

California Wines Come of Age

by Frank J. Priol

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, a fellow appeared one day at the Robert Mondavi Winery in California's Napa Valley. He was, he said, doing research on the wine industry. With traditional wine country hospitality, the Mondavis invited him in and answered his questions.

In due time, a novel appeared exploiting the long-standing feud between Robert Mondavi and his brother, Peter, who runs the Charles Krug winery a few miles up the road. It was obviously the work of the "researcher."

"We never did find out who he was," said Robert's son, Michael. "He used one name when he came here and another on the book, neither of which apparently is the right one."

The novel dropped deservedly from sight, which is probably just as well. The Mondavi story needs a Verdi, or at least a John Steinbeck: Two brothers, sons of a penniless Italian immigrant who made a fortune in the vegetable business, run rival wineries a few miles apart. They wage a spectacular fight through the courts for the family fortune. One brother forces the other out of the business, then relents. They make up and both prosper.

A publisher said recently that there are now in production at least three major motion pictures with wine themes. There are at least as many novels on wine in the works, too.

The only question is, Why did it all take so long? The wine business—the California wine business—is one of the last authentic frontiers of American independence and creativity. From the enormous, space-station-like wineries of the Gallos to the tiniest new converted barn in some remote corner of Mendocino County, the wine world in California is bustling with the kind of vitality and optimism a lot of people were convinced had disappeared from the American scene.

From one end of the state to the other, new wineries open almost every month. Five years ago, established wine men said there was no more room in the Napa Valley, but the *Redwood Rancher*, a magazine that annually lists all the new wineries in the coastal counties, has listed seven new ones in Napa since last fall. The wine writer William Masseé uses a phrase that de-

scribes the California wine scene perfectly. He calls it "joyous anarchy."

Bordeaux, in France, is known for its superb red wines. They differ in style from chateau to chateau and in quality from region to region. But the name Bordeaux remains synonymous with a certain kind of red wine. No one will ever say that about California.

Consider, for example, the zinfandel grape—California's own—which originally produced a blending wine, used by major producers in their inexpensive "burgundies." Clever wine makers have since turned the zinfandel into a light, smooth table wine. But, being Californians, they didn't stop there. Soon, adventurous vintners were making zinfandel rosés, white zinfandels, sparkling zinfandels, heavy, dark zinfandels that need years of aging, and even rare, high-alcohol zinfandels that look and taste like port.

Then, in their exuberant disregard for wine-making tradition, the Californians took the unloved Petite Sirah grape, which had produced a rough, almost black wine, and tamed it into an excellent American equivalent of the great Hermitage wines of the Rhône Valley.

At their best, the Californians have produced rieslings to rival the best in the Rheingau and clarets that have astounded the French. In their zanier moments, they concoct things called Ripple and Bali Hai, and they have even made (God only knows why) a chocolate wine.

California's lively wine world came of age in the early 1960s. Those were the years when Donn Chappellet and Jack Davies left prosperous Los Angeles businesses and came north to grow grapes and make wine, Chappellet to build his magnificent modern winery on Pritchard Hill and Davies to take over the old Schramsberg champagne cellars near Calistoga. During the same time Mike Robbins got out of engineering in San Francisco to start Spring Mountain, and Rodney Strong wound up a career in show business to start Sonoma Vineyards.

Scores of others have followed those early dropouts from the lockstep corporate world. Some are young, and come with a wife and baby and a lot of hope. Others, like Ely Callaway, are older. After his retirement as chairman

of Burlington Industries in New York City, Callaway built his dream winery in a mountain pass north of San Diego.

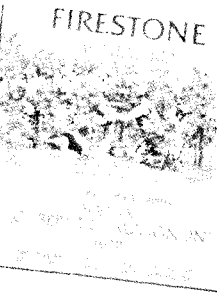
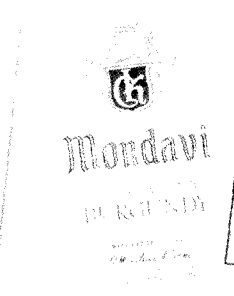
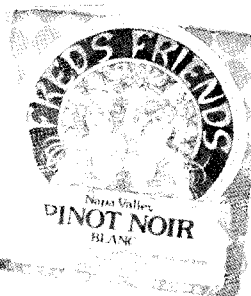
A few, like Brooks Firestone, the grandson of the founder of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, are quite wealthy. He established the Firestone Vineyard, a multimillion-dollar operation, in a corner of his father's cattle ranch north of Santa Barbara.

