

P and M Staiger

Most Santa Cruz Mountain wineries founded in the sixties and seventies have expanded considerably since they were started production. This is not so at the Staiger winery, perched on the side of a hill above Boulder Creek and off Hopkins Gulch Road.

Paul Staiger (PS) was born in Portland in 1941 and *Marjorie (MS)* in Seattle in 1942, but they both went to college in the Midwest and met there. He graduated in English from Northwestern and she took her degree in psychology from the University of Wisconsin. They were married in 1964. After Paul got his graduate degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Berkeley he took a teaching position in 1967 at San Jose State University and has been there ever since.

They built their home and winery in 1973 and planted their little vineyard in 1974. Since then they have producing small but commercial amounts of wine, supplying virtually all of the man and woman power needed to run the operation.

I interviewed them in their home on a cold winter day, before the toasty glow of their fireplace. The home can be seen by consumers in the photograph on the label of all their wines.

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CS: Tell me about your interest in wine and how it got started.

PS: It was in Paris in 1959, in the summer; I was eighteen. I was going to school there and this was my first experience with really good food and wine of any kind. When we came out here we started drinking California wines and we toured the Napa Valley in the winter of 1962. We visited all, I think, eight wineries at that time.

We bought some of the Louis Martini Cabernet Sauvignon Private Reserve from the Monte Rosso Vineyard in Sonoma. I think we got a case of 1955 Cabernet and 1958 Pinot noir. It amazed me how different those wines were from the standard line. And I wanted to know why they were different. Part of it was from the fact that the wines came from that specific vineyard up there in the Mayacamas Mountains between Napa and Sonoma. I was surprised to see what a specific vineyard could do for the production of a wine.

CS: It's interesting that you were doing exactly the same thing my wife and I were doing, only you were ten years younger. We first toured Napa in 1961 and bought a case of BV Cabernet Private Reserve.

PS: We also went by Stony Hill¹ and I liked the size of that operation. It seemed to me to be something that could be managed. I thought this was something doable.

So I was going to school in Berkeley and then we came down here. We started making wine as amateurs then in 1967.

At first we started buying bulk wine along Hecker Pass and we bottled it.

MS: We also visited Ed Gillick's winery off Blossom Hill Road.² We knew him quite well.

PS: We used to second pick that vineyard. A friend of mine in Oregon sent me a bottle of the wine that was Sylvaner (he thought it was White Riesling). So we made wine from those vines.

CS: What was the first wine you made?

¹ On Spring Mountain (BW 4461), founded in 1953.

² BW 4445 founded in 1950. Went out of business in 1972. The vineyard is now a housing development south of Blossom Hill Road in East Los Gatos.

PS: In 1967 we bought four tons of Zinfandel from John Roffinella³ on Hecker Pass.

MS: We had a little hand crusher and that tiny hand press you saw down stairs.

PS: We had a cottage on a hill in Los Gatos and the only access was a flight of stairs of 65 steps. We carried all that Zin up those stairs and crushed it at our house. Next year we bought Zin from Roffinella, but from a different vineyard. The second year wasn't as good. Then in 1969 we founded out that the Novitiate was going to abandon their vineyards up above the winery. That was when we were second-picking the Gillick vineyard.

CS: What varieties did you get there?

PS: Cabernet Sauvignon, Sylvaner and Grenache.

CS: He used to call that "True Riesling."

PS: Brother William at the Novitiate told me what they really were. Gillick had sold his property about 1962 to the Church. They were going to put a school out there. But it didn't happen and they eventually sold it for sub-division. He was just sitting on that property when I knew him. In exchange for pruning and picking his vineyard the Novitiate would take some of his grapes from him. He had a lot of problems with his cooperage; much of it was tainted.

We also made a Pinot noir from the vines out in front of the Almaden Vineyard on Blossom Hill Road. They were the vines that lined the driveway when you came in.

MS: It was just the two of us. We got permission from someone there. I can remember the tourists coming in and out.

But the Novitiate abandoned their vineyards right around the seminary there in Los Gatos. In 1970 we got a lease on them from Father Charvet. Starting that year we did a very fast and crude job of pruning, six acres of Cabernet on the top facing south, on top of St. Joseph's Hill. And there were another six or seven acres of White Riesling that had been planted in the fifties. That was just on top of the hill behind the seminary. There was a beautiful little lake up there, and a shrine. And in front there were about five acres of Grenache, which we also picked. WE made a rosé out of it.

CS: Just you two?

PS: No, there was a group of people involved.

MS: But we did a lot of it ourselves. Next year we did the pruning and did a better job.

PS: We had started late that first year. Bob Mullin came down from Woodside Vineyards to help. And we also had help from Dave Bennion at Ridge. They showed us how to prune the vines properly, along with Father Charvet and Brother Williams.

There was a lay worker in the office at the Novitiate, John Dach, and he wanted to get a bonded winery going. (That was not our thought at that point.) He joined us and he had found a piece of land up on Bear Creek Road, the first Christmas tree farm there, with an old adobe horse barn. It was about a half-mile up the road on the right. There was also an adobe house there. At one time that had been a vineyard, too.

So John Dach got the owner to let him bond that horse barn. That became Bear Creek Vineyards.

