Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series

William Bonetti

A LIFE OF WINEMAKING AT WINERIES OF GALLO, SCHENLEY, CHARLES KRUG, CHATEAU SOUVERAIN, AND SONOMA-CUTRER

An Interview Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1997

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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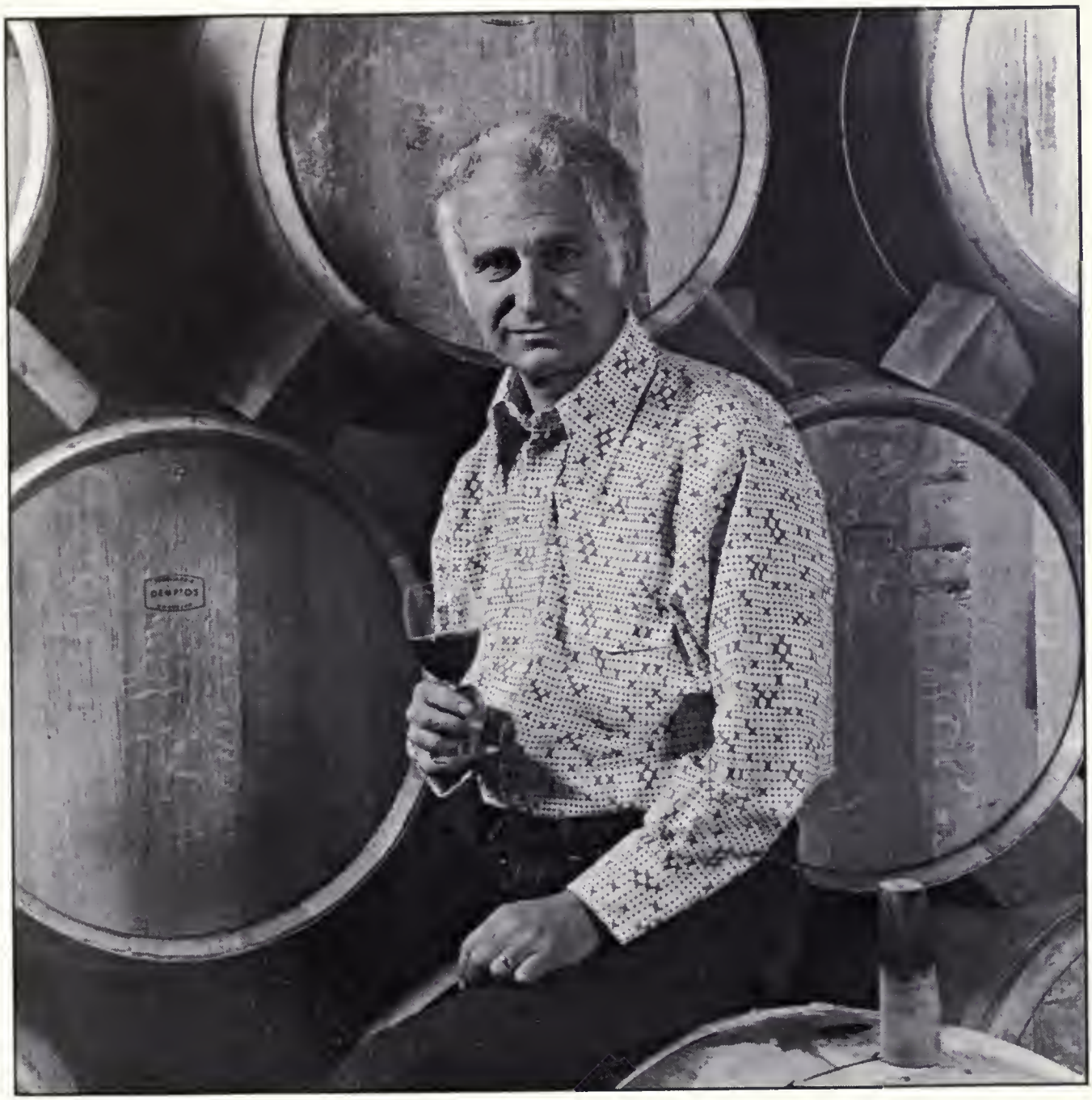

William Bonetti, late 1970s.

