



Prologue

Ed Zimmerman, a classic Type A personality who hides it well behind a casual façade and lots of throwaway lines, doesn't do anything halfheartedly. Chairman of the Technology Group at Lowenstein Sandler, a law firm based in New Jersey and New York, he was described by clients in Chambers, the lawyer-ranking service, as "one of the best venture capital lawyers in the country-period." The primary focus of his law practice is working with companies raising venture capital and private-equity investments. Zimmerman's passion, though, is wine.

Wine was not part of Zimmerman's life while he was growing up poor in Brooklyn in the 1970s and 1980s. At times his father held down three jobs, primarily working for the City of New York, but supplementing the family's income by driving a cab, delivering pizza, and picking up odd jobs such as stuffing envelopes. Embarrassed that he couldn't afford to buy the shoes he needed to wear to a wedding, the father once declined to attend the celebration.

Zimmerman still remembers his first serious wine experience. It was in December 1990 at the Cape Cod house of Betsy Marks, a girlfriend he had met on her first day at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He can't recall the vintage or the winemaker, but he's sure it was a Puligny-Montrachet Chardonnay from Burgundy. "It was an epiphany."

Although he has never been tested for it, Zimmerman may well be part of the 25 percent of the population that Dr. Linda Bartoshuk of the Yale School of Medicine classifies as "supertasters." "Supertasters live in a neon taste world; taste sensations are roughly three times as intense to them as non-tasters," writes Bartoshuk. Those people have an uncanny ability to remember wines and compare them to others they might have enjoyed years, if not decades, earlier. Zimmerman can recall in detail when, where, and under what circumstances he drank a memorable wine.

Zimmerman joined Lowenstein Sandler after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Law School. He soon married Betsy Marks, and the combination of good food and wine became part of their lives. In September 1992, the couple took a one-week honeymoon to London so they could dine at La Tante Claire in the Berkeley Hotel, where master chef Pierre Koffmann was cooking. Money was tight, but they stretched their budget and took the sommelier's suggestion of a half-bottle of Guigal Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine to go with squab.

For Zimmerman, traveling to vineyards where his favorite wines are made and talking with the winemakers is as exciting as going to see Santa Claus at the North Pole would be for a big-eyed five-year-old. In 1995, he and Betsy made their first trip to France, visiting the Loire Valley and Burgundy wine areas. The couple planned their itinerary around Michelin-starred restaurants and stayed in inexpensive hotels so they could spend more money on food and wine. For one memorable picnic in Beaujolais they enjoyed local cheese, a loaf of bread, and an award-winning wine from the area while looking out at a spectacular countryside. "It was the ultimate French experience that every American tourist hopes to have," he recalls.

One night in South Africa in 1996, Zimmerman struck up a friendship with Christian Fins, the sommelier from Bosman's Restaurant in the Grande Roche Hotel, and the next day the two went out to visit some of Cape Town's smallest

and best wineries. When traveling on business in California to see clients or law recruits at the University of California, Berkeley, Zimmerman routinely makes detours to visit the Napa Valley and dine at the homes of winemaker friends or at the famed French Laundry restaurant.

Getting to meet famous, but often reclusive; winemakers is no easy task, yet Zimmerman goes after them relentlessly. Colleagues at his law firm joke that he is so persistent in pursuing his targets that a winemaker will some day take out a restraining order against him. Zimmerman went after Austrian-born Manfred Krankl, the winemaker-owner of California's Sine Qua Non in Ventura, California, like a stalker. Krankl's winery is located in a shabby industrial park, but he makes California's most sought-after wines. Robert Parker's Wine Advocate regularly scores his wines in the high 90s and occasionally a perfect 100.

Zimmerman had been buying from Krankl since the 1996 vintage, and the two had struck up a friendship and enjoyed barrel tastings together. In 2004, Zimmerman thought it was time to get his hands dirty, by experiencing firsthand how wine is made. He e-mailed Krankl, asking if he could spend a week at Sine Qua Non during harvest. The lawyer said he would work for nothing, promised not to get in the way, and even offered to "mop the bathroom floor." In a series of e-mails, Krankl tried to discourage Zimmerman, by detailing how unglamorous, exhausting, and busy the experience would be. Krankl feared that when things went wrong, he might lose a friend as well as a customer. Krankl also insisted on paying him, "so I can yell at you when you screw up." Zimmerman demurred at being paid, but said Krankl could make a donation to a charity the lawyer ran.

