with Asiago cheese. The well-balanced Chianti, which showed raspberry and plum while still being dry, was very expressive next to the cheese. The wine’s good finish was particularly underscored by the cheese’s saltiness. One of the bolder pairings was a big **Dashe Cellars 2002 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel** (\$8.00) with Muenster. The fruit-forward wine and the Muenster’s strong nuttiness balanced each other out nicely. When combined with Smoked Gouda, the smooth and peppery **EXP Viaje 2000 Dunnigan Hills Syrah** (from **RH Phillips**) (\$10-\$12) presented a strong smoked flavor that managed to be both interesting and pleasant. The final notable pairing was a sharp cheddar with a *2001 Cabernet Sauvignon* from **Hess Estate, Napa Valley** (\$8) This is a solid wine with big fruits, and the pairing worked well for me.

Chris Pollan, the proprietor of **The Cheese Store in Silver Lake**, attended the SWE seminar. His insight was quite helpful. If you drop by his store, he’s the kind of fine-food lover that will happily point you towards extraordinary wines and cheeses that fit any budget and palate.

You can do many variations of this kind of wine-and-cheese tasting program yourself, be it with a group of friends, a significant other, or even just by yourself one decadent evening. I hope you give it a try.

We’re looking forward to raising a glass of wine with you!!

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