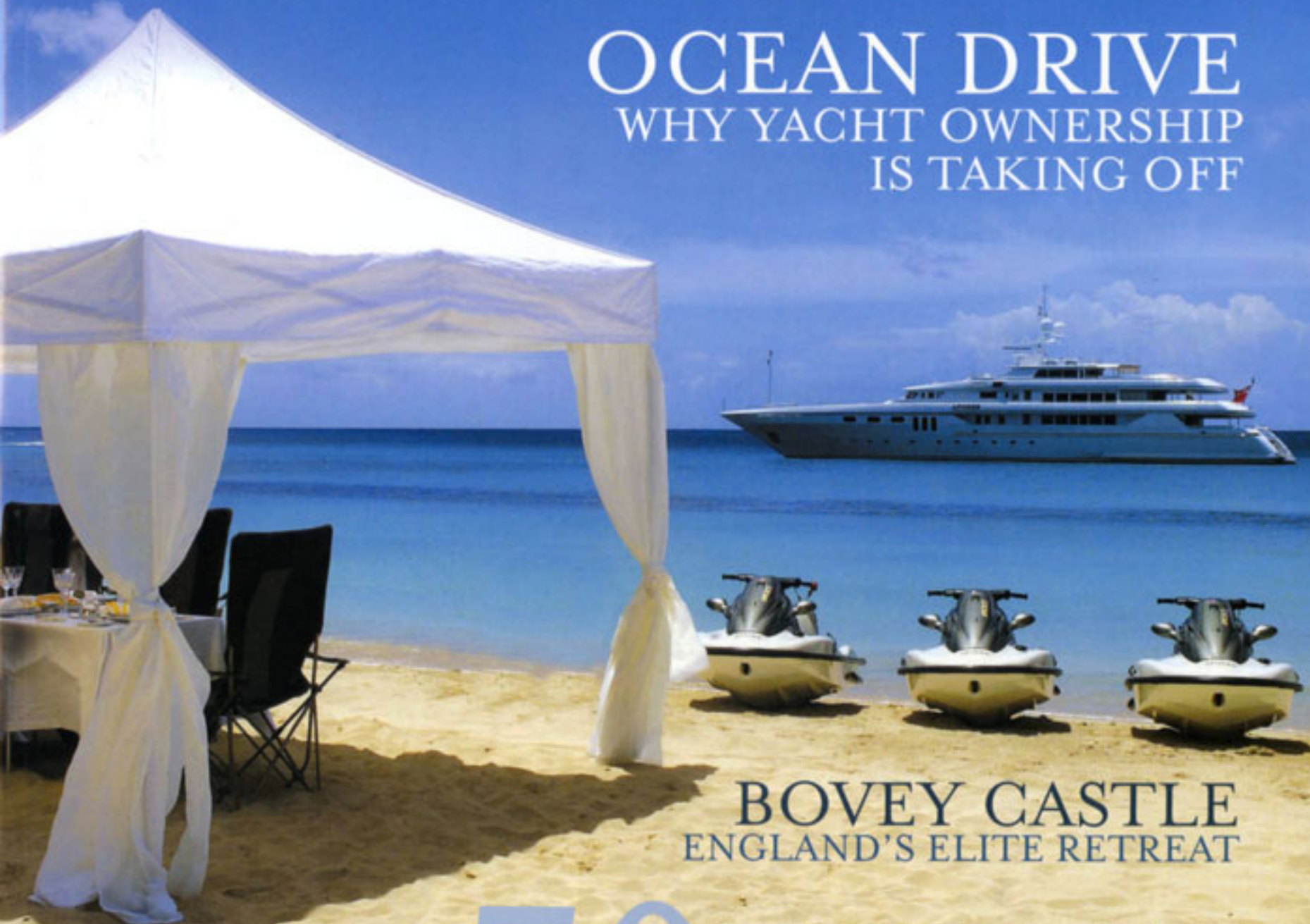


DEFINING THE COUNTRY CLUB LIFESTYLE

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MAY/JUNE 2006

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Super sommeliers

BY ANTHONY HEAD

Picking the right wine after playing a long round isn't always the easiest task. Fortunately, some of the brightest sommeliers are found at golf clubs across America. Leaving the choice to them is always a smart decision.

