

Scribner's Wines

May I help you sir?”, she said. Squinting, I tried to see into that dark room. Even the lobby of that restaurant was dark. What an incredible contrast to the brilliant late afternoon sunshine.

“Oh... thank you miss, I'm just here to pick up a 'take out' order of pasta and clams,” I offered.

“One of our truly best choices sir, I will ring the concierge to help you,” she lifted a well manicured hand to show me to a wall-to-wall, glistening in the candle light, walnut bar.

“Wow... a classy beach ristorante,” I said to myself. I wondered if my old friend, Carl Club the ESRD detective¹ ever came here. This place is less than three blocks from his office on Ocean Avenue. The first and last time I saw him was two years ago, maybe he's moved to less expensive digs. Bay City, or Santa Monica, California continues to become more and more uptown and upscale. Carl probably can't afford the kind of rent on this street... maybe not even to do what I was doing, getting 'take out.'

Shielding my eyes with my left hand from the glare bouncing off of hundreds of crystal glasses, lights, fixtures and the slanting sun, I moved towards the bar. The bartender... no make that 'innkeeper' as he was better dressed than most of the patrons, addressed me.

“Sir... there is one of our regulars that says he knows you. He wants to buy you a drink. He said, anything you want even if it is a snifter of Louis the XIIIth, which you know is about five C's a snifter.”

This innkeeper sounds like a member of the Sam Spade detective school. “Five C's a snifter.” That's five-hundred dollars for four ounces of brandy. Who in this blue world wants to buy me a drink? I had to meet this guy.

Now more accustomed to the dark with its splashes of crystal brightness, I stumbled along using my hands to pad my way over to the far booth. There a very well dressed dude was gesticulating wildly for me to notice him. Once he saw that I saw him, he stopped waving and used both hands and arms to beckon me enthusiastically to his male party of three.

Even in the dark I recognized his hand-made Armani suit. His sea-island white dress shirt was splashed with a red and yellow silk Duchess tie. A tie that I could only afford to peer at through thick counter tops at exclusive stores. My god, he's wearing an Audemars Piguet watch! Who is this guy!?

“Hey doc... it's me... Carl Club,” he said.

“Carl, since when have you been able to afford a suit that pressed,” I laughed, high-pitched and nervously, for I was embarrassed. My mouth must have been open in astonishment when I heard him call out his greeting.

Yep... it was truly and honestly Carl Club. But transformed from the seedy, disheveled young man behind a beat-up desk, sitting in a more beat-up wooden chair and snarling at me when I asked him if he had changed his last name because he was Polish.

“Doc... doc, meet Dave and Harry. Dave and Harry.” Taking a step backwards so that he could gaze at me and his two companions, he blurted, “This is ‘Big D!’”

One of them said, “Hey Carl... I’m ‘Big D!’”

Carl snarled, “No you’re not! Besides you’re still a junior partner, I calls the shots, now shut up and listen!”

“Big D, you made me rich! If it weren’t for you I would still be in saddle shoes wanting to move up to penny loafers when I made good. That *pro bono* work I did for you two years ago set me on the path to riches! Everything you told me was true. You trained a more than one guy who is now worth one-half a bil.¹ You started a dialysis company that became Vivra and got zip from that. Then Vivra was sold to Gambro for 1.6 bil. I checked into your unbelievable stories about all the billionaires and millionaires you made.² It’s all true.” He laughed, “And none of those millionaires is you!”

“Hah, what a hoot! You certainly got the ideas, but no stomach for shortcuts in good patient care. You may be a good doc, but you are a terrible, *terrible* business man?! I’ve got CEO of a hospital chain that loves what you wrote about me, especially my comment that you docs are all fancy-pants white collar criminals.”

Despite myself, I laughed. Carl looked great, flushed with excitement and with the all the trappings of the successes of this world. My history speaks for itself. I make others rich.

