

# Pure Palate

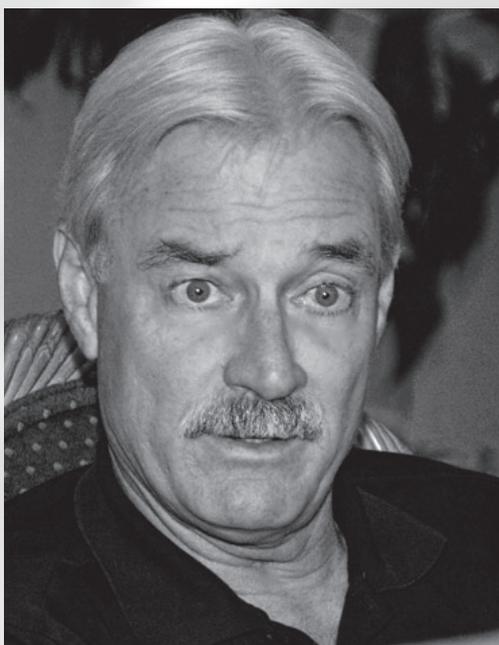
Wine Critic **James Laube**

**A** few months ago, I was at a dinner party, and one of the winemakers there boldly said, “I know how to make a James Laube wine. I can make the kind of wine that he’ll give a 92 or 93 point score.” He was referring to one of the most influential wine critics in the United States, if not the world, James Laube, of the dominant wine and lifestyle publication, *Wine Spectator*. I was struck not only by the arrogance of his comment, but also by his naïveté. If there is one thing that the more seasoned winemaker knows, it’s that James Laube is not only a very influential wine critic, but also an unpredictable one. As his palate has matured over the years, so have his tastes.

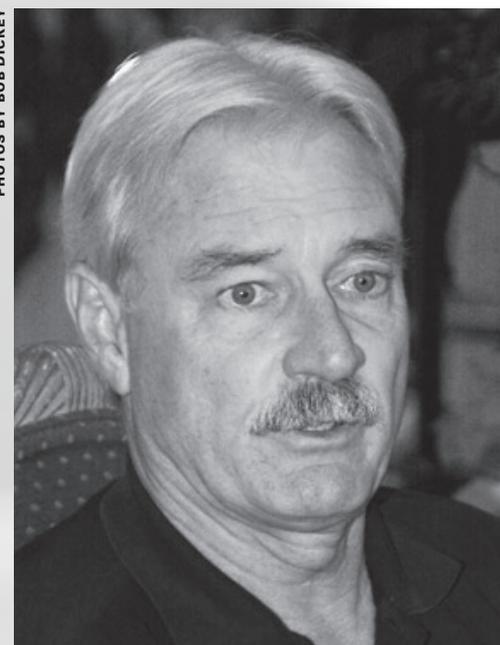
Whatever winemakers and consumers may feel about Laube’s influence, it is undeniable that he is passionate and intelligent in his approach to wine, and deeply thoughtful about his vocation. As with all wines tasted at *Wine Spectator*, Laube tastes completely blind. He does not taste with a panel, but invites others in his office to taste with him, not only to help educate their palate, but also to make certain that if he is finding something to be especially true about a wine, either positive or negative, that he is not alone in this assessment. He often tastes a wine two or three times before scoring it, and, on the rare occasions that a winemaker will ask him to revisit a wine, he will agree to do so. Laube’s ultimate goal is to write about California wines for 50 years, “So I have another 20-something to go.”

Recently, I had the rare opportunity to interview James Laube, who, at 53 years of age, is still athletic, handsome, and surprisingly shy. Though he has written four books about wine, including the popular *California’s Great Cabernets*, he does not possess the typical writer’s ego, and is thoughtful in his responses.

**A fair amount of wine consumers base their purchasing decisions on your reviews of California wines in *Wine Spectator*. How does it feel having that much influence on the wine market?** I don’t think much about what the influence is when I’m reviewing the wines. . . . If you come across a wine that I think is terrific, you try and convey that enthusiasm in your note, and then the 100-point scale to me is really the pleasure scale. So, obviously, the higher you get, the more pleasure you get, but I do take it extremely seriously. I know people work hard to make wine, and



PHOTOS BY BOB DICKEY



therefore to do anything but treat that as seriously as possible to me wouldn’t be right.

And, I’m trying to give my readers my best estimation of what the wine is. I know enough about taste to know that my tastes are not for everybody, but I do think that I’ve had a lot of experience, and, what I try and do is draw upon that experience and analyze and assess what I think the quality of the wine is, but I don’t sit in the office and think, “Gosh, a lot of people are going to read this review.” I guess inherently, I know that they will, but that’s not what’s on my mind at the time. It’s a matter of trying to describe it as best I can, and hope that people use that information in a way that’s meaningful for them. I would never expect people to always agree with what I say and evaluate. That would be unrealistic. And, in terms of trying to give the readers what you can, I think we review more wines than any other publication in the world. And, so then it’s really up to the consumer to decide. I do know that high scores and flattering reviews of difficult-to-find wines—I know that creates a scramble to buy the wines, but that’s the wine market that we’re in today.

