

INTRODUCTION

This book owes inspiration to an earlier book. *Great Winemakers of California: Conversations with Robert Benson* was published in 1977 by Capra Press. Sometime in the mid 1980s, I bought a used copy at a San Francisco bookstore. It instantly became one of my favorite wine books, and, when I became a working wine writer, it was a trusted source for historical information.

Benson's book consisted of a series of conversations—twenty-eight in all—between him and California winemakers (only one of whom was a woman; we've come a long way since then). Each conversation was published in question-and-answer form. That enabled the reader to get inside the winemaker's head, follow a train of thought, and pick up a little of the winemaker's personality.

A conversation is different from an interview. Usually, when writers interview subjects, only isolated quotes survive, scattered here and there in the resulting publication, sometimes out of context. Subjects, moreover, tend to be guarded during interviews. An interview has something of the feel of a third-degree grilling.

A conversation, by contrast, is a more natural context for human beings, who are, after all, social creatures. Conversation implies sharing, exchanging, interacting. We converse with friends; we don't interview them. I've done plenty of interviewing in my checkered career, but the conversations—the things you have when you're just hanging out—I've had with winemakers have been among the most satisfying aspects of my job, in both a personal and a professional sense. I wanted to share that experience with readers.

In his conversations, Benson delivered up the complete winemaker, so to speak: that mixture of intellect, temperament, and soul, heart and opinion, emotion and quirky individuality that constitutes everyone we know, including ourselves—what makes us, when you think about it, worth knowing. In an era when American wine writing already was becoming formulaic and breathy, *Conversations* was that rarity, a smartly readable (and rereadable) wine book.

Benson captured the California wine industry at a most interesting time. It was just after the beginning of the boutique winery era of the 1960s, when the radical experimentalism of that decade was bearing fruit. The excitement generated by Robert Mondavi's opening of his winery in 1966 seemed to symbolize the period, but there was so much more going on than that. Innovation ran rampant throughout wine country, guided by high-minded ambitions. The modern California wine industry was born in a flash of collective brilliance. By the time *Conversations* was published, the shock wave had spread across America and was being felt in Europe. (The Paris tasting had occurred in May 1976.) American (which is to say California) wine had clambered onto the global stage, and Benson caught his vintners in this heady, optimistic moment.

When Benson wrote, wine enthusiasts were interested in different sorts of things than they are today. They gravitated toward the more technical aspects. I've never been quite sure why; most movie lovers don't concern themselves with the minutiae of film technology, or book readers with the ins and outs of manufacturing paper. Benson's questions tended to be about fining, filtering, centrifuging, gondolas, crushers, and that sort of thing. Perhaps technique was something Americans, a race of tinkerers, could relate to; maybe that early in their wine learning curve, they needed the steadying effect of formula to latch on to.

I decided to take a different approach. It seems to me there's a limit to how much today's wine readers care to wade through deep trenches of technology. (The modern popular wine press, too, has drifted away from extensive reporting on hard-core viticulture and enology.) I couldn't see asking dozens of winemakers seriatim at how many pounds per square inch they press their grapes. When technique seemed a fruitful or appropriate area to investigate, I did, and as it turned out, technique crept into all of these conversations to a greater or lesser degree. But I also wanted stories, personal histories, opinions, viewpoints—to know not only *what* these people did and

how they did it, but *why*. For me, *terroir* includes above all the winemaker's vision.

Why include the human element in a definition of *terroir*? Most writers, as far as I can tell, don't. To me it's obvious, but this impossible-to-translate French term has been the subject of so much obfuscation and controversy that perhaps I ought to explain more fully. The easiest way is by a silly example. If you agree that, say, the Harlan estate vineyard is a great natural source of Cabernet Sauvignon because of the climate of the Oakville foothills, the soils, exposures, and so on, then consider this question: If you or I made the wine instead of Bob Levy, would it be "Harlan Estate"? Obviously, no. It might not even be drinkable.

Granted, you and I are not winemakers. Let's say, instead, that you plucked, for example, Justin Smith out of Paso Robles and shipped him north to make Harlan wine. Would it then be Harlan Estate? I don't think so. It would be a good wine, because Justin Smith is a good winemaker, but it would reflect *him* and *his* choices, not Bob Levy's and Bill Harlan's. So this line of reasoning suggests that mere technical aspects of place can begin to, but not completely, explain the totality of great wine.

Another thought-experiment way of looking at it is to imagine a winemaker known for mastering a particular estate working somewhere else under far different circumstances. I asked Mark Aubert if he thought he could make great wine in Lodi—an appellation not known for great wine—and he answered, "I could elevate Lodi!" which, broken down, is Aubert's way of suggesting the primacy of the winemaker over place. His reply made me think of Baron Philippe de Rothschild elevating Château Mouton-Rothschild from second growth to first. Did Mouton's *terroir* change when it leaped a level? No. But the vision imposed upon it by the baron forced a transformation that, ultimately, even the hidebound authorities of the INAO (Institut nationale des appellations d'origine) had to recognize. Baron de Rothschild became an indispensable part of Mouton's *terroir*.

When Benson hit the road, there weren't that many winemakers around, so his options were limited. He snagged most of the big names: Robert Mondavi, André Tchelistcheff (who wrote his preface), Louis P. Martini, Paul Draper, Richard Arrowood, and so on. When I began my selection process, the choices were vastly greater. I don't know how many winemakers worked in California when I wrote this book, but it had to be a lot. There were 1,605 bonded wineries in the state in 2004, according to the Alcohol and Tobacco

Tax and Trade Bureau. (And keep in mind that many brands produce under someone else's bond.)