³ A grape broker who also owned vineyard land there. His father, Cesare, had owned the land on which the Cassa Brothers Winery (BW 4463, founded in 1948), now Fortino Winery (1972), stood, and had a bonded winery there after Prohibition for a few years (BW 2248).

CS: Dach's name sounds familiar. Didn't he have a winery later in the Anderson Valley?⁴

PS: Yes, he's the one. Another person involved was Hanns Kobler, a waiter at Jack's Restaurant in San Francisco.

MS: He's at Lazy Creek Vineyard now.⁵ He and his wife would bring great food down when we were working in the vineyard.

PS: He and Dach were partners, very briefly, but they had a falling out.

We didn't really intend to sell any of this wine. But between us three and our friends we made about 500 gallons of wine and divided it up. But we did it legally, since it was bonded.⁶ But we never sold it.

CS: Was there a label?

PS: No. Maybe John Dach had one, but we were really just interested in making the wine. We had the bond there for three years. It was 1970, 1971 and 1972. The bond was in John's name, but we were all in it together. The grapes we got mostly from the Novitiate. We had the Cabernet on St. Joseph's Hill, which never ripened sufficiently. And there was the White Riesling on the terraces. It was really a beautiful place. The highest vineyard was about 1200 feet. You can look up from Highway 17 today and see a ridge where the terraced Riesling was at about 900 feet. To the right was Mt. St. Joseph's, which you can find on some town maps. Now it's just a clearing. They also had Cabernet at the vineyard at Bear Creek Road and Highway 17. When they moved down toward Hollister they planted some there too.

CS: I think they had some on the Guadalupe Vineyard at the mouth of the Almaden Valley, where Camden and Coleman Roads come together.

PS: The Cabernet we made was really hard, high on acid and tannic. But the Riesling was lovely. It was a luscious wine. But we didn't have any way to keep the fermentation cool. We did make small batches, and that helped. The Grenache was not much. We made a red wine and a rosé.

CS: What was guiding your winemaking hands at that time?

PS: I talked mainly to Brother Williams at the Novitiate and to Dave Bennion. And I read Amerine, and I had their lab manual, and I had Winkler.

After this experience "M" (Marjorie) and I decided to make wine on our own. At that point we started looking for land and Dave helped a lot with that. (Part of that was because the Ridge people owned several parcels around here in the mountains.)

We set up a thermometer on different plots.

CS: So at this time you were actually thinking about building a little winegrowing estate?

PS: Exactly. That would be about 1971. We had a thermometer at the Novitiate; it was one of those "U" shaped high-low things that Taylor makes. We didn't go out every day, but we had three thermometers eventually. And there was one here and one on the San Jose-Soquel Road on a piece of Ridge property. Later there was one on a piece about halfway between Soquel and the summit; they called it Hester Creek. Charlie Rosen had a little test plot going there, of Merlot and Cabernet

⁴ Dach Vineyard near Philo in the Anderson Valley (BW 4573) founded in 1971.

⁵ BW 4883, near Philo, founded in 1975.

⁶ Bear Creek Vineyards (BW 4573), listed as Los Altos, California in BATF records.

Sauvignon. But I don't think they ever got many grapes, because of the deer and birds. There was also a piece of land in a box canyon further down toward Soquel. In late 1971 we came across this property, through a realtor in Los Gatos. It was sub-divided into ten-acre parcels. Ours proved to be a fairly coherent piece of land, compared to other pieces. The Hester Creek plot was too big for us then. We have five acres in vines now.

CS: Did you pick up any of the winegrowing history around here then?

Local History

PS: We picked that up concurrently. In 1972 we met Dante Locatelli. We were out here looking at the land and he came by and told us about this having been a Zinfandel vineyard here before. But we had made the decision to buy this place before we talked to him.

We could tell there had been a vineyard here. We found stakes around and up the hill. Locatelli told us that this was a Zinfandel vineyard and had failed during a drought early in the century.

CS: There were a couple of terribly dry years during the 1920s.

PS: Locatelli said the soil cracked and opened up and the vines just died. But he was mostly interested in the Empire Grade property.⁷

But he told us where the winery had been up here and we walked over and looked at it. The big steel hoops were still there. This was called Seven Springs Ranch. I don't know whether they used that name for the winery.

One thing we didn't realize from the times we were out here was how much wind we would get in the afternoons in May. Dante had said that it was a windy spot. In that sense it's like Mt. Eden and Monte Bello. And it hurts the set in the late spring. Some years it will hit the Cabernet, others the Chardonnay. In terms of our crop size it largely has to do with what happens in May. I guess that Chardonnay is hurt more often than Cabernet. That has a continuing effect on our yields.

Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains that are exposed to the San Mateo coast, as we are here, have a real problem with these spring winds. We get them coming up from Monterey Bay and coming down from the San Mateo coast. You have to get down just about to Felton to get away from that cold wind coming off the ocean. Empire Grade really gets it, but I am not too sure about Bonny Doon. That area is a bit lower.

CS: How about the soil up here?

The Vineyard

PS: We planted about everywhere we could. But in some cases, like with the Cabernet on the ridge, it is really very shallow and full of shale. It really isn't much suited for growing anything. Most of the soil, however, is coarse grained marine sandstone. Toward the top of the hill behind us it gets into a lot of mud-stone, with a lot of marine fossils. But we don't plant much on that. Mostly it's the marine sandstone. It is fairly well drained and yet it is dense enough to retain plenty of moisture. We found that it goes down fairly deep. First there are a couple of feet of small particles and below that you get chunks of bigger stuff for about twenty feet. Then you hit solid sandstone.

