



## Smithsonian Institution

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

### Playbill for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

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## WINE OF CHOICE

[[image - black and white photo of Peter J. Morrell]]

As our lives become increasingly more complicated, many of us occasionally dream of getting back to basics by owning and operating a small farm and just living off the fat of the land.

Of course, some people actually pursue this dream, and a select few have done so in a way most of us never would have imagined: They bought raw land, cleared it of boulders and trees, but instead of putting in corn and artichokes, they planted vinifera grapes. Their goal: to make high quality wine.

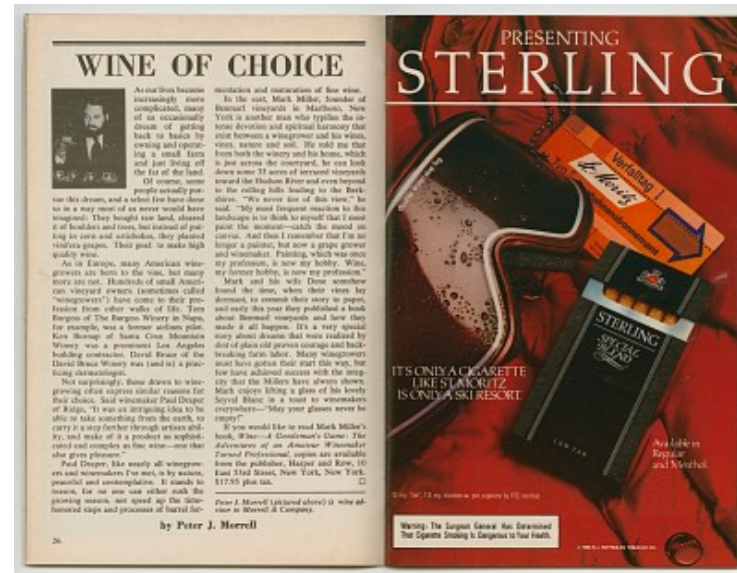
As in Europe, many American winegrowers are born to the vine, but many more are not. Hundreds of small American vineyard owners (sometimes called "winegrowers") have come to their profession from other walks of life. Tom Burgess of The Burgess Winery in Napa, for example, was a former airlines pilot. Ken Burnap of Santa Cruz Mountain Winery was a prominent Los Angeles building contractor. David Bruce of the David Bruce Winery was (and is) a practicing dermatologist.

Not surprisingly, those drawn to wine-growing often express similar reasons for their choices. Said winemaker Paul Draper of Ridge, "It was an intriguing idea to be able to take something for the earth, to carry it a step further through artisan ability, and make of it a product as sophisticated and complex as fine wine—one that also gives pleasure."

Paul Draper, like nearly all winegrowers and winemakers I've met, is by nature, peaceful and contemplative. It stands to reason, for no one can either rush the growing season, nor speed up the time-honored steps and processes of barrel fermentation and maturation of fine wine.

In the east, Mark Miller, founder of Benmarl vineyards in Marlboro, New York is another man who typifies the intense devotion and spiritual harmony that exist between a winegrower and his winers, vines, nature and soil. He told me that from both the winery and his home, which is just across the courtyard, he can look down at some 35 acres of terraced vineyards toward the Hudson River and even beyond to the rolling hills leading to the Berkshires. "We never tire of this view," he said. "My most frequent reaction to this landscape is to think to myself that I must paint the moment—catch the mood on canvas. And then I remember that I'm no longer a painter, but now a grape grower and winemaker. Painting, which was once my profession, is now my hobby. Wine, my former hobby, is not my profession."

Mark and his wife Dene somehow found the time, when their vines lay dormant, to commit their story to a paper, and early this year they published a book about Benmarl vineyards and how they made it all happen. It's a very special story about dreams that were realized by dint of plain old proven courage and backbreaking farm labor. Many winegrowers must have gotten their start this way, but few have achieved success with the integrity that the Millers have always shown. Mark enjoys lifting a glass of his lovely Seyval Blanc in a toast to winemakers everywhere—"May your glasses never be empty!"



If you would like to read Mark Miller's book, *Wine—A Gentleman's Game: The Adventures of an Amateur Winemaker Turned Professional*, copies are available from the publisher, Harper and Row, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York. \$17.95 plus tax.

[[line]]

Peter J. Morrell (pictured above) is wine advisor to Morrell & Company.

by Peter J. Morrell

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[[advertisement]]

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[[image - color photograph of ski goggles and cigarette box]]

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