

A BLENDING SESSION WITH MICHEL ROLLAND

THOUGH HE'S WORLD FAMOUS, AND EVEN BLAMED — ALONG WITH CRITIC ROBERT PARKER — FOR MAKING TOP WINES TOO SIMILAR, MICHEL ROLLAND IS UNPRETENTIOUS AND SELF-EFFACING IN PERSON AS HE TASTES WINES.

HE, ALONG WITH WINEMAKER JEAN HOEFLIGER AND ASSISTANT HENRIK POULSEN, TASTE THE MANY BATCHES OF WINES TO DETERMINE THE OPTIMUM BLENDS. "IT'S LIKE A THINK TANK," SAYS HOEFLIGER. "WE PUT A LOT OF BRAINS TOGETHER."

UNLIKE MANY WINEMAKERS, HOEFLIGER NOT ONLY HAS MANY LOTS FOR DIFFERENT VINEYARDS AND BLOCKS, BUT EVEN KEEPS THE PRESS WINE SEPARATE, TOO. THAT'S A LOT OF WINES TO TASTE, 100 TO 150 LOTS.

TO HELP PUT THE PUZZLE TOGETHER, ROLLAND VISITS THREE TIMES A YEAR. EARLY IN THE YEAR, HE COMES TO TASTE THE NEW VINTAGE "I GET AN X-RAY OF THE VINTAGE," HE SAYS.

THEN WHEN FERMENTATION IS OVER, HE CAN GET A BETTER PICTURE OF THE VINTAGE AND FINALIZE BLENDS FOR THE LAST TIME BEFORE BOTTLING.

HE ALSO COMES IN AUGUST TO BLEND WINES FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR, CHECK BOTTLED WINE AND TOUR THE VINEYARDS.

IN EARLIER DAYS — ROLLAND HAS BEEN VISITING NAPA VALLEY FOR 22 YEARS — HE SAYS HE WAS MORE INVOLVED IN ADVISING THE GROWERS. NOW, HE ADMITTED, "THEY DON'T NEED ME MUCH IN THE VINEYARDS. THEY KNOW WHAT TO DO AFTER 20 YEARS." HE SPENDS MOST OF HIS TIME ASSISTING WITH BLENDING.



FAMED WINEMAKING CONSULTANT MICHEL ROLLAND IS LENDING HIS EXPERTISE TO THE ALPHA OMEGA PROJECT.

LINDSAY GARVEY PHOTO

ROLLAND MADE MANY COMMENTS ABOUT NAPA VALLEY BETWEEN TASTES. HE NOTES THAT PHYLLOXERA, WHICH FORCED REPLANTING NAPA VINEYARDS OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES, "IS THE BEST SAD STORY. NOW NAPA HAS SOME OF THE BEST VINEYARDS IN THE WORLD. IF PHYLLOXERA HADN'T HAPPENED, NAPA VALLEY COULDN'T BE WHERE IT IS TODAY."

ROLLAND CONSULTS ALL OVER THE WORLD — EVEN IN VIRGINIA — BUT HE COMPARES TERROIR, THE LOCATION AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF A VINE, TO A CEILING IN A ROOM. "WE CAN MAKE GOOD WINES EVERYWHERE, BUT WE CAN'T MAKE GREAT WINES EVERYWHERE. WE TRY TO MAKE THE BEST WINE WE CAN EVERYWHERE WE ARE. EVEN AT \$2.99, YOU CAN MAKE A GOOD WINE."

HE ADDED, "PEOPLE (GROWERS AND VINTNERS) WILL BE DISAPPOINTED IF THEY DON'T ACCEPT THAT."

ROLLAND DOES SAY, "NAPA VALLEY HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST CEILINGS IN THE WORLD. NAPA VALLEY IS A PLACE WHERE WE CAN FIND A LOT OF GREAT WINES NOW."

HE SAID IT HAS MORE GREAT WINES THAN ANY OTHER PLACE — OTHER THAN HIS HOME FRANCE. HE ADDED, "THERE ARE MORE GREAT WINES IN NAPA VALLEY THAN IN ITALY."

HE ALSO LIKES WORKING WITH AMERICAN WINERIES. "THEY HAVE MORE ENERGY AND CREATIVITY THAN ELSEWHERE. YOU CAN DO SO MUCH MORE. THEY DON'T WAIT TWO GENERATIONS TO MAKE A DECISION. AMERICANS MAKE IT IN TWO DAYS. I WAS BORN IN BORDEAUX, AND I KNOW FRENCH BEHAVIOR. YOU NEED FIVE YEARS TO CONVINCE PEOPLE TO DO SOMETHING."

ROLLAND ENCOURAGES GROWERS NOT TO PICK TOO SOON. "IF YOU PICK EARLY, YOU KNOW IT WILL NEVER BE GOOD, BUT IF YOU WAIT, IT COULD BE GREAT. WE HAVE TO TAKE THE RISK."

"I LOVE WHAT I'M DOING," ROLLAND CONCLUDED, "BUT I DON'T WANT TO WORK TOO MUCH. I LOVE GOLF, BUT I LIKE TO TASTE LIKE I PLAY GOLF."