So how to choose? My foremost parameter was that the winemaker be making consistently excellent wine. I wanted, obviously, to include more women than Benson had, and I did. But in the period I wrote, there still was gender inequity in California winemaking, and of my twenty-seven winemakers, only seven are female. (But the University of California, Davis, recently announced that women now account for 50 percent of the students in the Department of Viticulture & Enology, so we should soon achieve parity.)

I also wanted diversity from a production point of view: small wineries and large ones, specialists and generalists. You'll find in these pages Randy Ullom, presiding over five million cases annually of many different varieties at Kendall-Jackson Vineyard Estates, and Justin Smith, whose Saxum winery produced, when I spoke with him, only a thousand cases of red Rhône wines from the western hills of Paso Robles.

I wanted geographic balance. Benson had sought this, too, but in a way that strikes us today as anachronistic. His three regional divisions were "South of San Francisco Bay" (but nothing of San Luis Obispo County or Santa Barbara County; neither made it onto his radar), "North of San Francisco Bay" (Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties), and "South Coastal Mountains," which consisted of a single interview with the founder of Callaway Vineyard and Winery, in Temecula (!).

Today's realities dictate greater, more precise geographic diversity, but the reader will note that there is no one in this book from inland areas: no Lodi, Sierra foothills, Central Valley, or Temecula. I agonized over this, but my foremost parameter, consistent quality, unfortunately precluded them. Nor was it ultimately convenient to divide the book into a geographic scheme of any sort.

I decided too against categorizing the book by wine type or variety. Too many winemakers are making too many different kinds of wines to be pigeonholed. Where would you put, say, Ullom in a varietally organized book?

So I have split up the book by the decade in which the winemaker first began his or her career: the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. We Americans are a decade-minded people anyway; I admit to thinking that winemakers who came of age in the 1970s (and thus have a few decades of experience under their belts) differ in outlook and temperament from those who came in during the 1990s. But I don't want to overemphasize divisions. The winemakers in this book, in their devotions and talents, are united far more than anything that differentiates them.

“My method was simple,” Benson writes in his introduction. “Between the summers of 1975 and 1976, I tramped through vineyards and wineries with a tape recorder, and questioned vintners face to face.” I did the same, thirty years later. His intentions, Benson explained, were threefold: to craft a record of “lasting value”; to record, through “oral history,” information about the California wine industry’s “most important era”; and to appeal to both “the casual wine drinker” and “the true wine buff.” These are my intentions, too.

Benson thought he was recording California’s most important wine era. Granted, the 1970s was an exciting time to be making wine in California, but so were the 1960s, and so for that matter were the 1880s, when California wines were winning medals in Europe. (Prohibition, of course, wiped out whatever progress had been made.) California wine is always in a state of ferment (no pun intended), always evolving from what it was to what it will be—like California itself. So what will historians say of our wine era?

After its razzle-dazzle, paparazzi-ed vault to stardom over the past thirty years, California wine no longer has a reputation to build; it has one to protect. There is no longer anything to prove (except to extreme skeptics), but plenty to enhance. Enscorced at the highest levels of world fame, California wine has entered its Golden Age, akin, perhaps, to glorious prephylloxera France. Bordeaux has endured, often supremely, for more than three hundred years, through ups and downs, trials and tribulations, peace and war. There is no reason California wine should not do the same—unless something drastic happens to end it, and us, all.

Yet all is not rosy. There are speed bumps in the road; California wine is not without challenges. High alcohol is a concern among many writers, sommeliers, restaurateurs, consumers, and even (when they will admit it) growers and winemakers, who worry that the resulting wines are not in balance and may not age. Related to high alcohol is residual sugar, or at least the perception of sweetness, which in a table wine is offensive to some people, including me. During the years I wrote this book, 2004–2006, these were red-hot topics of conversation in wine circles, guaranteed to prompt a debate. California winemakers are going to have to figure out how to deal with these things, which may involve factors beyond their control, such as global warming.

Then, too, pricing has become problematic, especially among the so-called cult wines. How high can they go? (As I write, Screaming Eagle’s retail price has been boosted to more than five hundred dollars, which is bound to have a ripple effect on everyone else.) And in today’s fiercely competitive, internationalized market, vintners also face challenges of marketing, promotion, public relations, and selling. The rest of the globe is coming online, not just

Australia and New Zealand, Chile and Argentina, and “old” Europe. In southeastern Europe and some of the former Soviet republics, entrepreneurs are working overtime to perfect their indigenous wine industries—and it should not be forgotten that this is the ancestral home of *Vitis vinifera*. We have recently heard reports of a massive wine industry in the making in, of all places, China. When these wines hit the market, duck; the grape and wine market will have to make serious adjustments. Even the most famous winemakers sometimes worry about their jobs; even the wealthiest owners understand that if they don’t relentlessly pursue quality, history may pass them (or their children) by. The best winemakers spend sleepless hours trying to figure out how to stay ahead of the game, knowing full well that nothing can be taken for granted.

What does it take to make great wine? Good grapes, of course. Beyond that, if it were simply a matter of technical correctness, there would be more great wine in California than in fact there is. In the end, it all comes down to the person, and while every great winemaker I’ve known—well, most of them—states humbly that he or she is a mere steward of the land, the truth is this: the greatest vineyard in the world would be reduced to raw acreage in the hands of the inexpert. What the vintners in these pages share is a tendency to view life as a quest, a do-or-die mentality; ultimately, a great, crazy-making passion. Money greases the wheels; if you’re a multimillionaire, you have what it takes to hire and buy the best. But as we see over and over (thankfully), wealth is not a necessity. Indeed, most of the winemakers in this book were born without it and succeeded through sheer zeal.

Which, come to think of it, suggests what may be the signal achievement of this era: winemaking has become, not the quaint eccentricity it was thirty years ago when Benson wrote, but a noble profession.