

ST. SUPÉRY DOLLARHIDE RANCH

NAPA VALLEY

40 YEARS LATER

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE,
THE MORE THEY SEEM THE SAME

BY ROGER MORRIS



The view is always worth the drive, says St. Supéry Estate Vineyards and Winery CEO Emma Swain. “I have lived and worked in Napa Valley for the past 20 years,” she says, “and each morning I have the same drive up Highway 29. And everything looks virtually the same as when I started. I smile and think, ‘Another beautiful day in the valley.’”

Of course, locals and tourists alike still complain about traffic along this main route up Napa Valley—as they have for decades—but Swain and her fellow winegrowers have much to smile about these days, as do wine lovers drawn to the valley.

Napa’s two iconic wines—Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay—are better than ever and increasingly finding markets around the world, especially in Europe where fine wine has been made for centuries. While top bottles from Napa Valley bring their producers world-class prices commensurate with the costs and winemaking skills involved, even entry-level drinkers have no problem finding affordable Napa Valley wines. Consumers today also love to see where their wines are made, and Napa Valley is undoubtedly America’s most popular wine tourism destination.

Despite the fact that in many ways Napa Valley seems relatively unchanged, it’s partly because change has come gradually. And those whose families have grown grapes here for many years recognize that Napa Valley today isn’t their grandfather’s—or even their father’s—Napa Valley.

Although wine has been made in Napa Valley for more than a century, it was only 40 years ago that British-born wine merchant Steven Spurrier invited an array of French wine experts to his Paris wine shop to participate in a blind tasting of Napa Valley

Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnays mixed in with top-rated French red Bordeaux and white Burgundies. The French wines were made from the same grapes but with a lot more pedigree and higher prices. Like a family story told over and over, the American Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnays were judged to be better than the French—*by the French*.

What is often forgotten is that Spurrier’s primary goal was to generate some buzz and draw more customers to his shop. But it turned into a seminal event that transformed Napa Valley from just another sleepy mom-and-pop operation into a world-respected wine-producing dynamo, bringing the rest of California and the whole West Coast wine industry along with it. If not for a simple afterthought, Spurrier’s tasting would have been like a tree falling in the forest and no one hearing it. As it happened, Spurrier decided to also invite someone who wasn’t a wine expert: a reporter acquaintance in the Paris bureau of *Time* magazine. Amused by the embarrassment of the French, the journalist filed a story, four paragraphs of which appeared in the magazine. As *Time* in 1976 had all the media left that Facebook and Twitter do today, the small tasting in Paris shattered wine glasses throughout the wine-drinking world. (See “Judgment of Paris” on page 19.)

It is helpful to understand that in 1976, the time of the tasting, even most of the wines in San Francisco’s best restaurants were French, not from California, because that was what customers expected. Only a handful of wines from Napa Valley, such as Beaulieu Vineyards Georges de la Tour Special Reserve, were even known in Eastern wine circles.

Spurrier’s validation became a game changer, one that was accelerated by Robert Mondavi’s brand-ambassador leadership and the attention given to Napa Valley by Robert Parker, the Pied Piper of wine ratings who trumpeted the valley’s wines to thousands of emerging wine lovers.

Today, there are 430 brick-and-mortar wineries in Napa Valley, according to Patsy McGaughey, communications director of the Napa Valley Vintners trade group, which has 530 members. In the late 1960s, there were fewer than 25 wineries. But McGaughey contrasts that with a century earlier, when the valley was humming with winegrowing. “In 1880, there were 140 wineries and about 18,000 acres planted,” she says. “Things have certainly ebbed and flowed in Napa Valley over the past 130-plus years.”

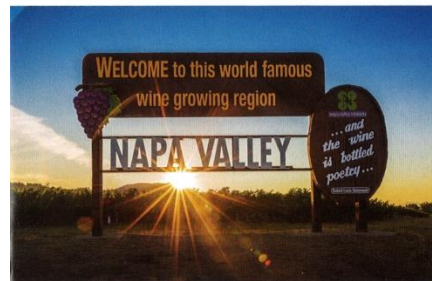
Also in the 1960s and ’70s, most winery tastings were free, and the typical Napa Valley winery then had as many as a dozen different varieties of reds and whites for the visitor to try. Cabernet Sauvignon was already the primary red grape in 1976, but there was twice as much Pinot Noir grown as there was Zinfandel. Napa Gamay, Petite Sirah and Gamay Beaujolais were more widely planted than Merlot, which only had about 400 acres. There were even 150 acres of Refosco or Mondeuse.



