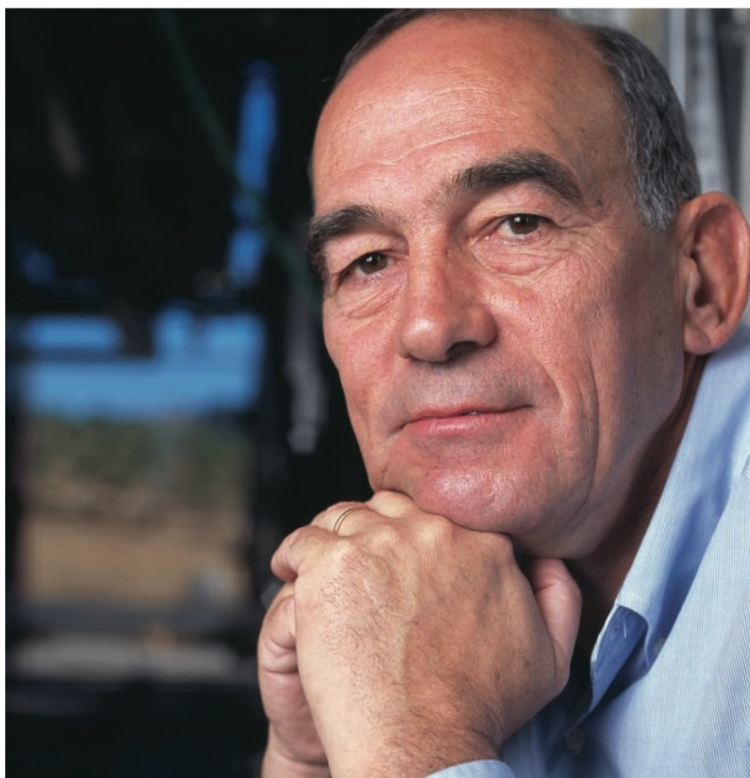


# The beautiful mind of Michel Salgues (1947–2017)

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As chief winemaker at Roederer Estate in Anderson Valley, and then as a much-respected sparkling-wine consultant, the Frenchman displayed a rare blend of intelligence and humility. Tom Stevenson remembers a dear friend



**A**t 4am on Sunday, October 1, 2017, a legendary figure in the sparkling-wine world passed away at Val d'Aurelle hospital in Montpellier. Michel Salgues established Roederer Estate in the Anderson Valley, where he produced the first truly world-class sparkling wine, comparable in quality not merely to Champagne but to an exceptionally fine Champagne. It was also at Roederer Estate that Michel became the first mentor to fellow Ardennais Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon. Michel was instrumental in maneuvering

young Jean-Baptiste to take over as *chef de cave* at Louis Roederer in Reims, where he has since established himself as one of Champagne's most gifted winemakers. After nearly 20 years as vice president and head winemaker at Roederer Estate, Michel retired and immediately became one of the most sought-after sparkling-wine consultants in the world.

I am privileged not only to have met Michel Salgues but also to have known him as a very dear friend for more than 30 years. I have come across

many bright people in my working life but none who has displayed such an inspiring combination of intelligence and humility. Michel's greatest asset was, without doubt, his ability to listen intently. When he asked a question, he would cock his head very slightly and turn on a kindly smile. He made the recipient of that smile aware that he would be clinging on to every word of his or her answer. He was one of life's natural givers.

## A brilliant career and rich legacy

Michel was born on April 30, 1947, at Vouziers, 30 miles (48km) northeast of Reims, but spent most of his early childhood at Machault, 50 miles (80km) southeast of Paris, where his parents continued to live until they passed away some ten years ago. He was the fourth of six boys (the others being René, Henri, Jean, Laurent, and Pierre), and his penchant for international travel in later life can be traced back to the wanderlust nature of his formative years. Having attended preschool and primary school up to the second grade in Machault, he was sent to live with his grandparents in Noyon (in the Oise

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département), where he spent two years at the College Paul Bert. Michel then moved to Reims, where he attended the Lycée de Reims for six years before moving to Paris to finish his general education at the Lycée Chaptal.