Several, like Justin Meyer at Franciscan Vineyards and Mike Grgich at Grgich Hills Cellars, both in Napa, came to work for someone else (Christian Brothers and Chateau Montelena) and could not resist going out on their own. Still others, like Robert Mondavi, broke away from conservative wine-growing families to try new methods and strive for new levels of excellence.

The 1960s were a time of change for the traditionalists, too. Ernest and Julio Gallo, who make more wine than anyone in the world, began to think of producing top quality table wines. August Sebastiani, who started out, with his father Samuele, producing anonymous bulk wines for eastern bottlers, began his extraordinary rise from obscurity to become one of the largest producers of premium wines in the state. Even today, as Sebastiani watches his bottling lines clank on through the night, he shakes his head in disbelief and says: "I don't know what we're doing, but we're obviously doing something right."

The Sebastianis in Sonoma, the Martinis in Napa, the Mirassous in Santa Clara, and the Wentes and Concannons in Livermore are elder statesmen of California wine country. They were a bit disconcerted by the bearded, sandaled youngsters who came into the valleys at first—the "boutiquers" August Sebastiani calls them—but they were generous with advice and encouragement. They also observed, when anyone asked, that wine booms are inevitably followed by wine busts.

In 1973, they were proven right. There was too much wine around and the country was in the middle of a recession. Prices plummeted. Curiously, it was not the naive "boutiquers" who suffered, but the big newcomers: Sonoma Vineyards almost went bankrupt, and Pillsbury, which had purchased Souverain Cellars, took a look around and decided to get out of the business.



The original Souverain, in Napa, is now called Rutherford Hills and is owned by several of the partners of Freemark Abbey, one of the better-known premium wineries in the valley. The big winery in the Alexander Valley is still called Souverain, but it is owned by a limited partnership of growers from the three North Coast counties—Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino.

Ask a French grower what he considers the most important element in growing wine grapes and he will say, without hesitation, the soil. Ask a California grower the same question and he will say the soil—and the climate. The accepted wisdom holds that California "has no vintages because every year is the same—perfect." But every year is decidedly not the same in California, as anyone who has read about the recent two-year drought in the west should know. Most of California's best vineyards are at about the same latitude as Algeria. To make wines of the caliber of the best French and German wines in what amounts to a Mediterranean climate obviously takes some doing. What's more, instead of having one benign climate all the time, California has many different climates.

Back in 1938, two University of California scientists, Albert Winkler and Maynard Amerine, classified these climates by their average daily temperatures during the growing season. They came up with five regions. Region I includes parts of Sonoma and Napa and corresponds to the temperature in Trier, Germany, and in Beaune in the Burgundy region of France. Region II takes in larger sections of Sonoma and Napa and corresponds to the Piedmont region of Italy and most of Bordeaux.

What is especially interesting is that Professors Winkler and Amerine found little pockets of region I weather all over the state, including places that had been assumed to be fit only for cactus and jackrabbits.

That is why Ely Callaway, today, grows grapes and makes wine in a mountain pass not too far from the Mexican border, why Brooks Firestone can produce superb wines on what looks like nothing but grazing land northwest of Los Angeles, and why Monterey County, once used mostly for growing lettuce and fruit, is becoming one of the most important wine regions of the country.

Certain mountain passes funnel cool, damp winds off the ocean each night, offsetting the hot sun of the day and providing the minimal moisture fine grapes need to thrive. These micro-climates, as they are called, make California the wine paradise it has become.

But what about the wines themselves? Compared to what they were 15 years ago, most California wines are exceptionally good, but compared to what they could be 10 or 20 years from now, they are probably only fair. There is, unfortunately, a tendency to compare California wines to French wines, vintage for vintage, but it just doesn't work.

In northern California, 1974 was a great year. In Bordeaux it was average. California wines often develop more rapidly than Bordeaux wines. A 1974 California cabernet probably will overshadow a 1974 Bordeaux right now. Ten years hence, just the opposite might be true.

