

THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL



MEET FRAN & JOE

KYSELA

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AND-SON IMPORTING
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ET FILS, LTD.

PHOTO: SONJA RIO

FRAN KYSELA AND HIS SON, JOE.



Meet Fran and Joe Kyselá

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE SUCCESSFUL FATHER-AND-SON IMPORTING TEAM OF **KYSELA PÈRE ET FILS, LTD.**

story by David Ransom / photos by Sonja Rio



Fran Kysela pours for an attendee at Mondovino 2022.

Producers from around the world poured at the Mondovino event. Pictured from left to right: Joe Kysela; Sam Clarke of Thorn Clarke, Barossa Valley, Australia; Carole Champion of Champagne Roland Champion; Jerome d'Hurlaborde of Mas Olivier, Languedoc, France; Pierre Malaval of Domaine de la Mordoree, Lirac, Rhône Valley, France; Thomas Hansen of Hansen-Lauer, Mosel, Germany; Martin Hugl of Weingut Hugl-Wimmer, Ketzelsdorf-Poysdorf, Austria; Hélène Jaume of Alain Jaume, Rhône Valley, France; and Fran Kysela.

Little did Fran Kysela know

when he experienced his first watered-down sip of red wine while out for a celebratory dinner with his father—at an age too young to publish—that it would lead to a life in wine and, eventually, to creating his own importing company.

Kysela, who grew up in Ohio, became a Master Sommelier through the Court of Master Sommeliers in 1989 and founded his eponymous wine import company, Kysela Père et Fils, LTD., in 1994. The 65-year-old credits his father's love of wine and joy in sharing it with others as one of his most cherished life lessons. That inspiration has been a guiding force in a four-decade career that now includes working with his 28-year-old son, Joe Kysela. As *The SOMM Journal's* editor-at-large, I recently spoke with the duo while attending Mondovino, the annual portfolio tasting they hold at their headquarters in Winchester, Virginia.



Give us a bit of background, Fran: Did you always want to work in the wine business?

Fran Kysela: I grew up the son of an oral surgeon who enjoyed collecting wine and had a significant cellar—16,000 bottles at its peak. He loved including me in his passion for wine, but I actually studied zoology in college thinking of a career in medicine. The wine bug bit me when I took a job selling for the local Gallo distributor [Goodman Beverage] to cover my expenses while in grad school. I found I really liked it and ended up working nights as the sommelier at a local restaurant at the same time—selling my wines to the restaurant in the process, of course [chuckles]. Zoology and grad school quickly fell by the wayside.

How did you come to be a Master Sommelier?

FK: While selling wine, first for Goodman Beverage and then for Bauer & Foss, Inc., now part of Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, I realized I had a good palate and I wanted to know more about the intricacies of wine. I entered the MS program in 1987—it was in Monterey that year—and flew out to do the workshops and testing. I passed the first two exams in 1987 and the final exam in 1989.

You worked for Kermit Lynch for a period of time. How did that come about?

FK: While in Monterey taking the MS

exams, I heard that Kermit had a job opening, so [I] drove up to meet him at his shop in Berkeley. The job interview consisted of having dinner with him and some colleagues at Chez Panisse, where I was grilled on my theoretical reaction to various sales scenarios while we tasted through and critiqued a handful of wines. Three days later he offered me the job and I spent five years with him, followed by an additional two years with Peter Weygandt, before deciding to open my own company in 1994.

Let's bring Joe into the conversation. Does Kysela have a geographic focus?

FK: If I have to name one, it's France, though we have a global portfolio. When I started the company, I gave it a French name, Kysela Père et Fils, in hopes that my son, Joe, would one day join the business, and as an ode to the French houses like Bouchard Père & Fils, a favorite of my father's. However, because I felt Burgundian winemaking was inconsistent back then—[it] has come a long way in the 30 years since—I chose to focus on the Rhône and the Loire.

Joe Kysela: The initial idea was to focus on the marquee regions of Côte-Rôtie, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and Sancerre, though we have since broadened that view to include other areas as the wine world has become more of a global entity. We're currently working in 15 countries, but even so, French wines still make up about 45% of the Kysela book.

Which wine that you decided to take on has surprised you the most?

FK: First and foremost, I would have to say Picpoul de Pinet. Nobody in the U.S. knew the wine when I took a chance bringing it on board; even so, I committed to 850 cases for the first shipment. There were some nervous moments when I thought I had made a mistake, but it sold

and continued to sell more and more with subsequent shipments.

JK: It is now the number-one SKU for Kysela Père et Fils; we import 85% of all Picpoul de Pinet sold in the U.S. Second would have to be [our] own label, The Rubus Project, which focuses on varietal wines from around the world that show



A drone shot of the Kysela Père et Fils headquarters in Winchester, VA.



typicity and sense of place. Over the years, it's gained a loyal following, particularly with aficionados who want good quality-to-value wines that prove their consistency from lot to lot.

Does Kysela have a house style?

JK: While some importers may focus on wines they like to drink or wines from a specific location, we're big believers that there is a place and an audience for all wines, and [we] have a broad selection of styles and price points in our lineup. We also take great pride in working mostly with family producers, as being able to put a face to a brand and tell, firsthand, the story of their wines goes a long way in creating sales and forming lasting relationships with our customers.

FK: Let me add this: I realized early on that at its core, wine is pleasure, and that to be successful, KPF would need to sell wines that delivered pleasure while encompassing these three qualities: great nose, great mid-palate, good length of finish. Cleanliness, good balance, and restrained use of oak also play a role, and I made it my mission to focus our portfolio on fruit-driven wines that present as varietally correct and stay true to type. Twenty-eight years in, we still adhere to the formula that if we can offer our customers pleasurable, high-quality wines for a good price, everybody wins.



Hélène Jaume of Alain Jaume pours wine from Châteauneuf-du-Pape at Mondovino 2022.

That philosophy seems to be working, as Kysela Père et Fils has grown from a tiny operation for which Fran and his warehouse manager, Devon Lewis (who still works for him to this day), made deliveries in an old apple truck to an operation with more than 50 employees on payroll, multiple warehouses, a fleet of trucks that covers almost every state east of the Mississippi, and a distributor network that stretches across the entire nation.

That's all thanks to trade members like Christian Borel, owner of L'Auberge Provençale, an inn and restaurant in White Post, Virginia. "We carry a number of Kysela wines, from HB Picpoul de Pinet to Champagne Roland Champion," says Borel, "and they all deliver. But it goes deeper than that: Kysela taking on a wine also means they give back to the source. Take Picpoul de Pinet, for instance. Fran literally helped change the fortunes of the town to the point where he now has a statue of his likeness on display in the town church."

Michael Good, the owner of Middletown, Virginia-based Timeless Wines—an online retailer that ships throughout the country to a loyal clientele—agrees. "Simply put, Kysela Père et Fils does their homework," he says, "and I know [that] every wine I sell from their book, be it Kysela's proprietary Rubus Shiraz or the acclaimed Alain Jaume Châteauneuf-du-Pape, is going to be not just good wine but good value."

So what does the future hold for the business, according to the Kyselas? "The wine industry is doing well, but I think it is currently at a crossroads with younger drinkers, who are focusing on alternate beverages like spirits, cocktails, and beer," Fran says. "At the same time, they are very curious and eager to learn," adds Joe. "We think that education is key to drawing in this demographic to the world of wine and . . . that we as an industry need to work more on teaching them about wine, how it pairs with food, and the story behind the bottle." SJ



Joe Kysela.

