

The vineyard of  
Clos de la Meslerie



## No *Vin* Before Its Time

*Can an American M.B.A. succeed as a French winemaker?*

BY HELENE RAGOVIN

**T**HERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN self-confidence and self-delusion, and ten years ago some of Peter Hahn's friends suspected he had crossed it. It was then that Hahn, A86, gave up his lucrative consulting job to reinvent himself as a professional winemaker in the Loire Valley of France. He didn't speak French, he'd never worked on a farm, and he knew little about viticulture, or grape growing. To make matters worse, the French wine industry, staggering under the competition from New World wines, was not exactly the place to gamble one's life savings.

What Hahn did have was a passion for fine wine, acquired some years earlier during his study-abroad experience in Europe. And he had a dream. "I've always been a bit of a dreamer," he says.

Hahn was working in the London offices of the Monitor Company, a global

management consulting firm, when he decided to move to Paris to be with his French girlfriend. The *amour* ended, but his other love continued to flourish. "When you live in France, you can't escape wine," Hahn says. "I did some good, hard thinking—what was I really passionate about? This notion of being involved in wine came to the fore." And so began an ambitious—some would say quixotic—journey.

During the French wine upheavals of the mid-nineties, "there were vineyards for sale at prices that weren't too prohibitive," Hahn says. "So I thought, if I want to make a go of it, this might be the way to do it." He found a small Loire Valley vineyard—Clos de la Meslerie, near Tours—with a winemaking history dating back to the seventeenth century. Never mind that the house was on the verge of collapse, or that wine hadn't been made on the property for some fifteen years. The

vines, in fact, were under lease to other winemakers, and it would be five years before Hahn could even get the rights to the vines back.

For the next several years, he threw himself into the physical labor of renovating the sprawling house, with its two dozen rooms—a job that today is only two-thirds finished. He also transformed some outbuildings into holiday cottages that would provide rental income. And once he had gained the rights to the vines, he had a vineyard to toil in.

Hahn adopted newfangled (actually, oldfangled) organic methods of grape growing, such as controlling pests with native grasses planted between the vines instead of spraying, and plowing the earth under the vines to get rid of weeds and aerate the soil. The local *vignerons* were skeptical. "Planting native grasses? What's wrong with you?" they would exclaim.

Being an outsider didn't help. "There's



always this love-hate thing between the French and the Americans,” Hahn says. “But I was good friends with a lot of young organic winemakers—who are seen as somewhat revolutionary—and I got bunched in with them, which helped mitigate that I was an American. Sometimes you’re not sure if they’re laughing at you or with you, but I never felt that I was not basically welcome.”

The sweaty work of restoring the property and tending the vineyard wasn’t the half of it. Hahn, who studied German at Tufts, had to learn a new language (“the French are not crazy about speaking English,” he notes wryly) and earn a professional diploma—*de rigueur* for commercial vintners—in enology, the science of winemaking and viticulture. For two-and-a-half years, he attended an agriculture and viticulture institute part-time, supporting his family through freelance consulting. “It was a real challenge,” Hahn says. “I had two young kids and I’d come home, study my winemaking, do my homework—and at the same time, I’d be on the phone to clients in New York or wherever, keeping the whole thing afloat.”

For his pains he received the *Brevet professionnel agricole*. “I’m almost as proud of that degree as I am of my bachelor’s



degree from Tufts and my M.B.A. from Dartmouth,” he says.

At last, in the fall of 2008, the grapes of Clos de la Meslerie were ready for harvest. With the help of some old-timers, Hahn restored a 60-year-old handpress, a rare implement in these mechanized days. The beauty of the manual press is that it brings forth only the clear, clean “first-run” juice. Its disadvantages are, first, its

smaller output—“we had about a quarter of the average yield per acre,” Hahn says—and, second, its toll on the human body. “It was the most physical exertion I’ve ever had in my life.”

Word of the unusual harvest spread quickly. “We had all these local winemakers come watch,” Hahn says. “They were amused, and bemused, but also impressed and enthusiastic.”

That first vintage was a Vouvray—a white wine that is a Loire Valley specialty, made from chenin blanc grapes. If the wine had turned out to be unexceptional, Hahn might have found the journey itself to be worth the effort. “It was a big gamble, but with each little step I took, it gave me more and more pleasure and joy,” he says. But Clos de la Meslerie’s Vouvray Sunrise was no dud. It was judged one of the “best wines in France” by the country’s leading wine magazine, *La Revue du vin de France*, in its roundup of the 2008 vintage. Tasters have described it as “rich, with a fruit-filled complexion” and having a “well-rounded mouth-feel” with “notes of honey, ripe pear, ginger, and lime-blossom on the nose.”

“I believe we can only get better,” says Hahn, his self-confidence very much intact.