

What Some Men Won't Do



for a Good Glass of Wine

There is a sharp snap in the fresh mountain air this winter afternoon. From where we stand, a thousand feet above Lake Keuka in the Finger Lakes district of upper New York State in Hammondsport, the setting is utterly pastoral. The last grapes of a good fall harvest have been picked; the bright blue sky stretches endlessly. It is the kind of place a stranger could come upon, unknowing, and remain for years out of a simple certainty that nothing more satisfying could possibly be waiting around the next bend. But for a hyperactive, dynamic, mercurial 42-year-old grape grower and winemaker named Walter S. Taylor, this place, the Bully Hill Wine Company in Hammondsport, N.Y., is the center of a raging storm.

Walter Taylor is obsessed by wine. Specifically, he is obsessed by the idea of making a better wine than is made by the well-known company that fired him—the company that bears his family's name. Quixote-like, he sallies forth determined that his Bully Hill wines will someday epitomize the ultimate nobility that can flow from the Finger Lakes vineyards, and will even rival the wines of the great French chateaux. And that is how Walter Taylor is going to right some wrongs.

Taylor was born into the business of wine-making. His grandfather founded the Taylor

Wine Company. His father had presided over its growth and its acquisition by Great Western Wines. Taylor has worked in the family vineyards and wineries from the time he was 16, admitting to some time out for tennis bumming in Coral Gables, Fla., and a couple of flings at schooling. "I was the worst student in the world," Taylor acknowledges. "It took me six years just to get through high school, and I didn't get to college until I was 29."

Three years ago, Walter Taylor was summarily fired by the Taylor Wine Company—control had passed out of the hands of his immediate family—for making one speech too many about his view of wine-making as "big business." Taylor had grown more and more upset with the methods of producing wine employed by most big companies. He claimed great amounts of water and sugar were added to the "must," the basic juice of the grapes. Under state law, as much as half of the wine used to produce "New York State wine" need not originate there, but can be tank-car wine shipped from California, Algeria, or elsewhere. Taylor felt assembly-line methods of processing the wine left it with a high acid content. Finally, and fundamentally, Walter Taylor believed that his company's reliance on the traditionally used grapes of the region—Concords and Niagaras—were

keeping the product away from the world's wine market, where tastes are influenced by European grapes which few companies had tried to grow in the Finger Lakes region.

Taylor said all these things—loudly and publicly. Finally, with the family's consent (except for his father), Taylor was dismissed from his vice-presidency by the company officers.

As far as the present-day Taylor Wine Company is concerned, the less it hears about Walter Taylor, the better. A company spokesman, with a look that suggests indigestion, patiently explains that the company's marketing position demands the production of "a uniform wine product." This, he goes on, calls for varying blends of different grapes from year to year, plus the addition of sugar or water to achieve the uniformity—"the consistency that the consumer expects from our wine." But in his speeches, Walter Taylor had interpreted this complex in the same way Ralph Nader might choose to expose massive corporate fraud. The consumer had no idea it was going on, Taylor said. So he was fired.

Taylor immediately began to turn an avocation into an obsessive business: the Bully Hill Wine Company, located in the original vineyards of his grandfather's company.

Bully Hill had its beginnings in 1958, when Walter Taylor and his father Greyton bought back the original vineyard. In addition to regaining ownership of an old family property, and establishing the only wine museum in the area, the Taylors, father and son, began experimenting with a different way of making New York wine.

"My father told me he was scared to death of the business," Taylor recalls. "They were all running away from the vineyards. He used to say, 'The whole thing is the vineyard.' You can have all the fancy buildings in the world, but if you don't have the proper soil and grape variety, you aren't going to have anything."

The Taylors began making their wine with no water or foreign wine added—strictly New York State wine from grapes on or adjoining their land (the legal definition in New York for estate-bottled wines). They began using European variety grapes: viniferas and hybrids instead of the native New



York State varieties which Taylor believes give most New York State wines a "foxy," sharp taste. And in 1968, Walter Taylor hired a 28-year-old German-born wine-maker named Hermann Weimer, who was convinced that European-style grapes could be grown in the New York wine country.

What was a hobby—or a foreboding—in the 1960's thus became a refuge, a fortress for Walter Taylor in 1970. Within a year, he had turned out three blended wines—a red, a white, and a rosé—and by 1972, he was selling nine different varietal wines and grossing more than \$250,000. Taylor is confident the winery will gross more than \$500,000 this year.

This still makes Bully Hill very much a David in the battle—the Taylor Wine Company, for example, is a \$50 million a year corporation. Most liquor stores have never heard of Bully Hill wine, and some who hear the name think it is a "pop wine," something akin to Boone's Farm or Annie Green Springs or Ripple.