California Pinot Noirs rarely match good Burgundies, which are made from the same grape, but Californians keep trying. "We will get it. I know we will," predicts Richard Peterson, president and winemaker at Monterey Vineyards.

When skeptical Easterners shrug, the Californians bring up chardonnay. This shy-bearing grape produces the great white wines of Burgundy, from Chablis and the fashionable Pouilly-Fuissé to the rare Montrachet. Twenty years ago, old vineyard hands scoffed at newcomers who set out to match those wines. Today, if there is any area where the Californians consistently come up to and surpass the French, it is in its fine chardonnays.

The chardonnays of such wineries as Chateau St. Jean, Freemark Abbey, Chateau Montelena, David Bruce, and Burgess Cellars are wines of the first rank. Costing up to \$12 a bottle, they are not for everyday drinking. Moreover, they are produced in such small quantities that few people get to try them, regardless of cost. Until recently, fanatical California drinkers snapped them up, practically at the winery doors.

David Bruce's chardonnays, the zinfandels of Ridge Vineyards or Clos du Val, and the cabernets of Heitz Cellar or

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Judging the Jugs

Franciscan Vineyard's Burgundy. A recent addition to the ranks of California generic wines, this one has been winning prizes everywhere, and deservedly so. Resembles a much more expensive wine.

C.K. Mondavi Burgundy. A slightly oaky taste that is most appealing. One of the last of the old-style, full-bodied jug wines still widely available at a reasonable price.

Gallo Hearty Burgundy. Immensely popular across the nation. The Model A of American table wines, it seems to have lost some of its heartiness in recent years. Worth trying nonetheless, just to see what all the fuss is about.

Sebastiani Vineyards Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon. It's fairly expensive for a jug wine, but the genuine cabernet style makes it worth the money.

Robert Mondavi Red Table Wine. One of the first of the new breed of jug wines created in the European tradition for more sophisticated tastes. Drier and a bit more subtle than old-fashioned jug wines.

Navalle Burgundy. A better than average jug wine from Inglenook. From a second level of wines under this famous label.

Inglenook's North Coast Counties Vintage Burgundy. Better, but less widely available than the Navalle Burgundy, Vintage Burgundy is a big, rich wine similar in style to the Franciscan. It also costs a few cents more.

Fetzer Mendocino Premium Red. An excellent wine made entirely of carignane grapes and aged in small oak casks.

Sebastiani Mountain Pinot Chardonnay. The Mountain Pinot Chardonnay doesn't have the varietal quality of the Mountain Cabernet, but it is a good, fresh white wine. Beats most of the blends called, unfortunately, "Chablis."