“Well Carl,” I said, “The people I trained with in Seattle were not about making money, but about making better patient care. Nobody in Seattle ever got rich off of dialysis. Remember, it was Scribner³ who started this whole business off.”

“Doc, you’ve got to sit down and tell us about Seattle, Scribner, and how you and your buddies bootlegged California wine to Washington state. These guys don’t believe me. Com’ on... sit down and tell us all about it.”

So I did.

ⁱ bil: short-hand for billion. An amount of money equal to 1 times 10⁹. In the United States of America, a billion is one-thousand million dollars. In England a billion is 1 times 10¹².

Scribner's Wines, A Commentary

Long long ago, in a far off land called Seattle, Washington lived a young visionary physician named Belding Hibbard Scribner. This medical doctor was known to all, from high to low as, "Scrib." I was fortunate to be in Seattle as an intern in 1959 when he began to astonish the world with: the "Scribner shunt" and the "Seattle Dialysis System." Scrib's vision had great help from everyone. Everyone, from the physicians to the machine technicians, everyone wanted what he wanted, to save human life. It was my great good fortune to work with him and the many, many wonderful people^{4,5} who helped Scrib achieve his dreams.

It was in 1960 when I was a first year medical resident, that I was called to see Clyde Shields⁶ who was on over-night hemodialysis. Clyde had belly pain. After that encounter, I was hooked. I wanted to do a medical fellowship in dialysis. There was no sub-specialty of nephrology, there were no jobs in medicine for "dialyzers" as we still are called. We were at the cusp, the beginning, of a brand new field of medicine.

Try to imagine the thrill of being able to keep someone alive with failed vital organs. At that time there were no artificial hearts, lungs, skin, or kidneys. This was a mechano-medical marvel and I wanted in. Though I was a lowly medical house officer, I attended a few of the teaching conferences that Scrib and his staff had.

I met with Scrib and told him I wanted to take a fellowship with him when I finished my second year in medicine. He had a federal grant that allowed him to accept up to ten (10) fellows a year. I was just one of many who trained with Scrib, only a very few of us were nuts about wine.

Washington state had a Puritanical streak in those days. Wine could only be purchased from a "state store." The wines in these stores were mostly from New York State. I was from New York State and had been to many of the Finger Lake wineries. The best wine to be had from New York state was something red, sweet, and bubbly called "Cold Duck." All California wines were brilliant by comparison. Though it wasn't illegal to offer the finer California wines in the Washington state stores, they didn't care any, you couldn't order any, and unless you were a liquor wholesaler, you couldn't even complain!

There were only a few state stores, with poor lighting and an even poorer selections of wine. Somehow these stores wanted one to purchase beer or hard liquor, not California wines. The California wines were cheaper than French wines, more consistent, and far better. Those of us who actually drank wine knew that, and we were distressed.

One day, I was ranting to one of the house officers who was telling me to give it up and take up sailing, skiing, or mountain climbing. Scrib came over stopped for a moment to listen and then moved on quietly.

Sometime later as I was making rounds and he was attending on medicine he came over to me to ask where I was going for my one week annual vacation.

"Why... Napa Valley, fer sure, Scrib. I'm going to load up on California wine and bring it back here. Hell, I'll probably buy a case of this Italian wine called Grignolino which is 100% Grigno-

lino grape. It costs less than a buck a bottle, tastes like a nouveau Beaujolais and smells like strawberries. The new owner of the winery, Joe Heitz studied enology and viticulture at Davis and worked at Beaulieu Vineyard for years before he bought this little Italian vineyard. I heard all about this from a GI fellow who works with Cy Rubin, the GI guy that's trying to develop a small bowel biopsy capsule." Scrib smiled a secret smile and walked away.

Cyrus Rubin, MD was another blazing star in the Seattle medical heavens. He was also one of those enologists that I met during my medical residency. He had me over to his home for a party with Scrib and others to share in his first wine harvest. Cy showed me his nascent vineyard in his backyard. He scoffed at the idea that Seattle was too far North to raise good wine.... He was right. What a rush!