CS: What's the process by which you create this estate?

⁷ Later the G. Locatelli Winery (BW 3682) became the first Sunrise Winery in the late seventies, before it moved to the Picchetti Ranch. See Sunrise interview.

PS: Dave Bennion was up here several times and advised us on how to plant it. He was very encouraging. And, you know, he wanted to encourage people to plant grape vines in the mountains here. Talking to Fran Bennion in recent years I get the idea that perhaps this was the scale that he would really have liked to be on himself.

I recall being up there very early and talking about what I was doing, and I got the impression that he might have wanted me to be his assistant up there. That was before Paul Draper came. And he liked my tasting ability. And he liked that I was outspoken about what I thought about a wine. But when he was up here later he was really interested in how to plant this place. I can remember the two of us walking along the lower road and we talked about the differences in the slopes and what would be best to plant here and there.

Bob Mullin also helped. And I was interested in his operation because of the scale of it. It's very much like ours in that sense. He crushes above in the car port and has the same kind of chute system as we do.

CS: How about getting the vines in.

PS: We had the nursery going that first winter. We got the cuttings from David Bruce, the Chardonnay and the Cabernet. That little bit of Pinot noir we got from a nursery. Later we found it was too hot and that's where we put in the Merlot. We rooted the cuttings, so they were on their own roots when we put them in.

CS: Have you seen any signs of phylloxera over the years?

PS: Maybe. I'm not sure. I'm not sure that I could recognize it. We do have eutypa. And we have done a lot of retraining because of that after cutting back on the dead wood. We'd take up a sucker from the bottom. Not too many, but each year we've done a few.

CS: How about Pierce disease?

PS: So far, no. But I haven't put out any traps for sharpshooters yet. I've seen some things that make me wonder, but no clear signs yet.

CS: What kind of a take did you get when you brought the new vines out of the nursery?

PS: We knew we had about 2.5 acres for the Chardonnay and about the same for the Cabernet. We started off with about 1500 cuttings each. The replanting went all right, but they were slow coming up because of the 1976-77 drought. It took us longer than we thought to get the vines up the stakes to where we wanted them. The first year they had been in a trench up above about 200 feet long. That's where we had the 3000 cuttings. The take rate there was about 90%. Next year we dug them up and the take rate there was well over 80% in the vineyard. We had to water them. We had plastic pipes going out there and used used long garden hoses. And we had a small nursery going for replanting next year. Since then we've also been able to propagate by layering the vines when we had a blank to fill. But we don't layer unless the vine fits. The second year we put in the Pinot noir.

CS: How many years did it take to get real vines?

PS: Four to five years. I'd say 1979 was our first real crop here.

CS: So that's when you really move to make this an estate operation. What do you figure your temperature accumulation here is?

PS: The average is about 2850 "degree days." Some years it goes over 3000. So we are a high region II, at least on paper. But that doesn't tell the whole story. Our evenings are really cool but the days can be very hot. Our heat peak is fairly short. I think that Bonny Doon is about 2500.

CS: When did the house go up?

PS: In 1973-74. We did crush grapes up here in 1973. September 15 for the Riesling. But we didn't move in until spring of 1974. So we came out here that winter of 73-74, but we hadn't moved in yet. I remember when we brought the cuttings in before we planted them that the road had washed out down below and we had to drag them up here on a little sled. We had brought them up in our Volkswagen bus, which we still have, but the road was out. And we had dragged up a couple of bales of peat moss as well. We had to get them in since we didn't know when the road was going to be fixed.

The Winery

The winery, which is tilt-up concrete had been finished in September of 1973 and the house and my studio was built in 1973-74. So we had made the 1973 wine and then we put in the cuttings. And in the following dormant season we put them out in the field.

CS: Did you design the winery?

PS: The house and winery were designed by Robert Walker, who had been associated with Charles Moore and Bill Turnbull in San Francisco. They had done Sea Ranch up the coast. But I couldn't afford Turnbull, so he introduced me to Bob and Walker did it. He designed it and was also the builder. We had been able to get the property for \$17,500 and the house and winery came in at about \$50,000. The winery is 1000 square feet. If you look at the house from above it looks like a ship and the back of the winery looks like the prow. The engineer who worked with Bob on the plans talked about how the top soil moves. The soil goes around the prow of the boat. They put it on piers, too, which go down through the sandstone into the bedrock.

CS: So you planned the winery to be that size without figuring growth in the future.

PS: We wanted to make about 1000 gallons per year, a gallon per foot. Now we are actually at about 800 gallons. We were going to do it ourselves, except for the picking, including the vineyard chores, like pruning and sulfuring. So if we were going to do it ourselves we had to keep it at that scale. We had talked it over with Father Charvet at the Novitiate; we wanted to know what the two of us together could do. And he said about five acres, which was just about what the usable land for vineyard here was. At that point we were thinking about two tons per acre. Over the years that projection has been pretty good. It takes us about two to three months to prune. That's a couple of hours per day. It's comfortable at that rate.

CS: Do you disk in the cuttings?

