

Peter Blattmann: Canada's Can-Do Wine Impresario

By: Michael Botner

When Peter Blattmann held the first International Festival of Wine and Food at the Banff Springs Hotel in 1991, there were only 28 paying guests. "At that time," says Blattmann, "Canada-and Banff, in Alberta-didn't exist on anybody's radar screen." Achieving the pinnacle of success in the foodie firmament proved more strenuous than scaling any Canadian Rockies summit. But today the Banff event stars in the stratospheric universe of exclusive, extravagant international wine and food gatherings, thanks to Blattmann's celebrated perseverance and personal charisma (with assists from influential friends who shared his vision).



When I met him in 1999 at the ninth annual Festival, Blattmann's reputation as Canada's wine maestro had been cemented in North American wine circles. The line-up from California's top winemakers and chefs exceeded the spectacular Rocky Mountain setting. "For the event, we highlighted a mind-blowing selection of top wines and big name producers such as Jack Cakebread, Caroline Bailey of Gallo Sonoma and Tom Shelton of Joseph Phelps," says Rick Slomka, Canadian director of the California Wine Institute. "Every single attending producer gave it a ringing endorsement, a 10 out of 10, extraordinary for an event of such magnitude."



Blattmann's rapport with top producers is legendary. "Producers line up for my events because I always exceed their expectations," Blattmann asserts. "I attract the consumers and investors they want to reach, plus my events are always superbly run."

Blattmann's attention to detail and organizational skills are big factors. "I'll never forget the scene of 700-plus place settings in one room at the educational seminars," says Slomka. "His troops were drilled in the art of pouring precisely 14 servings from a single bottle using colored water." Experts even supervised the cleaning of wine glasses to ensure they were as odor-free and spotless as humanly possible. Indeed, the effusive Blattmann is part showman, part drill sergeant, all perfectionist. His commitment to "making big improvements to the show year after year" is uncompromising, including asking all participants for their honest evaluations of the weekend event. Blattmann sums up his approach succinctly: "Like the restless child who gets bored very easily, I am never satisfied... Transforming the next [new] idea that nobody else ever tried into reality is what drives me. My extraordinary focus and persistence, some would say stubbornness, set me apart."

That ferocious resolve became apparent at an early age. "A World War II orphan, I rebelled against my adoptive parents when I was 16," Blattmann says. "They ran a delicatessen and small winery in Germany's Black Forest where I acquired a taste for good food while supplying raw ingredients on bicycle to restaurants-and tasting the finished dishes-since the age of six." Despite his appetite and aptitude, they believed business studies were a sounder investment. "Not surprisingly," he said, "they were roaring angry when I decided to enter a culinary apprenticeship at a German Spa instead." To make matters worse, the chef with whom he negotiated was a deli customer.

"After completing my training with honors, I received an ultimatum to show up for military service," he says. "To avoid the draft, I fled to neighboring Switzerland where my journeyman's papers from a German spa were of no help. My volunteering to work for room and board persuaded the economically minded chef at one of Switzerland's best Italian restaurants to take me in. It took three years of slave work, preparing millions of risottos, and one historic incident to realize that I might have a chance to make a career in my adoptive country." The incident evolved around plating the main dish during a marathon gourmet dinner hosted by the U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland in honor of Elizabeth Taylor. "We got off work early when the ambassador was called away, upon being informed of the assassination of J.F.K.," Blattmann recalls. "As I watched the news with fellow chefs, I suddenly realized that I must have been a pretty good chef to be preparing food for such prominent people. It gave my culinary career a boost, which soon led to positions in some of the world's famous palace-hotels."



Traveling through the vineyards of Europe during that time rekindled his taste for good wine and prompted him to register for wine studies and other hospitality courses at a Swiss hotel school. "That experience, followed by a three-year stint as a chef in Paris and London, convinced me that there would be a market for an event combining the best food and wines from around the world," he said.



Winning a six-month scholarship to study marketing and finance at Cornell University in 1975 changed his life. "I ignored the finance course to research my favorite topic. Deciding within the first 24 hours that my future would be in the New World, I named my paper 'CEA Feasibility Study for an International Wine and Food Festival,' focusing on a venue in North America. The concept was born, even though it wasn't realized until 15 years after I immigrated to Canada in 1976."