So in September 2004, Zimmerman, who earns several hundred dollars an hour as a lawyer, packed his grubbiest clothes, told his clients he would be gone for a while but not what he was doing, and flew off to California to do work for which migrant laborers might earn \$9 an hour. During that week, Zimmerman did everything. He cleaned hoses, washed barrels, sorted grapes, pumped over fermenting grape juice. Living up to his promise, he even mopped the bathroom floor, though only once.

Maggie Harrison, Sine Qua Non's first employee and the assistant winemaker while Zimmerman was there, recalls him arriving at dawn, and staying late. "He knew he wasn't going to be leaning on a barrel, swirling a glass of wine and discussing whether the Syrah would be more like a Hermitage or more like a Côte Rôtie," she says. The only jobs the staff didn't ask him to do were manning the overnight shift and operating a forklift.

Sine Qua Non double-sorts grapes, first by bunches and then by individual grapes, while many producers don't hand sort in the winery at all. "Ed knew so much about wine when he arrived, but he had never had the experience of sorting grapes or understanding how important that is for the final wine," Harrison says. "Until you stand there doing it for a half day, as he did, you can't get what it's all about."

In August 2007, Robert Parker awarded the 2004 Sine Qua Non Poker Face, the Syrah on which Zimmerman had worked, a perfect 100 points. In his signature style, Parker wrote, "Fabulous texture, beautiful richness and purity, and a finish that lasts nearly a minute. It is a wine of enormous richness, multiple dimensions, and unreal purity."

Zimmerman also connects with winemakers by arranging unusual tastings. In early 2008, he invited a good friend to guest-lecture in his venture capital course at Columbia Business School. As he does with his many guest lecturers, Zimmerman decided to treat his friend and other wine lovers to dinner and some great wines after class. He and seven other wine geeks gathered at New York's Aureole Restaurant for a vertical tasting of ten of the best vintages of Château Margaux going back to 1961, with some bottles of Château Lafite Rothschild and Harlan Estate California Cabernet Sauvignon thrown in to make things more interesting. Zimmerman contacted Château Margaux in advance of the meal, and received a call back from Paul Pontallier, who provided tasting notes and recommendations on how to serve, decant, and organize the wines.

Zimmerman purchased the first release, a 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon, from a new Napa winery called Blankiet Estate and soon began e-mailing owner Claude Blankiet, asking him if he could visit. After a three-year campaign, Blankiet relented. At the end of several hours spent walking the mountainside vineyard and the construction site of Blankiet's new home, Zimmerman asked how frequently Blankiet gave tours. The amused Blankiet responded, "This is the first!"

On a subsequent visit to Blankiet's house, Zimmerman noticed a picture of Blankiet with a group of men in flowing red-and-gold robes and wearing funny hats. Blankiet explained it was a picture of his 1997 induction into Burgundy's Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, the world's most prestigious wine organization, whose home base is at the Clos de Vougeot winery. Blankiet, who had grown up in Burgundy, volunteered to sponsor Zimmerman for membership. The lawyer listened politely but dismissed the idea, thinking that he did not want to impose on his friend and knowing that it would be hard for an American to be inducted into the exclusive Clos de Vougeot chapter. This time, it was Blankiet who persisted, ultimately sending Zimmerman application materials. These included writing short essays on his love and knowledge of wines, particularly Burgundy, and getting endorsements from leading wine personalities, which Blankiet arranged. On the first weekend in June 2006, Zimmerman trekked to Burgundy's majestic Château du Clos de Vougeot where officials in those same red-and-gold robes inducted the tuxedo-clad group of some twenty mostly French wine insiders as Knights of the Tastevin. It didn't matter that Zimmerman couldn't understand most of the French ceremony. He was on top of the wine world.

Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and the theater, casts a magical spell on people such as Ed Zimmerman, who will travel far and wide to meet a winemaker and to taste his product in the place where its grapes were grown and it was made. This has become more and more common in recent years as the popularity of wine has spread from its roots in Europe. The most popular tourist destination in California today is Disneyland, the granddaddy of all theme parks. But the second most visited one is the Napa Valley, which each year welcomes more than 5 million travelers. Wines first enjoyed on distant shores seem to earn a warm spot in our remembrances of vintages past. British author H. Warner Allen wrote in *The Romance of Wine*, "Nearly every natural wine, though it be sour or coarse or rough in taste, has a singular attraction when it is drunk in its native place."

In January 2008, I set out in search of Bacchus: to explore wine tourism in twelve of the world's most interesting wine regions. This is the story of what I discovered.