But the product has also received remarkable public attention and acclaim for such a small and newly distributed wine. Without exception, the tasters and publications who have reviewed Bully Hill wine have been enthusiastic, comparing it with good French wines, rather than with the

Wine-maker Hermann Weimer shared Taylor's belief that European grapes could be grown in New York's vineyards to produce superior wines.

conventionally denigrated New York State wines (the comparison seems fair, given the fact that both the grape varieties and the wine-making processes of Bully Hill are far closer to the natural European process than to the highly mechanized New York State process). At about \$3.25 a bottle, Bully Hill wines are more expensive than other New York wines, but a better buy than many French labels.

For Taylor, the business of wine-making is more than a business; it is a way of life, a form of combat, something close to religion.

His insistence on honest labeling is an obsession: the law says a wine can be called by a grape variety if 51 percent of the wine is made from that variety. At Bully Hill, the Seyval Blanc is labeled *95 percent Seyval Blanc, 5 percent Aurora blanc*.

"If people want to drink wine made with water, or with 1,000 milligrams of salt in it, that's fine, let them. *Only tell them what they're getting.*"

His attacks on the wine company his grandfather founded, as well as on other large wineries, are often bitter:

"If we can't raise European-style grapes, then the whole New York State wine industry might just as well fold and put houses up in the vineyards. All they're doing is lying to the growers, telling them that Concord grapes are the way into the wine markets of the world."

For Walter Taylor, his father Greyton represented the last link between his family's company and the tradition of personal devotion to wine-making. Shortly after his dismissal, Walter Taylor claims, the company and his relatives pressured Greyton Taylor into resigning from the Taylor Wine Company. He died in 1971. "After they fired me, they worked on my father until they got rid of him. And the sickening thing is," he says, "after my father died they sent over an engraved book honoring him for 50 years in the wine industry...as if there was some way a few pieces of gilded parchment absolved everything."

His break with much of his own family was intensely personal as well: "My wife left me for another man the day before I was fired. The only people who stood by me were Walter John (his 14-year-old son who lives with him on the estate), my father, and Hermann Weimer."

Walter Taylor is to a typical corporate executive what Howard Cosell is to a monk sworn to pietistic silence. He is physically imposing, with sandy hair on a receding forehead, a tinge of middle-aged spread on a strong body, seemingly tense with restless energy. He has no secretary, no public relations firm, no advertising agency; he answers his own telephone and writes most of his own letters.

His sense of the land and the grapes is mystical. "There's such a great feeling of enjoyment in making plants move and sing, and knowing that those plants know that every bit of their juice is gonna go into a helluva product," Taylor exclaims. "A grapevine has just as much right to exist as a person." In the fall of October 1970, on the occasion of his first harvest, Taylor

wrote that "from the tips of my fingers I can visualize my friends, the grapes, growing. An everlasting friendship and communication." During this same time, Taylor began carving an elaborate woodblock of grapes growing out of the human hand; the symbol which is now on every bottle of Bully Hill wine.

All this might seem a bit much for a man who also has a highly developed sense of profanity and robust appetite for earthly pleasures. Yet both sides of Walter Taylor's personality seem utterly genuine.

"What Taylor tells you, you can believe," says a resident wine expert at New York City's prestigious Sherry Lehmann wine emporium. "That man gave up a great deal to do what he felt he had to do, and he's revolutionizing wine-making in this state. He's turning out a product completely different from any major New York State wine."

"That wine you're drinking right now," Walter Taylor says over dinner, "that's 100 percent baco noir. It's the greatest red wine produced in America. Beautiful." He and wine-maker Weimer acknowledge that the wines are not the equal of the great French estates, the Lafites and Margaux, but both of them believe that within 10 years, they could approach that level,

and Taylor tells with pride of blind tastings where a 1967 Bully Hill red outrated a 1959 Chateau Latour.

Taylor also freely admits to bigger dreams. Does he visualize taking over the Taylor Wine Company some day? "Absolutely. It's my name. I have a definite feeling that eventually I will be back at the Taylor Wine Company." He maintains, in addition to Bully Hill and the wine museum, an AM and FM radio station and an airport. He also publishes *Vineyard View*, a monthly compendium of history, news, tips for making wine at home, and does constant editorial battle, naturally, with the major wine producers of New York State. He cheerfully takes on all comers, from large banks who he sees as conspiring with big wine companies against the interests of grape growers, to the state and federal governments for not cracking down on what he sees as dishonest labeling.

And always there is the wine, trying to make it better, pursuing his belief that a man's wine is an extension of his soul so the better the wine, the better the person.

"We really struggle here to make a good wine. We fight and argue and do everything else. We do it because we really haven't made as good a wine as I know we can make here. We haven't really reached it yet." ©

At the end of another day with his "friends"—the grapes—the master of Bully Hill settles down to ruminate on matters of wine and the soul of man.

