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## Wine

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# Behind the lawsuits against Robert Parker

by Philip Ulanowsky

Wall Street's favorite wine critic, Robert Parker, whose early devaluation was forecast in our April 1 issue, has begun running into some serious problems. Parker led much of the speculation surge in wines that began in 1982. For over a decade, he has wielded tremendous power to sell or kill a wine with a numerical rating on his hundred-point scale. Under the pressure of this 1980s-style madness, a growing number of quality wines have been "redesigned" to show their best in early tastings, which considerably shortens the slow-maturing lifespan for which they have been rightly prized for over a century. The effect on the great winemakers is not unlike putting Mercedes engineers to work as Chevy assembly supervisors.

Some in the wine establishment have drawn the line against this reign of destructive irrationality. Since the first cracks in the wall of protection around Parker showed about two months ago, the floodgates have opened.

Some preliminary coverage of Parker's shaky footing respecting his interest in an Oregon winery was published in March in Paul Gillette's trade publication, *The Wine Investor*. This appeared almost simultaneously with a pair of articles in an East Side New York publication, *The Observer*, co-authored by former editor of *Spy* magazine, Tony Hendra, and one John Anderson. The latter articles included quotes from several of the wine establishment's most respected wine writers, illuminating publicly for the first time some of the *modi operandi* of Mr. Parker, so well protected for years by his powerful backers.

Now that open season on Mr. Parker's professional image has been quietly declared, there is probably little—even his reputed friendship with French President François Mitterrand, who once honored him with a medal—that could save him from the repressed fury of wine professionals on both sides of the Atlantic who appreciate the historical-cultural role of wine in pre-yuppie civilization.

Some observers believe that the unusual moves afoot may portend much more significant moves by larger economic and political forces. If so, it could be part of an action to clear the decks for a major battle on economic issues.

## Bordeaux to follow Burgundy?

Aside from a brewing scandal about conflict of interest in an Oregon winery which he and his brother-in-law own, Parker is now facing serious charges in France from one of Burgundy's (therefore, the world's) most prestigious wine-makers, François Flaiveley. Though lips at Flaiveley are politely sealed at the moment, no outright denial of the existence of the case is coming from Flaiveley's offices. Henry Cavalier, Flaiveley's importer in the United States, is similarly mute, in deference to French law, under which the case cannot be discussed before coming to trial; however, he indicates that Monsieur Flaiveley is receiving unexpectedly great support from the trade in the United States.

Within days after the first rumors of this case reached these shores, new rumors of other actions have followed. If the latest ones are also true, not only has another Burgundy house, Pousse d'Or, initiated a suit, but a major Bordeaux force, the Moueix family (owners of important properties including the legendary Château Petrus, one of the most coveted wines in the world) is making its own moves.

When the Flaiveley story broke, word circulating among knowledgeable sources was that Parker had overstepped his bounds with a request for wine from Flaiveley. Parker reportedly asked for a bottle or bottles to be delivered to his hotel room for tasting, a practice with which he has gotten away with for some years, according to the *Observer* article. His request was declined by Monsieur Flaiveley, the story goes. In any case, the critic published a remark in his most recent *Buyers Guide* (Simon and Schuster), implying that the wines of Flaiveley that he tasted in France were not the same as those exported to the United States. Flaiveley, whose reputation and financial position are no small factor to be reckoned with, is not taking this lying down.

## The economic policy debate

Whatever may be the particulars of the suits and other actions, their significance is that they are taking form in the rapidly heating environment of debate over fundamental economic policy throughout the world. Parker is merely one of many expendable tools employed, directly or indirectly, by market controllers over the past decade, to effect their own financial and political advantage at the cost of the productive economy. The breaking point for many of those in the productive sectors is being reached.

Parker's fate may be something of a weathervane for French agriculture in general. Voices such as that of Nobel Prize-winning economist Maurice Allais have for some time been making forceful arguments in the French press against the ravages of so-called free trade and the mechanisms being used to impose it to the detriment of producers. Meanwhile, the wild turbulence in international markets driven by multi-trillion-dollar speculative flows, has continued to bring ruinous chaos to industry and agriculture both, not to mention general living standards.