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THE LUCKY WINEMAKERS THAT ENTREPRENEUR **JOHN HUNT** HAS CHOSEN FOR HIS VENTURE ORIEL ALL PRODUCE QUALITY WINES WITH LOCAL CHARACTER AND IN LIMITED QUANTITIES BY JAY MCINERNEY



Hunt at home with an array of the wines he selects from vineyards all over the world for Oriel's wine portfolio. The painting in the background is by Ysabel von Bayern.

him at New York's Cru and heard from our mutual friend that Hunt had just launched an exciting new wine venture. Two years later, I'm happy to report that my skepticism was unjustified. Oriel wines, the company that Hunt founded in 2001 and launched in 2006, is an innovative enterprise that is really beginning to deliver on its considerable promise.

When Hunt, a serious art collector, is asked to come up with a metaphor for his business model, he likens himself to Larry Gagosian, the art dealer. "I like to think of myself as a talent scout for winemakers," he says, lounging on a sofa in his Upper East Side, Stanford White-designed town house in jeans and a bespoke tweed sport coat. His wine world role models include Ridge and

THE WEALTHY ENTREPRENEUR who seeks to glamorize and dissipate his new fortune in the wine business is by now a familiar figure on the cultural landscape, and journalists, unlike jurors, start out with the presumption of guilt. Hence I was somewhat inured to the formidable charms of Irishman John Hunt when I was introduced to

Guigal, two brands that produce wines from different regions at both the high end and the low end of the market. "I wanted to be a global version of what those guys were doing." Oriel's wine portfolio reflects Hunt's peregrinations. "Wine is a travel product," says Hunt. "Pull the cork and you're there." ▷

"After September 11th, I was trying to figure out what to do with some ill-gotten gains," Hunt says. He had recently sold a software company he founded after selling a chain of coffee shops, called the Seattle Coffee Company, he had started with two friends—a neat trick considering that the buyer was Starbucks, the model they had copied in the first place. Hunt seems to have that incredibly successful form of ADD that afflicts certain entrepreneurs. "As soon as I really understand something," he says, "it ceases to engage me." If he has a single abiding passion, besides Samantha, his wife of 8 years and companion of 20, it is wine.

As a child in Dublin, Hunt naturally first became interested in beer, which he started to brew when he was 14. He soon turned to wine because the ingredients were cheaper. "Hops were expensive, but I discovered I could make wine out of elder flowers and oak leaves, which were free." Later, while attending the London School of Economics, he took a summer job as part of the ground crew for a ballooning company in Burgundy. His great epiphany came one night when he first sipped a glass of Chambertin. He can't remember the vintage or the maker, but from that moment forward, wine became something of an obsession. "I started spending holidays visiting wine regions."

A little more than five years ago, Hunt bought a winery in Priorat, a remote region of Catalonia that has developed a worldwide cult following in recent years, but apparently this wasn't enough to satisfy him. He consulted with his friends Eric de Rothschild and Steven Spurrier, the English wine writer who organized the famous Judgment of Paris in 1976. And then he drove to the Santa Cruz Mountains to sit at the feet of the great Paul Draper, the presiding guru at Ridge. (See the May 2007 *Uncorked*.) What intrigued him about Ridge, Hunt says, is that in addition to its famous Monte Bello cabernet, it made high-quality wines from grapes from all over California, from Paso Robles to Sonoma. Suddenly it occurred to him that he could do something similar on a global scale. The difference would be that each wine under his brand, Oriel, would be the product of a different winemaker.

"Winemakers are an abused bunch," Hunt says, suggesting that they often labor in the shadows, hemmed

THE OENO FILE

- **2004 ORIEL BARONA RÍAS BAIXAS** If you're not familiar with the snappy pleasures of Albariño from Spain's Rías Baixas, this is a great place to start. A big round mouthful of grapefruit. This has a surprisingly creamy texture for a wine with such bracing acidity. \$20
- **2004 ORIEL PORTIA BIANCO DELLE VENEZIE** A blend of pinot grigio, chardonnay, and Tocai Friulano from Friuli, this white has lots of pear fruit and a nice underlying layer of stoniness. \$20
- **2004 ORIEL COURANT CÔTE DU RHÔNE** A spicy nose with hints of rosemary and thyme leads into a lush mouthful of blackberry fruit. Pure pleasure. \$15
- **2004 ORIEL HUGO RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY ZINFANDEL** Another great summer red, suggestive of crushed cherries and raspberries, framed in toasty oak. Crafted by Dan Goldfield. \$25
- **2002 ORIEL VQM MAIPO VALLEY CABERNET SAUVIGNON** Pure cassis on the nose—a sweet, juicy cabernet with plenty of black currant fruit and tobacco highlights. A medium-bodied, complex Chilean cab from Chile-born, globe-trotting Ana Salomé. \$17
- **2002 ORIEL FALERNE CAHORS** An inky black monster with a spicy, slightly minty nose that leads you into a viscous mouthful of brooding dark fruit. \$50

in by a house style or the dictates of marketing. Hunt's idea was to find winemakers he admired and give them carte blanche. A few were established stars, like Alain Reynaud of Château Quinault and John Duval, formerly of Penfolds. Others were unknown outside their region. "They would say, 'What do you want me to make?' And we said, 'You decide.'" Of course, this raises the question: What do these wines, bottled under the Oriel name, have in common? "Balance" is Hunt's answer. Tasting through much of the portfolio recently, I felt that most of the Oriel wines had a certain polish, like their godfather, but nevertheless seemed distinct and representative of their respective regions. All of Oriel's wines are small-batch, artisanal productions, ranging from a couple hundred to a couple thousand cases.

The excellent 2001 Barolo, Etereo (\$70), made by Paolo Caciorgna, tastes like, well, a Barolo. You wouldn't mistake it for a cab from Napa or a merlot from Tuscany. It has the nice ripe fruit of its vintage and just a hint of the signature Barolo tar. (Parker recently gave it 91 points.) Palatina (\$20), made in the Mosel by Bernward Keiper, is a crisp, bright, refreshing Riesling. I suspect that German wine experts would be able to identify its provenance in a blind tasting.

One of Hunt's favorites is Oriel's Cahors, Falerne, from an unloved region that, as he says, "went into a funk for seven hundred years after Eleanor of Aquitaine." Made by Xavier Copel, it might make a few new converts. In fact, tasting Oriel's portfolio, which currently includes 30 wines from nine countries, is an excellent way for fledgling oenophiles to explore unfamiliar wine types and regions. Even jaded grape nuts stand to make some very pleasant discoveries under the Oriel banner. This particular grape nut hopes that Hunt's restless brain remains focused on the wine business for many years to come. □