Cataloging information

BONETTI, William (b. 1925) Winemaker

A Life of Winemaking at Wineries of Gallo, Schenley, Charles Krug, Chateau Souverain, and Sonoma-Cutrer, 1998, ix, 116 pp.

Early years and education in Italy; emigration 1946; Gallo Winery, 1949-1955: vermouth, Vino Paisano; Schenley's Roma Winery, 1949-1955: lab work as senior chemist, botrytised Semillon, vineyards and wines in Delano; Charles Krug Winery, 1961-1972: Peter and Robert Mondavi, winemaking techniques, equipment; Chateau Souverain, 1972-1981: winery design, Frank Schoonmaker, Columbard Blanc, Beaujolais, Pinot Noir; Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards, 1981-1997: Brice Jones, innovative equipment, barrel cellar, Chardonnay colloquiums.

Interviewed in 1997 by Carole Hicke for the Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series, the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated by Ruth Teiser in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed has been made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Carole Hicke, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

Until her death in June 1994, Ruth Teiser was project originator, initiator, director, and conductor of the greater part of the oral histories. Her book, Winemaking in California, co-authored with Catherine Harroun and published in 1982, was the product of more than forty years of research, interviewing, and photographing. (Those wine history files are now in The Bancroft Library for researcher use.) Ruth Teiser's expertise and knowledge of the wine industry contributed significantly to the documenting of its history in this series.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grapegrowing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of winemen. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his or her own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Carole Hicke
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Wine
Oral History Series

July 1998
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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Philo Biane, *Wine Making in Southern California and Recollections of Fruit Industries, Inc.*, 1972

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Cornelius Ough, *Researches of an Enologist, University of California, Davis, 1950-1990*, 1990

John A. Parducci, *Six Decades of Making Wine in Mendocino County, California*, 1992

Antonio Perelli-Minetti, *A Life in Wine Making*, 1975

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Janet and John Trefethen, *Trefethen Vineyards, 1968-1998*, 1998

Louis (Bob) Trinchero, *California Zinfandels, a Success Story*, 1992

Charles F. Wagner and Charles J. Wagner, *Caymus Vineyards: A Father-Son Team Producing Distinctive Wines*, 1994

The Wente Family and the California Wine Industry, interviews with Jean, Carolyn, Philip, and Eric Wente, 1992

Ernest A. Wente, *Wine Making in the Livermore Valley*, 1971

Warren Winiarski, *Creating Classic Wines in the Napa Valley*, 1994

Albert J. Winkler, *Viticultural Research at UC Davis (1921-1971)*, 1973

Frank M. Woods, *Founding Clos Du Bois Winery: A Marketing Approach*, 1998

John H. Wright, *Domaine Chandon: The First French-owned California Sparkling Wine Cellar*, includes an interview with Edmond Maudière, 1992

INTERVIEW HISTORY--William Bonetti

William Bonetti, longtime California winemaster, was interviewed as part of the Wine Spectator's California Winemen Oral History Series to document his contributions to the history of California wines. Longtime winemaker and recent nominee for Winemaker of the Century, William Bonetti has had a successful career in the California wine industry.

Although born in New Jersey, Bonetti was raised in Italy in the wine-producing area north of Venice. He attended the School of Enology in nearby Conegliano, then returned to the United States in 1946.

Going west to California in 1948, he began work with Dr. Carlo Aggozzotti at the Opici Winery, and two years later was hired by Gallo to work in the analytical laboratory, then manage the Fresno plant. Seven years later Schenley recruited him as senior chemist in their Fresno microbiological laboratory.

In 1961 he went north to work as assistant production manager at the Charles Krug winery. The following year he made his first Chardonnay, a wine that was to become his hallmark. While producing one winning Chardonnay after another, building on his knowledge of chemistry and microbiology, he participated in innovative winemaking such as centrifuging, and gained experience working with Robert Mondavi.

Moving to Souverain as winemaster in 1972, he helped design the Alexander Valley facility and developed an award-winning Pinot Noir, along with some notable Cabernets, Zinfandels, Petite Syrahs, and barrel-fermented Chardonnays. Bonetti's career culminated as winemaster at the newly built--in 1981--winery of Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards. Founder Brice Jones wanted to make only Chardonnay, and Bonetti's skills were just what he needed.

