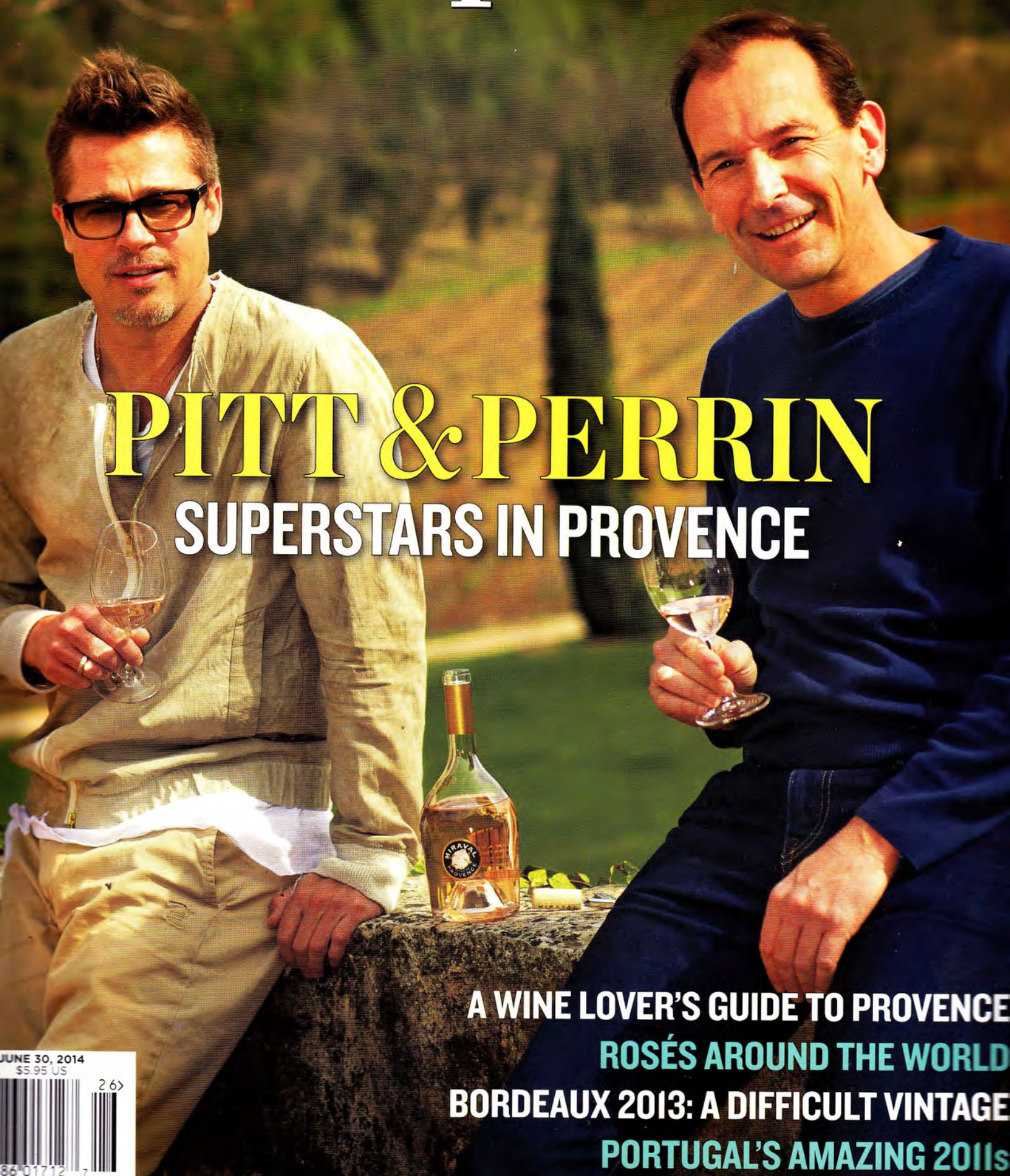


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From Songbird to Somm

Former jazz singer Elizabeth Huettinger now manages one of the country's top wine lists

Elizabeth Huettinger was 19 when she first worked at a Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning restaurant, moonlighting as a jazz singer at Monterey, Calif.'s Sardine Factory.

Since then, Huettinger, 28, has moved south along the California coast, pouring wine at some of the state's finest restaurants: Aubergine in Carmel, Spago in Beverly Hills and now Addison, located within the Grand Del Mar in San Diego. As wine director, Huettinger oversees a 3,500-selection wine list that has earned Wine Spectator's highest honor since 2009. She sat down with writer Lizzie Munro to discuss her transition from music to wine, her approach to wine service at Addison and her trials with the Court of Master Sommeliers.

Wine Spectator: How did jazz singing lead you to a career in wine?

Elizabeth Huettinger: I would sing jazz and lounge music at the Sardine Factory piano bar, where my roommate worked. I started getting involved with the sommeliers there.

I was only 19 at the time, but I was so impressed that I started studying, and when I was old enough, I started taking tests. I never looked back.

WS: Where was your first job as a sommelier?

EH: At Aubergine, at L'Auberge in Carmel. I didn't realize at the time how amazing that opportunity was. I really jumped into the deep end in terms of having to learn a lot about a very complicated subject very quickly.

WS: And from there you went to Spago?

EH: The gentleman who had hired me [at Aubergine], Blake Gilbert, introduced me to [beverage director] Christopher Miller, at Spago. I worked with Chris for a little over a year and saw him get his Master Sommelier certification. My experience with him was incredible and invaluable; he always encouraged me to take some risks and to keep tasting. Chris actually knew Addison chef [William] Bradley. When one of the positions became available at Addison, I met with chef Bradley, and we connected on very similar levels on how we view food and wine.

WS: Did you make any changes to the Addison wine program when you arrived there?



Elizabeth Huettinger

EH: I spent the first few months filtering through things that I knew weren't going to age and making space for a lot that I wanted to bring in. I wanted to focus on grower Champagne producers as well as increase the large-format selection.

WS: How do you approach wine when it comes to a tasting menu?

EH: By-the-glass wine pairings are huge here. Actually, they're a bigger aspect even than the bottle sales, because there's such an opportunity to try unexpected things. Usually, when people order wine pairings with the tasting menus, they have very open minds. When it comes to a lot of the small producers and oddball varietals that are phenomenal, people wouldn't necessarily order a bottle, but I can give them that experience on the tasting menu.

WS: What's an example of a pairing that you love?

EH: A favorite of mine is the chef's salmon with dashi broth, which is a very

salty dish, but also fatty because of the salmon. I like to do kind of a pairing of the opposites. I pair it with a Cashburn Pinot Noir from Central Otago in New Zealand. That particular wine is light, clean and bright, and there's an almost candied quality to the fruit. It offsets the saltiness, and the brightness and acid levels just drive right through the salmon.

WS: How did you do on the Court of Master Sommeliers' Advanced exam in April?

EH: I passed! When I had taken the exam last fall, I missed passing the theory category by a few points. But I did have one of the highest scores on blind tasting and service, which made me comfortable taking the exam again. Retaking it in April, I passed three sections, with my strongest score in tasting. Most thrilling for me was that Shayn Bjornholm, Chris Miller's mentor, gave me the news and feedback.

WS: Do you still find time to sing?

EH: I sing in the cellar, and I sing during setup sometimes. It doesn't factor too much into my day-to-day, except that I love singing. But, you know, I find that a lot of sommeliers have a creative background. □