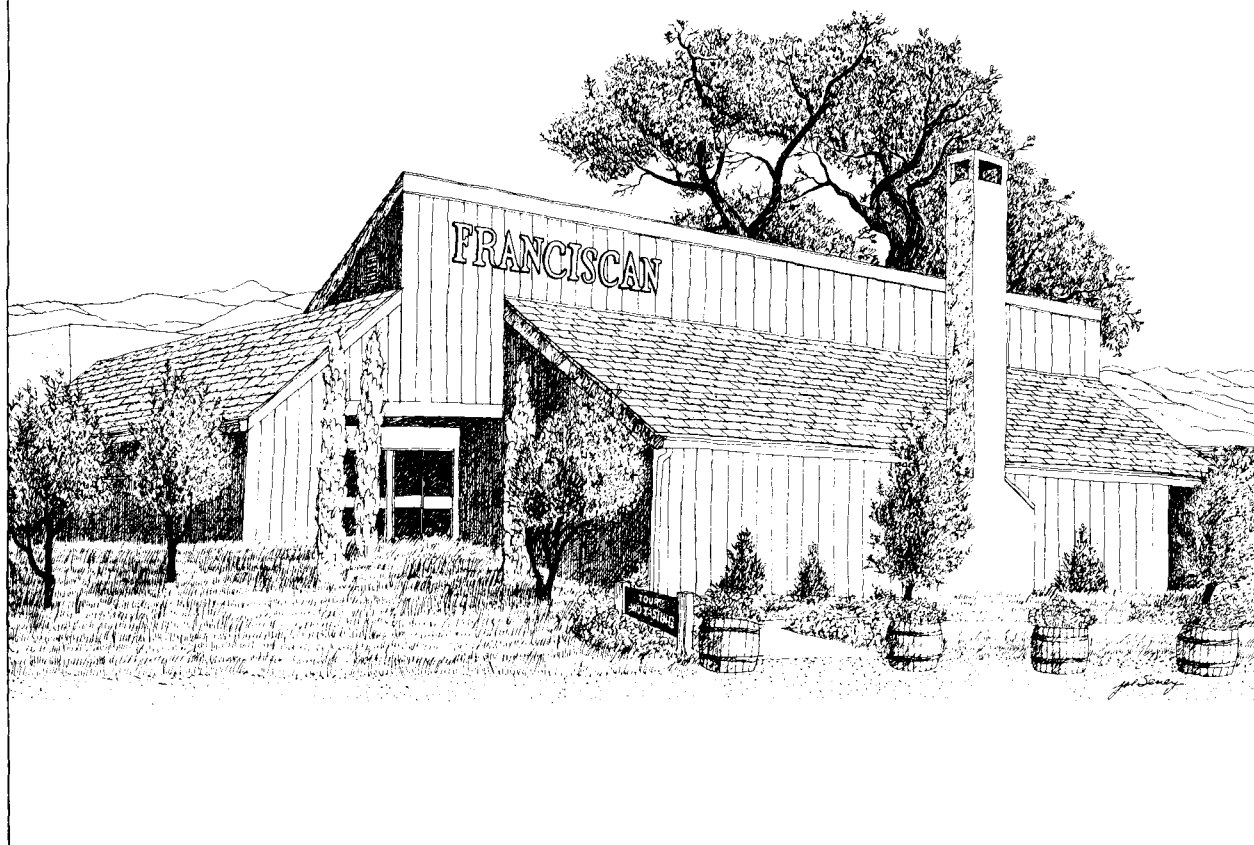
Gallo Chablis Blanc. A little sweet, but a consistent value and widely available. Better than the Hearty Burgundy and best when drunk extremely cold.FP

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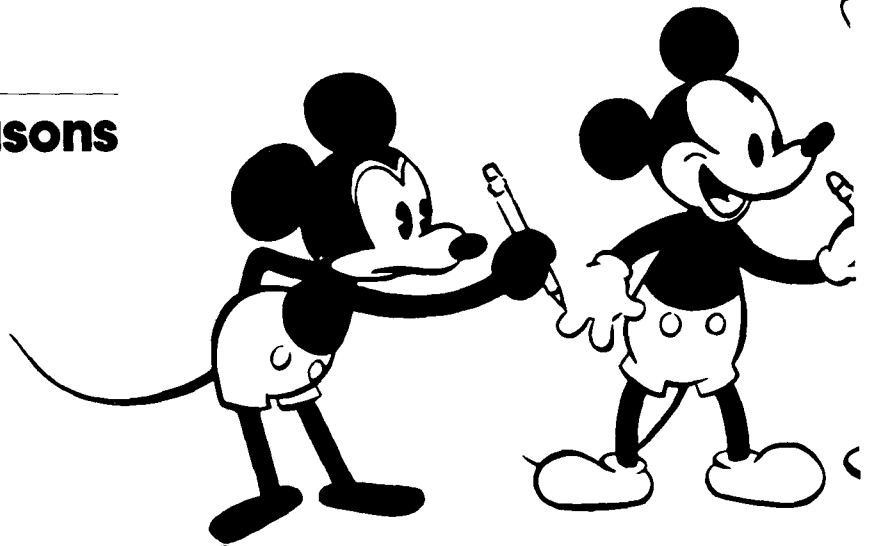
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THE ARTS

A Mouse for All Seasons

by John Culhane

*"You're the top!
You're the Colosseum,
You're the top!
You're the Louvre Museum,
You're a melody from a symphony
by Strauss,
You're a Bendel bonnet,
A Shakespeare sonnet,
You're Mickey Mouse."**



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MICKEY MOUSE has always been a star. When Mickey first played New York City's Music Hall, Cole Porter would bring his dinner guests there just to see the cartoon. In 1935, Arturo Toscanini asked that *The Band Concert* be stopped and re-run because he so enjoyed the Mousetro's sly caricature.