In 1986, the winery hosted the first Focus on Chardonnay Colloquium, gathering top California Chardonnay winemakers together with the creme de la creme of the French white Burgundy producers. "It's very productive because it stimulates things and you can talk openly," says Bonetti of the colloquiums, which have been held every four years since the first.

"In the long run," he adds, talking about significant changes taking place in the industry, "if you stand still, you'll be overtaken. You have to do it better." It sums up his entire career.

Bonetti was interviewed on February 12, 13, and 14, 1997. Before the interviews, he gave me a fascinating tour of the Sonoma-Cutrer winery facilities, describing the various innovative designs and equipment. He then welcomed me to his Healdsburg home for the recording sessions. He had made extensive notes in preparation. The transcript was reviewed and clarified by Lisa Jacobson, and Bonetti then went over it and made a few emendations.

This series is part of the ongoing documenting of California history by the Regional Oral History Office, which is under the direction of Willa K. Baum, Division Head, and under the administrative direction of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carole Hicke
Project Director

June 29, 1998
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name William Bonetti

Date of birth 12-29-1925 Birthplace Clifton N.J.

Father's full name Guglielmo Gilberto Bonetti

Occupation Mechanic Birthplace Borca in Cadore (Italy)

Mother's full name Anna Gasperina De Vido Bonetti

Occupation weaver Birthplace Santa di Cadore (Italy)

Your spouse Josephine Bettina Bonetti Crespi

Occupation Dressmaker + Dress designer Birthplace Bellinzona (Switzerland)

Your children Lisa Tatiana

Where did you grow up? Conegliano Veneto - Italy

Present community Healdsburg, Sonoma County

Education School of Viticulture and Enology -
Conegliano Veneto - Italy

Occupation(s) Winemaker - Enologist

Areas of expertise Wine making

Other interests or activities Wood working - hiking
skiing

Organizations in which you are active

I FAMILY BACKGROUND

[Interview 1: February 12, 1997] ##[1]

Grandparents, Parents, and Italian Ancestry

Hicke: Okay, let's go back a little bit and tell me about your grandparents and parents' ancestors as far back as you remember.

Bonetti: I never met them. They died before I was born.

Hicke: Your grandparents.

Bonetti: I can show you a picture of them.

Hicke: All right. In Cadore [spells].

Bonetti: Yes. In the Dolomites. One was a picture of my grandfather, my grandmother, and my mother, when she was quite young.

Hicke: Can you give me their names? Or they're here. De Vido Coleti?

Bonetti: Coleti. She had two brothers. They both came to the United States. One returned to Italy. One died in the States.

Hicke: And your grandmother's name was Maria Virginia Zammatio.

Bonetti: Yes. Zammatio was her maiden name.

Hicke: Were they born in Europe and lived most of the time in Cadore?

Bonetti: Oh, yes. In fact, our roots there go back quite a few years. They go back to the seventeenth, eighteenth century. One of my cousins made a genealogical tree that goes way back.

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[1]## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Hicke: And your mother is Anna?

Bonetti: Anna.

Hicke: And then her brother is Tommaso?

Bonetti: One of the brothers is Tommaso. The other one was Gaspare [spells].

Mother's Immigration to the United States, 1905

Bonetti: There's another picture in this book. When my mother was coming over to the United States, they had a long stay in Le Havre, France, because the ship had problems. I think it was the last voyage for that particular ship. It was an old, old steamer. So they stayed in Le Havre for a week. At that time people from Cadore were going through France and embarking at Le Havre.

Hicke: Oh, they went overland to Le Havre.

Bonetti: Yes. It was 1905, so from Cadore, they had to take a horse carriage--what do you call it—a coach. And then I'm sure they took the train further on.

That's my mother. [Referring to photograph] Notice everybody has a bottle of wine. [laughter]

Hicke: Let's see, this is your family?

Bonetti: No, no, only my mother was there. They were other people she went to America with. The oldest one here was the leader of the group. He took trips back to the Dolomites, to Cadore, and then he would escort the young people to New Jersey. So the parents felt very confident; they did not want to let them go by themselves.