A WORKER SORTS THROUGH A BIN OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON, REMOVING ANY LEAVES AND NOT-RIPE-ENOUGH CLUSTERS TO LEAVE ONLY PRISTINE FRUIT TO HIT THE CRUSHER.

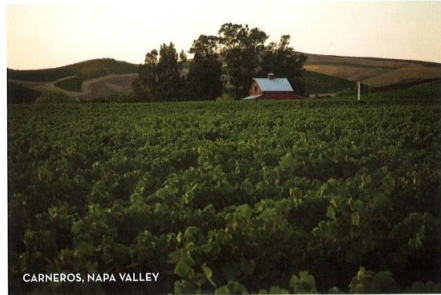
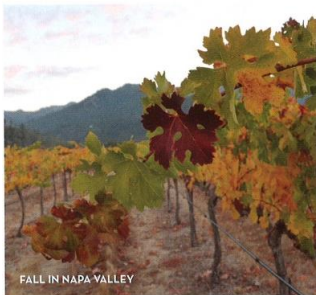


CELEBRATE SWAIN



WINTER IN OAKVILLE

THIS PAGE, PREVIOUS, AND SWAIN (OPPOSITE) COURTESY OF ST. SUPÉRY ESTATE VINEYARDS & WINERY; ALL OTHERS, OPPOSITE COURTESY OF NAPA VALLEY VINTNERS; WORKER, JASON TRINACCI; SIGN, BOB MCCLENNAN; WINTER, TONY ALBRIGHT



Chardonnay had become the primary wine grape, but that was a fairly recent occurrence. Only 10 years earlier, there was more Chenin Blanc. Surprisingly, there was twice as much Riesling being grown in 1976 as Sauvignon Blanc, which is second only to Chardonnay today. Chenin Blanc plantings have now shrunk to 16 acres, and looking for a current Napa Valley Chenin Blanc is like going on a scavenger hunt. Recent statistics show there are almost 20,000 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the valley, yielding nearly 70,000 tons of grapes at an average price per ton of almost \$6,000.

Chardonnay has about 6,600 acres at a price per ton around \$2,500. Although other varieties, notably Merlot, Zinfandel and Sauvignon Blanc are grown, Cabernet and Chardonnay are the valley's bread-and-butter.

It is true that most wineries and vineyards in Napa Valley are family-owned, but it is telling that only three have been making wine for 50 years. One is Stony Hill, now in its third generation of ownership by the McCrea family, which first planted vines in the hills near St. Helena in 1952. Surprisingly, the McCreas say they have done little to change with the times, keeping to their innovative roots. Stony Hill was one of the first valley wines sold primarily by a mailing list, which is still the case. But it resisted the temptation to make a major switch from white grapes to red, and the McCreas have kept growth gradual and manageable.

"Very little here has physically changed at the winery," says Sarah McCrea, the third generation of McCreas to run Stony Hill. "We bought a new press in the mid-'80s. It's still here." Although

Chardonnay has long been its signature wine, Stony Hill is also one of the few Napa Valley wineries to still sell Riesling and Gewürztraminer.

Of course, new owners and investors—even from other countries—have been vital in adding vigor and diversity to the valley's winegrowing. It will surprise many that the French themselves have historically been among Napa's biggest boosters. Even before Spurrier's Paris tasting, Champagne maker Moët et Chandon established a Napa Valley subsidiary, Domaine Chandon, in 1973 and other sparkling wine producers from abroad quickly followed. Bordeaux was also close behind, with the 1979 vintage of Opus One, a joint venture between owners of Robert Mondavi and Château Mouton Rothschild. Christian Moueix, of the family of St-Émilion négociants, which also owns Château Petrus, opened Dominus in 1982.

