

Jay McInerney | Uncorked

# A novel approach to wine writing

By W. Blake Gray  
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McInerney is a highly successful novelist who has dived into wine writing, and has discovered it allows him to drink his way across the globe.

He made his mark on the literary world with his novel, "Bright Lights, Big City," in 1984, written entirely in second person, making the drug-addled fact-checker for the New York Times a job McInerney himself had done.

In 1996, his friend Dominique Browning was hired as editor in chief of House & Garden magazine. When McInerney had taken to extravagant wine adventures, such as flying to London for a single dinner when his friend, novelist James Jones, offered to open something good in his cellar. Browning asked McInerney if he would write a monthly wine column for the mag-



Liz Harpaz / The Chronicle

azine. You interested in

Every night I would take home a bottle. I started with \$1.50 Yugoslavian Cabernet and worked my way up to \$6 Freixenet. I was at the liquor shop when I heard my first novel was accepted by Random House. I bought one of the Bordeaux that had been gathering dust, a 1978 (Chateau) Smith Haut Lafite. That was a great bottle.

**Q: What are you drinking most right now?**

**A:** I'm drinking a lot of California Pinot Noir from the Santa Barbara area, like Sea Smoke and Brewer-Clifton, and Hartford Court, Hirsch (Vineyards) and Flowers from the Sonoma Coast. I find myself reaching for Pinot lately because it's so good with so much food. I'm drinking a lot of Riesling now. I love that it's low alcohol, and I can drink a half bottle before a meal and not get completely (drunk). I'm drinking wines that are not absurdly overextracted and absurdly high in alcohol. I still like a Shafer Hillside Select (Cabernet Sauvignon) or a Harlan Estate or a Long Meadow Ranch.

the first great wine ever having?

writing program with Raymond Carver, and I got a job at a liquor store to support my fellowship. We had "20 and Night Train.

azine.

McInerney had never written about wine, but he says, "The state of wine writing in this country was pretty abysmal. It was boring. It was technical. It seemed like there might be room for a passionate writer." So he agreed.

He says at the time he disliked California wine, so he flew here to see if he could overcome his bias. The first person he met was celebrity winemaker Helen Turley, and he says she interviewed him about which wines he liked before allowing him to taste hers. Fortunately for him, he unknowingly told her a Peter Michael Chardonnay she had made was one of his favorites.

McInerney was seduced by California's cult Cabernet Sauvignons, which he says are rock 'n' roll, sexy and loud," but he says he still loves Burgundies best. He does love eating in the Bay Area; he says he had a fabulous meal at Quince the night before our interview, and left to meet friends for

dinner at Chez Panisse afterward.

McInerney's wine columns have been in two books, the most recent of which is "Hedonist in the Cellar" (Alfred A. Knopf). Even for a wine writer, he drinks very little. It's apparent from the columns, which often alternate between seeking out and drinking with people and writing about the best small-production wines the world has to offer.

He got married for the fourth time in October to Anne Hearst (a member of the family that owns this newspaper); former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani officiated. They served Ridge Geyserville and 2004 Michel Bouzard Grands Charrons Meursault at the wedding, along with NV Veuve Clicquot Champagne Brut because "I couldn't get a grower Champagne in large enough quantities." He did not serve 1990 Dom Perignon Champagne because of a rehearsal dinner.

voluptuous. Michel Rolland knows how to finesse tannin.

**Q: What wine do you think people don't drink enough?**

**A:** Riesling. Wine geeks are always trying to get the rest of the population interested in Riesling and it never works. Every sommelier I know will tell you how food-friendly Riesling is, but nobody ever orders it. People have this visceral fear when they see the tall, thin bottle. They think of Blue Nun. I serve Riesling to the food and wine fanatics I hang around with, but I would never think of serving Riesling to civilians. They just wouldn't get it. Rioja is underrepresented in the red category. For \$10 you can get a very decent wine that has four or five years of bottle age. For \$60 you can get something extraordinary.

**Q: How many wines do you have in your cellar?**

**A:** I think I have about 120 cases. So many people collect more than they drink. The object of life is not to die with a cellar full of wine. The object is to die with no bottles

in your cellar. To drink your last bottle of wine and go to sleep that night and not wake up. On Sept. 11 (2001), I was in New York. Lora Zarubin, the food editor of House & Garden, cooked dinner at her home for a few of us. I grabbed the two best wines I had, a 1990 La Chappelle Hermitage and a 1982 Lynch-Bages. Bottles of wine aren't like paintings. At some point you have to consume them. I thought that if I walk out of here and get hit by a cab, I don't want to think, "I didn't open that bottle."

**Q: If you were on death row and the warden allowed you one**

glass of wine, what

**A:** The '71 La Tache. It's a great contender. The best I've had was the '55 La Mouton-Rothschild. That's my birth year.

**Q: If you were a winemaker, would you be?**

**A:** I would probably be a Pinot neuf-du-Pape because it's so subtle. I'm passionate about Pinot. If I was to make Pinot, I would make Pinot. I would make Pinot. I would make Pinot.

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