I came to wine by accident, by way of my writing and not my palate, with as much an ear for stories as any innate talent with the stuff. But the more attention I paid to it, the more I was attracted not just to the stories but to the flavors and the soft intoxication of this beverage, its allure, its elusive qualities, and the rich metaphorical terrain it could inspire.

My wine education begins on Martha’s Vineyard in 1993, at a restaurant in one of the five towns that prohibits the sale of alcohol. There well-heeled denizens of nearby West Chop, including Mike Wallace, Arthur Liman, Art Buchwald, and William and Rose Styron, could uncork their vast stocks of older Bordeaux and Burgundy for a tiny corkage fee, and there they offered me tastes of their Lafons, Latours, and LaFlaives—a gesture repeated just enough times to discombobulate me. Something about this stuff was clearly and uncommonly rare, complex, and disorienting.

The following year I moved to San Francisco, where I took a job at a new restaurant called Forty-Two Degrees, owned by chef Jim Moffat. The name referred to the Mediterranean latitude, with the kitchen taking its inspiration from Marseille and Bandol, Siena and Pisa, Rome, the Greek Islands, Barcelona, the Costa Brava, and Portugal. It quickly became one of San Francisco’s most popular restaurants.

The dining scene was already becoming a central part of the city’s cultural zeitgeist, a sport and a pastime, a stand-in for theater, for nightlife, for sex—and wine often provided the lubrication, especially with the state’s burgeoning wine regions just an hour away. Almost from the start our wine focus was southern France, especially Provence, Languedoc,
and the southern Rhône, as well as a small well-chosen group of Californians emulating the flavors from those places.

It turns out I had a modest palate. I could distinguish the flavors in a wine and take an honest stab at describing its texture and its lift, and I could unfailingly wax poetic about its deliciousness. I had enthusiasm mostly, but as a writer I had an additional gift that my fellow servers didn’t: a vocabulary, a facility with metaphor, and more than anything, an ability to describe how the wines made me feel.

Pretty soon wine became a new and thrilling metaphorical terrain, a chance for me to rehearse the story lines and contours of this newfound passion. Before long, every time a bottle was opened at the lineup preceding service, the staff would look to me for the words for what they were tasting. Eventually, I was hired to direct the wine program.

Forty-Two Degrees received glowing reviews from local critics and quickly vaulted to the national stage. In 1996, Chef Moffat was named one of the country’s Top Ten New American Chefs by *Food & Wine* Magazine, and suddenly the world was descending upon us. Not least, in the wine trade ours became an A-list account, which meant I could get nearly anything I wanted from wine sellers.

Mostly this meant adhering to the latitudinal constraint implied by the restaurant’s name. The forty-second parallel put us in line with Roussillon, Rioja, Priorat, Barolo, Montalcino, and the Piedmont, but the heart of the list remained the Rhône Valley and its American adherents: Bonny Doon, Sean Thackrey, Alban, Qupé, Edmunds St. John, Jade Mountain, Tablas Creek, Beckmen, and Sine Qua Non. We poured John Alban’s Central Coast Viognier by the glass across nine vintages without a break, longer at the time than any other restaurant in the country.

In 1997, we reached out to this pool of winemaking talent to help with a tasting series I curated. John Alban, Randall Grahm, Sean Thackrey, Steve Edmunds, and Bob and Louisa Sawyer Lindquist all poured their wines in the restaurant’s quiet, secluded patio, paired with tapas from the kitchen.

One such evening I’m sitting on the patio. It’s moments before I’m to introduce Sean Thackrey, an American Rhône-affiliate who lives in a small Marin beach community called Bolinas, where he makes wine in a gimcrack winery near the vast lagoon. I’m pre-tasting Thackrey’s wines, Pleiades, Taurus, Andromeda, and the red wine he calls Orion, the wine that made his reputation. Orion is where I lose my bearings entirely.

Orion is ostensibly Syrah, made from an old vineyard in Yountville. The wine smells of licorice and smoke and eucalyptus and bay laurel, pepper and earth. There’s fruit I’m sure, but I don’t remember the sort. Instead I remember a vinousness that borders on the otherworldly, as if you could identify the veins of earth that the vines’ roots had deciphered and delivered to the cluster, pots of herbs, dried flowers, strange tinctures, fragrances so exotic I start thinking of it more as a potion than a wine. Tasked with introducing the winemaker, my mind is crammed with so many muddled associations and thoughts that I find I have absolutely nothing to say.
Thackrey tells the story of finding the vineyard and working with its remarkable grower, Arthur Schmidt. Schmidt received Syrah budwood some time in the sixties (it’s not clear when) from Napa’s winemaker monk Brother Timothy, who made the wines at Christian Brothers during their heyday. Brother Timothy had planted Syrah on a bad patch of ground near the Napa River, where it grew poorly; with the fruit from this same vineyard Joseph Phelps made the country’s first modern Syrah in 1974.

Timothy never liked the variety, so it’s a mystery as to why he’d sell cuttings. Schmidt grafted them onto old, established roots, interplanted among other vines; each Syrah vine was tied off with a red ribbon so that Schmidt and Thackrey could identify which plant to pick. Something about this expressive variety, given the chance to tap deeply into Napa’s alluvial secrets, gives the fruit an enigmatic depth of flavor, which Thackrey merely channels for five memorable vintages, getting out of its way as best he can. Schmidt eventually sold the property to the Swanson family, creators of the American TV Dinner, who tore up the vines to plant Merlot. Says Thackrey, without vines to tend Schmidt was dead within months.

When we taste it, there is this awkward silence that seems to go on for several minutes, as everyone tries to make sense of what they’re tasting, but like many a great wine, this one simply keeps eluding us, slipping through the safety net of what we’ve come to expect from American wine. It’s my job to break the silence, and so partly to give us something to hold onto, I stand up and look at the group of tasters before me, turn back to stare in my glass and say, “Not only is this a great wine, this is a weird wine.”

I suspect many of you reading this have had similar epiphanies, but there’s something about your first sip of great Syrah that stands out, when you first encounter its wild, febrile magnetism, the heady disorientation in its inky, murky, smoky depths—it is a moment, in other words, when you realize that your love of wine need not be a chocolate-and-vanilla experience. For this very reason, the American Rhône wine movement is more than just a movement; it’s the moment when many of us realized that American wine did not have to be defined by Chardonnay, Cabernet, and Merlot, that it could have breadth, dimensionality, an expanse of styles, and that it could be as quirky and singular and subversive as Orion.

For those who love American wine, American Rhônes are the first avenue out of the ordinary and into the realm of the odd and the extracurricular. This is the cultural landscape producers of the American Rhône occupied for a critical period of American wine history, roughly 1988 to 2005, when greatness and weirdness were routinely conjoined, where wine’s capacity for seriousness and snobbery was once and for all disrupted.

For myself, this curious commingling of great and weird in Thackrey’s Orion seemed like a lens through which I could see my future as a writer on this subject, that wine’s capacity to inspire and confound would be a topic in its own right, that like any other art form, it could take you out of yourself into another altogether unfamiliar realm. When I became a wine writer, I felt duty-bound to bring people closer to these experiences. A half-dozen years later, when I was approached to write this book, I was reminded that the American Rhône had taken me there.
The market for these wines is massive now, and multifarious, and while some are
great, most are no longer weird. Like many commercial products, their production vol-
ume has resulted in a “great middle” of wines that please but don’t challenge. Still, the
wines of the American Rhône overdeliver pleasure in a way that few categories can
match. They remain prized for their charm, their hedonism, their wildness: this is their
story.