

PASCALINE LEPELTIER

philosophy of wine

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In Albert Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, truth springs from suffering, as the Greek king must push a large stone up a steep hill only to watch it descend again and again. In this tragic circumstance, Camus found his answer to the eternal question of why. The French philosopher surmised, "The struggle itself . . . is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

On the journey that brought her to the top of the wine world, Pascaline Lepeltier had watched her boulder roll down that slope more than once. Through crushing disappointment and emotional turmoil, she refused to surrender or settle and managed to overcome the challenges to push her boulder over the top of the hill. Despite achieving the rarified status of Master Sommelier, becoming the first woman to win the *Meilleur Ouvriers de France* (Best Craftsmen of France) in the sommelier category, and being named Best Sommelier in France in 2018, Lepeltier is not content to rest. There is more for her to accomplish. From her vantage at Racines NY, she is fomenting a revolution.

Growing up in France's Loire Valley, Lepeltier was focused on becoming a professional tennis player. At seventeen, after years of intense practice and competition, she profoundly injured her right shoulder. Unable to return to the game, she refocused her drive and dove into the study of philosophy with the hopes of earning a master's degree and becoming a professor. Over time, a debilitating depression consumed her, making even a trip to the store an overwhelming odyssey. With the support of family, she began to heal and was eventually able to climb up and out of that dark place.

After deciding to build a career in hospitality, she began working with a premier caterer in France and was privileged to taste a 1937 Château d'Yquem. In that moment, the wine whispered, with an intimate yet profound weight, the answer to the critical question that echoed deep within her soul. Through wine, Lepeltier found her voice. In wine, she discovered her why. She signed up for sommelier classes and started up the next mountain.

"I really believe that wine is such a heavily charged product—socially, economically, spiritually, religiously. With the wine, you can absolutely [ask] a lot of questions and [find] solutions on a lot of topics that are far away from the wine [itself]—politics, economics, sociology, ethics. You can pick everything, but you can see that the wine is linked to it."

With the intensity of an athlete and tenacity of an academic, Lepeltier is internationally known as a gifted sommelier and a zealous advocate for natural, organic, and biodynamic wines. In 2017, after nearly a decade of building and buying at Rouge Tomate in Chelsea, *The World of Fine Wine* magazine awarded her efforts with "Best Long Wine List in the World" and "Wine List of the Year."

As managing partner and sommelier at Racines NY, Lepeltier is still learning and teaching. Still asking the important questions. After decades of immersing herself in terroir and taste, she looks for wines with the ability to make her feel while partnering with growers who think about the quality of their wine along with the health of our planet.

"That is the challenge. We are killing our soil right now. We are killing our soil; we are killing our land. We are not able to grow things that are going to feed us properly. And it's the same thing with wine. So even beyond being organic and biodynamic, how can we move forward from being monoculture to polyculture, and how can we do that without too much effort? We can do that by changing our habits daily. And we will be even happier. It will be better, make us feel better, and we will be guaranteeing a future."

Wine is the lens through which she views the world. Lepeltier recently led eighteen eager students to the Loire Valley to see her vision through their own eyes.

"I look at my job here, and it's not just to sell wine. I don't care about whether I sell a Chablis or white. It's about giving them an experience where they can taste something. They can feel like 'Oh my god, I have a palate. I've never had anything like that! I can feel something different!' That's my job. To open





a window ahead and say, 'I've got something so powerful inside of me. I didn't know I could do that.' And then you open the door and they will go on their own path. If you don't know about wine, it's okay. It's not about that. Here we are calling ourselves 'experts', but you know what? We are not experts at anything. It doesn't work like that. The most important thing is to make sure people every single day [think about] the way they eat and drink. We have so much power to nudge people on the right path."

At this point in the journey, paths are merging, bringing her back to where she started yet guiding her somewhere new. A school in France recently asked her to teach on the metaphysics of experiencing wine.

"I'm going to go back to philosophy and taking a couple of classes on that in Paris. But you know, it's like when you read Plato and Socrates. Socrates was teaching at the agora, in a public space. So yeah, there's philosophy everywhere. You don't need to have a classroom."

Resisting gravity's persistent tug, she has kept her head up and eyes focused ahead. And though the adage that struggling vines produce better wines may be overly simplistic, there is an element of truth in it for both plants and people.

"So what you are doing is, if you really care about your soil and you are really trying to make sure that there is a balance, you are going to use less and less pesticides. The more you are working with industrial farming, the more you are going to have to add. Your soil is destroyed, and your plants are not able to survive by themselves. Not only do you have to help it fight against predators with fungicides, herbicides, and pesticides, but you also have to feed the plant because the plant is not able to feed itself. So you start using potassium and nitrogen and phosphate and all that. Because of that the plant gets bigger, and the life expectancy is shorter. So you are going to have to replant. And because you have no time, you're not going to let your soil rest, and you are going to replant in bad soil, and so the cycle is endless."

Breaking the cycle. Not an easy task personally or globally. Yet Lepeltier has learned to be refined by her suffering, not defined by it. And while the cause she champions is an uphill battle, she is resolute.

"So I feel very responsible. I am so lucky. I have responsibilities. As a citizen, and even more today as a citizen that has a voice, I have to. I just can't let stuff go. I couldn't just wake up every day and be like, 'I'm living for the stock exchange, and I'm going to be more wealthy today.' I have a personal responsibility. Especially when we are lucky to live in a certain environment, we have responsibilities. So as long as I am here, I have to do something."