PS: I'd like to but we can't. What I have to cultivate is an Italian machine, I guess you'd call it a walking tractor. It's a big rototiller. You actually walk behind it. We use the cuttings for barbecue.

CS: Tell me about the 1973 wine.

PS: We got the Riesling from the Novitiate. It was all volunteer pickers, including a few students from school. It was pretty chaotic, but we were having a good time and learning a lot.

That brings to mind what happened the year before with one of my students. That year we

made some Zinfandel. I had a student up in Napa whose family had a farm along Silverado Trail. That was back when we had Bear Creek in 1972, with John Dach. The deal was that we'd get the grapes and give him back half the wine. This was on a Saturday, and we had several volunteer student pickers. It had been raining something terrible⁸. So I told the pickers that if there was any rot at all on a bunch just to let it drop on the ground. So we ended up with half the crop on the ground. So my student, whose family owned the place, came back later, he was working at the Napa Co-op Winery, and he sees all these grapes all over the place and he really got excited. He was responsible for all this for his father, so he said that we had to pick up all the grapes, put them into boxes, and he hauled them down to the Co-op and they took them and crushed them. That was really an adventure. But that Zinfandel wasn't very good, from the Wheeler vineyard.

The 1973 Riesling we made up here from the Novitiate grapes was not a very good wine. It was sold primarily by Larry Rugani, of Gene's Country Liquors in Los Gatos. He bought lots of it and sold it at a very low price, because I didn't think it was so good.

CS: Who was leasing the vineyards up there, you or Bear Creek Vineyards?

PS: I was actually leasing them and then technically selling them to Bear Creek Vineyards. That was from 1971-1973. And I did the sulfur dusting up there with a little two-cycle job I got from Dave Bennion. I remember one time I was dusting up there at about dawn and I couldn't see very well with the sun coming up and the sulfur dust everywhere. Suddenly I almost trip over the carcass of a deer they shot up there. It was all legal and we had the tags for them, but it was really a shock.

CS: What kind of equipment did you have up here then?

PS: We had that press you saw that we got from Ridge. We still use it. Then we got our crusher-stemmer, but at first it wasn't motorized. We were also getting American oak barrels from Ridge, for about \$30 apiece. But since then it's been all French oak. And we have our stainless barrels, also.

CS: How did you handle the Riesling back then?

PS: We fermented it that that big black plastic tank and then it went into oak barrel for about four months. We bottled it early. It was a hot wine, high in alcohol. I made it as if it were a Chardonnay and sold it for about \$1.50 a bottle. I think that Larry took about 150 of the 175 cases we made. We were concentrating on getting the house together and the nursery at that point.

CS: Was there a commercial red wine in 1973?

MS: No. There was almost no Cabernet up there that year.

CS: What were you looking for in those early years so far as profits were concerned?

PS: Break even, pay for itself, but some years we made some money. But I was always putting money back into the operation. I always thought of this as an experiment. I wanted to make the best wine I could off this particular plot of ground. Always fine tuning. If we had one bad barrel it went down the hill. But at the first everything was pretty chaotic. I was always adjusting variables to get it better. When we prune we're not looking to maximize crop size. From 1979 on, when we had our own grapes come in in large enough number, we have been testing continually. Skin contact, different coopers, all of that.

CS: So this is pretty much the kick you get from the business. Playing with variables and testing the outcomes.

⁸ The 1972 vintage in the North Coast came in during a series of storms that made the vineyards seas of mud.

PS: Yes. That's it.

CS: Back to the vintages, it sounds as if 1973 wasn't a very important commercial year.

Vintage 1974

PS: No, it wasn't. 1974 was far more important. In that year we got Zinfandel down in Templeton from an outfit later called Old Casteel, off Vineyard Drive.⁹ I was directed to this place by Roy Thomas of the Monterey Peninsula Winery. This was really distinctive fruit, beautiful blackberry flavors, and later on I talked to Dave Bennion and learned about your research on Zinfandel history and decided that this might be a different clone, perhaps that Black St. Peters you wrote about.¹⁰ It was so distinctive that I thought it might be that clone.

In 1975 we got our Zinfandel from the same source. We did that through 1978. That was our main emphasis then. In 1977 and 1978 the Zinfandel also came from Templeton, but from a different vineyard. The Sandahl Vineyard. (Maurice Sandahl was the waiter captain at the Scandia Restaurant in Los Angeles. We met Nate Chroman through him.) One year we made a late harvest Zin from Sandahl that was about 16% alcohol. In 1976 we got some Chardonnay out at Ruby Hill near Pleasanton in the Livermore Valley. We also got some from Doug Meador's vineyard, Ventana, in Monterey County. We also got a Chenin blanc and a Cabernet Sauvignon down there. These others, outside the Zinfandel, were mainly done experimentally.

All this time we were working to bring in the vineyard up here.

CS: But all the time you are emphasizing Zinfandel production you raising a vineyard without Zinfandel.

PS: Looking back on it we might have put in some Zinfandel. But it's probably too late now.

MS: I think there was a time when we were thinking about keeping up our buying Zinfandel, but the more we got involved here the less we wanted to go out on the road and buy other people's grapes.

PS: And we were just buying a couple of tons here and there, and you can't keep a source forever buying at that level. Sandahl was down to about a half ton per acre. So we could buy it all.

MS: Eventually he pulled the vines. I think he put in rye.