Arguably the best-known imaginary creature in history, Mickey Mouse will be 50 years old on November 18. From poor kids to presidents and once-and-future kings, millions have given their hearts to this cartoon personality. *The New York Times* reported in 1935 that "the King of England won't go to the movies unless Mickey Mouse is on the bill." Today, Emperor Hirohito wears a Mickey Mouse watch.

That this mouse is still so loved is indicated by the dimensions of his 50th birthday party. Celebrations will include a black-tie dinner attended by the President of the United States at the Library of Congress; a party at the White House for Mickey and some heretofore underprivileged children, hosted by Amy Carter; an NBC television special; and retrospectives at the Chicago Film Festival, the American Film Institute Theater at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. At New York's Broadway Theater—which was called the Colony when Mickey made his debut in *Steamboat Willie*, "the FIRST animated cartoon with SOUND," at 2 PM on Sunday, November 18, 1928—a plaque will be dedicated exactly a half century later.

Mickey began life as an expression of Walt Disney's innate optimism. The car-

toonist had just lost his job—making Oswald the Rabbit cartoons for a New York distributor named Mintz—but instead of sinking into depression, Walt came up with Mickey.

"Walt designed a mouse, but it wasn't very good," Otto Messmer, creator and designer of Felix the Cat, once told me. "He was long and skinny. Ub Iwerks redesigned the character."

"It was the standardized thing," Iwerks—the one animator on Disney's staff who had not stayed with Mintz—told me in 1967. "Pear-shaped body, ball on top, couple of thin legs. If you gave it long ears, it was a rabbit. Short ears, it was a cat. Ears hanging down, a dog. With an elongated nose it became a mouse. Mickey was the same basic figure, initially."

Initially. But Iwerks made the ears big circles—no matter which way the head turned. In fact, Mickey's face is a trinity of wafers—and the circular symbol, as C.G. Jung has told us, "always points to the single most vital aspect of life—its ultimate wholeness." Simple round forms portray "the archetype of self," he said, "which, as we know from experience, plays the chief role in uniting apparently irreconcilable opposites and is therefore best suited to compensate the split-mindedness of the age."

Personally, I have always thought that the secret of Mickey's appeal lies in the fact that his design is the perfect expression of what he symbolizes—survival. "Our work is a caricature of life," Disney told me in 1951. Mickey is a caricature of the optimistic adventurer that mankind has had to be to survive through the centuries. Somehow, the three interlocked circles that make up his famous face communicate that.

This is pretty heavy to hang on a

cartoon rodent, and yet, things have kept happening involving Mickey for half a century now that suggest he is communicating something more profound than did Felix the Cat or the Kewpie Doll—or any of the other fads he has outlived.

There is even a fairy-tale ring to the fact that it was Disney's third try that succeeded. The first Mickey Mouse cartoon, *Plane Crazy*, in which Mickey burlesqued Lindbergh's conquest of the Atlantic, could not find a distributor; nor could the second, *Gallop'n' Gauch'o*, in which the mouse caricatures Douglas Fairbanks the swashbuckler and rescues Minnie from Peg-Leg Pete. Part of the reason was that they were silent cartoons. Al Jolson's *Jazz Singer* had already created a demand for sound pictures, so the indomitable Disney made his third attempt, *Steamboat Willie*, the first synchronized sound cartoon.

BEFORE MICKEY was a year old, the stock market crashed. The optimistic mouse may have succeeded initially because of his winning looks and the novelty of sound, but now he was an idea whose time had come. In the long days of the Depression, fellow optimist FDR found Mickey a tonic. "My husband always loved Mickey Mouse," Eleanor Roosevelt later wrote, "and he always had to have the cartoon in the White House." While Roosevelt battled economic royalists, the epidemic world lawlessness, and fear itself, Mickey took care of a mail bandit (*The Mail Pilot*, 1933), an escaped gorilla (*The Pet Store*, 1933), and a small-time gang of cutthroats (*Shanghaied*, 1934).

It wasn't just morale-building. The mouse is credited with saving at least two other corporations besides the Disney Studio—the Lionel Corporation,

*Cole Porter, "You're the Top"

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