



The Anatomy of Success

By Naomi Barry in Paris

The Two Gentlemen from the Rue Verneuil

Is it possible to become a self-taught expert of French wine? Take a note from the Vifian brothers, a pair of gentlemen cooks who met the challenge.



Like many an amateur lover of fine French wines the world over, I would give my silk purse to be able to analyze a Lynch Bages with discernment and discuss the suavity of a precious glass of Sauternes' Chateau Climens.

Even though I don't believe this will happen to me, I am captivated by the saga of Robert and Freddy Vifian, the two scholarly brothers who own Tan Dinh, an upscale Vietnamese restaurant in the fashionable 7th arrondissement of Paris. The Tan Dinh enjoys a reputation for the finesse of its off-beat Southeast Asian cuisine. It enjoys a second reputation for its choice collection of quality Bordeaux and Burgundies of small growths that are little known to the general public. The house expertise was publicly proclaimed when "Cuisine & Vins de France established its Pantheon of the 100 most important specialists in the world of wine and included Robert Vifian in its list. The colleagues in the profession agree. Among the brothers' long time closest friends are a coterie of starred French chefs who turn up in the restaurant from time to time, drawn by the happy matching of specific French wines to specific Oriental dishes. Since the brothers were born in Saigon and come out of a Tea Culture, their achievements in western viniculture seem even more remarkable."

The atmosphere of the Tan Dinh vaguely suggests a private home or a laid-back club. The menu is small and carefully composed, ingredients are impeccable. MSG never entered the premises. The family background was a cuisine of extreme refinement. The Vifians' maternal grandfather was the leading importer of delicacies and luxury food stuffs from Europe and the rest of the world and his household reflected his position.

"I cook in my tradition but I do not cook traditional Vietnamese" says Robert, who belongs to that small but international group of chefs who delight in producing subtly delicious dishes that tease the diner into thinking about what they are putting into their mouths.

As Orientals aiming to run a high end restaurant in Paris, the Vifians faced a forbidding hurdle. Coming out of a Tea Culture, they knew precious little about the world of the grape. Paris assumes that any restaurant worth a star will have a wine list on a par with its cuisine. When the brothers opened the Tan Dinh back in the eighties, they realized they had to learn about French wines and they had to learn fast if they wanted to be taken seriously.

"We took a scholarly and intellectual approach," confesses Freddy "because that was all we knew. We were just out of the Sorbonne and we didn't know which way we were going. Our main interests were history, pharmacology, cinema and contemporary art. We spoke three languages as a matter of course. For better or worse, we were intellectuals with a talent for cooking. When it came to wine, our knowledge was limited."

The Vifian's self-education program started with two ball point pens, two notebooks and one bottle of wine. By sharing the bottle they were able to obtain two separate analytical opinions based on the same source. The comparisons grew into a trove of invaluable reference material. The method worked so well they kept it up.

Because wine is a living organism sensitive to changing environments, the brothers rented a house in Burgundy for three months so they could be close to the vineyards and taste the new wine at different stages...before it was bottled, at the moment it was shipped to suppliers, at the moment it was uncorked at table. Had it changed on the trip from the vineyards to Paris? Had it altered during the storage period? Freddy who had taken his degree in pharmacology was already adept in the important practise of writing down all observations in the precious notebooks. The next year they rented a house in the Bordeaux region for three months and followed the same procedures.

Once certain basics had been acquired, they adjusted the program deciding that during the season Robert would make day trips, concentrating on vineyards that were within a three hour train trip

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from Paris. By leaving on an early morning train he could spend several hours either in Burgundy or Bordeaux and be back in the Tan Dinh's kitchen in time for the dinner service. It was a tough schedule made possible by the fraternal teamwork. For the unsuspecting clients the dining room always seemed the acme of serenity. The brothers claim that their system of alternance – a day on and a day off or switching from kitchen to dining room and vice versa – helps them keep their balance and allows time to pursue other interests, without which, of course, there would be no balance.

On his field trips, Robert hunted for wines he judged worthy but unsung. He was interested mainly in wines that were of small growths and outside the official classifications. He inspected vines, noted the effects of different types of casks and suggested changes, asked for cuvees to be made up exclusively for him according to his specifications. The vintners respected his acumen and complied. His goal was to create a connoisseur collection for the Tan Dinh. He became such an authority on Pomerol that around Bordeaux he was dubbed Monsieur Pomerol. He earned favorable comment from Robert Parker.

In Saigon, Grandpa had kept a special chef on his staff whose sole duty was to teach his four daughters to cook so that when they married they could give intelligent orders to their own cooks.

History had other ideas. It is well known in Paris among those who have to remake their lives that the fastest way back is through the kitchen. In the first years after the escape from Vietnam to France, the gently reared Mme. Vifian opened a small restaurant in the Latin Quarter. The boys sat in the kitchen to do their homework with an occasional help to their mother at the stove and osmosed a lot of her knowhow.

Whenever I come to the Tan Dinh I feel I am in the domain of a couple of cultivated gentlemen cooking for friends. The two waiters in their brown uniforms – Quyen and Giang – have been with the house for years, their unchanged presence adds to the sense that the Tan Dinh is a private privileged place. And should one of the gentlemen cooks be absent for a day, one would not be surprised to find him strolling through the Art Fair in Basel or the Biennale in Venice.

The iconoclastic Tan Dinh accepts no credit cards. Those unforeshadowed have a moment of panic. However, Leon – the brothers' natty 86-year-old father – will walk the guest to a cash distributor half a block away. People are surprised but hardly anybody seems to mind.

Naomi Barry