PS: The last year the vineyard produced anything was in 1979 and he did not sell the grapes to us; he wanted them for himself. The wines from there had that dry, blackberry, very distinctive Templeton flavor.

CS: Historically Templeton has a reputation for Zinfandel going back early in the century. I think it's partly the maritime air influence. If those vines were out at Shandon the grapes wouldn't be that good.

What were you doing to get ready to be a Cabernet producer as your vines matured up here?

PS: We got Cab grapes in 1976 from Monterey, but that was more a curiosity than anything else. We picked them down there on December 4 from the Macfarland vineyards, near Ventana. But those were the best Cabernet grapes we ever got down there, the least vegetative and the best pH. I really don't care much for grapes from down there. And I'm not very keen on the Chardonnays; I think they taste like canned grapefruit juice. I have this memory from earlier when I would drink grapefruit juice

⁹ Old Casteel Vineyards (BW 5013) bonded in 1980, no longer in operation.

¹⁰ "A Viticultural Mystery Solved." *California Historical Quarterly* (Summer 1978).

taste like canned grapefruit juice. I have this memory from earlier when I would drink grapefruit juice from the can and there was a little metallic taste; that's what they remind me of.

CS: What about selling this better wine in the later years. How much wine are you talking about?

PS: Between 200 and 300 cases. I was doing the selling, which I just abhorred, but I did it. There was an operation in Los Angeles, Bacchus, that bought a lot and I would truck it over to Fremont and ship it down. We had won some gold medals at the LA and Orange County Fairs, so there was pretty good demand for our wines down there. We sold Zinfandel, Cabernet and Merlot down there quite well. The Merlot was from Templeton. But we couldn't get the grapes the way we wanted. That's the problem of buying grapes from others. Later Joe Kimbro handled our wines, the Monterey Bay Wine Company. He used to be a salesman for Bargetto.

MS: Larry Rugani still took a lot of our wine. And we'd take wine up to Beltramo's in Menlo Park and they would taste it and then order some.

CS: Tell me what the vines here are doing in the late seventies.

In The Vineyard

PS: The drought years of 1976-77 really slowed them down, so they don't really get up to producing until 1978-79. Some of them took three and four years to get as high as we wanted them. When we first planned the vineyard we did about what David Bruce had done. We just put up a single wire trellis. We decided to cane prune and renew the cane each year. We still do that. But we found that we had to come back between 1978 and 1981 and retrain the vines and change the trellis. The wind was worse than we thought and there was no way to keep the new canes from breaking in the spring. And we were getting bad set because the flowers were just being blown apart. First we went to cross arms. And we planted pine trees as a wind break. Eventually we lowered the vines and added wires so that we could put the fruiting cane up over and down. Then what grows during the season grows up into the cross arms. This was an evolutionary process; it took several years to do this. I have gotten to like this idea of a vertical trellis. But I don't like the idea of hedging during the summer. I do some topping to keep it neat for the bird nets later on.

CS: Cutting back the vines like that makes me think of eutypa and the danger that comes from making large cuts like that. How do you protect the vines? Benlate?

PS: No, we use a tree seal. It's not a fungicide. More and more people are going to a physical barrier rather than a fungicide. Ridge now uses a redwood paint stain.

CS: Is that for all cuts or just larger ones?

PS: Larger ones, bigger than you thumb. We don't cover the regular pruning cuts.

CS: Then you don't have a very virulent eutypa situation.

MS: We'll go out in the winter and prune for two or three hours and then and the end go through and cover the cuts. We used to prune when it was misting but we don't do that any more.

We take our time, though, when we are pruning. Sometimes we'll ask each other how we should do a certain vine. You'll go by an old favorite here and there, and we'll remember we had to do this or that to it, and you see how it came out. We do enjoy the vineyard more than the winery.

eutypa. That may be a little much, but people don't prune much when it's drizzling any more.

PS: They have it bad down at Kathryn Kennedy's place. They are planning on retraining most of their vines.

CS: How about soil management? Do you use an herbicide?

PS: We use Roundup down the rows, since we can't cross cultivate. I do it twice, usually before bud break and again before the canes start to drop over.

I have the English herbicide spreader that throws little droplets, battery powered. It spins off a pattern about a meter wide. But I go out and make sure the vineyard is completely suckered before I use it. We probably don't have to be so careful. But I want to be.

CS: How about pests?

MS: We have to put the nets on for the birds. It's really a job. It takes two to put them on, but one person can take them off. Paul is usually back in school by the time they should come off, so I end up taking most of them down.

CS: I hate that job. I'll bet in a few years you'll hire someone to do it. That's what high schools are for; they have all kinds of people not out for sports who'll be glad to do it for you.

PS: I've thought about it.

CS: What about deer. Do you have a good deer fence?

MS: We have a good one, but they still come in, and the dogs are getting a little older and not barking as much.

CS: Gophers?

MS: Terrible.

PS: We used to use strychnine but then we lost a dog.

MS: Now we use "Gopher Grain." You drop it in the whole.

PS: When the vines are well established I don't think they're all that tasty for them.

CS: Burnap says it's the number one pest problem. And his vineyard is older than yours.

MS: We have lots of gopher mounds but they go for other things too. Our vines are fatter than Ken's, even though his are older. I don't think they go for the bigger ones.