Hicke: Why did your mother want to come to the U.S.?

Bonetti: She was the only daughter, and my grandfather really didn't want to see her go. He really didn't. So when she was eighteen, she put it squarely to my grandfather: "I have an opportunity to go to the United States, and I'd like to go with your blessing. Otherwise I'd have to wait three years and I'll go when I'm twenty-one. But if I leave now, I will always be your loving daughter."

Hicke: [laughter]

Bonetti: So she got his blessing.

Life in Cadore, Italy

Hicke: Why did she want to come?

Bonetti: Oh, did you see all those people [in the phototograph]?

Hicke: Yes.

Bonetti: They were all from that village, or the two towns around it, and they all came to the United States. Life was pretty tough in those days in Cadore. Now it is a touristic spot. It has hotels. They had some tourists before. But really, the tourism was not developed. They worked really hard. It was mostly agricultural.

Each family had cows. They cut the hay way up in the mountains, and would bring it down in the winter with a sleigh, or with the horses during the summer.

Hicke: So they had sort of a summer farm up in the mountains?

Bonetti: Well, all had properties on the mountains, you know. Some of the properties were quite small. Some were not larger than this lot. As the years went by, the properties were left in the will, and they were divided and redivided.

Hicke: Divided among the children.

Bonetti: And by law in Cadore, they could not be divided any further than what would make one carload of hay. That was the minimum, to make it viable.

Hicke: Interesting.

Bonetti: Cadore is quite an interesting place. It has its own dialect.

Hicke: And scenic too, I'm sure.

Bonetti: Scenic, but when [my mother] was young, it was rather poor country. So you don't appreciate the beauty of nature as much. [laughs] The land didn't produce very much. The major crop was potatoes--the best potatoes in Italy. But it would be too high

an elevation for grain. They could grow some rye, I think. They grew linen for their clothing.

Hicke: How about grapes?

Bonetti: No grapes. There were forest products, you could cut the lumber. Forests were the largest source of revenues.

Settling in Clifton, New Jersey

Bonett: Practically every family had some kids in the States. And most of them went to New Jersey. New Jersey had large textile mills, in Clifton, the Forsman and the Botany. At one time, Forsman was probably the one that produced the best wool fabric. My mother went to work as a weaver in the Forsman.

The plant was owned by a German group. After the First World War, on the 11th of November in 1920--the armistice was commemorated, the end of the war--a lot of the people in the factory stayed home and celebrated the victory. When they went to work the following day, the foreman was out by the gate looking at people, "Why were you absent?" Well, Mother said, well, she wasn't feeling well. Okay, go in. Somebody else followed her and said, "Well, I stayed home to celebrate the victory." "What victory? Didn't you know we lost the war?" [laughter] He was fired. [laughter]

Hicke: Point of view is important.

Recollections of Father

Hicke: Okay, tell me about your father.

Bonetti: My father came from the next town just south from San Vito, Borca di Cadore.

Hicke: And what was his name?

Bonetti: Berti. Actually, it was Guglielmo, which is William in Italian. But he was known as Berti, which is Gilberto, but Berti for short. Berti Bonetti dei Golge.

Hicke: How old was he when came to the States?

Bonetti: My father left his hometown when he was about fifteen; he went to work as a mechanic in the rails in Switzerland. And then went back to Italy, served in the army, finished his tour of duty, and immigrated to the United States. So he must have been about twenty-one years old.

Hicke: And what year was that?

Bonetti: It must have been 1906 or 1907.

Hicke: And what was he doing in New Jersey?

Bonetti: He worked as a car mechanic, and he worked for a place making scales, also as a mechanic.

Hicke: How did your parents meet?

Bonetti: Oh, they met in Clifton.

Hicke: Did your parents ever talk about their times during the World War I?

Bonetti: Well, they were in the States during World War I. My father wanted to join the army, and my mother talked him out of it, because she had a little girl. My sister was born in 1914. So she was able to talk him out of it; [my sister] was so young.

Hicke: Yes. He was probably beyond the age when he had to go.

Bonetti: Yes. So the only thing I remember about the World War I was they didn't really feel it, except for the influenza which occured after the war.

II EARLY YEARS AND EDUCATION IN ITALY, 1927-1946

Family's Return to Italy, 1927

Hicke: You were born in 1925?

