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Learning to “Drink Bravely” with Mark Oldman

Roger Beery

“I am going to make it (wine seminars) worth their while. I have a short attention span. I don’t want to be bored. I am going to do whatever I can to make them walk away and say, that over-delivered.” Mark Oldman

During the Austin Food and Wine Festival we had the chance to meet wine style guru Mark Oldman, two time winner of Georges Duboeuf Best Wine Book of the Year Award for:

Oldman’s Guide to Outsmarting Wine: 108 Ingenious Shortcuts to Navigate the World of Wine with Confidence and Style and *Oldman’s Brave New World of Wine: Pleasure, Value, and Adventure Beyond Wine’s Usual Suspects*.

Oldman has a distinct style described by Bon Appétit magazine as “winespeak without the geek” and by Publishers Weekly as “the ideal mix of wine connoisseur, showman, and everyday dude.”

I didn’t know what to expect from Oldman, of Drink Bravely fame. He was very fun, engaging and frankly a blast to chat with. While in Austin he professed his love for the Lone Star State repeatedly, interesting for a Jersey guy. He even pulled out his Longhorn money clip in testament.

One of the funniest moments however, was during his last seminar when he pulled out a 3X5 foot blowup of his outstanding arrest warrant from the 2012 AFW festival and his newly minted “Free Oldman” t-shirt. It seems Mark was caught by the tireless (obviously with too much time on their hands) Austin police for ...drumroll... Jaywalking, which in Austin is, believe it or not, a criminal offense. The crowd rolled out of their chairs laughing.

Mark says he tries to over-deliver in all aspects of life and in fact he did, both in person and his three amazing seminars. If you ever get a chance to participate in a Mark Oldman wine seminar, do not pass on the opportunity.

B&B – Define your phrase Drinking Bravely

That’s sort of my catch phrase for going outside your comfort zone. I’m guilty of sticking in my comfort zone; not only in wine but in all aspects of life and you really need to push yourself. It’s understandable,



especially in restaurants where wine is really marked up, that people don't want to take risks. So it's great when you can find a wine teacher or blogger that turns you on to functional alternatives.

Some wines are overvalued and others are undervalued. I don't like to spend a lot on wines so I tend to sniff out wines you need to drink bravely for...like the ones with hard to pronounce names and wines from unusual regions, like Portuguese reds. You have to know what stones to look under and trust your sommelier, if they seem trustworthy. Engage them in a conversation. Give three criteria, like I want a red, not too tannic and light bodied and have them suggest a few things. Then pick the one that's most appealing to you. That can start a love affair with a particular region that you otherwise might not have discovered...so that's Drinking Bravely.

B&B – Where did your fascination with wine begin?

Oldman – In college I started a wine club, the Stanford Wine Circle. Back then I thought we'd have to pay the winemakers to come in but to my surprise nearly every winemaker we invited was chomping at the bit to market to the younger generation. I knew very little about wine then but we had Robert Mondavi, himself, Bruce Cakebread and Jim Clendenen from Au Bon Climat. So there were these 21 year olds getting to drink \$80 mountain-grown Cabernet basically for free. It was like going 0-70 in one fell swoop. We really learned a lot that way.

B&B – Tell us about your path from running the Stanford Circle to Mark Oldman, famous wine guru?

Oldman – I don't know about guru, you're very kind. After college I went back to New York, I'm a Jersey guy. I like to think that both Jersey people and Texans tend to have big personalities but Texans are cool...and Jersey people aren't always so cool...we're from the wrong side of the tracks (letting out a hearty laugh).

So armed with my new knowledge I began approaching restaurants about teaching wine classes in their empty banquet rooms. The all said, "kid we could make a lot more money selling wine to people...good idea but No!" Then in '91 I found what was the first major wine bar in Soho before Soho became as popular as it is now, Soho Kitchen and Bar. It's closed now, but the owner was totally cool and the idea had traction from the first day.

B&B – Was your New York wine audience a tough crowd?

Oldman - Second only to teaching a crowd of Texans, a crowd of New Yorkers want good value for their money. So when you're teaching wine, you really have to know your stuff. You have to be crisp. There are people who will probe you, so you really have to study five times over.

B&B – What is the key to being a successful wine educator?

Oldman - It's about being that bridge between that 99% of the population who feel they know nothing about wine. It's a complicated subject, not a difficult subject. But it is complicated. So you have to think a lot about how to make it easily digestible for people.