CS: Maybe it's the depth of soil. Yours is much deeper. That may be the answer. Gophers don't go down eight feet to nibble.

Let's go back now to the transition between 1978 and when you become an estate operation.

PS: In 1978 we got a little crop off our vines. At first we were getting very small berries, but that changed. The skin to grape ratio was too high. I was really worried at first. That wine was really tannic. And that's when we decided to put in some Merlot where the Pinot noir was, in the late seventies and early eighties. But we really lagged behind in that spot because it does get gophers and it took a long time for it to be ready.

it took a long time for it to be ready.

We did make some Zinfandel in 1979 from the Brown vineyard in Paso Robles.

Our 1979 Chardonnay gave us about 1.5 tons. First we picked a few boxes and ran a sample which ran 22 Brix. Then we used those grapes as a starter. On September 21 we picked the rest at 23.5. We had some student help.

CS: You'll get about 100 cases. How do you remember that wine?

PS: As being too high in alcohol. It came out at 13.6%. We also made a very small amount of Cabernet. Very small amount.

In 1980 we picked the Chardonnay on October 11 at 25.5 Brix. We got two tons. The crop was small and it really ripened fast. We really were fighting this soaring Brix early on.

In 1981 2.75 tons, picked on September 26 at 24.5 Brix. With this wine I started using the ice water bath for the plastic fermenters, to keep the temperature down. Before this we had been fermenting Chardonnay in barrels. So now we put these 50 gallon grey Italian Marischino cherry plastic shipping barrels, and three of these would sit in the big plastic bin liner. Then we'd bring up block ice from town and put it around the plastic barrels in water. I note here that the fermentation always stayed below 59 degrees. We bought ice every other day.

Now we get some Cabernet Sauvignon. We picked it on October 3. Brix was 25.5. We pressed at 2 degrees Brix. We had about .75 tons. That really isn't very much. This year (1993) we knew that we weren't going to get a commercial size crop so we didn't bother netting.

Our 1982 Chardonnay got lots of good press. *Wine Spectator* named it one of the top ten Chardonnays. We used Chanson yeast, a very slow fermenter. We picked at 24 Brix and had 3.7 tons. The total acid was 1.06, very high. We let it go about halfway through malo-lactic and then sterile filtered, so that lowered the acid some.

CS: Do you have to inoculate for ML?

PS: No, it just goes. After it is about halfway through, we sterile filter it. But I don't like a butterscotch flavor in Chardonnay. I think that's what people call "buttery." We use paper chromatography to tell how far we've gone on converting the malic acid. We are typically high, about .90 acid.

CS: Where do you like the acid to end up?

PS: About .80. I like a lean, somewhat Burgundian style.

In 1982 we got two tons of Cabernet Sauvignon and picked it at 24.4 Brix. TA of .81. High temperature during fermentation was 75 degrees.

CS: How do you keep it that low.

PS: Those black bins are sitting on the concrete floor and they're fairly shallow. And we open things up at night so the fermentation temperatures stay down pretty well for the Cabernet. Our night temperatures go way down and that really helps.

In 1983 we got about three tons of Chardonnay. 23 Brix. We had some rain and some rot. TA was .90. There were still just two tons of Cabernet, picked at 24 Brix, TA was .89. I was trying for something lighter. Five days on the skins. Previous years had been so tannic. But this early wine was not what we wanted. It was just too harsh.

1984 Chardonnay picked on September 21, 23.7 Brix with total acidity of .93. This fermentation got a little hot, up to 65 degrees.

CS: I recall you said you didn't like the grapefruit flavor in Chardonnay, but some people say that's what you get from a long, slow fermentation.

PS: There is a citrus flavor, but I wouldn't call ours grapefruity. It's more lemony. We go into the French oak in about two weeks, some into new barrels, some into year-old oak, and some into the stainless drums. We buy typically three new barrels a year. And we use them for three years. Then we use them for Cabernet. Then we give them away.

CS: Have you tried any sur lie aging in the barrel?

PS: Just a little bit last year. But these are very fine lees. I was rocking the barrels, but I didn't notice any difference. I'm concerned about H₂S. One year we had a mercaptan problem and we had a couple of barrels we had to try and clean up. We sent samples to the Wine Lab. But doing it took about everything out of the wine.

CS: When do the Cabernets start becoming what you were looking for.

PS: It was 1984, and really in 1985. And we still don't leave them very long on the skins. By now the grapes are bigger and by 1986 we had a wine that we didn't have to worry about. But we still don't leave them on the skins for more than a week.

CS: You haven't tried this extended maceration to soften the tannins, as they say?

PS: I haven't tried it. I've read about it. I know I don't like the Pinot noir made that way.

CS: I don't really understand it, but it seems to be working, if you can believe the people who are doing it.

PS: In 1985 we got 3.7 tons of Chardonnay. That was the year we had the H₂S. We picked at 24 Brix. Ten pickers. Our tonnage on the Cabernet dropped down to just one ton. And we added some tartaric acid to bring down the pH. The TA was .81, but the pH was 3.78. We want the pH down to 3.60.

In 1986 we picked the Chardonnay on September 28 at 23.1 Brix and a TA of .87. And we had five tons. That was pretty good. The Cabernet we picked on October 2. 23 Brix, TA .84. Two tons.

