



ASEV 2009 Merit Award

Presented at the 60th Annual Meeting, Napa, CA

Zelma Long

Lessons from Global Winemaking



Professional colleagues, ASEV members, leaders, and staff, friends, supporters, overseas colleagues, and my husband, Dr. Phillip Freese: I am honored to receive the 2009 American Society for Enology and Viticulture Award of Merit. It is a profound and unexpected honor, and I wish to thank all of you who have contributed to and supported my work in wine-

making and winegrowing throughout my career. Asked by ASEV to provide a lecture associated with this honor, I have chosen to present a global perspective.

Why the focus on global winemaking, not simply that of California or the United States? For 25 years I have traveled globally: advising on winemaking, giving seminars, and investigating wines and vines. I have found that these experiences, and my work in Italy, Argentina, Israel, Germany, France, and South Africa, have been richly rewarding and deeply satisfying. These experiences have expanded my professional knowledge, further developed my palate, and deepened my understanding and expertise. I know that our historical benchmarks for wines reside overseas, and I see that many Americans are interning, consulting, or running overseas wine businesses. I know we American winemakers need to keep our eyes on our overseas competitors and understand the broad world context in which we do our work.

Additionally, in the last decade my husband and I have purchased raw land and established a vineyard and winery in the Cape of South Africa, Vilafonte Wine Estate, with a local partner. This has been a profound overseas opportunity—our ability to acquire and make the planting decisions for our own land and make our wines (Vilafonte Series C and Vilafonte Series M, a Cabernet based

blend and a Merlot-Malbec based blend, respectively) exclusively from our site.

And finally, I would like to convince every young winemaker to seek an overseas experience. It will be invaluable to you and make you a more seasoned, wiser contributor to our U.S. wine business.

For these reasons, I wish to present a global perspective. I have learned many lessons, but five stand out and serve to summarize my experiences. They will not necessarily be new to you, but my time overseas has made them more profound for me.

Lesson 1:

Great, fine, and delicious wines are made in every country.

This lesson may be the most important. The United States is full of human talent and natural resources, but in the last two decades we have seen a powerful emergence of Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Argentina, and South Africa in the European market. Spain has re-emerged and is bursting with old vines and fine wines. Israel just showed up on Robert Parker's screen. What country is next? Clearly, we have no monopoly on great grapes, good weather, talent, and financial resources.

I don't find many poor wines anywhere. Yes, there are some wines mismatched for their price category, but bad wines are moving off the average consumer's radar. It is clear to me that producing and delivering excellent quality for each price point is the foundation of being competitive. Beyond that, of course, we need to make wines of personality and distinction. And we must effectively position and market, not only our own wines, but also our wine-producing states and appellations.

Do you know that the convention center at Vin Expo in Bordeaux is a kilometer long? And that there are 6 to 8 rows across, 6 to 8 kilometers of wine booths, which is approximately 4 miles of booths? Fine wines are everywhere . . . and numerous.

Lesson 2:

Terroir (vine microclimate) is a powerful force.

Let me illustrate my second lesson with terroir stories from my own experience.

Germany. Phil and I spent three years making Riesling in the Nahe appellation, near the 50th parallel north

ASEV is not responsible for statements or opinions printed herein; they represent the views of the author and are not binding on the ASEV as a whole.

Copyright © 2009 by American Society for Enology and Viticulture. All rights reserved.

latitude. The climate there, extremely long summer days, but cool, is unmatched at lower latitudes, and we cannot by any winemaking or winegrowing technique provide the circumstances that give these high-latitude Rieslings their unique fresh, floral characters, lovely acidity, and extraordinary longevity.

South Africa. On our first visit to South Africa, in 1990, we fell in love with Sauvignon blanc, so pungent with enticing passionfruit aromas. Sauvignon blanc there is made most successfully with overnight skin contact, which gives intensity yet preserves delicacy. But in California, my experience was that similar treatment, even at very cool temperatures, gave slightly phenolic, firmer wines. In Sonoma, I preferred not to use must maceration for Sauvignon blanc. I had learned quickly that what works in one region, California, will not work in another, South Africa.

The Cape of South Africa is one of the five Mediterranean climates in the world. We have planted Cabernet, Merlot, Malbec, and Cabernet franc in rocky clay soils that are so ancient that stone-age tools over a half-million years old lie on the surface of our vineyard land. The weather is slightly milder than ours in the California North Coast, not quite as hot in the day but warmer at night, yielding higher, and misleading, degree day numbers. By misleading, I mean that the numbers imply a hot climate, while the wines imply a cool climate. And indeed we have ocean influence from two oceans close to us, the Atlantic and the Indian. We find our red grape tannins there seem to be less astringent than ours can be here in the North Coast, we believe due to slightly higher humidity, softer skins, and a milder vine microclimate. And our Merlot—small vines grown in old clay—is matched in fruit intensity nowhere else I have worked.