Scrib also had his fellows over to his modest home on occasion. I was allowed to attend one such outing probably because I was soon to be a fellow with him. We were invited to his home for a out-of-doors picnic. Whilst there, he asked me to come with him to his basement. He needed my weak mind and strong back. I followed him down the stairs, feeling the old field stone of the walls as I descended the stair case. I marveled that these older Seattle homes had full basements though there was never any snow nor bitterly cold weather in Seattle.

In one section of his basement he had wooden boxes of California wine which he wanted moved to an other corner of the basement. I took a case and followed him. He put the case down in front of the most unusual wine racks I had ever seen.

The racks were custom made of wood, from floor to ceiling. Most of the racks had individual holders for one bottle each. These holders were made so that the wine bottles were placed with the wine bottle neck to the rear. The wine bottle neck was held in a slightly angled up position, to keep the cork wet with wine. The label was in front so you could read it, the date and the vineyard. A beautiful and simple method of racking wine for long term storage. Most wine storage racks displayed just the cork and neck of the bottle; the beautiful label was hidden.

Scrib said he collected only Cabernet Sauvignon wines and preferred those wines which were one-hundred percent of the Cabernet Sauvignon grape. He didn't like blends of different kinds of grapes. He said that only collecting one kind of grape and one kind of wine; he felt he could be certain to know which wines matured well. He planned to keep his wines for, "twenty-five to fifty years or so, the Cabernet Sauvignon wines are best for this as they get better and better with age. Some are good when over a hundred years old," he said softly.

He picked up a bottle of Beaulieu Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon and said, "This looks like the ones you can buy in the stores outside of the Napa Valley. But look more closely at the label, its a special blend and a special lot number. It's not 100% Cabernet Sauvignon but it should be marvelous in the years to come. I want some Charles Krug 100% Cabernet Sauvignon that can only be purchased directly at the winery," Scrib almost whispered as if talking about something sacred.

I don't remember much more about that day as I was blown away by Scrib's careful and passionate dedication to the art and science of wine collection, storage, aging, and tasting.

One must try to recall that the great state of Washington had no wineries at that time. No *premier cru* wines, no audience of yuppies visiting their vineyards wanting to taste, then buy cases of wines. No nouveau Beaujolais festivals, no nouvelle vague middle class that had a passion for good wine. Not only had I stepped into the world's center for dialysis, but also a center of passionate wine collecting and tasting.

Seattle is the major city of Washington state and the major city of King County. In the 1950's a Washington state law was proposed that all cheap, high alcoholⁱⁱ content wines should be fortified with vitamin B complex. The law was opposed by all the Puritans. I groused that it was the liquor lobby; but was told no, it was the solid Mid-West gentry and the Women's Temperance League who were violently opposed to helping drunks get drunk without getting deadly nerve damage. Drinking wine was not classy, it was associated with skid row.

One thinks that skid row is a term that originated in the shanty section of New York City. That is incorrect. The term is from Seattle. Skid row was exactly that. A section of town where logs were skidded down the road to the water. That was when Seattle as a boom town for the timber industry.

On skid row, then and now, there are many who can't face life head on and face it through the bottom of a cheap wine bottle. We nascent wine drinkers of Seattle were smirked at. Drinking wine was associated with alcoholism. Real men drank bourbon, or if wealthy enough single-malt Scotch.

Think how things have changed, at least in California. We still don't add vitamins to cheap fortified wine but we do offer clean needles to heroin addicts.

Yes, Seattle had wine, but for many of us, it was undrinkable. My complaints did not fall on deaf ears... I had some good company. Some of the young physicians were interested in good wine as it allowed one to drive home safely and was drunk with food and fellowship, not to intoxicate. We eventually held a spectacular wine tasting party for the house staff that our chief of medicine Robert G Petersdorf, MD, MACP felt compelled to invite himself to, saying to me after I answered the door of my tiny home, "De Palma, I hear this is were the action is... I want in."

