

Farewell to Sleuth and Mole

EUGENE EDUCATOR AND *EW* WINE WRITER LANCE SPARKS REMEMBERED

By Camilla Mortensen

After longtime *Eugene Weekly* wine columnist Lance Sparks retired, the paper briefly searched for another wine writer.

Then *EW* stopped the search, because it wasn't so much about the wine as it was about the way Sparks blended his encyclopedic wine knowledge with quirky characters and, from time to time, politics.

Sparks' final column in September 2017 is emblematic of his style. He says a sad goodbye to his fictional partner in wine sleuthing, Mole, and to his readers, and somehow also writes about rosés, one of his favorite topics over the years.

In answer to Mole's question of why Sleuth (Sparks) and Mole are closing their "Wine Investigations," Sparks writes:

"You're right, pal," I answered, my own voice hoarse, "and I couldn't have done any of this without you, but I feel like I'm knocking on Heaven's door, having trouble seeing or even staying on my feet. I can still taste pretty well."

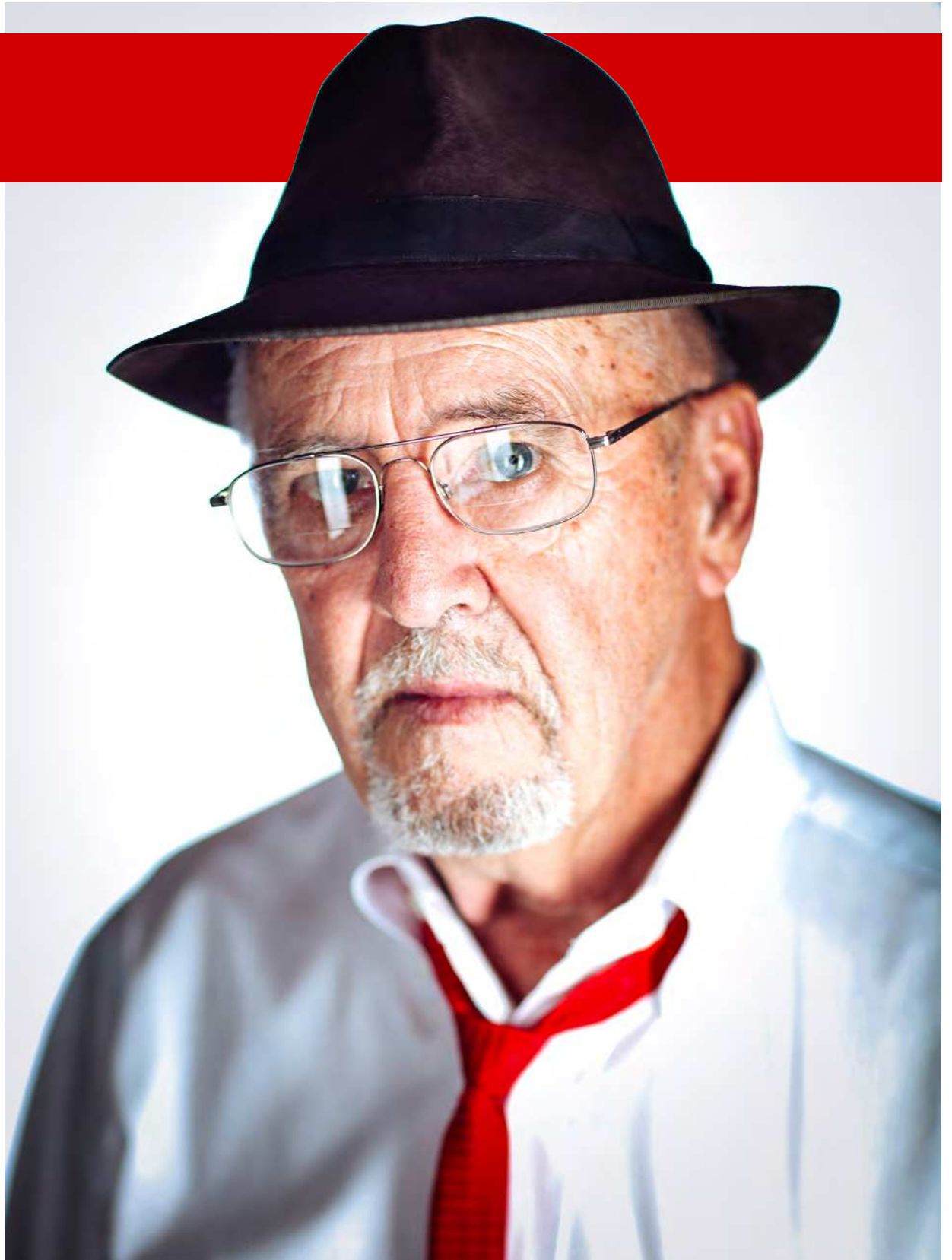
Sparks, a writer and teacher, and a beloved family and community member, died March 1 at age 75 of progressive supranuclear palsy.

Sparks taught at Lane and Linn-Benton community colleges as well as the University of Oregon and University of Portland. His wife, Kat Chinn, says Sparks had a "profound effect on students and people he coached and mentored all these years." She said students routinely commented on how he made a difference in their lives. She adds, "I know he did mine."

Sparks earned a BA at the University of Nevada and a Ph.D. in psycholinguistics at the University of Oregon. In addition to teaching and his 20-year tenure at *EW* writing about wine and other topics, he wrote for *Eugene Magazine*, was a headwaiter at Excelsior Inn Ristorante and managed Ambrosia.

The latter is where Sparks and Chinn met 30 years ago, she says.

Sparks was born in Pensacola, Florida, but grew up all



over the world with his mother and stepfather, who was in the Navy. Sparks went to 14 different high schools, lived three years in Africa, and learned Arabic and French.

He wrote sometimes of his youth in his columns, remembering in a 2013 piece on wine growers how while living in Morocco he and his friend Pierrot would run to the neighborhood grocery store with bottles to be filled with red and rosé wines. "No questions about our ages, no issues about whether we intended to get drunk."

He finishes, "Someday soon I'd like to send my grandson to the local little store, toting a couple of vacant growers, doing the essential work of garnering our lunch vins. He'd dig it. And nobody can run like that boy."

From elegant wines to screw caps and wine labels, there was no wine topic Sparks couldn't delve into, with or without his whimsical sidekick Mole, formerly of Flatbush, Brooklyn, more recently found in a downtown Eugene high rise in Sparks' fictional realm.

"He was such an interesting man with his life," Chinn remembers. "So damn smart about everything; there wasn't anything he didn't read or have knowledge about."

Besides Chinn, Sparks is survived by his two stepdaughters, Shana Molnar and Dana Cooley; his previous wife, Judith Sparks; his daughter Sulwyn Sparks; and previous wife Evelyn Conroy, daughter Paloma Sparks and four grandchildren.

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