In 1987 we picked the Chardonnay September 21 and got about four tons. 23.5 Brix, TA .90. But we had a very bad Cabernet set that year. So we bought some Pinot noir down north of Soledad. A lot of people liked it but I didn't. The Cabernet was picked on October 20 and we got only 1.3 tons. From these data you can see that the Cabernet is being affected most by the ups and downs of berry set.

In 1988 we were back to two tons on the Cabernet. The Chardonnay came in at 1.09 TA, 23.5 Brix. We had ten pickers at \$7.50 per hour.

CS: Why so many to pick a couple of tons?

PS: It's picking on the hillside here. It's slow. We pick first into boxes, then into boxes. Two or three of those guys are just carrying grapes and not picking at all. In 1993 we were up to \$8 and \$10 per hour, but they'll come here before they'll go somewhere else.

MS: The one who drives them up gets \$10; the others get \$8. And we guarantee an eight hour day

MS: The one who drives them up gets \$10; the others get \$8. And we guarantee an eight hour day and they usually finish in seven hours. We have this fellow in Santa Cruz we call and we can call him two days before and he'll have a crew up here. He used to pick here. It would be a nightmare to try and pick it ourselves. They work so fast. They have a half hour for lunch. We're not in this for the money and we want to feel good about this.

CS: I think you're doing the right thing. I'd hate to have people walking off my property at the end of the day mad at me.

How do you determine ripeness? Do you around tasting them like Burnap?

MS: I think that's too unreliable.

CS: It sure is for me, but the people who do it really believe in it. Joe Swan believed absolutely. But I just don't get it. The Ahlgrens pick to taste also.

PS: The two of us go out and collect samples and then test them with the refractometer. We'll take different rows and get as broad a sample as we can.

MS: I try to get a good cross section, from all over.

PS: My samples read higher than hers.

MS: We go out separately and have our separate little bowls and then crush them and test them. And here the top of the vineyard is different than the bottom, and the ends are different from the middle.

CS: Am I correct in thinking that you don't really care as much about the Cabernet as you do the Chardonnay?

PS: Well, Cab doesn't take the attention that Chardonnay does. But I do think that the Chardonnay now is closer to what I want out of it than the Cabernet is.

CS: In my mind I see you as a red wine guy, from those early days when you chose to make those Zinfandels. You could have done Sauvignon blanc.

PS: True. The Zinfandel was there; I liked it. The Sandahl vineyard worked for us. He didn't sell to anyone else. We didn't have to worry about the grower giving us what was left over after he's sold to someone else. That's what happens with some people. I remember back in the seventies going down to Ventana with Merry Edwards, when she was at Mt. Eden, and we really had to stay on top of things to be sure that we were getting what we were supposed to be getting. But it has been between chancy and a disaster any time we haven't had that hands-on, one-on-one relationship with the grower.

MS: The Chardonnay requires more work, so that's why I think Paul talks about it more. It's more of a challenge.

PS: Talking about Sandahl I just noticed this in my journal. 1978 Zinfandel, Brix 26 which soaked to 28.5, TA 1.28.

CS: That is simply fantastic. How did you get that acid number?

16.4%.

1988 is next. Chardonnay was picked on September 16, 1.09 TA, 23.5 Brix. The Cabernet was 1.7 tons, but I don't have the tonnage on the Chardonnay. Cab was 22.5 Brix and TA of .80. We were starting to experiment here with Cabernet picked at lower sugars. We did that in the late eighties.

1989 Chardonnay. Twelve pickers. Six hours. 23.8 Brix. 3 tons. We had three plus tons of Cabernet, five pickers, seven hours. 22.7 Brix.

CS: Your Cabernet numbers are really sounding very Bordeaux-like now.

PS: The 1990 Cabernet was 22.8 Brix, alcohol just over 12%, pH was 3.62. This is where the Merlot goes in, about 20%. It helped soften the Cab, but the grapes have been getting bigger and it is not as harsh as it was. The Chardonnay was picked September 13, 23.1 Brix, TA .95.

CS: It's remarkable how your numbers and picking dates have settled down to a clear pattern.

PS: The acids on the Chardonnays have come down some. But in 1991 we picked the Chardonnay on October 12 at 23.7 Brix. The Cabernet was picked October 13 at 23.3 Brix, TA .84.

CS: Did you ever allow much skin contact with the Chardonnay?

PS: No, not now, but earlier we tried it with the Ruby Hill Chardonnay, but it didn't work well. We didn't like it.

1992 Cabernet was picked on September 25 at 23.5 Brix and TA of .90, which ends up at .77 after malo-lactic. We don't sterile filter the Cabernet. It stays now 18 months in the barrel and then to stainless barrels for about six months, so it is stable after that second summer. Earlier we kept it in wood for two years.

In 1992 the Chardonnay was picked September 11 at 23.2 Brix, TA .855. In recent years the TA has been coming down on the Chardonnay, even when pickled at the same sugar.

Here's 1993. Cabernet on October 2 at 23.8 Brix. TA was .69. That's low.

CS: The rest of Northern California didn't do that. There were thousands of tons of Cabernet hanging all over at 21-22 Brix on that date. Montebello didn't start picking until October 18, after it warmed up again. That was a miracle. Maybe yours came in early because of the low yield.

PS: In 1993 the Chardonnay was picked on September 26 at 23.6 Brix, .825 TA.

