

Ken Kester

History 413

J. Rees

Research Paper

The Grape Crush Gold rush

Most stories of the American West have been subject to a great deal of 'enhancement' by the teller, and I'm sure that this story will be the same. But the common theme is that in order to spin a good western yarn, your main character has to be resilient, strong minded, battle ready, eager to face the world and take it over to make something for himself. The subject(s) of my story, the Trinchero family, have these character traits and epitomize and illustrate a remarkable upbeat American business success story. Through ups and downs, fortuitous accidents, blind trust, brilliant marketing, savvy smarts, hidden drama, and even a bit of dumb luck, they have contributed to the success of the Napa Valley. Theirs is a story of rags to riches and international notoriety. With their contributions the Napa valley wine industry triumphed and survived various struggles to become known for producing some of the finest wines of the modern day.

December 5, 1948, was a rainy, foggy day in northern California. After a three-day, cross country train ride from New York City, Mary Trinchero and her three children - Bob, 12, Vera, 10, and Roger, 2, arrived at the Oakland train depot. Her husband and father of her children Mario Trinchero who had moved to California a few months earlier was waiting for her and his kids at the station. From there, they traveled to the small

town of St. Helena in Napa Valley to begin their new lives as wine vintners at Sutter Home Winery. But in order to encapsulate the grand story of the Napa Valley wine industry as a whole, we have to go back a bit farther to examine how it grew to host internationally renowned vineyards.

At this point our story expands to include Henry Thomann, who was one of the very oldest of the pioneers, having crossed the plains from St. Louis in 1845. On reaching California he entered the employment of General Sutter, later went to Sonoma, and was with General Vallejo. Upon the discovery of gold in 1848, he was one of the first to engage successfully in washing for the precious metal, since during his youth he had practical experience in washing the sands from the rivers in his home country of Switzerland. While in service to General Vallejo he fell sick and had to return to Sacramento. Later after his service in 1852, Thomann established a vineyard on land he bought from Sutter, which was quite possibly the first vineyard planted in California for the purpose of commercial winemaking. This first vineyard for manufacturing came in 1856. From that point forward grapes would be a crop grown by farmers in California throughout the Napa Valley and surrounding areas.

In the 1880s, California was known among fine wine enthusiasts primarily for Riesling and Cabernet wines.¹ Napa Valley enjoyed having a reputation for the greatest quality of these wines, and with that grape and wine prices steadily increased over the years. This was thanks to Henry and John Thomann, who based their influence and love of the Napa Valley to General John Sutter. The Thomann's Napa Valley venture proved very successful, and probably set the foundation for what would occur in the

¹ <https://www.intowine.com/agoston-haraszthy-father-california-wine>

wine industry in the next century. In His first year, John Thomann would produce 40,000 gallons of wine; by the early 1880's he was produced a staggering 200,000 gallons of wine, or about 83,000 cases.² Like most other ventures in (to be) Sunshine State, the California wine industry was off to a quick start.

The northern California wine industry in the nineteenth century was very different than it is today. Hardly ever did wineries bottle, age, or distribute their wines. That job was left up to wine sellers in San Francisco, because it was from there that the wine was distributed by rail or by boat to markets across the Nation. Late in the 19th century that Caroline and Emil Leuenberger arrived and established the Sutter Home Winery and Distillery Company, which Caroline named after her father John A. Sutter. From their headquarters on Folsom Street in San Francisco, the Sutter Home Winery was the first company that would grow, bottle, and distribute their own wine, the first example of vertical integration in the Napa Valley.

Unfortunately the Leuenberger's success did not last long. For example in 1909 after the near collapse of the American banking system they produced no wine at all. By 1914 their situation had improved slightly, however to finance a war effort, the federal government implemented a six cent per gallon tax on wine.³ Interestingly, the entry of America into World War 1 in 1917 only fueled the national conversation about alcohol. In August 1918, the Wartime Agricultural Act or the WAA got a bill passed which banned the sale of all alcoholic beverages until American armed forces were demobilized. By

² Harvesting the dream 115

³ Roy G., and Gladys C. Blakey. "The Revenue Act of 1918." *The American Economic Review* 9, no. 2 (1919): 214-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1823605>

this time in 1918, counties across the United States passed “dry” legislation.⁴ Although prohibition wouldn't be ratified until the 1920's, it was the death blow to the winemaking career of the Leuenberger's because just like most wineries in Napa Valley during Prohibition, Sutter Home was dormant.

During the 1920's the American legal system outlawed alcohol in the United States, and the prohibition era as it would be known swept across the nation. Various forms of legislature detailed the different types of alcohol that would be banned. Although the production and distribution of alcohol were prohibited this didn't stop various outlaw groups to become renowned for their grasp of alcohol on the black market. This would give rise to spots like Speakeasies, which became popular in big cities across America. Congress ratified the 18th amendment in 1919, but it would not become effective until January, 1920. Congress tried to cover this time gap with a form of legislation called the Volstead Act, which implemented the enforcement of the prohibition amendment and was effective immediately on October 28, 1919.⁵

The part that I love about prohibition that not many people realize is that there was a loophole for grapes and wine. The main goal of prohibition was to eliminate the Beers, hard liquors, like whiskey, vodka, and those kinds of spirits. Wine on the other hand was permissible if it was to be used for medicinal purposes or for sacramental purposes, thus few vineyards continued their work during the prohibition era by making wines for consecration.⁶

⁴ https://www.stamp-collecting-world.com/winestamps_RE1914.html

⁵ <https://winefolly.com/update/prohibition-facts/>

⁶ Ibid.,.