Bonetti: I was born in '25.

Hicke: When did you move to Italy?

Bonetti: In '27. My first recollection, of course, was pretty much when we arrived to Italy. That was such a drastic change, and you recollect when something dramatic occurs in your life.

Hicke: What did you do in your early days?

Bonetti: Not much. We used to spend two months in the summer up in the mountains at my father's homestead, an old house which was very primitive. We didn't even have running water in the house, for example. Very few people in Cadore had running water at that time.

Hicke: This was up in the Dolomites or near some town that I might recognize?

Bonetti: Yes, near Cortina d'Ampezzo. San Vito is the town next to Cortina. My mother used to walk to Cortina to do her shopping when she was little, because at that time, Cortina belonged to Austria, and you could buy tobacco and salt and flour cheaper there, because it was not so heavily taxed.

Hicke: And what did you do up there?

Bonetti: Oh, hiking. What I'm doing now when I'm in the mountains. [laughs]

Hicke: [laughter] The more things change...

Bonetti: Yes. And occasionally, my father and I used to go mushroom hunting, for chantrelle and porcini. There were lots of mushrooms to pick. And picking strawberries up in the mountains, and blueberries.

Hicke: Nice.

Bonetti: It was a nice life. I loved it.

Early Schooling

Hicke: What about your early schooling?

Bonetti: Schooling was in Conegliano.

Hicke: Do you remember anything particular about it?

Bonetti: No, except the building, which was an old, old building. So it was built possibly in the seventeenth or sixteenth century, it was quite old.

Hicke: And cold?

Bonetti: It was cold, even though they had a boiler someplace. Nevertheless, it was cold in the winter.

Hicke: Do you remember liking any particular subjects or issues?

Bonetti: At the time, I was not particularly fond of school. I had one teacher for five years.

Hicke: Oh, is that right? For everything?

Bonetti: Yes, for the first five years, the same teacher. She didn't like my handwriting. [laughter] My father had such beautiful handwriting, and I was totally the opposite.

Hicke: Isn't that funny, how important that seemed in those times?

Bonetti: At that time, I remember getting always poor grades because of my handwriting. [laughter] I remember my first day of school, though.

Hicke: Do you? The first day of first grade, or whatever?

Bonetti: Yes. We started singing. And the teacher was listening and listening and listening, and then she finally zeroed in on me and said, "Bonetti, you sit down." And that was the end of my singing.

Hicke: Oh, no!

Bonetti: I must have been way off tune.

Hicke: Between your singing and your handwriting, you weren't making much of an impression!

Bonetti: I was really in trouble. [laughter]

Hicke: Did you learn any English when you were starting out?

Bonetti: I studied by myself some English.

Hicke: Did your parents speak it to you?

Bonetti: No. My sister spoke English quite well.

Hicke: She was a lot older, though.

Bonetti: She was eleven years older. We were getting quite a few packages from friends and relatives from the United States, and they always sent the funnies. I remember reading the funnies.

Hicke: L'il Abner, or what was it?

Bonetti: Possibly.

Hicke: Yes, that's probably a good way to get acquainted with the language, because you've got the pictures that give you an idea of what's going on. So you can try to make out the writing.

Bonetti: Yes. But when I came back in the States, I had pretty much a picture of what Clifton looked like from my mother's descriptions.

Family Businesses in Conegliano

Hicke: Why did your parents move back?

Bonetti: I don't know. My father always had a nostalgia for the old country, I believe. He took several trips visiting the old

country. Then he bought in Conegliano a three-story house, with a bar. He was renting it out, and when the man who was renting it left, he felt he had to go there and keep the business going.

Hicke: This was the one you showed me before, close to the school of enology?

Bonetti: Yes, it was next to it.

Hicke: So when you first went back, he ran the bar?

Bonetti: He ran the bar for a few months. Mother didn't like it. Actually, Mother really spent very little time in the bar, but once in a while she'd give him a hand, which was not really good for business, because Mother used to serve one glass of wine, and then if you asked for a second glass, she would say, "Now, go home to your wife. You've had enough." [laughter] Which was a terrible way to run a business.

Hicke: Oh, she was way ahead of her time!

