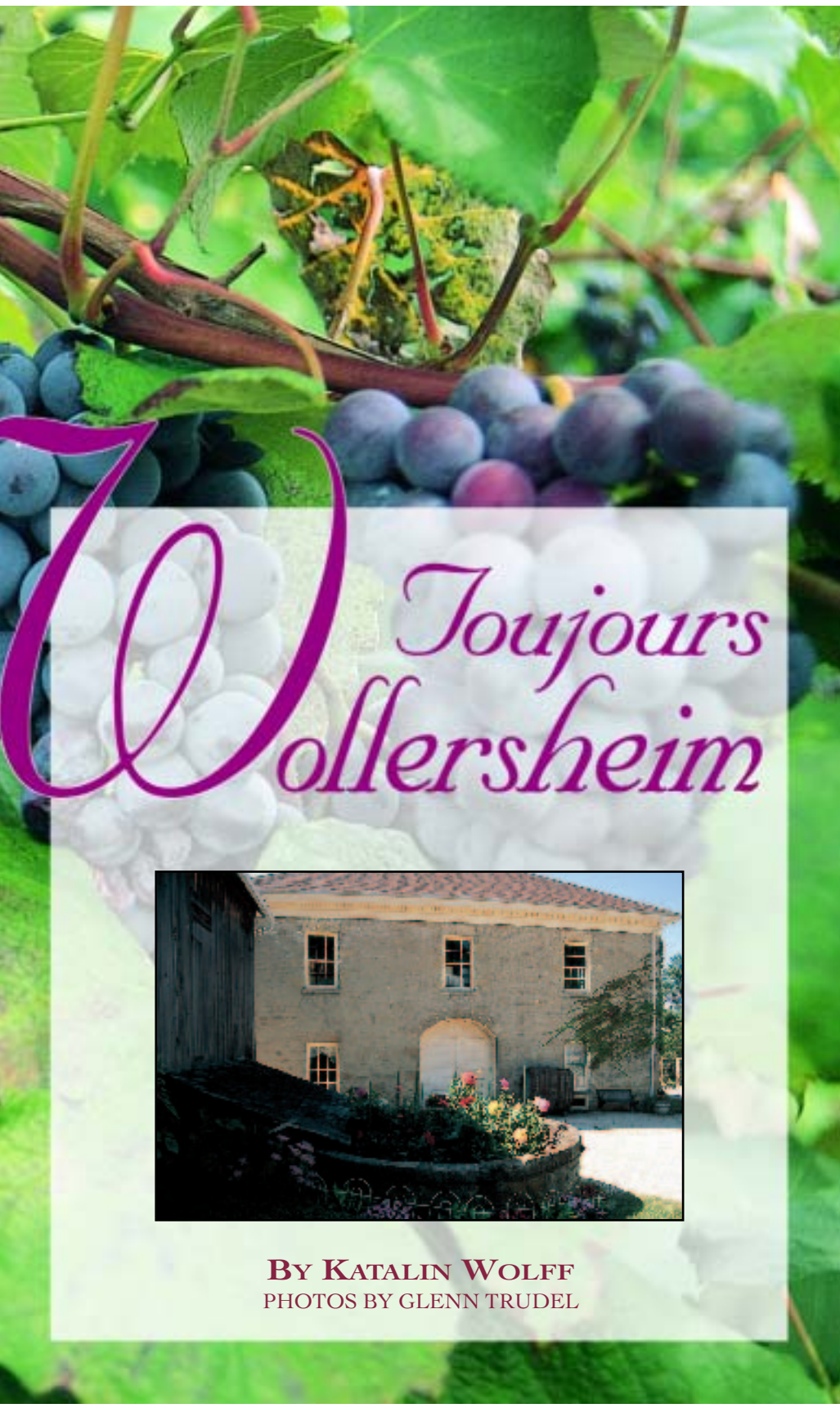




*“Goûtes au vin  
et à l’amour,  
tu ne vivras pas  
toujours!”*

Pulling through the gates of Wollersheim Winery on a late summer day, I am immediately struck by an odd sense of dislocation. A moment before, I was driving through a typical Wisconsin landscape, with gently rolling farmland, fine old barns, and herds of indolent Holsteins. But as I park my car near Prairie du Sac and gaze up a steep hillside to an old stone winery and to tiers of grapevines rising above, I feel as though I’m not in Wisconsin anymore.