Mario and his brother John had been working together in New York during the prohibition era, and when it ended in 1933, they split up as John sought work elsewhere. It was always a family business for the Trinchero's during the prohibition era, their uncle was a mechanic, so he kept the cars in good shape between alcohol runs. "Dad had a Dodge with a false floor to hide the wine. He got caught once, though, and they took all his stuff away from him. But he made \$500 a week during prohibition. Now that was really good! A Lot better than bartending."⁷ In fact, the Trinchero Family sold wine to the mob. The Mafia didn't really have any problems with families that made and sold their own wine because it was part of the Mafia's heritage as Italians, and besides they were after the liquor and beer business. Many mob member consumed wine for their own enjoyment. However this form of black market jobs in the wine industry died down once the 21st Amendment was passed in December of 1933, which repealed the 18th Amendment and allowed alcohol to be made and distributed again. Thus, that Napa Valley wine industry could return to the business of growing some of the best grapes for wine in the world.

As glamorous as the life at a winery sounds in the Napa Valley in 1948, it wasn't very luxurious at all for Mario, his family, and his brother John, until they converted and old two story barn into their living quarters. Once they did that, the family could move out of the small unheated motel like cabin with no indoor bathroom. Napa Valley was a far different place in 1948 than it is today, it was completely rural, with more acres of prunes and walnuts than grapes.

⁷ Harvesting the dream page 16

Compared to New York City, life in Napa Valley was drastically different. Going from life in the big city, to thinking that their dad was lost in the woods when they first headed into their new property in the valley. Bob is quoted in saying “I burst out laughing. I thought it was a joke. I'd never seen my dad wear anything other than three piece suits and a nice hat. He used to be a sharp dresser, but now he wears Levi's and short sleeved shirts.”⁸ Life in Napa valley was going to be an adjustment for the Trinchero family, but the biggest change the family was able to make was to where the family first lived. The hotel where the family first stayed, today called the El Bonita Motel where rooms range from \$135- \$300 per night, is hip, trendy, contemporary and upscale.⁹ But back when the family first moved to the motel, it was run down. Mario had never really expressed any desire to get involved the wine industry, but as an Italian, wine was a part of his family history and culture therefore he naturally gravitated towards a career in this field. The culture of the wine industry in America during this time, reflected wine culture of a global landscape in that French and Italian wines were of top class. Yet through a unique combination of soil, climate, and water, this Valley in the heart of California was able to grow and emerge even though Pedigreed wineries in the Napa Valley during the 1940's were those like Inglenook, and Beaulieu who set the standard for wealth, elegance, and high society vintners. Cesare Mondavi made a good living in his families Charles Krug Winery. A winery that has roots in the Napa Valley since the 1870's, his sons, the two brothers Robert and Peter Mondavi Sr. were among

⁸ Ibid.,. Pg. 47

⁹ <https://res.elbonita.com/ChooseRoomAndRates.aspx>

the founding members of the Napa Valley Technical Group.¹⁰ Formed to share knowledge and information with fellow vintners, it was the origin of what is today known as the Napa Valley Vintners. The big wineries were Beringer, Beaulieu, Inglenook, Christian Brothers, and Charles Krug all of which dominated a share of the wine market.

During these early years, the struggling vintner Mario, who had a dream of pulling the Trinchero winery out of the ashes with his sons, started to repurpose old wine bottles, sterilize them, and rebottle his products out of cost necessity. Mario wasted no time introducing his children to the life of a vintner, starting them out with bottling the grapes that his brother John had crushed. Throughout the years the Trinchero family would go their own ways, and eventually Bob Trinchero would take over as the winemaker for Sutter Home.

During the mid-1960's Bob Trinchero would gain confidence as a winemaker, as he upgraded the quality of the Sutter Home wine. Implementing a strategy of affordable wine produced in an even more cost effective way. While his jug wines paid a good portion of the winery bills, Bob seemed to most enjoy his time as a winemaker as he's quoted saying "I took over in 1960, and that's when I made my first vintage. Then in '68 I made the first Amador Zinfandel, eight vintages, from that point on I really started to put it all together and the wines were really first class."¹¹ Perseverance is what Bob was experiencing, the ability to grow into a position he was probably groomed for since he was a young lad. Being able to make it through the tough times, and emerge on the other side better for it is what make for a good story, and in a good classical western

¹⁰ <https://www.charleskrug.com/estate/innovation>

¹¹ Harvesting the dream 62

story the main character always finds a way to prevail. Isn't that what makes a western story truly classic? A display of toughness through perseverance and innovation propels Bob Trinchero to be identified as a top vintner in the Napa Valley.

