

Steven Spurrier - Obituary by Michèle Shah



Tributes have been published widely from around the world for one of the greatest wine connoisseurs of our times, the ‘gentleman’ of the wine trade Steven Spurrier who died at his home in Dorset earlier this week at the aged 79.

Steven Spurrier was a luminary, he knew at the early age of 13, after having tasted a magnificent Cockburn’s 1908, that he wanted to work in the wine business and so he did, dedicating his enthusiasm to a lifetime of adventures where he was valued as an educator, taster and writer, but above all for his modesty, elegance and generous spirit.

Spurrier entered the wine trade in 1964 as a trainee with London’s oldest wine merchant Christopher and Co. In 1970 he moved to Paris where he purchased a small wine shop which he named *Les Caves de la Madeleine*, located in a passageway off the *rue Royale*. Being a man of vision, he made his mark of difference encouraging clients to taste wines before they bought them, achieving recognition as a highly regarded specialist wine shop.



In 1973 he established *L'Academie du Vin*, France's first independent wine school in Paris, but his real breakthrough and fame in the wine world came in 1976, when he organized the "Judgement of Paris", the first blind tasting between French and Californian wines in which Californian Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon wines came out top, above some of the most prestigious wines of Burgundy and Bordeaux. An outcome that possibly to this day, never truly went down well with the French, but it was certainly a ground-breaking moment in the world of wine and one for which Spurrier will always be remembered for.

In 1988 Steven Spurrier sold his wine shop in Paris and returned to the UK to become a wine consultant and journalist. He became director of The Christie's Wine Course, which he founded with then-director of the wine department, Michael Broadbent. He also took on the role as wine consultant to Singapore Airline and many of the trade will remember him as consulting editor for *Decanter* magazine and chairman of the *Decanter Wine Awards*, which is when I met Steven during my seven years as panel judge for Italy. I was always struck by his understated knowledge of

Italian wines, which was just part of his overall depth of knowledge of wine. During the competition one of Steven's role was to give his opinion on any wine that was disputed among a panel when unable to reach a unanimous agreement and score. Steven would be asked to step in and give his ultimate opinion over the wine, which he always did with absolute clarity.



Wines of Sicily Tasting 2013- London

During my years as a wine critic it was a pleasure to meet Steven at the various Italian wine events. In particular I remember the Sicilian wine tastings, which in my role as international development consultant to Sicily's IRVOS (Istituto Regionale Vini Oli di Sicilia) from 2010 to 2013 I and Fabio Piccoli organized *Wine of Sicily* together with Jane Hunt MW of Hunt & Coady. Three such events were held in London and Steven would always attend showing the utmost interest to Sicily's wines and its producers.

On his many trips to Italy and in particular to Tuscany's *Anteprima* (en primeur) tastings, Spurrier was awarded in 2019 the title of *Chianti Classico Ambassador* which aims to create a network of *Gallo Nero* Ambassadors in its leading markets. A nomination which at the time, its

president, Giovanni Manetti, was said to be “personally gratified and honored that a prestigious leader of the wine community such as Steven has so enthusiastically accepted our award,” and to which Spurrier remarked: “I have attended Chianti Classico previews for over 20 years, but I’ve been drinking Chianti Classico for over 50. I am often asked to express an opinion about my favorite wine, and I always answer that there are too many excellent wines to choose just one; but if there is a wine I would always want in my cellar, that wine is Chianti Classico, and thanks to its excellent quality, that’s truer today than ever”.

With regard to Chianti Classico, more than 10 years before Spurrier received the accolade as Ambassador, he went as far as predicting “Here’s a prediction for you – by the beginning of the next decade, Chianti Classico will be replacing Médoc in many a wine lover’s cellar. The simple reason is that Chianti Classico is still vineyard-driven, while Médoc has become market-driven. The result is wines with energy and individuality on one hand and semi-standardised concentration on the other”. (*Decanter*, October 2007)

As a man of vision and always looking for a new challenge, in 2008, Steven and his wife Bella planted 10ha of vines on her family’s sheep farm in Dorset, launching their own sparkling wine, Bride Valley Vineyard, he first vintage was 2011. He always remained resolutely optimistic about the future of English sparkling and Bride Valley Vineyard is today recognized as an established superior English sparkling wine.



Steven and his wife Bella at Bride Valley Vineyard(©Club Oenologique)

Spurrier's international acclaim led him to establish a number of Wine Academies in different countries including one in Rome, The Wine Society of India and the Académie du Vin in Japan.

People often think of wine critics as being one-dimensional but Spurrier had many interests not least that of art which led to his incredible art collection which he began as a teenager. His house in Dorset is testimony to the many sculptures and paintings he collected since this early age.



photograph Lucy Pope

Out of the many obituaries that I have read over these past days I would like to mention two quotes from colleagues in the wine trade who were closest to him.

Modest until the end, shortly before his death Steven Spurrier opened up to Jancis Robinson MW about his two greatest passions, aside from his wife Bella and their children, Christian and Kate: “I have loved wine – and art – all my life, and the wonderful people I have been lucky enough to meet and perhaps inspire.”

“He was, above all, a selfless promoter of wine and of people,” said Bartholomew Broadbent (son of Michael Broadbent). “He had no ego or illusions of grandeur. He was charming and modest. He loved life and lived it to the full.”

Steven Spurrier was an inspiration to us all in the wine world and will be truly missed, our thoughts and sympathies go out to his wife Bella and their children, Christian and Kate.

Michèle Shah

Awards

Steven Spurrier received several international awards for wine writing including Le Prix de Champagne Lanson and the Bunch Prize, both for articles published in *Decanter*. In 2001 he was awarded Le Grand Prix de l'Académie Internationale du Vin and The Maestro Award in honour of Californian legend André Tchelistcheff (2011). In 1988 he was made Le Personnalité de l'Année (Oenology) for his services to French wine. He has also received the Ritz Carlton Millennia Singapore Lifetime Achievement Award and the Prix Louis Marinier. He was a regular judge at international wine competitions and the president of the Japan Wine Challenge and the *Decanter* World Wine Awards. He was a president (2006-2015) and Chairman (1980) of the Circle of Wine Writers (CWW) in UK, and a member for over 40 years. In 2017 he was named “Man of the Year” by *Decanter* Magazine and honorary Chairman of the Wine and Spirit Education Trust. 2019 named Chianti Classico Ambassador. And there are probably more that I have not mentioned!

Links related to Steven Spurrier:

<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/steven-spurrier-wine-educator-and-enthusiast-dies?fbclid=IwAR2Lh3lYiaMKW2ifc9p7x63bTSwMOmXlwSHWukNAlm1RtTKc4lrnHORc1kc>

<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2021/03/great-man-of-wine-steven-spurrier-dies-at-home/>

<https://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/steven-spurrier-1941-2021>

<https://cluboenologique.com/story/steven-spurrier-there-are-three-important-things-in-life/>

Suggested reading:

Steven Steven Spurrier: A Life in Wine is available from Académie du Vin Library at £30. To order the book with a £5 discount, visit academieduvinlibrary.com and quote the code CLUB21 on checkout



Bartholomew Broadbent and Steven Spurrier