**“Savor wine and love, you won’t live forever.” That’s the motto of the Wollersheim-Coquards, an American-French family that has restored an 1840s winery above the Wisconsin River. It wasn’t quite rocket science — but it took the creativity of a UW engineer in space science, a business school graduate, and a French-born winemaker to succeed.**



# *Toujours Wollersheim*



**BY KATALIN WOLFF**  
PHOTOS BY GLENN TRUDEL

THE CHIRPING OF CRICKETS fills the air. Colorful pots of flowers perch on the edges of steps and windowsills. Workers move among the grapevines, cutting the great bunches of purple grapes that hang heavy on the vines. A genial, thirty-something man wearing dusty trousers tucked into his rubber boots directs them.

Perhaps it's because I've only recently returned from a trip to France, but I could swear I'm back in Provence. The crickets, the flowers, the hillside vineyard, and even the way the man tucks his trousers into his boots — they all seem so familiar.

I want to sit with a glass of wine in one of the wrought-iron chairs on the terrace and take in the scene, just as I sat on another terrace overlooking the hills of the Lubéron only a few weeks ago.



With her vaguely European air, Julie Wollersheim Coquard '87 fits right into my French reverie. She's slim, and she wears her thick, dark hair in a long, dramatic sweep. I am not surprised when she calls to the man working in the vineyard in French, her voice rising to the higher register that French women use. Then she switches to English, her voice dropping a bit, and taking on an amiable, Midwestern accent.

She introduces herself as the winery's director of advertising and public relations. Her father is Robert Wollersheim '66, MS'67, the founder and president of the winery, and her husband is the French-born winemaker working in the vineyards, Philippe Coquard.

How, I ask her, did a French winemaker wind up in Wisconsin? I can tell by the way she smiles that I am not the first to ask.

"Wine is such a fascinating subject," Robert Wollersheim tells me as we watch the newly harvested grapes ride down a conveyor belt to the vat where they will be crushed. "You can never learn enough to satisfy you."

His powerful build and tanned face and arms make him look as if he were born to an outdoor life. But back in the 1960s,

*One day in 1972, Wollersheim heard of a long-defunct winery up for sale in nearby Prairie du Sac. When he saw the property, he knew he'd found the ideal place to plant his vineyard.*

he was a lab-bound professor of electrical engineering at the UW Space Science Center in Madison. He made wine in his basement as a hobby, and this pastime eventually expanded into a mail-order

business and a shop selling winemaking equipment on State Street.

One day in 1972, Wollersheim heard of a long-defunct winery up for sale in nearby Prairie du Sac. When he saw the property, he knew he'd found the ideal place to plant his vineyard.

Conventional wisdom at the time held that it was just too cold and wet to grow wine grapes in Wisconsin. But this property, situated on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River, was steep enough to provide good drainage and air flow, and it faced south, where it caught the full warmth of the midday sun. Surrounding hills sheltered the property from the brunt of winter winds, and the Wisconsin River helped to moderate the temperatures. In effect, it had a micro-climate that was milder and drier than the rest of the state.

But what made the property truly irresistible was its association with the flamboyant Hungarian "Count" Agoston Haraszthy, a central figure in the history of winemaking in America.

Haraszthy (who was of "dubious lineage," according to one source) had fled Hungary after ending up on the losing side of a revolution. Hoping to make his fortune, the Count (or "Colonel," as he sometimes fancied himself) decided that



**Electrical engineering professor Bob Wollersheim left the UW Space Science Center to transform his home winemaking hobby into a full-time occupation. His daughter Julie (holding grandson Nicolas) is the director of advertising and public relations, and she says the national trend to buy local farm produce and microbrewery beers helped launch their Wisconsin wines.**



**In the beginning, the Wollersheims relied upon family and friends to help out with the planting, harvesting, and bottling of the wines. But soon, with the help of a French intern (soon to be son-in-law), the Wollersheim wines began to gain the attention of influential restaurateurs. Overall, the winery has increased its production 20 to 25 percent each year for the last decade.**

what this country needed was some good, European-style wine. He acquired land overlooking the Wisconsin River in the 1840s and began to plant vineyards and build a winery. He also founded the nearby "Village of Haraszthy," whose name was later changed because people



found it too hard to remember. (It eventually became Sauk City.)

Had gold not been discovered in California a few years later, Haraszthy might have stayed in Wisconsin and become a household name. Instead, he left to follow the gold rush and made his mark on California.