Eastern Washington State. When I first started to work in eastern Washington I was amazed by the weather differences at harvest. I would leave Napa and arrive in the Tri-Cities to find the days significantly shorter and about 10°F cooler. Yet my midsummer consulting there found that the very long days at 47°N latitude, with its attendant sunlight load on the grapes, demand more focus on protecting grapes from direct sunlight midday. And I noted the very high anthocyanin content of the musts, higher than I was used to seeing. This unique environment has yielded great red wines and lovely Chardonnays, in styles quite different from the California North Coast.

Priorat, Spain. The first time I tasted L'Ermita (Garnacha), grown in Priorat near Barcelona, I was bowled over by its combination of fruit intensity and elegance. The wine was truly different than any I had known. Soon thereafter, I was fortunate to be in Priorat, visiting some of the recent pioneers who revitalized an area that had declined. Priorat has marine climate influence and extraordinary "soils" of decomposed slate. Traversing down a steep vineyard there is like walking down a sand dune, feet sinking into the sand, only it is tiny stones of slate that slide beneath your feet. Using old

Carignane, or Cabernet as a small percentage of blends, the Garnacha (Grenache) produced there were a revelation to me: magical combinations of cultivar, terroir, and human enterprise.

Terroir summary. Terroir is ground truth. Some say the word, the concept, is overused from a marketing perspective, but even if true, that does not detract from the differences in chemistry, color, tannins, aromas, flavors, elements we have not yet measured, that result from differing vine environments. In the high brix symposium yesterday, Markus Keller said that "season trumps all" and I have learned this lesson watching the colors in our Vilafonte red grapes from one season to the next. In 2008, our grapes had about one-third less total anthocyanin than in any previous years. And, the local Vinlab, that tracks color and phenolics for many, confirmed that this was a trend for the vintage, not just a local anomaly. I applaud sensitivity to the differences in vine microclimate, because I believe great winemakers observe these differences in their own site and respond to them in their winemaking.

Finally, our foods also reflect their terroir. Only due to the transient nature of many foods, we have not been so sensitive to the differences. Growing wine has made me more attuned to, and respectful of, the effect of our environment, not just on wine but on our whole food supply.

Lesson 3:

Culture has a potent impact on winemaking.

It is often said that the concept of terroir includes those who grow the wines. And we know this to be true; we know how impactful our wine and vine decisions are on the wines we produce. Because of the human impact, to make wine successfully elsewhere one must be sensitive to the cultural environment. Let's look first at who Americans are:

- Americans have a can-do attitude; an approach of "how we can" rather than "why we can't."
- We have more tolerance for risk, and we can be headstrong.
- We are a young wine business, with fewer templates and without the degree of regulation, and historical wine knowledge, of the older cultures.
- In general, as individuals, we operate more independently than many other cultures.

Our culture has allowed us to respond quickly to Americans' growing interest in wines by pushing out into new areas and trying new winemaking and winegrowing techniques. We have questioned conventional wisdom from other countries at the same time we have, and are, learning from them. Our culture has also led us to plant the wrong cultivars, plant in the wrong terroirs, to make our own mistakes. But, in 40 years our country has been transformed in wine. I take 1966, the year that Robert Mondavi built the first new winery since Prohibition, as the beginning of the American modern era of wine.

How are other cultures different from our winemaking culture? Consider the following.

Winemaking history is deep in many countries. In Israel, old wine presses are everywhere because they were made out of the rocks, in the ground, and still exist, in those pieces of ground. Wine in Israel has deep history.

Let's consider France. Longevity of wine and consistency of quality are hallmarks of success, and France, in particular, is rich in having great local wineries and expressive local wines with historical vineyards tracing back centuries. This wine culture has a depth of knowledge about terroir that is much richer than ours, and it informs their attitudes and decisions and produces many wines with extraordinary aging ability.

Winemaking practices and winegrowing regulation can be unique to a region. The Jewish religion and culture influences winegrowing in Israel. For example, once planted, a vineyard can't be harvested until the fourth year and cover crops, with a few exceptions, cannot be used. Why? In Israel we see deep religious history, where the reasons for a practice may go back centuries.

In Germany, where labeling regulations are varied, we found that our Auslese Riesling grapes, officially determined at harvest to be of Auslese standard, couldn't be so labeled because the wine "wasn't sweet enough" per the Nahe standards, as managed by a local wine board. This was a reasonable decision by Nahe standards but admittedly a surprise to us.

In France, although Professor Alain Carbonneau has been a great researcher on trellis systems for quality wine, growers are constrained by local regulations from easily testing new trellis systems. And they can't just plant a vineyard anywhere; there are planting rights that must be obtained and may be difficult to obtain.

The political culture in each country impacts winemaking. For South Africa, the end of apartheid created a wine, winery, and vineyard boom that has changed South African wine more in the last decade than in the previous three decades. The Australians place more emphasis on mechanical vineyard work because less labor is available. Vineyard labor is an issue in all countries; for example, when we were in Germany, the Polish were employed there for vineyard work. And here in the United States, we struggle to get immigration laws that will enable us to legally employ immigrants who do our vineyard work so well.

