

# WS40



**THE LEADERS OF WINE**  
*By: Mitch Frank - Nov. 15, 2016*

Our modern wine culture has been built on the efforts and achievements of a community of passionate people—vintners, farmers, scientists, chefs, importers, marketers, the list goes on and on. Over the years, Wine Spectator has brought its readers many of their stories. Here, we profile more than 40 wine-world luminaries who made a difference.

## ROBERT DROUHIN

The plan had been for Robert Drouhin to study enology and viticulture at the University in Dijon to prepare him for the day he would take over Burgundy négociant Maison Joseph Drouhin. But he never made it to enology school. His adoptive father, Maurice, suffered a stroke in 1957, and 24-year-old Robert, armed with an education in law and literature, took control of the family business. Over the next 47 years, he would skillfully guide Drouhin through good times and bad, building one of Burgundy's most successful companies and in turn helping solidify the reputation and reach of one of the world's most important wine regions.



By the time he was 7, both of Robert's parents had died. He and his sisters moved from Paris to Beaune to live with their aunt and uncle, who adopted them. When the Germans invaded shortly afterward, Robert helped Maurice hide their stocks of wine. When Maurice was incapacitated by a stroke, Robert stepped into his role, helped by Maurice's friends.

Burgundy was in transition. War and financial depression had been hard on the region. Maison Drouhin had succeeded by purchasing quality wines and investing in vineyards. Drouhin saw opportunity in hard times. He began buying more land, particularly in Chablis, which had never fully recovered from phylloxera decades earlier; Drouhin added 100 acres to Maison Drouhin's holdings. When he noticed that the quality of Burgundies available for purchase was declining in the 1960s and 1970s as plantings of new clones of Pinot Noir began to mature and vigneronns increasingly used chemical fertilizers and pesticides, Drouhin began cutting back on chemicals on his land.

The domaine would go completely organic in 1988 and has been biodynamic since 1997.



In 1961, Drouhin visited California. In a meeting with Robert Mondavi, Drouhin listened as the Napa vintner urged him to invest in California. It was an intriguing idea, but California was known for Cabernet Sauvignon then, not Pinot Noir, Drouhin's area of expertise. But he didn't let it rest. In 1979, he assembled a blind tasting of American Pinot Noirs and Burgundies. An Oregon bottling from pioneer David Lett caught his attention, and Drouhin began exploring the New World region. In 1987, he found 100 acres in the Willamette Valley that he believed could make exceptional Pinot Noir. He asked his daughter, Véronique, a trained enologist, if she would be willing to oversee the project, dubbed Domaine Drouhin Oregon.

Drouhin's investment in Oregon was a watershed moment for the state. Before then, Oregon's wineries were a cottage industry with potential. Now they had been recognized by Burgundy, the benchmark of Pinot Noir. Drouhin's effort there took years to truly take off, but it laid the foundation for the wave of major newcomers the state has seen in recent years, including California's Jackson Family Wines and Drouhin's Burgundian colleague Louis Jadot.

Back in Burgundy in 1993, Drouhin confronted a much more difficult situation. The company had become overextended thanks to extensive loans and high interest rates. Faced with insolvency, Drouhin sold 51 percent of the company to his Japanese importer. He included a provision allowing him to buy back majority control as soon as he was able. It took 11 years, but in 2004 Drouhin regained control. Today, the company is firmly in family hands for the next generation.

Drouhin and his wife, Françoise, encouraged their children to follow their own passions, and all four followed their hearts right back to the company. Today, son Frédéric is president of Maison Joseph Drouhin; Philippe is the estates manager, in charge of the viticulture and grape contracts; Véronique is winemaker at both Maison Drouhin and Drouhin Oregon; Laurent is the export director for the United States and the Caribbean. Robert, who retired as president in 2003 but remains on the board, left them with a strong company and a philosophy of always looking ahead.



*Robert Drouhin earned Wine Spectator's Distinguished Service Award in 2013.*