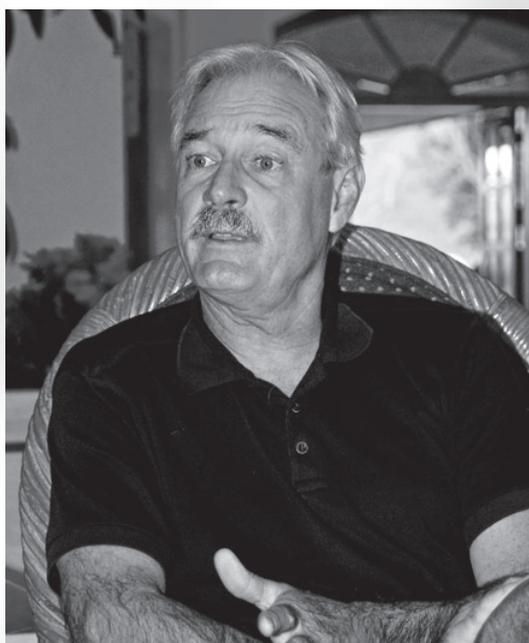
**You started writing at a pretty young age—16. Later you became a journalist after graduating from San Diego State with an MA in history. How does one end up a wine critic?** I didn’t start out to be a critic. I

started out as a journalist covering the wine business, and for me it’s a matter of my own passion and my interest in the industry and writing, and in wine. And, of course, as one gains more experience as a taster, somebody else decides whether you’re good enough to be a critic or not, and make those judgments. In my case, I was extremely fortunate in that I moved to Napa in 1978. I started writing about wine then. It was comparatively easy to keep track of most of the wineries. There were a lot of opportunities for me to taste lots of different wines. Then, when I started to write for *Wine Spectator*, there was a period of time, roughly, from 1983 to 1990 or ’91, when all of the wines from all over the world were tasted in San Francisco [where *Wine Spectator* had their offices at the time], so I got to see all the wines from California, France, Bordeaux, Rhône, Alsace, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Washington, Oregon, Australia, New Zealand, Chile . . . and I really got a chance to see a broad scope of wines. I spent a lot of time doing that, and became involved in providing more consumer wine-buying advice; I became one of the critics carrying that information to the consumer.

**Do you remember the first wine that really captured your imagination . . . that really stood out as something special?** It was the 1968 Heitz Martha’s Vineyard. I had that when I was in

## Talks Vino

by Sao Anash



college. I'd been drinking wine for a little bit, and during our semester breaks we would leave San Diego, and we'd go up and tour wine country. Once you got to Napa, it was pretty easy going from Charles Krug to Beringer to Martini to Heitz, and that was a pretty fun experience because at Beringer and Martini, they made lots of different wines so you could really see a cross-section of everything from gewürztraminer to zinfandel. And, one day we went to Heitz. They were pouring the '68 Martha's Vineyard, so it would have been February of '73, and after tasting other wines, it was dramatically more complex. We bought some of it, and drank it for a long time. It was about \$8.50 a bottle.

**You've been very supportive of Santa Barbara County wines. Can you talk about how you perceive our wine industry down here? What grows well here, some of your favorite producers, etc.**

Pinot noir is doing extremely well in Santa Barbara. I think it has dramatically improved in the last few years. I like the chardonnay. I think syrah is making some really nice gains as well. I've never been terribly fond of the cabernets or merlots, the Bordeaux varieties here. I'm not surprised people experiment with different types of grapes in a region where many of the sites are untested. I'm not sure how else you would go about it. I would assume people would make the most educated guess they can, based on soil, climate, so forth. With winemakers that I talk to here, they

are starting to have a great consensus on what works well. And there will always be mavericks, which is good. But people know that competing with Napa's cabernet is extremely tough. There are always going to be audiences for those types of wines. If someone likes Santa Ynez nebbiolo, there are probably markets for that. But, when you're competing with nebbiolo from Piemonte, it's a tough sell. I think you have to decide what your audiences want. And Santa Barbara is located between two of the biggest wine markets in the country. There are a lot of open-minded people in these areas. It's an interesting mix.

**And what are your favorite Santa Barbara producers?** AP Vin, Au Bon Climat, Babcock, Beckmen, Bonaccorsi, Brander, Clos Pepe, Foley, Foxen, Gainey, Hitching Post, Jaffurs, Loring, Margerum, Melville, Ojai, Qupe, Rusack, and Sea Smoke.

**When you're critiquing a wine, what, in your estimation, constitutes a great wine?** Lately I'm more into what I refer to as T&P — that's texture and pleasure. Wine should give you those things more so from the start, instead of hoping they'll develop in the bottle. That's something you get from the experience of tasting wine for a long time. The more I'm into it the more I pay attention to texture, and whether a wine is a pleasure to drink, both the first glass and the second glass. Really, it's a matter of complexity, more so than weight. I like a lot of different types of wine. I like wines that have restraint. I like wines that are cleansing. Great, great wines have persistence and length. I like some wines that have a fair amount of oak, yet I also like pinot noirs and chardonnays that are more delicate, more fragrant. One has to answer as to whether it's varietally true. I see some wines from Napa and these wines are 16.7 percent alcohol with residual sugar, and I'm thinking, "Is that what Oakville Merlot should taste like?" Jammy or porty? No. Are there going to be some people that like it? Yes. But, I question if that's what the wine should be. Great wines are like great books. They have a beginning, middle, and end. They have great complexity, great balance. They capture a grape's varietal character, or they achieve something out of the blend that transcends varietal character.

**4.7.1** To learn more about Jim Laube and Wine Spectator, visit [winespectator.com](http://winespectator.com).