He graduated in agricultural engineering and oenology from SupAgro Montpellier in 1969 and one year later gained a master's in agricultural engineering from McGill University in Montreal, Canada. From 1972 until 1985, Michel was resident associate professor at the Department of Enology for Inra-SupAgro Montpellier. During a sabbatical year at UC Davis in 1983, he gained a master's in food sciences. His research on enzymatic oxidation of phenols at Montpellier led to his place on Dr Singleton's team at UC Davis, which resulted in the discovery of a hitherto unknown major path of white juice oxidation. In 1986 he gained a PhD in food sciences from SupAgro Montpellier.

Michel so enjoyed his sabbatical in California that he was easily persuaded by Jean-Claude Rouzaud to establish Roederer Estate in the Anderson Valley. "Given my inclination to play the Franco-French card," Jean-Claude told me, "I did not think for a single second that I should hire an American winemaker. I was out to make a statement, and Michel's credentials were perfect. To be absolutely honest, before coming to see me, he had an image of Roederer Estate that so resonated with my vision that he almost begged me to let him take the lead. So I did, and in the end Michel was probably more captivated by our Anderson Valley project than I was!"

Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, who spent one year at Roederer Estate with Michel, has "lots of memories, and they are all good. What a passionate teacher he was! I remember asking him some theoretical questions about the metabolism of yeast and sulfur, and he answered not only from the practical side but also drew at high speed formulae showing all the enzymatic transformations! Our friendship was strong. Even in his recent work as a consultant, he would often call me. In our last conversations, during his final phase of illness, we developed a new relationship that was deeper and probably more philosophical. It was probably Michel's way of saying,

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**Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon has "lots of memories, and they are all good. What a passionate teacher he was! In our last conversations, we developed a deeper relationship. It was probably Michel's way of saying, *Go on, do your best, and do it passionately. I remain with you*"**

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*Go on, do your best, and do it passionately: I remain with you."*

Michel published more than 25 scientific and technical papers and developed and patented a Champagne Pressure Gauge and automatic equipment for measuring grape rot.

His consultancies included the award-winning sparkling wines of Caraccioli Winery in the Santa Lucia Highland AVA of California (2006–17); Arcadia Vineyards Family Vineyards in Turkey (2006–17); Bodegas Pomar in Venezuela (2004–10); and Hundred Hills Vineyards at Pishill, near Henley-on-Thames, in the UK (2012–17), which is where I saw him last, walking through the vineyards together on a bright sunny day in June, and that is as good a last memory as anyone could possibly hope for.

#### **Modest, multifaceted, passionate**

Michel Salgues was more than the sum of his parts, and although he had a burning passion to make the most elegant sparkling wines possible, he was not completely obsessed by it or even by wine in general. His beautifully rational mind was multifaceted, and he possessed more hobbies than you could shake a stick at. His enthusiasm for astronomy was such that he had been building his own telescope for the past ten years. He was also a mushroom hunter extraordinaire and was very much into history, both ancient and modern, with European and Middle Eastern history his favorites. He spent a lot of time rummaging around used bookshops. He collected books and read a lot. He read in German, as well as in French and in English, and was

especially fond of Goethe but would read anything from Kurt Vonnegut to Noam Chomsky and everything beyond and between. He was particularly fond of 20th-century art and collected books on art, including any he could find about his father-in-law, who was an artist. He did not believe in any deity, but he read about religion—from the history of the Mormon Church, to the origins of Islam. And of course he devoured everything about science. He was affectionately known by Camilo, the husband of Michel's daughter Emmanuelle, as The Science Channel. Emmanuelle told me, "You could call him day or night with questions regarding anything from flocculation, to the chemical compounds found in baby oil, and he would know the answer. He was extremely knowledgeable, but he was very humble and always so keen to learn new things. When I was working on my PhD, he learned cuneiform numbers and read up on Babylonian mathematics in order to help me with the calculations and agricultural concepts found in my cuneiform texts!"

Sadly and rather suddenly, Michel was diagnosed with cancer in November 2016, and underwent six months of chemotherapy in Montpellier, after which his oncologist gave him the all-clear. But the disease returned within just two months, and he died before he was able to start another course of chemotherapy. Michel is survived by his wife Sylvie (who has returned to Montpellier), his son Mathieu (46, Alameda), and his daughters Anne (45, Paris) and Emmanuelle (40, Germany). Michel had three grandchildren: Diego and Téó by his son Mathieu, and Zélie by his youngest daughter Emmanuelle, who was so happy her father lived long enough to enjoy the first three and a half months of Zélie's life. Michel is also survived by all of his brothers except Pierre, who passed away several years ago.

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