Natural Evolution

How Jenny Lefcourt quietly, radically changed the way we drink wine.

"Everything I do is a statement," says Jenny Lefcourt, the owner and co-founder of Jenny & François, one of the most successful natural wine importing companies of the last 20 years. The key word in that sentence is "do."

For over 20 years, Lefcourt has quietly grown her business from a two-person operation (Lefcourt bought out her founding partner and first husband, François Ecot, in 2013) to a thriving company with offices in New York, New Jersey, and California, distribution in almost every state, and a producer roster covering France, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, and beyond. But she's written her story through actions—the wines she imports and sells—rather than chasing trends and headlines. "I'm a news junkie," Lefcourt says. "I'm interested in politics. I'm in business because I sell organic wine, so the viticulture is a political statement. That's why I do what I do."

Lefcourt grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. When her graduate studies brought her to Paris in the late 1990s, she fell in love with the culture of hour-long bistro lunches, farmers markets, and what would become known as "natural wine." After finishing her PhD in French Literature and Film at Harvard University, Lefcourt decided against pursuing a career in academia ("the best job was probably in Minnesota at the time") but couldn't ignore the lure of these wines, which were impossible to find in New York.

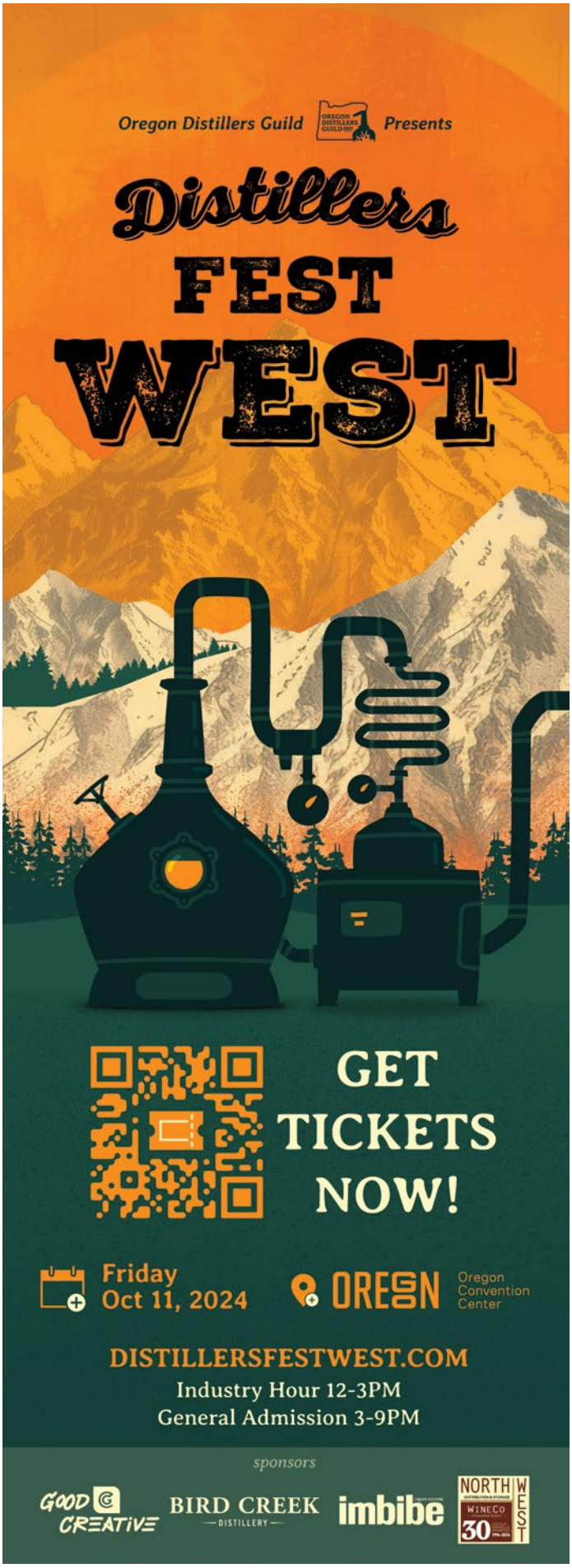
"Eventually I started asking [the producers], 'Do you sell your wine in the U.S.?' And none of them did," she says. "I was so naive and didn't really know anything about the players at the time. Neal Rosenthal, and Joe Dressner, and Kermit Lynch would've been who I would've modeled myself after, had I known that they existed."

As a trial, Lefcourt took two bottles she brought home in a suitcase to Joshua Wesson. One of the top sommeliers in the U.S., Wesson had opened Best Cellars, an innovative wine store in Manhattan where wine was sold by flavor profile rather than region. He told her the wines were great, and that he would buy them if they were the right price. And then he asked the magic question: " 'Are you going to import them?' And I thought, 'Well, maybe I should,' " she recalls.

For the first eight years after moving back to the States, Lefcourt and Ecot bounced between Paris and Brooklyn, then ran the company from a Greenwich Village studio apartment before settling in a shared office on Spring Street with a wine fridge. A family friend who imported wines for auctions handled compliance for the first year. She drove her father's car to tote wines around before realizing the subway was more convenient. "I hit the pavement and ran around town and sold wine, brought in as much as I could afford, sold as much as I could, made my catalog, wrote all of it," she says.

