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Harvesting Time in a Bottle

profile

Just outside the fortified walls in Beaune, France, on a bustling boulevard that rings the medieval city's center, stands an imposing white stone building with red block letters: Alex Gambal. A simple sign over the entrance reveals more: *Alex Gambal, Vins Fins de Bourgogne*.

Inside, **Alex Gambal '79** is indeed crafting fine wines from Burgundy, garnering praise from critics and connoisseurs far and wide. Not bad for an American who, in the heart of one of France's — and the world's — most prestigious wine-producing regions, corked his first bottle only a decade ago.

For Gambal, a trim, energetic man who was born and raised in the Washington, D.C., area, the French countryside is now home and represents *la bonne vie*, the good life. For Americans with wanderlust daydreams, it might sound like an idyllic life, behind which is a curious tale peppered with a sense of adventure, dedication, deeply honed skills and some luck.

Gambal, 51, studied in the College of Arts and Sciences at UNC and was a member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. He looks back fondly on his alma mater and time in Chapel Hill, though beer was his preferred beverage in those days.

"I loved Carolina and remember some of the great teachers I had," Gambal, a past leader of the Washington, D.C. Carolina Club, said on a rainy spring afternoon in his tasting room in Beaune. "That is the beauty of an arts and sciences school and its discipline. I was an OK student but was always a curious one. I loved to learn and still have many interests outside of my work, from classical music to history and literature."

After graduation, he returned to Washington to work for his family's business, Colonial Parking, a large real estate and parking-garage business that is a fixture in the nation's capital.

"I was very fortunate to have been given a great deal of responsibility managing people and other real estate projects and operational businesses at an early age," he says. "I always worked and enjoyed making money and being independent, starting with the proverbial paper route in the seventh grade, and working summers so I had my own money. I was always able to work at things that give me enjoyment, but not afraid to change direction when I'm no longer stimulated — that curiosity thing."

In 1992, Gambal and his wife, Nancy Golz Gambal '80, took a vacation to France, the first time either had been there. While in France and through a connection at a Washington wine shop that he frequented, Gambal met Becky Wasserman, a well-known American wine broker based in Burgundy. France made an immediate impression on Gambal just as he was growing bored professionally back home. Conceiving a sabbatical of sorts, he persuaded Wasserman to hire him as an adult intern so he could increase his knowledge of wine, for which he already had accelerating passion.

Believing the cross-cultural experience would be great for their family, Gambal and his wife

and their two children, then 10 and 8, packed up in 1993 and moved to Beaune, a picturesque city of 25,000 surrounded by famous wine villages in the *Côte d'Or*, which translates to Golden Hillside. The area is renowned for its pinot noir and chardonnay grapes. Beaune, about a three-hour drive southeast of Paris, is the wine capital of Burgundy, though nearby Dijon is the seat of regional government.

With the family well integrated into French life, Gambal enrolled in the elite school of winemaking and viticulture in Beaune. In 1997, Gam-

and centered in Burgundy."

Gambal's eponymous firm produces nearly 60,000 bottles a year — fairly small by industry standards — and he doesn't want to get any bigger. About 60 percent is white and 40 percent red, with exports going to upscale wine shops and specialty restaurants in 20 countries. About 45 percent of sales are in the U.S., 20 percent in France and the rest spread across Europe and Asia. Gambal's wines have a solid following in Britain and Japan. Average retail prices for Alex Gambal wines in the U.S. range from \$30 to \$150 a bottle.

Gambal's wines have been lauded by noted critics such as wine guru Robert Parker and featured in the industry bible, *Wine Spectator* magazine, and other international publications. He is particularly proud of his critical acclaim in France, where he was named one of the winemakers of the year in 2004 by the French equivalent of *Wine Spectator*.

Though down-to-earth and self-deprecating, Gambal is a celebrity in Beaune, known as the American guy who broke into France's wine establishment. Mention of his name in local restaurants and even at the hotel front desk brought smiles and praise.

"There were more skeptics in the States than here," Gambal says matter-of-factly. "To win

over the wine trade to sell my wine was much harder than getting the French and Burgundians to believe in me. This is the irony. I was schooled in the traditional ways of Burgundy and had no intention of being anything but the real deal here. Locals understood this."

On a tour of his huge, damp wine cellar, a couple of stories below street level, where scores of handmade French oak barrels (costing about \$850 apiece) are maturing, Gambal offers a primer on the complex Burgundian wine market and history. With the enthusiasm of a scientist describing his favorite experiment, he covers everything from the rocky soil to the weather, and explains the French concept of *terroir*, which expresses each wine's character and purity based on the precise location of the grapes, the soil and microclimate.

"It is the magic and miracle of nature," he says. "You start a growing season anew each year. This is the paradox. Nature controls the rhythm, and we adapt to it, not her to us. To work the soil, see the grapes develop, harvest, vinify, and finally — 18 months later — to bottle, it is magic. You are literally putting time in a bottle, the season and the moment of the harvest in a bottle. That is the magic."

— Andy Trincia '88



ANDY TRINCIA '88



Alex Gambal '79 says the process of winemaking, from the soil and vines to the bottle, is "the magic and miracle of nature." He takes pride in producing artisanal wines in relatively small volume to ensure high quality control.

bal founded Maison Alex Gambal as a full-fledged *négociant-éleveur*, the French term for wine merchant that carries special distinction in Burgundy, where there is a differentiation between a grape grower and a winemaker. Gambal is both, though he initially bought semi-finished wine that he aged and bottled, later buying grapes from local growers. Today he owns about six acres of vineyards, from which he produces about 30 percent of his own grapes. He prides himself on hand-crafted artisanal wines from small lots for high quality control.

Gambal's commitment to fine wine didn't go unnoticed in famously insular Burgundy, nor did the family's effort to blend in with the locals. "From an early point, I was part of the community, because when we came over here, we came as a family, and it was as a family that people came to know us," he said. "The kids were young then, and it was in the milieu of our children's lives that we operated. As a result, there was never a 'Grand Plan,' but life evolved