In 1972, Bob Trinchero experimented with a winemaking technique called "Saignée," draining some of the free-run juice from Zinfandel skins to create a concentrated, robust Amador County Zinfandel. His Creation of the First White Zinfandel in the 1970's is evidence to his mastery in the art of winemaking and marketing because by the end of the decade his Zinfandel only idea for the Sutter home winery came true.¹²

Mario died in March of 1981, and his widow died in November of 1999. Those two and their family are responsible for the transformation of the Sutter Home Family Winery, a winery that would rise, influence, and change the Napa Valley wine industry. The Sutter Home Winery brought their Zinfandel wines to the forefront of wine culture as people would start switching their preferred beverage to a White Zinfandel. It's like my mom once told me "Never laugh at someone for drinking a White Zinfandel, because they're learning how to appreciate wine." During his reign as a winemaker for Sutter Home in the 1970's and 80's it was apparent to the winery that his ideas and innovations would help boost the winery to higher profits, and a wider market.

Some critics question the merits of the Sutter Home Winery, as in wine culture procuring the finest bottles and grapes for the most exquisite taste is typically the goal of vintner. Whereas the Sutter Home Winery implemented a single product with diverse varieties that would undeniably satisfy and attract a large and new market of wine

¹² <https://www.sutterhome.com/our-roots/>

connoisseur. To accommodate for the larger demand of wine distribution, the Sutter Home Winery did something that they hadn't done since the founding of the company. It wasn't until the mid 1970's that the company started to invest into more modern technologies and more acreage. In an attempt to diversify their markets and attract a more serious tone, Bob and Roger told their reps at Vintage Wine Merchants that they plan to double production from 15,000 to 30,000 cases. At first they were almost laughed out of the meetings and a critic in a *Wine Spectator* article said that the increased production was a hard sell.¹³

However, in spite of the doubters, the winery slowly but surely saw growth in popularity and production. It was at this time that Sutter Home got the advice of a savvy sales manager Jim Miller. Miller joined Sutter Home Winery in 1984 and within two years of working with the company was able to boost their sales to around 2 million cases of White Zinfandel.¹⁴

Now to the average person this may not seem like quite a significant feat, but you have to keep in mind that the wine industry is an agricultural business, and that rapid growth like this is not commonly seen. In fact it was this rapid growth that marked the end of the Trinchero family's run as an upstart mom-and-pop winery and its introduction to the realities of a global, corporate wine selling a 21st century company. It wasn't just the Sutter Home Winery that brought a huge spotlight to the wine industry in the Napa Valley, each of the big wineries were still steadily growing too, and as Sutter Home brought a spotlight to themselves, they brought it on everyone else as well.

¹³ Robyn Bullard. *The House That White Zinfandel Built*. *Wine Spectator*, vol. 19, no. 3, may 15, 1994

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

Under Miller's direction Sutter Home Sales continue to mushroom. During the 1990s the company's rapid growth boosted production of other popular varieties such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Sauvignon Blanc. By the late 1990s Sutter Home was selling over 7 million cases annually and its sales force continue to expand. The rags to riches tale of the Trinchero Family and the Sutter Home Winery etched their place not only in wine culture, but in American history as well by creating a company which caters now to millions of Americans and people worldwide. What makes the Trinchero's loved by their fan base, was the willingness to adapt the changing market. If the market called for a non-alcoholic wine, White Zinfandel was there to corner the market. They also innovated in the food business, producing a wide range of pasta sauces. Staying hip as a company and being able to identify niche's to squeeze into can really boost profits at a low cost.

Take a break from reading this paper, pour a nice glass a Sutter Home wine and put on a quick YouTube video about the Build a Burger Contest hosted by the Sutter Home Winery. This was a contest that was created as a promotional contest to see who could pair a burger with a glass of Sutter Home Winery Zinfandel the best. A panel of qualified independent judges selected by the Sponsor will judge each eligible recipe based on these different criteria: Perceived Taste Appeal (40%) Does the recipe sound appealing? Creativity (25%) Is this recipe creative and one of a kind? Ease of Preparation (25%) Could anyone create this burger by following the recipe? Perceived Wine Pairing (10%) Does the wine complement and enhance the burger? Sounds easy right? Sounds Yummy to me, The Grand-Prize Winner will receive \$25,000 cash.¹⁵ Of all

¹⁵ <http://www.buildabetterburgercontest.com/official-rules.php>

the esteemed wineries in the Napa Valley exemplify progress in agricultural success, none do so quite as innovatively and as successfully as the Sutter Home Winery.

Thus our story on how this vineyard has transformed the Napa Valley Wine industry reaches modern day and still continues to grow in popularity. The story of perseverance, hard work, and ingenuity defines the story of the Sutter Home Winery and Mario Trinchero. The Wineries overall goal is not only cater to, but expand and diversify their following that resulted in them becoming a top vineyard in Napa Valley through their use of product and promotional events control and corner the wine market. Mario and his family have a classic rags to riches tale, starting from the bottom with a rundown vineyard, they successfully triumphed and persevered to create a Winery that today carries international notoriety with some of the finest wines of the modern day.

