

The Wine Mechanics

When there's a challenge, wineries big and small consult with a Mr. Fix-It

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In the world of wine, the winemaking consultant is the ultimate hired gun. For the right price, he or she can save a floundering winery the way a new sheriff might restore order to a lawless town in a classic Western.

Often working behind the scenes with a winery's in-house staff, they're brought in to repair defective wines -- other times just to fine-tune them.

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What separates winemaking consultants from average winemakers is the depth and breadth of their experience and sometimes genuine enlightenment. They've tasted enough wine to know what qualities the best wines have in common, and know how to make wines that have those qualities -- seamless wines as precisely composed as a great painting or a perfect pop tune. It takes a lot of energy and enthusiasm to constantly shuttle between clients, tasting barrels, solving problems and teaching winery staff. Kerry Damskey has it.

Damskey has been making wine for more than 25 years and not only has a degree in fermentation science from UC Davis, but studied business at Stanford and is a Master of Wine candidate as well. Through his consulting company, Terroirs Inc., Damskey offers everything from grape growing to winery design. His clients include Charles Creek Vineyard, TR Elliot, Dutcher Crossing, Godwin and Huntington across Sonoma and Napa counties, and Hedges Cellars in Washington state -- a winery that has consistently made some of that state's finest wines and best values.

Damskey says that doing the job right can mean tasting every lot of wine almost every day. "That means I drive 8,000 to 10,000 miles a month. But I wouldn't sleep if I didn't do that." Damskey also maintains elite frequent flyer status by consulting with Sula Wines, one of India's largest and most highly regarded wineries. Rather than catching high critical scores for his clients, Damskey aims to teach his clients how to fish for themselves.

"Your job as a consultant is to be a good teacher. Not browbeating people, but telling them and explaining to them, showing them examples and saying, 'This is where we're trying to go,'" says Damskey. "As a consultant, you'll go away. If you base the relationship solely on the time that you're there, you're not going to be successful."

In some situations, he may be asked to be more personally involved in day-to-day winemaking decisions. Other times he just gives occasional advice for an hourly fee.

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