Wine as a drink for the middle class, wine tasting and wine appreciation was in its infancy in Seattle. Even then Scrib was an established collector and connoisseur.

I didn't serve a fellowship with Scrib in 1962. My draft board from Syracuse, New York sent me greetings saying that since I was one of the youngest MDs in Onondaga County, I was not allowed to avoid the draft. I was 26, soon to be 27. President John F Kennedy had promised to make Germany safe from the Russians.... I was to be drafted in the US Army as a physician. If I refused, I would be drafted as a private. My US Army career in Nürnberg, Germany was a won-

ⁱⁱ By natural fermentation of grape, the alcohol content of wine tops out just below 13%. Fortified wines have distilled alcohol added to make them 20% alcohol or 40 proof. One-hundred *proof* is fifty percent alcohol. A drink of gin which is 80 proof is diluted with 20 proof vermouth. Thus two ounces of the fortified wine has the kick of a martini. At Seattle's King County Hospital, the most common alcoholic was a "wino." Some of the most terrible problems were those associated with vitamin B complex deficiency such as Wernicke encephalopathy, more precisely described as superior hemorrhagic polioencephalitis.

derful, maturing experience. I recommend being drafted for all young Americans, male and female... it would help to make all grateful for what we have in this grand land of ours.

Scrib wrote me in Germany wanting to know if I still wanted a fellowship with him, his training program had become most sought after. I told him that after a two year rest in Germany, I more than ever wanted to get back to a normal eighty hour work week. He agreed... I was relieved.

In 1964, after being away from American medicine for only two years, I found that I was miserably and almost hopelessly behind in all areas. Such was the speed of change some forty years ago. The change is faster today. Nervously I attached myself to Lars Grimrud and Les Babb, both professors of Chemical Engineering at the University of Washington to learn fluid mechanics and kinetics.

Over-night unattended hemodialysis had become the standard of excellence while I was away. My old classmate Joseph W Eschbach, MD⁷ had published with Scrib the seminal studies on this new technique. I was way behind. I learned how to surgically insert the Teflon arterio-venous (A-V) access by assisting David Dillard, MD⁴ the surgeon who originated the technique. I bothered Wayne Quinton,⁴ who modified the Kiil dialyzer for home hemodialysis. He designed and made the original A-V access tools and cannulas. He went on to develop the treadmill used by almost all cardiologists in this country and founded Quinton Instruments. Mister Quinton may be the first American bio-engineer. He, along with many, asked me to stop asking so many questions about things I didn't understand.

And... I annoyed Scrib because I didn't really understand his concepts about fluid balance. Eventually, I was asked to teach his course to the University of Washington third year medical students. I suppose it was the smart thing to do, have the dummy teach. It worked.

Being curious, nervous, and forever behind in all things medical, mechanical, and electrical, I met then queried everyone in Scrib's empire. I made Kiil dialyzers with the machine technicians, I bent Teflon tubing to make shunt pieces. I made and gas sterilized blood lines. If they had let me, I would have tried to fix the central delivery system that proportioned concentrate and pumped dialysate to a four station dialysis unit in the clinical research center on the fifth floor of the University Hospital.

In my second year I personally trained the future medical director of the Northwest Kidney Center, Thomas W Sawyer, MD.⁸ He didn't like it at first but he grew to love dialysis and spent the rest of his active career doing so. That second year Tom and I maintained three patients awaiting renal transplantation on chronic hemo and peritoneal dialysis at King County Hospital under the wise guidance of Ralph E Cutler, MD.⁹

I learned peritoneal dialysis (PD) from the master who taught Henry Tenckhoff, MD.¹⁰ Henry was a research fellow at that time. I learned PD from ST (Fred) Boën, MD. Doctor Boën published a monograph on peritoneal dialysis while a medical student in Holland. I have a signed copy of said monograph. He invented the first version of the "Tenckhoff PD catheter." He invented the PD cyler system used for home PD. Fred reluctantly left Seattle with his family in 1966. He returned in 2000 for a belated dinner convened to honor his historic work.^{11,12}

Back to the past, Scrib called me into his office, “John, what mischief... *research* are you doing?”