That concept culminated in the 1999 California festival, described as a "scintillating achievement" by John DeLuca, former president of the California Wine Institute. Blattmann made another big splash in 2000, spotlighting Spain. Isabel Riaño, the Spanish Trade Commissioner in Toronto comments, "Despite its size (close to 750 guests), it was the best ever. Blattmann goes over the top with everything, but the splendid results could not be disputed." After this extravaganza, in a stunning unexpected move, Blattmann left his position as food and beverage director at Fairmont-Banff Springs Hotel to develop his own consulting business, specializing in exclusive, upscale tours of top wine regions for small groups of 12 to 14 people. "Its roots go years back," he says, "when clients of my festivals at Banff Springs asked me to help them plan their visits to European food and wine regions." His 2001 premiere, The Best of Bordeaux and Paris, included visits to specialty food shops in Paris-Fauchon and Hediard, as well as Dehillerin, famous for fancy kitchen equipment and utensils. "The money they happily spent, combined with their passion they displayed during the cooking lesson in Bordeaux and the École Ritz Escoffier-Paris, motivated me to plan similar tours."

"He's just like a mother hen," says Ene McGregor, a loyal client who took both the Bordeaux-Paris tour and 2002's Ultimate Italian Gourmet Tour. "He even checked that everyone's luggage was safely on board the train before departure," she chuckles. "So intense is his love of food and wine that his enthusiasm is contagious. When I attended the Banff Festival in 1999, I was so impressed that I signed up immediately, and even took my three grown children, all of whom have studied hotel administration,



along on different tours."

After a one-year hiatus, the festival returned to Banff Springs in 2002 as a smaller but grander event with 250 guests. No longer limited to one country or region, the lineup's breadth and depth were even more spectacular, including an extraordinary vertical of six Château Pétrus vintages, under the tutorship of Christian Moueix, director of the firm that administers Pétrus among his illustrious contingent of "right bank" estates. Also featured: The Macallan, including the rare 1946 vintage worth \$2,800; Riedel Crystal test; caviar tasting; Parmigiano-Reggiano & Emilia-Romagna honey tasting; Tignanello; Dom Pérignon; and Cloudy Bay. Another example of Blattmann's relentless pursuit of higher quality.

In 2003, James Sichel, son of the late Peter Sichel (who was instrumental in getting Bordeaux's support for what proved to be the pivotal 1993 festival), conducted a vertical tasting of eight vintages of Château Palmer and Château d'Angludet. The blockbuster contingent also included Penfolds Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Henri and Grange Shiraz; Joseph Phelps; M. Chapoutier; Symington Port; and Courvoisier Cognac. Only winemakers and/or owners represented the participants, while many rare bottles were available for sale via a respected retailer. This was Blattmann's farewell event at the Fairmont-Banff Springs. In May 2004, Blattmann will hold the new Wine Summit in nearby Lake Louise at the intimate Post Hotel, a Relais & Châteaux member, where he can pamper his well-heeled guests with even more individualized attention. Attendance will be restricted to 120 people, allowing producers to showcase "only the best vintages and exclusive library wines. Although I will not be directly involved, Fairmont-Banff Springs Hotel will continue to organize a world-class wine and food festival," says Blattmann. Indeed, the hotel's impressive setting and facilities-including the marvelous Rockies-themed Banffshire Club gourmet dining room-will be augmented by a hedonistic spa expansion.

"No one else in Canada could pull this off," admires Rens Breur, the Director of Food and Beverage at the nearby Fairmont-Château Lake Louise Hotel, who has attended several Blattmann events as both colleague and critic. Blattmann unequivocally agrees. "Nobody else does what I do. Nobody else is that crazy." Contributing Editor Michael Botner is a governor and co-founder of Canada's National Sommelier Guild; wine columnist for Diplomat, International Canada Magazine and The Ottawa Sun; and publisher/editor of the respected website, Accounting for Taste.

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