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Wine journalist James Suckling swirls over to his own website

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In December, wine journalist James Suckling launched his multimedia wine website, marking the next chapter for one of the country's more controversial wine personalities and signaling, in no uncertain terms, his intention to become the wine world's Next Big Thing.

Just months before, the Wine Spectator, the country's largest-circulation wine publication, had announced that Suckling had retired from the magazine. For his readers, it seemed unimaginable. Suckling had spent nearly 30 years as a writer and editor there, and was the magazine's critic of record for some of the world's most prestigious wine regions, including Bordeaux, Porto and much of Italy. The suddenness of his departure and the use of the word "retired" — Suckling is only 52 — only added to the confusion.

But in a steady diet of tweets, posts, teases and appearances — noted in tasting rooms and chat rooms alike — it became apparent that Suckling was starting a new venture. By the time [jamesuckling.com](#) launched, it was clear that Suckling was re-positioning himself from being just a name on a masthead to being a high-profile presence in the wine media landscape.

Indeed, as Robert M. Parker Jr. edges into retirement, it seems as if James Suckling — the man, the expert, the tastemaker, the brand — is looking to claim the pole position, employing all the brashness and hubris required to get him there.

In 1981, fresh out of journalism school, Suckling answered an ad in the Los Angeles Times to write for a fledgling magazine called the Wine Spectator, then based in San Diego. His wine knowledge was modest, but his father, a Beverly Hills lawyer, had a substantial collection, which he happily shared with his son. He wrote news articles, coming up to speed about his new subject as the nation's interest in wine slowly kindled. It was not the sort of journalism he had foreseen for himself — "I thought I'd be bringing down governments and chasing Pulitzers," he says — but he proved to be more than adept.

In 1983, Suckling made his first wine trip to Europe at the age of 24 to Vinexpo, the French wine fair, evaluating the 1982 Bordeaux vintage alongside such esteemed experts as Alexis Lichine, Anthony Barbour and Terry Robards — elsewhere in the grand *salle*, a young Robert Parker was wetting his lips and scribbling notes. Parker would go on to proclaim the vintage one for the ages, establishing his reputation and setting in motion changes that would rock the wine world for the next three decades. Suckling realized he was standing at the crossroads of a great adventure.

He persuaded his publisher, Marvin Shanken, to allow him to work abroad, where he rapidly became a leading voice on some of the Old World's most

esteemed wine regions. In addition to his sway on all matters Bordeaux, Suckling's enthusiasms for Tuscan reds, Brunellos and the SuperTuscans in particular helped spark a demand.

With his natural ebullience, his penchant for First Growths, lavish meals and fine cigars, Suckling came to personify a classic archetype in wine journalism: critic as bon vivant.

While living in London, Suckling got to know Jamie Oliver, Britain's "Naked Chef," who managed to straddle the culinary arts, authorship and showmanship. "He was writing, acting, doing a little bit of everything," says Suckling. "I thought, 'Why isn't someone doing that for wine?'" Suckling began toying with the notion of becoming that person.

Jamessuckling.com is a co-venture with producer, director and screenwriter James Orr, designed to explore, promote and critique wines from around the world. It is mostly a repository of video posts — some free, most available through a \$14.99-per-month subscription. Currently, he says, there are about 1,000 paid subscribers.

The site promises a video segment a day. The content for these is still taking shape, but for now they're composed primarily of Suckling's visits to wineries, vineyards and wine shops, where a tasting and discussion is recorded rather artfully by Orr, in high definition.

You're not likely to see Suckling admire a vineyard's bucolic charm, nor will you see him talk about dirt or coastal fog patterns, or any of the usual trappings of *terroir*. The meat of the message here is what Suckling thinks of the wine in his glass. If his opinion matters to you, it is highly entertaining. If it does not, it is a different sort of spectacle altogether.

Suckling possesses a nimble palate, with plenty of verbal skill to expound on a wine's nuances. One of his greatest assets is his prodigious palate memory, and his familiarity with many of these wines — he can convincingly tease out associations between the wine at hand and vintages from 10 and 20 years before — is a boon to any collector wondering how cellared wines are progressing.

When Suckling speaks, he does so with a warbling, musical cadence. He is prone to punching certain words for emphasis, like "sexy," "sassy" and "funky." He tends to flaunt his pronunciation of French, Italian and Spanish wines.

At times he descends into jargon, leaving an odd sort of emptiness at the heart of the message ("just lots going on," he says of one wine; "a wine you want to spend time with and understand," he says of another.)

Of course to improvise on camera about such a subjective topic is difficult, a task that's made more challenging by the fact that the content of these videos is almost exclusively devoted to the physical spectacle of James Suckling tasting wine — swirling, smelling, tasting, aspirating and finally spitting a mouthful of wine into a bucket.

The payoff of these tastings, of course, is "the Score." Just as he did in print at the Spectator, Suckling employs the 100-point score system to rate wines on camera, usually in the presence of the person whose wines he's scoring. Setting aside the obvious questions of objectivity this brings up, the

Score becomes a central focus of each video segment, and Suckling is being promoted as the ultimate arbiter.

In a promo titled "Is Perfection Attainable?" Orr spliced together a string of assessments for various wines, in ascending order: "I'm 95 points on that," says Suckling, "I'm 97-plus points on that," he says elsewhere, getting more and more energized by his own pronouncements, until inevitably we cross the Rubicon in Bordeaux: "100 points," he exclaims, "a perfect wine!" Apparently perfection is attainable, and Suckling is the man to confer it.

The other great benefit that the website promotes is access. Suckling gains entry into the world's greatest chateaux, where one can steal a glimpse of this world of unparalleled prestige and glamour. In another tease video, Suckling is seen rubbing shoulders with producers in Napa, Montalcino, Pomerol and Pauillac, in rapid succession ("I'm here at Chateau Montelena," "I'm here with Jacques Guinaudeau, the owner of Lefleur," etc.). The segment concludes with the critic facing down the camera and announcing with the utmost gravity: "I'm here."

For his vainglorious swagger, Suckling has been savaged in the blogosphere. And it's true, the net effect of all this posturing is sometimes unintentionally hilarious, even cringe-worthy. On camera Suckling can seem drunk on punditry. On Bordeaux and other collectibles, he speaks earnestly to a tiny segment of the population (collectors) while the rest of us are left to wonder whether he's a master of wine or a master of self-parody. (Other segments, usually set in retail stores and focusing on a more affordable slice of the market, are less mannered but also far less elaborate.)

In the end, jamessuckling.com may find its audience, and Suckling will learn to live with his detractors who, in their criticism, ultimately direct attention to the site. The Suckling Phenomenon is still accelerating. Whether or not he succeeds at becoming the Next Big Thing, he's gotten the world to pay attention to him, and that, in the long run, may be the desired effect.

food@latimes.com