Business cultures are different. Before investing in another country, it is wise to investigate the accounting, legal, and tax systems of the targeted country. For example, business decisions may be influenced by tax advantages/disadvantages in the process of land purchase and/or business development. And it is important to know the interaction of tax regulations in another country vis-à-vis the United States. Other countries may have a completely different basis for law than our own and accounting practices and financial reporting may be different. As a business owner, it is wise to be savvy to these differences

and to establish the legal, financial, and tax advisors to place your business on solid footing.

Language is also a huge cultural distinction, as we all know.

Cultural suggestions for anyone working overseas:

- Ahead of time, learn about the regulatory and cultural differences in your new environment.
- If you plan to start a winery or vineyard, investigate the business culture.
- Respect and seek to understand the whys and ways your new environment is different.
- Make changes as needed, but in a respectful way.
- Learn from your new environment; every place has something to teach.
- "Our way," here, may not be the best in a different culture and terroir.

You can, however, bring a fresh perspective. Napa Cabernet winegrowing and winemaking benefited enormously from trellis research done in New York, France, and New Zealand and from the French Bordeaux wine-making expertise brought to California by the Opus One project and those that followed.

You can contribute to other countries and cultures while working elsewhere.

Lesson 4:

There is a much to be learned "out there."

Benchmarks, new ideas, historical perspectives, and current research exist in every wine territory. We can see this just in the presentations this week at the 2009 ASEV Annual Meeting from our overseas speakers.

Seek out the specialties and specialists of the country or area you are in or visiting. In Australia, the Australia Wine Research Institute has made major contributions in the area of closures, terpenes, and smoke taint, to name a few examples. Australia also excels in work on the application of mechanization in vineyards and has very strong extension and outreach functions, including publications that benefit us all. In France, the winemaking and winegrowing community has a reverence for the wine, the vine, and the land, an appreciation for the role of old vines, a historical sense of place, of terroir, and thousands of small wineries that fit into the "locavore" trend here in the United States.

Spain and Portugal, as part of the Iberian Peninsula, have over 100 winegrape varieties, which include the extraordinary Garnacha, and a flinty style Xarello, often used for cava, but delicious as a young white wine. Spain also has many young mavericks exploring new ways of working with the many old vineyards.

Eastern Washington has particular specialties of adapting *vinifera* vines to cold winter conditions, growing vines on their own roots, and working with red varieties at northern latitudes. And in the greater United States, pioneers are both beginning and reviving winegrowing traditions in almost every state, including the development of university and extension programs that are adapted to local environments.

Lesson 5:

Financing, and financial success, bring results.

Business financial success can bring startling changes. A look at Bordeaux in the 1970s versus the 1990s shows strong contrasts—new chateaux, new cellars, refined winemaking equipment, and so on—as a result of the funds generated by the market success of the wines of the 1980s and 1990s. The same can be said of Napa Valley. As each decade has brought improved winegrowing and winemaking and better wines, increased income has built new cellars, not just bigger, but better designed and equipped, and new vineyards with selected clones and refined planting and winegrowing techniques.

Research funding from government agencies is powerful. Australia has been most singularly successful in convincing its government that if a significant investment were made in the wine and grape industry for research, then it would pay off in increased exports as a percentage of GNP. And indeed that is what happened. Australia, a smaller producer, “outfunded,” in total dollars, the U.S. grape and wine research funding.

We can learn from these lessons. With investment, personal and financial, new areas can develop and achieve enough critical mass that they become successful wine areas, attracting more resources and visitors. Marlborough, New Zealand and Walla Walla Valley, Washington are two examples.

New investment can revitalize old areas. The South African industry has exploded with new wineries, top-flight winemaking equipment, European winery owners investing in South Africa because of the confidence in the future of that country and its greater interaction on a technical and business basis with the rest of the world.

And in Priorat, Spain, old, abandoned vineyards have been reclaimed, producing some of the great Grenache-based wines. In the United States, we need to be sure that we are investing and reinvesting in our industry to keep it strong and competitive.

Politics of funding is important. Marketing, business, and technical research support can give a country significant competitive advantage. Thus, it is useful and important for winemakers and winegrowers alike to participate in the political processes in their respective areas.

Quality—of grapes, of wine—is the foundation for success, and investments must be made to sustain, ensure, and further develop that quality. Napa Valley is a good example of the linkage of quality development and wine and vineyard value increases. Successful wineries and vineyards are important to preserve our agricultural land on which they reside. Look at Napa Valley’s Tokalon Vineyard: a site that has been producing fine winegrapes for over 100 years. Its solid financial returns should sustain its agricultural use for future decades.

In Conclusion

To the students of winegrowing and winemaking, work overseas before committing yourself to a position—learn, have fun, make the global wine and vine friends that will become your professional network—and returning you will have more to contribute to your own success and to that of our winegrape and wine business.

—Zelma Long

*Vilafonte Wine Estate, South Africa
Zelma Long Wine Consulting Practice
Long Vineyards, Napa Valley*