Bonetti: Yes.

Hicke: Well, you had wine on the table, I presume?

Bonetti: We always had wine if there were guests and so forth, but not as a regular routine until the wartime. When the war began and food became scarce, then Mother felt that a glass of wine was good nutrition, and we did need it. From then on during the war, we always had a glass of wine with meals.

Hicke: So you had the local wine, or did you make some of your own?

Bonetti: No, local wine. Actually, my father, at that time, was managing several properties, farms. There were a lot of people from Borca who wanted to invest some money in Conegliano, so my father used to find these properties, and find somebody to run it, to work it, and then he managed the books and the sales and the administration of it. So the wine was bought from the farmers who produced it. You'd buy a barrel, and then take off a few bottles at a time.

Hicke: Was there other produce, too, that you'd get from your farms?

Bonetti: No, no.

##

Bonetti: Except during the war, we bought some corn, and then we tried to grind it somehow, because it was illegal to go to the mill to have it ground. If you owned the farm, you were allowed a sack or so of corn a year. If you didn't own it, you were not allowed. And my father never wanted to break the law in any form or manner. But we had some corn, and tried somehow to grind it with a coffee grinder.

Hicke: To make bread?

Bonetti: To make polenta.

Hicke: Yes. Polenta is sort of a gourmet meal now.

Bonetti: Yes. [laughs] At the time, it was a peasant meal.

Hicke: What other kinds of values did you learn from your parents?

Bonetti: Well, my father was straightforward; he valued honesty, work. But mostly, he was known in the region as a man you could depend on for his honesty. Even after he passed away, when I went back to Italy, my father was well remembered.

Recollections of Mother

Bonetti: My mother was somewhat more like her father. She liked to do a lot of things. There was great affinity between me and my mother. She understood me, always. She had an affection for the United States. Actually, what I learned about the United States from my mother was about an idealistic United States that perhaps never did exist. But in her eyes, it was real to her. She saw the United States as an egalitarian country: people have the same value, no matter what they're doing.

Hicke: The way we wish it could be.

Bonetti: I wish we could be, but it isn't. In Italy, when you took the train, you had three classes. You had first class, second class, and then third class. In the United States, you had only one class. Of course, in the States, if you were very rich you had your own train. So it wasn't quite true either.

Hicke: Well, yes, but there is a gigantic middle class, obviously. Your mother must have had a very good experience.

Bonetti: Yes. She loved to work. She worked until I was born. She worked about twenty years.

Hicke: So you and she were close.

Bonetti: Very close. Her ideas were very modern.

Hicke: Did she read a lot?

Bonetti: Not that much. She read the paper every day.

Hicke: So she had a lot of common sense?

Bonetti: She had very much common sense.

Secondary Education

Hicke: After you went to the first five grades of school, then what happened?

Bonetti: Then I went to middle school. At that time, either you go for classical studies, or you go into a trade, or art. I took business classes for three years.

Hicke: Were you a little inspired by your father for that?

Bonetti: Most of the kids I knew went to business class, and I didn't particularly like Latin and the classics. In the middle school, I just took one class of Latin, it was the only class I flunked. [laughter] The teacher was a friend of my father, too, which didn't help. So I went to that school, and I wasn't doing very well.

But there was one teacher who really turned me around completely. This teacher was a very interesting fellow, Concini.

Hicke: Is that his name?

Bonetti: Concini. He had a law degree, and he loved medicine. He spent more time in the hospital than doctors did, assisting surgeries. So he was very versatile when he talked about things. And he was also a journalist, and later went back to journalism. That's what it takes, at least one teacher in your life, to make a difference.

Hicke: Oh, yes. It can make an enormous difference.

Bonetti: It can make an enormous difference.

Wine Growing in Conegliano

Hicke: Before we go too much further, let me check your notes here. You said Conegliano was a wine-oriented community.

Bonetti: Yes. Conegliano had the school of viticulture and enology, and a research station for viticulture and enology. Conegliano is situated on the foothill. There are hills all around it which produce predominantly wine, because up in the hills, there are not many things you can grow profitably. They had wine, and they raised silk worms, very little grain, a little bit of hay. But wine was the major crop.

