

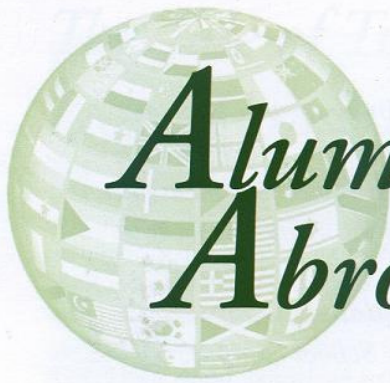
Joan G. Ogilvy Holden

*25 Years of  
Leadership*

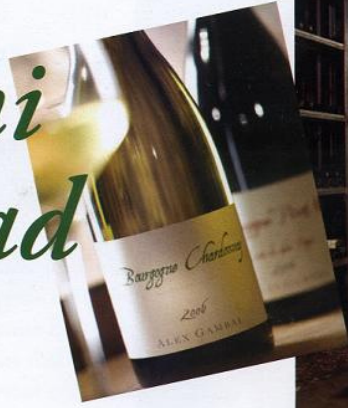
SJ. STEPHEN'S &  
ST. AGNES SCHOOL  
Spring 2009



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# Alumni Abroad



## Alex Gambal '75



### For the Love of Wine

Alex Gambal's story began like many others. After growing up in Alexandria,

he graduated from the University of North Carolina and then returned to the Washington area to work in the family business.

In 1993, he changed the story and it became one unlike any other. He simply threw convention out the door and moved to the celebrated wine region of Beaune, France. Though he had a few connections in the wine business that inspired his new adventure, the reality was that he had only visited the area once and he did not speak French.

By 1997, having been through winemaking and viticulture school, he was a *négociant-éleveur* with six acres of Burgundy soil to his name. Maison Alex Gambal now produces chardonnay and pinot noir in the traditional way. His objective is "to produce no more than 60,000 bottles a year in order to maintain a high level of quality, to preserve his mission, and remain humble and respectful of the land." His wines are hand crafted into four classes of increasing quality: basic, village, premier crus, and grand crus. They are sold in the United States and throughout Europe, as well as in Asia and Brazil.

Mr. Gambal's goal of making special wine that possesses the character of its place and its harvest has earned high marks from industry critics. He was named one of the "winemakers of the year" in 2004 by the *Revue du Vin de France*, which is a sort of combination of *Wine Spectator* and wine critic Robert Parker. On its own, *Wine Spectator* has highly rated and featured his wines more than two dozen times in just the last four years.

Mr. Gambal and his wife Nancy have two children, who have recently graduated from college. They maintain a house on Cape Cod and return to Washington occasionally for business and to visit brother Paul Gambal '77, who also attended St. Stephen's. His two sisters, Krista and Leah, are former St. Agnes students.

*Alex Gambal answers some questions about his life, wine, and how to be successful in a new place.*

**Q.** What is a *négociant-éleveur*?

**A.** A *négociant* is a winemaker by any other name in most countries. In California, Chile, Italy, Spain, and even in France they are grape growers and wine makers. In France, and especially in Burgundy, the difference is pronounced. They make a distinction between someone who raises his/her own grapes and someone who makes wine from their own grapes. The latter is a *propriétaire*, though he/she may also sell grapes or semi-finished wine to the likes of me.

A *négociant* can be a *propriétaire* but the minute he/she buys in grapes - just pressed juice, semi-finished wine, or finished wine in bottle - they become a *négociant*. For example, most Champagne is *négociant* wine; the champagne houses buy most of their grapes from grape growers.

I started by buying the "semi-finished" wine in barrel in 1997, but in 1998 I started buying grapes. Now I produce 25 to 30 percent of our own grapes.

Buying grapes is always fraught with risk because one has so little control of the vineyards and the quality that can and often does come out each year. Owning takes a lot of effort and work, but there is a wonderful comfort level knowing that we have control and that we cannot blame anyone else but ourselves if the quality is not there. This is what I love most about my work. It is the magic and miracle of nature. You start a growing

*Alex Gambal*





season anew each year. You can and must always start over. This is the paradox; one never is done, nature controls the rhythm, and we adapt to her, not her to us. Thus to work the soil, see the grapes develop, harvest, vinify, and finally, 18 months later put in bottle, is magic. You are literally putting time in a bottle - the season and the moment of the harvest in the bottle. That is the magic.

**Q.** You played four sports at St. Stephen's and wrote for the school newspaper *Scroll* for three years. What about your upbringing do you think led you to Beaune?

**A.** I was never a great student but was always a curious one. I loved to learn and had and still have many interests outside of my work: classical music, history of all types, literature, etc. I was encouraged to think and to express myself with the written word. Thus, I enjoy writing and sharing my life of wine with others.

I also always worked and enjoyed making money and being independent. I had the proverbial paper route in seventh grade, but always worked in the summers so I had my own money. After college I was very fortunate to have been given a great deal of responsibility managing people, real estate projects, and operational businesses at an early age. But when I was no longer stimulated and wanted to work at something new that I enjoyed, I was not afraid to change direction.

**Q.** Still, an American permeating the French wine business ... that is uncharted territory. How did you bridge the gap and do you have any advice for students who may be thinking eventually of living abroad or even breaking into the wine business?

**A.** First and foremost, my family and I became fully a part of the community, which is a must for anyone moving to a new place. We came over as a family and it was as a family that people got to know us. Our children Tyler and Alexa were ten and eight-years-old respectively, and it was in the milieu of their lives that we operated.

Second, it is critical to be open to new possibilities. I never had a "Grand Plan," but a life that evolved and centered around the world that is Burgundy. This is not something one can create; I did not intend to be where I am, but it evolved and I was always open to the possibilities.

Frankly, there were more skeptics of my "fitting in" in the United States than here. 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 else but the real deal

here. The locals understood this; they never saw me as a fake.

Finally, I think part of my success here is that I do not attach my personality to my work. Too many people are what they do. I love what I do but it does not define me.

**Q.** Have you gained a different perspective of the United States by living abroad?

**A.** Absolutely. Generally speaking, most Americans are not very curious about other cultures. This is partly due to socio-economic reasons. Europeans have to travel, but as a rule they also love to travel abroad; the difference being that they love the spirit of travel. My wife and I travel and we love Italy. Again, the esprit is terrific.

*In 2008 fellow SSS graduate of 1975 and friend Russell Pleasants visited Mr. Gambal at his vineyard. Below are Mr. Pleasants' thoughts on his time spent in Beaune:*

"I have to say it was quite an experience I will always remember. Alex has built a first-class operation and built quite a reputation within the Burgundy community, as well as the industry as a whole. The wine business requires a lot of relationship building and patience. I have to say Alex is a master of both. He is well known all over the region making his way around the different vineyards "politicking" in his old beat up VW that requires both hands to open any of the worn-out doors! Appearance management is part of his success formula and he knows how to do that too.

Personally, I spent most of my time working the harvest, which has a narrow window where all the grapes must be picked, transported, and processed back at Alex's winery. Alex runs a tight ship; up at 6:00 a.m. and lights out at 11:00 p.m. The business and subsequent brand development that Alex has built has taken a lot of planning and effort. It seems he has thought through all the key details and it is obvious he has invested his heart and soul into something he can call his own. He has four staff members that are as committed to excellence as he is, and his leadership and support have really rubbed off on all four of them. Doing a harvest in the Burgundy region of France is a unique experience - a memory I will always cherish. The weather was superb and everyone I came in contact with was very hospitable. It was a very special time all the way around."