Haraszthy traveled up and down the state of California (he is remembered as the first sheriff of San Diego, for example) before settling in Sonoma County and returning to winemaking. He is credited today with founding the California wine industry and is invariably referred to in promotional material as the "Father of California Viticulture" (perhaps his

**Wollersheim's Philippe Coquard was named "Winemaker of the Year," and his Prairie Fumé was named "Blockbuster Wine of the Year" at the Wineries Unlimited Conference in Hershey, Pennsylvania, in 1995. The Domaine Reserve has been listed as a "Pick of the Month" by *Bon Appétit* magazine. The Beverage Testing Institute in Chicago has rated both the Dry Riesling and the Prairie Blush as "Best Buys." The Prairie Blush has also been named the "highest rated pink of the year" and a "Best Buy" by *Wine Enthusiast* magazine, which has also called Wollersheim Winery the "premier blush producer in the U.S."**

only bona fide title). Haraszthy met his death with characteristic panache in Nicaragua, where, as legend has it, he slipped from a log while trying to cross a river and was devoured by crocodiles.

The count's successors in Wisconsin had considerably less luck growing grapes than he did in California. After a freeze in 1899 killed the grapevines, the property was converted to growing conventional crops, and the oak wine barrels were cut up for firewood.

By the time Robert Wollersheim and his wife, JoAnn, bought the property in 1972, it was nearly abandoned. All that was left of the old winery was the 140-year-old building, its cellars, and its limestone caves.

The Wollersheims had to start from scratch, planting the hillsides with winter-hardy, French-American hybrids, retrofitting the winery with state-of-the-art equipment imported from Europe, and furnishing the underground wine cellars with new oak barrels. The family, which included Julie, age seven, Steve, five, and Eva, four, moved into the stately mansion adjoining the winery, and Bob's parents, Ed and Clara Wollersheim, moved nearby to help out.

It took years to establish the vineyard and harvest the first crop. Much of that time was spent forming the young vines by training the trunks and shaping their fruiting zones. Wollersheim needed to rely upon his family and friends to help out with planting, harvesting, bottling, selling wines, and giving tours.

"There's a difference between home winemaking and commercial winemaking, but you don't find that out until you start making wine commercially," he tells me. Wollersheim kept his day job for a few years, commuting to the UW several mornings a week.

Even when the first vintage was finally bottled and offered for sale in a retail space on the old winery's first floor, there were problems to face. The new wines from Wisconsin were at first considered novelty items — something for tourists to take home and chuckle about with their friends. "People didn't take them seriously," Julie admits.



## The Fruits of the Vine

"One of our goals is to demystify wines so people are not afraid of doing the wrong thing," says Julie Coquard. "We'd like to help them become more comfortable in buying and ordering wine." Wollersheim Winery's Web site

([www.wollersheim.com](http://www.wollersheim.com)) offers a wealth of information on selecting and serving wines, including suggestions on pairing different types of wines with different foods. You can also order wines online.

The winery, located on Highway 188 near Prairie du Sac (check the Web site for a map), offers tours and wine tastings year-round. An outdoor wine garden is open in the summer. The winery's phone number is (800) 847-9463.

**A number of special events are held throughout the year, including:**

### **Grape Stomp Festival**

October 2 and 3, 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.

Grape stomping and spitting contests, cork tossing, fall foods from the grill, and wine tasting

### **Ruby Nouveau Tasting**

November 20, 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. The first taste of the new wine made from the year's harvest

### **A Vintage Christmas**

December 2, 5:00–8:30 p.m. A program highlighting wine and food for the holidays

Wollersheim's Ruby Nouveau will also be featured at a Nouveau Beaujolais party at the UW's French House, 633 North Frances Street, on November 19, from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. Call the Alliance Française at (608) 262-3941 to make a reservation.

Just for the fun and education of it, interested oenophiles can go to work in the vineyards in September for a few days. If you're contemplating such an experience, contact the Wollersheim Winery.

But then a funny thing began to happen. Gradually, the winery's greatest liability — its location — turned into an asset. It had become trendy to buy local farm produce and microbrewery beers, so why not wine? Locals were willing to give a Wisconsin label a try, and they liked what they tasted. Influential restaurateurs who had been promoting Wisconsin products began to feature Wollersheim wines on their menus. The business grew on word-of-mouth advertising.



Julie Wollersheim knew from a young age that she wanted to join her dad in the business, so she enrolled in the UW-Madison business school to earn a degree in marketing.

While she was cracking the books in her final year of college, a young winemaker in France was poring over an atlas, trying to locate a place called Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin, where he was about to be sent on a Future Farmers of America exchange program.

Philippe Coquard came from a family that had been making wine in the Beaujolais region for hundreds of years.

Like Julie, he had wanted to be a winemaker since he was a kid helping his

*Philippe Coquard's wines now attract notice far outside Wisconsin's borders . . . wines from Wollersheim and Cedar Creek have won dozens of medals, including five double golds, at national and international wine competitions.*

father and uncles in the vineyards, graduating with degrees in oenology and wine marketing from Macon-Davayé in 1983.