Meet five wine experts redefining the 19th hole.

JOHN WINFIELD

The Lodge at Pebble Beach, Calif.

Having been at the Lodge at Pebble Beach for eight years, beverage manager John Winfield trains the staff, builds the wine list, and works the floor as sommelier for the resort's restaurants. His philosophy of providing something for everyone is practically guaranteed by the Lodge's massive 12,500-bottle cellar. Still, he balances bottles carefully.

"Some wine lists are so esoteric that if you're not in the wine business, you won't recognize anything," says Winfield. "That's great for some people, but bad for most. So when I'm writing a wine list, I include recognizable names for the people who aren't as familiar with wine."

The Lodge's clientele includes a lot of East Coast and Midwest guests making the pilgrimage to this golf Mecca. Winfield likes to keep popular West Coast wines on hand, but also features many blue-chip wines (Silver Oak Cabernet, Jordan Chardonnay, Sea Smoke Pinot Noir) for people with wine savvy.

He also keeps a few off-the-list-bottles, sort of the unregistered phone numbers of the wine world, to hand-sell.

"We want to hold back, for instance, the 2002 Paul Hobbs Beckstoffer To-Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon," says Winfield. "It's not ready yet, I don't think, and it's not on the list. But if someone were to come in and ask for it — of course I'd bring it out."

Winfield has a very simple reason behind that: "Wine is made to drink. A lot of people collect it as a trophy, but if that trophy sits and gets dusty it's going to zoom past when it should be consumed and the experience isn't going to be as enjoyable."





ROBERT VASKOVIC

SUSANNE LERESCU

Crystal Springs Resort, N.J.

Talk about being in the right place at the right time. When the sommelier for Restaurant Latour departed last December, Susanne Lerescu was tapped to fill the position. She's worked at Crystal Springs Resort in Vernon, N.J., for more than three years and helped launch the French fine-dining restaurant last year. What really assisted with her advancement, though, was that Lerescu helped build the wine cellar — literally.

"Mr. John Foy, a wine consultant, was in charge of putting together the multi-roomed wine cellar. He needed an extra pair of hands to help him, so I offered my services," says Lerescu, who helped rack the wines and paid very close attention to the elaborate system Foy set up.

WHAT REALLY ASSISTED WITH LERESCU'S ADVANCEMENT WAS THAT SHE HELPED BUILD THE RESORT'S WINE CELLAR — LITERALLY.

Today, Lerescu knows the cellar intimately, which is no small feat. As the 2003 Bordeaux arrived, the number of bottles at the resort jumped past 33,000. The sheer volume of wine, coupled with Latour's "Excellent" rating from *The New York Times*, put a bit of pressure on Lerescu.

She's prepared, though, with more than 20 years in the restaurant and hotel business, including an extensive three-year apprenticeship in her native Germany and tenure as a sommelier in England. Lerescu passionately guides guests through the enormous world-class wine list, which includes vast numbers from California, Burgundy and Tuscany, and almost four dozen vintages of the restaurant's namesake wine, Chateau Latour.

But it may surprise no one to learn that — even more than the wine list itself — Lerescu loves the labyrinthine cellar.

"I adore the stone walls and arched doorways. It's almost castle-like," she says with a hint of romance. If you ask nicely, she'll probably give you a tour.

SAMUEL MCFALL

Santa Ana Golf Club, N.M.

Most wine discussions begin with the question, "Red or white?" But in New Mexico, you first answer the question, "Red or green?" Referring to the colors of the state's indelible chiles, the selection poses quite a challenge for which wine should accompany a dish.

Unless, that is, you're Samuel McFall, sommelier for the Prairie Star restaurant at the Santa Ana Golf Club.

"Chilies were a big problem until I figured them out: Acid is the trick," says McFall. "You need to bring high acid or the wine gets destroyed by the food. So with red chile

saucers I usually reach for big reds like Nebbiolo or Barbera. With green chiles, a good Riesling can't be beat."