People knew the difference between the wine grown on this site as compared to another site. So the town was oriented to wine.

Hicke: The people knew then that the vineyard made such a difference? That's what we're just learning now.

Bonetti: Oh, yes, definitely. And they knew that the soil made a difference, and they chose the type of variety accordingly. Most of the varieties growing on the hillside were the white, and predominatly Prosecco and Verdiso [spells]. So wine was important for the region.

Hicke: Not only consuming it, but producing it.

Bonetti: Producing it as well.

Wine Tasting Trips

Bonetti: I have down here, the annual trip to the vineyards. The man who ran the wine bar used to take a trip to the hillsides tasting the different wine produced on that vintage. Usually it was around this time of the year--February.

I went along with my father and Mr. Mason. Mr. Mason used to rent a taxi for the day. Some of the vineyards were located without a good solid road to get to it. We used to drive up in the hills. If it had rained, the roads were muddy, and the taxi

would occasionally get stuck in the mud. The taxi driver would cuss and say, "I would never come back again, no matter how much you pay me!" And the farmer had to come down with oxen to pull the taxi out of the mud! We stopped at the different producers and tasted the wines. Mr. Mason would select one barrel, whatever he needed for his business. We children were allowed to have just a sip. And then, of course, there also were apples and walnuts. At one of the farms, we used to have a dinner of polenta.

Hicke: Did you try to distinguish among these wines yourself?

Bonetti: Oh, which ones we liked and which ones we didn't like. But it was beautiful; those were memorable trips, really pleasurable.

Hicke: Every year?

Bonetti: Every year. We'd return home when it was dark. We would start early in the morning, so it was a long day. I have fond memories.

School of Viticulture and Enology, 1943-1946

Hicke: Okay. Back to high school days. Is there anything there that we haven't talked about?

Bonetti: No. That's about it in school. And then I went from that to the School of Viticulture and Enology [Il Sculio Enologica].

Hicke: Tell me why you decided to go there.

Bonetti: Well, because it was next door.

Hicke: It was handy?

Bonetti: It was handy. I didn't even have to ride a bike to get to it, just walk.

Hicke: Were there any entrance requirements?

Bonetti: I had to take a preparatory course of one year. I was in my fourth year when the Italian army collapsed. I was in Cadore, and telephone communication was really difficult. You didn't know exactly what was going on. But by evening, I decided I wanted to go home. It was about 100 kilometers from my home

town, and I borrowed my cousin's bike and came down during the night. That was a wild bicycle ride down from the mountains.

I went back to school in September. And then school became very difficult. The Germans--the Fascists started making raids at schools.

Hicke: They did? What for?

Bonetti: To find if there were people who should have been in the army. They wanted to draft as many people as possible. The day they came, we were in the middle of a lecture. I remember I looked out of the window, and we were surrounded by the Fascists. Some of the professors were pretty bold. The one that was in our class was of Jewish ancestry. He changed his name during the war to Ferri. His original name, I think, was Stillman.

I remember when one of the young officers came in the room and tried to order him around, he said, "Look, I'm a colonel in the army. You're a lieutenant. Salute me." [laughter] And he did.

Hicke: That would take a lot of courage.

Bonetti: That took courage. But we had to leave school. I took my exams for the class during the following fall. I studied at home a little. I always remember those exams, particularly the one on surveying. We went in the field on that day for the exam. We had our instruments set up in the field, and we were supposed to take the measurements, and then design the plot of the field. I didn't know what I was doing, to be quite honest. [laughs] But we had an air raid--planes flying over started bombing--so the professor said, "Well, let's skip it, let's go in the classroom; I'll give you the numbers." [laughter] And that was my exam.

Hicke: Yes, I'm sure you would remember that.

Bonetti: But the war finally finished.

Hicke: What precisely did you study there?

Bonetti: It was mostly agricultural classes in the first few years; winemaking was studied in the first few years as well, but not as extensively. Then after the war, it was mostly viticulture and enology; the wine business; bacteriology, or the study of yeast; and machinery, design of wineries. We had to project a winery. Plant pathology. Pretty much what they're teaching now in Davis.

Hicke: Was what you learned there useful to you?

Bonetti: Oh, it was useful. At least it gives you confidence, if nothing else.