Uh... well, Scrib, I sweet talked Carl Anderson into doing a study on platelet adhesiveness¹³ pre and post dialyzer. Uh... Scrib, I was able to talk the pathologist at King County out of a phase microscope for the summer.... Boy what a grouch! He was put out about it but gave up after I showed I actually knew how to use it. I had to sign a document giving him my first born son if I failed to return it,” I whined.

“John, what happened to your work with heparin? We paid for a special device for you to analyze heparin using a form of activated clotting time. How is that going? Scrib queried.

“Well Scrib, though I can’t find a reference, it looks like the dose of heparin influences the half-life¹⁴ of the heparin and I am sorely confused. I’m at a dead end at arriving at some kind of graph or formula”

Scrib shook his head, “John, I don’t know how you do it. Out of the twelve abstracts we submitted to ASAIO,ⁱⁱⁱ the only one accepted for presentation was the one from you and Carl Anderson. Why is that?”

“Gosh, Scrib, just luck I guess,” I submitted.

“Now I hear that you have been chosen to head up the NIH home dialysis program awarded to Cedars-Sinai and UCLA. I never wrote a letter of recommendation for you. I didn’t even know about it until today. John, if you take that job, you won’t last six months down there. Those guys are vicious, they’re tigers. If you do take the job promise me you will keep your big mouth shut and never do anything you can’t prove! Lastly do you actually understand this ‘paired T-test’ statistic that you using to validate your platelet work?” Scrib was nervous. Nobody understood statistics.

“Ok, Scrib when I get to LA, I promise to behave,” I said. And I did, at least for a whole year.

“Uh... Scrib, as far as this statistic stuff, Ralph Cutler actually understands it. Um... he says what I am doing is valid. Call him up. I learned the technique from him.” Yes, Ralph Cutler, MD taught Carl Anderson, Tom Sawyer and me renal physiology.

Scrib warned, “John, don’t get Carl in trouble. He a good lad. He has a bright future in academic medicine. As for you... your future is a mystery to me.”

Scrib was correct. Carl finished his fellowship, returned to the Mayo Clinic to work with Bill Johnson¹⁵ until Bill retired. Carl then became chief. My future remains a mystery.

“John”

“Yes Scrib?”

ⁱⁱⁱ ASAIO: The American Society of Artificial Internal Organs. At that time the place to publish.

“I need some wine from California for my collection, do you know anyone that would buy me a dozen cases of Charles Krug 100% 1964 Cabernet Sauvignon and drive it back up here?”

I smiled, remembering the conversation with Scrib two years previously. “Uh... let me see who I can con, ah... talk into getting this stuff for you.”

I won't go into the details of who went and who transported the wine, but it was done with alacrity and dispatch. A dozen cases of wine is a huge amount. I didn't know that Scrib was buying for his wine collecting group. It was not my position to ask. The small clique of us who were wine aficionados decided to buy a few bottles for our own and put on a wine tasting bash. Some of us were so enthused we traveled on our own to the wilds of the Napa Valley.

My gosh, there were all of twenty wineries along Saint Helena highway in 1964.^{iv} We wandered off the beaten track and found the “Mario Lanza Winery.” Thinking this was the famous tenor and movie star we stopped. This Mario was Italian, but no movie star. He sold us Italian red wine by the glass gallon jug. Four gallons for a dollar! We laughingly cooked up a scheme to decant this Mario Lanza wine into empty bottles of wine with expensive labels and vineyards betting that no one would tell the difference. We were right. No one did. It was an experience to hear some of the nouveau cognoscenti talk about this or that wine's “nose,” when they were all the same wine. As a group, we only got to do that trick once. I continued this ruse after moving to Los Angeles.