Style

CS: What are the variables in the future you think will be in your mind for your wines, variables you'll play with to improve quality?

PS: Yeasts have stabilized for us. But we still try new yeasts on a small scale. We are also experimenting with different forests for wood, and we're looking at different coopers and different "toasts" for our oak. This is particularly true for Chardonnay, because the Cabernet inherits the Chardonnay barrels. But a couple of years we did buy new wood for the Cabernet, particularly for those years when we were picking with a little lower sugar, but I thought they were too oaky.

CS: How about the fermentation process? Anything there?

CS: How about the fermentation process? Anything there?

PS: We're playing with a little longer time on the skins. We're pressing now in minus Brix figures. And we are also looking at whole cluster by varying the space in the rollers of the crusher. We look at the size of the clusters in the crush and set the space between the rollers. With the Pinot noir we'd actually take a roller out of the crusher. So we have some whole cluster at the beginning, and that slows down the start of the fermentation. We put the yeast on dry, so it starts slowly anyway.

CS: Are you continuing to hold down Cabernet fermentation temperatures?

MS: Yes. We like it cool and clean. Sitting on that cold floor keeps it down and we like it that way.

CS: Do you fine the wines.

PS: No. And we don't put anything in the filters, either. We just eat filters. We'd get much longer life if we used bentonite, but we don't.

MS: We think it would take too much out of the wine.

PS: We also use gas to move the wine, and that helps. We blow it with nitrogen. At different times we use argon, nitrogen and CO₂.

CS: Argon? Why would you use a noble gas?

PS: When we fill the bottles. Argon is inert and it isn't soluble. CO₂ is really quite soluble, so if you want a gas that's heavier than air, and we do on the bottling line, and other points when the wine is going to be in a container when it's finished. It isn't as heavy as CO₂ but it is heavier than air.

CS: It's also more expensive than CO₂.

PS: I do the corking and I fill the cases.

MS: I fill the bottles and sparge them with the argon.

PS: We have a blow-gun and she hits each bottle for about a second or two. I remember seeing at Louis Martini's thirty years ago that they were using CO₂ to sparge the bottles and that impressed me. That was pretty advanced at that time. Other people also use argon too, but it costs about three times as much as nitrogen.

MS: I think it's about \$80 for a tank.

CS: It's a natural part of the atmosphere, but you'd have to take the Cow Palace to get a tank of it.

Are you breaking even on the operation now?

PS: Yes, and some years we make a profit.

CS: So you get your wine, your fun and sometimes a few bucks also. Is it still pretty fun.

PS: The vineyard part is.

MS: We are getting tired of the winery. All that washing. But what do you do?

CS: You two are rare birds. You haven't allowed yourself to go up in capacity so you could afford to hire someone to drag hoses for you.

MS: But I wouldn't want someone I hired working for us in the winery. We live a very isolated life and I like it that way. I wouldn't be as comfortable.

CS: That's the thing with Ken Burnap. He's found Jeff Emery, and Jeff may as well be his son now. But I guess that's pretty rare. He has a degree in geology; what is he doing up there? It's a very special situation. You could never count on it.

So when you get tired of the winery you can just walk away from it, or just stop doing it. I guess you wouldn't walk away from a place like this.

MS: That's right.

PS: And our daughter isn't going to pick it up.

MS: And I tell her she shouldn't; it's our insanity, not hers.

CS: I agree with you. I think most normal people who are fanatics in this area are vineyard people. But I have a son who's a winery guy. Ever since he was a little boy squashing the grapes with his hands. And he married a girl who owns a winery in France. I'm a vineyard guy. I froze my butt off helping a friend prune his vineyard up in Forestville last year.

PS: Before we end up I should say something about the whole viticultural area here. When the Santa Cruz Mountains viticultural area was being established I would have been for a much more limited set of boundaries. I think it's too big.

CS: I think the answer is sub-appellations. Beauregard already got a Ben Lomond appellation. You and Ahlgren and others around here should be Boulder Creek or Bear Creek.

PS: For us the elevation is critical, about 1100 feet, where the inversion is at about 1000 feet so all our vines are just above it. In the fall that is extremely important. And we don't have much fog. Felton is socked in all the time.

CS: You can't ripen Cabernet Sauvignon in Felton, but your numbers are excellent.

PS: Sometimes they could at Hallcrest, but not often enough.

CS: As we finish here I want to go back to Zinfandel. Do you think you'll ever make it again?

PS: I would if I could get right grapes, like those we got at Templeton. And I would plant it here, perhaps, but we'd have to fumigate first. It's a thought.

CS: You really like your wines now, don't you? You should like that 1991 and 1990 Cabernet we just tasted. Those are outstanding clarets.

PS: Yes we do. And we can sell as much as we want and keep what we want, and if we don't like it--- well, the 1990 Chardonnay we dumped down the hill.

* * * * *

1990



P & M STAIGER
SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS
C A B E R N E T

ESTATE CABERNET SAUVIGNON • PICKED SEPT. 30 @ 22.8° BRIX
T.A. .74 • ALCOHOL 12.4% BY VOLUME • CONTAINS SULFITES
GROWN & BOTTLED BY P & M STAIGER • BOULDER CREEK, CALIF.

1992



P & M STAIGER
SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS
C H A R D O N N A Y