But certainly no Frenchman has injected as much fun and flamboyance into the valley's commercial and social life as has Jean-Charles Boisset. In many ways, Boisset has become the new face of Napa Valley with his enthusiasm and boosterism. Boisset's father started winemaking in Burgundy in 1961. Then the family expanded to the Rhône Valley and the south of France before Jean-Charles made the big leap to the United States—first in Sonoma and then to Napa Valley with the purchase of the large Raymond Estate in 2009. In the same year, Boisset married Gina Gallo, whose family wine dynasty also owns Napa Valley properties, including Louis Martini. Marriages between wine families such as the Boissets and the Gallos may be commonplace in Europe, but it created a sensation in California wine circles.

"I first came to Napa Valley when I was 11 years old in the early 1980s," Boisset says, "and I was inspired by this amazing place—its beauty, its possibilities, its people." Although his first purchase was DeLoach Winery in Sonoma's Russian River area, he says, "I knew I could not be in California and not be in Napa Valley." Six years later, Boisset has expanded Raymond from 100 acres to 120, and the estate has been converted to a totally biodynamic production.

While Boisset may advocate environmentally friendly winemaking, he is not worried as some are about tourism ruining the valley's ecosystem. "Napa Valley is one of the greatest successes in the wine world, and guests here are at the epicenter," he says. "Visitors get a great learning experience and an enjoyable one. I think the more guests, the better. It's selfish for those who live here to want to keep it private."

Of course, there is little possibility of that happening. The secret was let out 40 years ago. ■

ROGER MORRIS WRITES ABOUT WINE, FOOD, LIFESTYLES, ART AND CULTURE, AND TRAVEL FOR ABOUT 20 PUBLICATIONS AND TRAVELS SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR TO WINE REGIONS WORLDWIDE. HIS NEWEST BOOK, THE BRANDYWINE BOOK OF THE SEASONS, IS ABOUT THE CULINARY TERROIR OF THE BRANDYWINE REGION AND WAS PUBLISHED IN SEPTEMBER 2012. MORRIS AND HIS WIFE ELLA HAVE RECENTLY RELOCATED FROM PENNSYLVANIA TO DELAWARE WITH THEIR MENAGERIE OF CATS.

JUDGMENT OF PARIS

Cast of Characters:

Steven Spurrier is the English-born Paris wine shop owner who held the 1976 wine competition. Spurrier is still active in the wine trade in England and regularly writes for *Decanter* and other publications. He was played by not-look-alike actor Alan Rickman in the fictionalized film account of the tasting, *Bottle Shock*. Spurrier didn't think much of the 2008 film or his portrayal.

Bo Barrett had just started working with his father, Jim Barrett, at the family's Chateau Montelena when the winery's Chardonnay was judged the best of the tasting over several white Burgundies. Making winning wines runs in the family, as Bo Barrett's wife, winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett, is best known for her Napa Valley cult Cabernet Sauvignons, including Screaming Eagle. Bo Barrett still runs Montelena.

Miljenko "Mike" Grgich was the actual winemaker at Chateau Montelena when the winning Chardonnay was crafted. After working at Montelena and other major Napa wineries, Grgich established his own Napa Valley winery, Grgich Hills, in 1977. After more than 50 years of making Napa Valley wines, he still runs Grgich Hills with his daughter, Violet.

Warren Winiarski struck gold on his first Stag's Leap Wine Cellar Cabernet Sauvignon, the 1973 vintage, which took first place in Paris. The University of Chicago professor-turned-winemaker continued to make wine at Stag's Leap until 2007, when he sold the famed winery for \$185 million to Italy's Marchesi Antinori and Washington state's Chateau Ste. Michelle. He is still active at wine events.

George M. Taber was a reporter in *Time* magazine's Paris bureau when young Steven Spurrier asked him to stop by a wine tasting he was having the next day. Without Taber's four-paragraph article in the next issue of *Time*, it is doubtful anyone would ever have heard about the Judgment of Paris. Since retired from the magazine, Taber writes books about wine.