We wanted a wine tasting party like the ones we had read about in the posh magazines in the posh places. You know: plates of sliced French bread, plates of French Brie to cleanse the plate between discrete sips of wine. Raw carrots, slices of Washington state yellow delicious apples... you know... the works. And, a single type of wine to savor.

Since my group of wine nuts included zealots of: red wines, or white wines, or after dinner wines, or champagnes, we were at loggerheads (a fitting term for a former timber town).

I think it was one of the research fellows with Cy Rubin who said, “What the hell... let's taste them all. It's doubtful we could ever pull this off more than once.”

By now there more than a few physicians in the area who had captured Scrib's passion for wine and wine appreciation. Some had been fellows with him during my hiatus in the US Army. They came and offered their help, money and style.

One of them made a flyer of our wine tasting party. His wife was an artist and freely borrowed from the Heitz Cellars label. This is a replica of that flyer.

^{iv} There are over two-hundred (200) wineries in that same area today.



Wine Tasting Party. Just bring yourself for a unique adventure with 17 wines, Brie, bread, cheeses, and champagne!

We had it on a Friday night. It began at seven PM. No one remembers when it ended. All the wines were numbered from one to seventeen with a marker on the brown paper bags the wine bottle were encased in. We didn't want anyone to read the labels to see if we had cheap or expensive wine in the bag. We stood and watched. The very few felt the shape of the wine bottle in the paper bag. One can tell the long necked Riesling bottle from a Cabernet bottle. By the dimple in the bottom of the bottle one can tell if the Cabernet shaped bottle is meant for red or white wine. We could tell who were a real wine aficionados. What these folk didn't know was California white wines labeled Riesling were more like Chardonnay than anything else. Chardonnay bottles are a third different shape. Some even smelled the cork.¹⁶

We handed out score sheets for everyone to rank the wines. We thought that we could add up the scores and see if the quality of the wine had anything to do with the score. Our science failed us. The score sheets were used as coasters. We ran out of pencils. It seemed like the entire household and their wives were there. If true, we had over one-hundred people in that tiny house. This wine tasting party has the feel of spontaneous combustion.

Sometime about nine PM the door bell rang. It was our chief, Robert B Petersdorf, MD. "Oh... m'god, I said, it's 'The Dorf,'" when I opened the door.

The great man said, "De Palma, how come I wasn't invited?" Flabbergasted we bowed to made a path to him. He was a god to us; we were honored with his presence.

At eight AM the next morning, Saturday, was to be the daily “Prayer Meeting,” aka morning report for all the medical resident section heads of the hospital. I think Petersdorf was the only one to show... he never said a word about this one-time failure of all his faithful admirers.

Years after I left Seattle, I was sent the newspaper articles about Scrib and his colleagues being busted for having California wine without a wholesalers permit or some such nonsense. As a penalty, the state confiscated all three of these university medical professors wine cellars. The state was determined to auction them off and keep the money. The wines were now very valuable. What was acquired cheaply and with great love was to be squandered by the Puritans of Washington state.

There was a public outcry. Scrib was no ordinary citizen. He had given much to the state of Washington. Now they were going to take away something they could not fathom or value. Take away a life's pursuit of passion, knowledge, and pleasure out of some mean spirited and flawed notion of justice.

Some sanity prevailed. A new Washington state law was passed which returned the wines to their rightful owners and allowed all to import California wines.

“Thus ends my direct knowledge of ‘Scribner’s Wines,’” I said.

“Wow...,” said Carl, “Uh... what part of that story is fable and what part is true?”

“Well, Carl, Dave, and Henry, you’re all medical detectives, you figure it out. I’m going home to re-heat then eat my dinner....”

With that I left those three arguing among themselves as to what if any laws were broken. As I strode out of earshot into a gorgeous Santa Monica sunset, I thought I heard Carl say, “Maybe we should do a wine tasting party... sounds like a blast from the past...”



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