

edible MARIN & WINE COUNTRY

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JANCIS ROBINSON ON AMERICAN WINES

BY KATHLEEN THOMPSON HILL

Jancis Robinson, one of the world's most respected wine writers, blames it all on "a boyfriend whose father gave him too much money."

With that money said boyfriend bought, among other trinkets, a bottle of Chambolle-Musigny 1959 Burgundy for the two of them to enjoy.

And enjoy it Robinson did. Studying mathematics and philosophy at Oxford University at the time, she says that particular wine sent her in a new life direction as she sipped and fanaticized about "its romance, complexity, sensuality, history and geography." She admits that, in that moment, the romance and sensuality parts were shared between her, the wine and the boyfriend, but her focus had shifted irretrievably to the wine and away from the boyfriend.

She did go on to earn her degree from Oxford, but her career choice upon graduation, the travel business, was a calculated call, offering her opportunities to explore the world and its wine regions. Robinson started her nearly 40-year writing career in earnest when, in 1975, she became assistant editor of *Wine & Spirit*, a British wine trade magazine.

I had the pleasure of meeting Robinson this past spring when she was in the area on a tour for her newest book, *American Wine: The Ultimate Companion to the Wines and Wineries of the United States* (University of California Press, 2013). The book covers wineries throughout California, Oregon, Washington and what Robinson and her co-author, Linda Murphy of Healdsburg, call "the other 47" states. Hundreds of Bay Area and California wineries take up more than half of the attractive and informative coffee table book.

Prior to turning her attention to American wines for the new book, Robinson made an international name for herself editing *The Oxford Companion to Wine* and co-authoring *The World Atlas of Wine* with Hugh Johnson. The latter will soon be published in its eighth edition—that is, after she gets back to London to finish it. She also serves as the wine writer for



the *Financial Times*. Good taste apparently runs in the family: Her husband, Nick Lander, is the *Financial Times*' food critic.

In 2003, Robinson was made an OBE (officer of the Order of the British Empire) in recognition of her work, and was the first person outside the wine profession to attain the coveted Master of Wine designation.

When asked how she has gained such prominence in the wine world, Robinson replied, "I work so bloomin' hard. I was born on a Saturday: 'Saturday's daughter works hard for a living.' If you consider having dinner with wine working, then yes, I work all the time."

Robinson says she decided to focus her attention on American wines when she realized how important they have become in the world of wine. Wine is now produced in every state in the Union.

Although this is Robinson's first book that focuses specifically on American wines, hers is not a new name in the United States.

More than 250 fans showed up at the book signing at Jean-Charles Boisset's newly renovated Raymond Vineyards, where I met up with she and co-author Murphy.

One of my first questions to Robinson was how she found and chose Murphy as a co-author. Easy.

Murphy started her writing career in the sports department of the *San Diego Union* newspaper and eventually became the paper's sports editor. After visiting Sonoma County on vacation, she had that not-uncommon "light bulb moment" that told her that Sonoma was bliss and where she belonged—right among the vineyards, wineries and the rest of us.

After relocating up the coast, Murphy wanted to learn more about wine and took a job working a harvest at the renowned Merry Edwards winery. There, she combined her writing and wine skills to become the winery's communications director, moving "from hack to flack," as she put it, which obviously she did well.