But he also had another cherished dream: to travel to America to see for himself, as he puts it, the land of "Harley-Davidsons, hot cars, and the West."

Coquard had hoped to intern at one of the prestigious wineries in northern California, so his posting to Wisconsin left him somewhat underwhelmed at first. But then he met the daughter of his sponsor.

For his part, Bob Wollersheim was immediately impressed with Coquard. Within months of Philippe's arrival at the winery, he asked him to stay on as the company's winemaker. Philippe, who by this time was enchanted by Julie, naturally agreed. The pair married the next year.

As in a fairy tale, everyone in this story (except the long-departed count, that is) is living happily ever after. Both Bob and JoAnn Wollersheim are still active in the winery, and JoAnn tends the winery gardens.

Steve Wollersheim, an architect in Milwaukee, still helps out occasionally and designed an addition in 1995. Eva is the cellar master at Cedar Creek Winery, another Wisconsin winery the company acquired in 1990.

The Coquard children — Celine, age eleven, Romain, eight, and Nicolas, two — are learning about winemaking the way generations of their ancestors did — by playing in the vineyards and watching their parents and grandparents at work. They understand wine the way other kids understand Nintendo.

“They already know the difference between a Beaujolais and a Riesling,” boasts Philippe, who admits that he would be pleased if some of the children eventually carry on the family’s wine-making tradition.



Watching Philippe at work in the fermentation room is an education. The newly harvested grapes are crushed into juice, which runs through clear tubing into a gigantic, steel tank at the back of the room. Everything looks very modern and very clean.

He stands by another tank of fermenting wine, pours a little from a spigot, takes a sip to test its progress, and judiciously swishes it about in his mouth for a moment. Then, looking satisfied, he takes aim at a grate in the floor several feet away, and spits. Bull’s-eye. Not a drop stains the immaculate floor.

We walk outside to the terrace and settle into the wrought-iron chairs I’d been eyeing earlier.

“European and American winemaking tend to differ in philosophy,” he tells me. “American winemaking is very high-tech and businesslike. Most American winemakers were not brought up in the business. Their style of wine tends to be market driven — that is, determined by what consumers like.

European winemakers are closer to their product. They drink it every day and take personal pride in it, so their wines tend to reflect their own individual tastes more. We’re trying to incorporate both approaches here by producing wines to suit a variety of tastes and income levels.”

Historically, Wollersheim Winery has sold more white wines than reds. Profits



**When the Wollersheims bought Count Haraszthy’s defunct winery in 1972, all that was left of the 1840s operation were the sandstone buildings, the cellars, and the limestone caves built into the hillsides. But the micro-climate of the Wisconsin River never changed, and has proven to be an ideal one for growing grapes.**

from its popular Prairie Fumé, a crisp, fruity white, paid for a large addition to the winery a couple of years ago. But sales of reds are now increasing three times faster than sales of whites. The *Domaine Reserve*, a full-bodied red, sells out each year. (The ’98 vintage, due out in November, was already half pre-sold by late last summer.) Overall, the winery has increased its annual production by 20 to 25 percent each year for the last ten years.

Philippe attributes the growing preference for red wine partly to the increasing sophistication of Americans’ tastes. Another factor has been reporting on the “French paradox” — the surprisingly low incidence of heart disease among the French, despite their fondness for butter, cheese, and cream. This has been explained by their consumption of red wine, which contains substances that lower blood cholesterol.

“We’ve carved out our own niche with a local style of wine that benefits from the unique flavor imparted by the soil here, as well as from a French touch,” Julie tells me. “Philippe works to bring out the best of each year’s vintage, rather than to standardize the wine too much. That’s where the art comes in.”

Philippe Coquard’s wines now

attract notice far outside Wisconsin’s borders. In recent years, wines from Wollersheim and Cedar Creek have won dozens of medals, including five double golds, at national and international competitions.

Yet for all his success, Philippe admits that it took him a while to adjust to the differences between American and European ways of doing business. “American thinking tends to be short term, bottom line. Perhaps that’s because the country has such a short history,” he says. “Here they put furniture that’s 150 years old in a museum. In France, we have 150-year-old furniture in our homes, and we use it. We tend to take a longer view.”

The “all work and no play” American ethic has also taken getting used to, says Philippe, who still prefers the “work hard, then play hard” French ethic. “Why be greedy? You won’t be able to keep it in the end,” he defends.

On the other hand, he doubts that he could do without American efficiency.

“The more time passes, the more American I become and the more French Julie becomes. That must be why we’re still so much in love.” #

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Katalin Wolff and her son began to research this story while practicing their French on vacation in Provence.