Story by JENNIFER FIEDLER
Photo by ERIC MEDSKER





Jenny Lefcourt continued

Part of the hard sell was being an unknown upstart in a sea of more established importers, but the other issue was the types of wines she was importing. They were often made with organically grown grapes, indigenous yeasts, and low-intervention methods on the winemaking side—what we now understand as natural wines, but no one had started to call them that yet. "I was too far ahead for a long time," she says. Modern heavyweights Hervé Souhaut and Olivier Cousin were among her first clients, and her list was Loire-heavy in an era well before it became fashionable.

"The whole wine world—there's really been a revolution. When I started, there weren't a million retailers. No one was even interested in the Loire Valley," Lefcourt says, reminiscing about selling wine in New York in the early 2000s. "Nobody really cared about how wine was made—that was too technical. And then these regions were obscure. It was really an uphill battle."

She recalls early successes that seemed especially meaningful: A sommelier at Veritas, then one of the city's great wine restaurants, devoted a page of the wine list to her selections; Astor Wines held tastings; David Lille, then working at Garnet Wines and an avowed Loire fanatic, became an early champion.

"Her impact has been enormous," says Lee Campbell, whose path in the wine world crossed with Lefcourt many times in their two decades of work, from Chambers St. Wines to Louis Dressner to Andrew Tarlow's group of restaurants. "[Natural wine] has often been a space where there are a lot of big personalities creating their own personal brands as well as their companies. I feel like Jenny has always let the wine speak for itself.

"She has always been at the beginning of whatever trend was about to happen," continues Campbell. "She's determined what natural wines we are drinking and which regions get focused on, and she's been doing that consistently and quietly for years."

There were failures, too: wines sent back from a restaurant after the back label—printed at home by the producer—was deemed too ugly; and the time when, after she arranged a small tasting in Manhattan of natural wines from French producers, a group of eight defected to another, more established importer. At the time, it stung, because she had become close with many of the winemakers—sleeping on their floors, meeting their families. Now, with reflection, she can be objective about it. "It's business," she says. "It's like a record producer who discovers a great band, but then they get an offer from a real record company."

Throughout the process, Lefcourt employed a careful hand with her roster—being selective about not only who she took on, quality-wise, but also in how she presented them. Take her relationship with Cristophe Aguilar's Domaine de la Patience. This 100-hectare outfit in the South of France was one of the first wineries she signed, bringing in the first, small amount of Merlot that they farmed organically. After watching the success of her other labels, Aguilar converted the entire vineyard to organic in 2007, a point of pride for Lefcourt, who views promoting sustainable agriculture as a cornerstone of business philosophy.

"That was also a wine where, years later, I said to them, 'What do you think of changing the label?' That was a big, big changing point for me in my career, daring to ask that question," she says. Her photographer husband, James Robinson, took charge of finding an artist and redesigning the labels for La Patience plus a number of their other bottles. The next year, their sales were up 900 percent. "The label redesign just blew it out of the park," she says, a lesson about trusting her instincts that she continues to apply.

Lefcourt notes a turning point, career-wise, around 2010, when more small wine shops began to open up, the natural wine movement gathered steam, and more women—including sommelier Campbell and writer Alice Feiring—rose to prominence in the industry. "I definitely had very little confidence when I would go to sellers," she says, recounting experiences when she was the only woman in the room. Did having more women on the scene make it easier? "For sure," she says.

As the natural wine world grew up around her, sprouting branches of different philosophies and personalities (Think: zero-zero marketing jargon, and off-color wordplay on labels), Lefcourt stands out in the way she has remained true to herself and the original spirit of the company. "I've always had a palate and the vision, and know what I like," says Lefcourt. She learned to largely sidestep many of the biggest controversies that plagued the natural wine scene. "I'm not interested in extremely faulty wines," she says. For her palate, she says, the wine must always be pleasurable—and that's reflected in the wines on her roster. "I'm not going to tell these producers they can't ever filter or they can't ever use any sulfites. If they need to in their process, because the wine's going to go bad or there was a little rot that year—that's their cooking."

And she doesn't chase trends—whether they be grapes or regions. "We're picking up our first Georgian wines, because a few I liked best became available recently," she says. The country's wines have been winning headlines in the U.S. natural wine press since the early 2010s, but Lefcourt—who was solidly ahead of the curve on the demand for natural wines from other Central European countries—chose to bide her time with Georgia. "Those had always been my favorites, and I just never found any that I wanted to import. Now we're going to have the best of the best."

Recent years have brought a fresh wave of challenges and opportunities. In 2020, then-President Trump enacted a 25 percent tariff on French, German, and Spanish wines as part of a trade war with the EU, which sent her scrambling to find wines outside of those countries—and to negotiate with the effected producers. And then the pandemic set in. "Some wines, if they weren't doing super well already, and then they wouldn't negotiate, we had to drop.

"The tariffs kind of opened the door for me to realize I don't have to *not* sell a wine," she says. The experience changed the way she operates now. "I can talk to the producers and say, 'I know what you do is worth what you were selling it for, but the market is saying this is where it has to be. Either we continue together, or I'll continue buying this much wine. I can probably buy much, much more wine at a different price. I can buy much more wine if it's a different label.' And that really helped transform the size of our company."

Lefcourt is betting on herself once again when it comes to future plans. Despite a challenging set of headwinds—inflation, demographic shifts in drinking, tariffs, shrinking wine lists in restaurants—she has made two big investments: a new, larger New York office with room for more employees and space for customers to come for tastings, as well as an expansion to California and hiring a sales team there, rather than going through a distributor. "It's always these kinds of risks that have brought me success," she says. "That's what it is to run a business. You have to think big picture and about what to do to grow in a difficult time." ◨

