

A life of wine and orchids: French heritage nurtures â??Orchid Doctorâ??sâ?? love of food and foliage

Description

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Wine and orchids have long played a starring role in Paul Bourbinâ??s life.



Paul Bourbin still values the customs of his French grandparents. (Photo by Jan Robbins)

When he was just seven, his grandfather would serve him a heavily diluted glass of wine with meals, a custom carried on by the Frenchman who made wine in the old country and later in California.â?• Eventually, Bourbin, too, became a wine expert, managing tasting rooms and working in the industry for decades.

Wine was a â??very important food and something for the soul, and for my French and Catholic heritage,â?• he said. â??It wasnâ??t just a commodity.â?• Bourbin has always embraced his ancestry; heâ??s still able to read in French and manage a bit of conversation.

His grandparents also taught him how to grow food and cultivate a variety of flowering plants. â??My Epiphyllum (Orchid) Cactus, which just bloomed, originally came from cuttings from my Grandmother Aliceâ??s plants in 1957,â?• he said.After leaving the wine industry, he looked to horticulture for a new career and focused on orchids.

If the shoe fits

He got a job in the former White Oak Orchids greenhouses near City College and volunteered at the San Francisco Orchid Society. He was soon giving talks there, at area nurseries and at the Conservatory of Flowers, where he became a docent. The expertise he developed earned him the moniker â??The Orchid Doctor.â?•

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The â??Orchid Doctorâ?• at the San Francisco Orchid Societyâ??s Pacific Orchid Exposition. (Photo courtesy of Paul Bourbin)

When he retired at 65, the Conservatory asked if he would help care for orchids in its greenhouse. Bourbin grows and tends them and helps decide which ones should be displayed in the Conservatoryâ??s Victorian greenhouse in Golden Gate Park.



Paul Bourbin at the Conservatory of Flowers. (Photo courtesy of Paul Bourbin)

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At first after earning a bachelorâ??s degree in business from San Francisco State University in 1973, Bourbin focused on his childhood love of winemaking. He worked at wine shops, managed a tasting room in San Francisco and got a job doing data entry for â??The Wine Spectatorâ?• magazine.

Then came a break that led to a lasting collaboration with a noted wine columnist and television and radio personality. While working at The San Francisco International Wine Competition, he landed a job as an assistant to Anthony Dias Blue. Bourbin performed the chores needed to make a wine competition successful. He worked for Blue full-time for 12 years on various projects; the two still work together on the annual event.

In a recent interview, Bourbin, now 73, reflected on how the wine business has changed since his French-born grandfather, Joseph Claverie, first made wine in the back of the laundry he owned and in the basement of his home in Redwood City.

Third-grade fascination

Wine tastings when Bourbin was young were much simpler than todayâ??s elaborate and pricey affairs, he said. Tasting rooms put a plank across a couple of barrels, displayed a few cases of wine and broke out the cheese and crackers. They never charged for tastings. â??There wasnâ??t such an emphasis on selling like there is today,â?• he said. â??It was a friendly community â?? wineries helped each other out with production, and the people intermarried.â?•

When Blue moved his operation to Los Angeles, Bourbin, not wanting to uproot his family, turned to horticulture.



Paul Bourbin describing orchid care at an Orchid in the Park demonstration. (Photo courtesy of Paul Bourbin)

He had already built a greenhouse in the backyard of his home in Mission Terrace near Twin Peaks. â??I decided to grow orchids because they held a fascination for me since I saw them in the Conservatory of Flowers on a third-grade field trip,â?• Bourbin said.


The South African Disa orchid.

A friend who grew orchids gave him some plants to get him started. Maybe thereâ??s a business in this, Bourbin thought. But growing them at scale would have meant leaving the city. Instead, he took the job with White Oak Orchids.

Bourbin loves all varieties of orchids, the largest family of flowering plants. Orchids, he explained, grow nearly everywhere in the world, except for some deserts and polar areas. Most of the flashy ones come from the tropics, where they need to display a showy flower so their pollinators can find them in dense foliage. South African Disa orchids, he said, are â??one of my favorites and one that is most challenging to grow.â?•

A family affair

Bourbin and his wife, Edith, enjoy gardening together. They share space in their backyard greenhouse where she grows tomatoes and he tends carnivorous plants, cactus and Disa orchids. They volunteer together with the Sutro Stewards, clearing trails and restoring native plants on Mount Sutro, considered one of the cityâ??s most beautiful green spaces.



Paul Bourbin and his wife, Edith, enjoy gardening together. (Photo by Jan Robbins)

The Bourbins also spend time with their nearby, pre-teen grandsons. Like their grandfather before them, the two boys are allowed to drink a bit of wine on special occasions. Their father teaches them about wine and their grandparents teach them about horticulture, encouraging them to help with the work on Mount Sutro.

But itâ??s not just plants that Bourbin has tended to over the years. For the past 40, heâ??s been a volunteer at Laguna Honda Hospital, where he spends time with patients. â??I followed the precepts of my faith when Father Sterling at St. Brendanâ??s told me the patients at the hospital needed comfort and companionship,â?• he said.

From that first volunteer experience through his work educating others on wine and orchids, Boudin was able to also do something for himself â?? overcome his shyness. â??I always knew inside I was an extrovert,â?• he said, â??and all my life experiences have helped me get there.â?•

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jrobbins

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