The 38-year-old McFall has been managing wine lists since he was 23, but says he was most inspired by working with Steven Geddes, at the time the master sommelier was at the Rio Hotel's Fiori Steakhouse in Las Vegas. From Geddes, McFall learned that a deep tasting history is irreplaceable.

"When you're interested in wine, you're always paying attention. So I've been tasting weekly for more than 15 years to develop a vocabulary — a language of wine to learn how to express what you're experiencing," says McFall.

It's a big vocabulary, too. When he took over Prairie Star's wine list, there were only 50 or 60 wines. Today, after 11 years of popping corks, McFall's *Wine Spectator* award-winning list features 525 selections, including about 50 by the glass. His "Cellar Treasures" program pours some of the world's great finds, including 1996 Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon, 1999 Domaine Roulot Meursault and 1977 Graham's Vintage Port.

©STOOD PICKERING



DENISE GILL

Mayacama Golf Club, Calif.

Mayacama is a private golf club in California's Sonoma County with a membership that includes 29 vintners. Wanting to capitalize on such a strong wine presence, Mayacama searched for a liaison between those vintners and its other club members.

They found Denise Gill, Mayacama's first Director of Wine.

"Wine is the most passionate beverage out there," says Gill. "Tender loving care goes into it, from carefully choosing the vineyards to decisions of barrels, bottles, and

**"WHEN YOU'RE INTERESTED
IN WINE, YOU'RE ALWAYS
PAYING ATTENTION."**

labels. I fell in love with that process many years ago and went full force into the wine industry."

Gill previously worked for Fritz, Blackstone and White Oak wineries, running their wine clubs and special events divisions. But when she found that her palate was



GLIZ LOPEZ/ALBUQUERQUE THE MAGAZINE



BARBARA WERLEY

The Greenbrier, W.V.

If you love Spanish wines, it's a good time to be at West Virginia's Greenbrier resort. Beverage director Barbara Werley journeyed to Spain in early 2006 and is now pumping up her list with great selections from La Rioja and Priorat.

As one of only 13 women master sommeliers in the country, Werley's made a reputation by shaking things up wherever she goes. In fact, she ascended to the master sommelier level while breaking the Las Vegas boy's club barrier to become the first female wine director at Caesars Palace.

"I FOUND ONE SOUTH AFRICAN WINE AND ASKED TO HAVE ALL OF IT. IF I FIND SOMETHING SPECTACULAR I'M HAPPY TO LOCK INTO IT."

above average — being able to pick out varietal, vintage, and sometimes even the appellation of the grapes in blind tastings, she pursued the tasting side of the business and began judging around California, including the *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition.

Today, Gill's wine list is 250 selections strong, representing about 70 California wineries. No doubt, vintner members such as the owners of Joseph Phelps, Landmark, and Harlan Estate, who provide the club with a barrel of wine each year, significantly augment Mayacama's wine program.

"I'm very fortunate to have such great vintner members' wines to showcase," says Gill. "And since we serve a variety of food at the club, I always have something for our golfers — whether they're wanting a beef filet with truffle butter or a Kobe beef burger."

Gill's Thursday wine and food pairings in the dining room show the range of the entire wine list, while her First Friday Vintner Tastings promote Mayacama's vintner members' best bottles.

Having been at Greenbrier for only a year, she intends to keep things moving at her own pace.

"Re-doing wine lists is what I like to do," says Werley. "This is a destination resort. You have to make a point to get here, and so the experience needs to be worth the trip. It needs to be memorable."

Part of that unforgettable experience for Werley is working the dining room and reading the mood of the guests to see if an opportunity exists to hand-sell a gem that's not on the list. Another aspect is trying to be exclusive, not just to West Virginia but also to the country.

"I found one South African wine and I asked to have all of it," says Werley. "If I find something spectacular and the production is only a couple hundred cases, I'd be happy to lock into it just for the Greenbrier."

But even master sommeliers go off the clock. "When I go out, I just drink what I feel like drinking, rather than worrying about matching," says Werley. "It's too much like work if I think about stuff like that." ■