I asked for an exam on Friday, because on Saturday I had to take a train for Genoa. I had my ticket to return to the States.

Hicke: That was cutting it a little close.

Bonetti: Close. [laughs] But I was anxious to come back.

III EMIGRATION TO UNITED STATES AND EARLY WORK EXPERIENCES, 1946-1949

Decision to Return to the United States, 1946

Hicke: Tell me how that decision to return to the United States came about.

Bonetti: Well, actually, as I said, my mother was very enamored of the United States, and she always told me I was going to come back as soon as I could. After the war ended, I wanted to finish school, particularly since I cut it short because of the war.

Hicke: What did you do between the time when you stopped going to school and returned?

Bonetti: Oh, just tried to stay alive, stay out of reach [of the army]. Actually, the entire family moved out to stay in one of the farms my father was managing, because our house was too close to the school, and next to it was also a factory. And the railroad was not very far. So it was not a good position to be in during the war.

Hicke: You were eminently draftable, as far as the Germans were concerned?

Bonetti: I was eminently draftable.

Hicke: So then you had just always assumed you would go back to the U.S.?

Bonetti: I had always assumed I was going to go back to the States, yes. I knew as soon as the school was over, I was going to leave. Actually, Uncle Sam loaned passage fare to every American citizen who was in Italy at that time, even though my sister had sent over the money for the trip.

Hicke: She was in the States?

Bonetti: She was in the States during that time. But we didn't use it, because we received a ticket from Uncle Sam, which then sent me a bill exactly twelve months later. He also gave me ten dollars spending money.

Hicke: Did you ever have the option of choosing Italian citizenship, or did you have to decide at some point?

Bonetti: No. For the Italians, you are an Italian citizen if you are born from an Italian parent. Some of my cousins were eventually drafted in the army; they were older than I was, and they thought they didn't have to serve in the army because they were born in the United States. But one day, they received a draft order; they had to serve.

Hicke: What was your trip back like? You went to Genoa first?

Bonetti: I went to Genoa with some friends from Conegliano. One of the boys was from a farm that my father managed, and we were all coming to New Jersey. One went to Hoboken. Another friend, Joe Battiston, and I and two girls, Dina and Bruna, we all settled in Clifton, New Jersey. We had a marvelous trip.

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Hicke: So this was about '46 or '47?

Bonetti: It was '46, I believe.

Hicke: And you went by ship, then.

Bonetti: By ship. I remember the name of the ship, the Vulcania. One single class at that time.

Hicke: [laughs] Very democratic.

Bonetti: It was very democratic. Except at first they put us in a large dormitory, with twenty, thirty people there. The friend of mine from Conegliano, Joe Battiston, went to the captain and he said, "Oh, I can't sleep with that many people." So four of us had a cabin by ourselves.

Hicke: So much for the democratic system. [laughter]

Bonetti: Yes. Which was very nice. We had a ball. It was a wonderful trip. It was full of anxiety, because even though I had pretty

much a picture of what New Jersey was like, it was still--you know.

Hicke: It's a long way, and it's all the unknown.

Bonetti: Yes. But I knew that my sister was there, and all my relatives were there.

Hicke: She was in New Jersey?

Bonetti: She was in New Jersey, actually practically in the same street, a parallel street to where I was born. The same block.

Attitudes Toward Wine in New Jersey

Hicke: When you got there, what did you do?

Bonetti: When I got there, I found out that wine was not a big priority in the New Jersey way of life. As a matter of fact, at that time, none of my cousins drank wine. Wine was only for the old people, the old Italian folks. Some of the friends of my father were making it in their homes. But otherwise, wine was something which didn't seem to belong in America. Which was surprising, because when I went to school, we had studied the work which [U.C.] Davis was doing. We were familiar with the name of the professors in Davis, and their research.

I was still interested in wine, however. So I used to go out to the clubs and ask to see what wine they had by the glass. Obviously, they only had some muscatel or sherry or port.

First Jobs in New Jersey

Hicke: So what did you do?

Bonetti: My first job actually was working in construction. But that didn't last very long. The job didn't pay very much; I was getting minimum wage. It was seventy-five cents an hour at that time. We worked only seven hours a day, five days a week. So that didn't amount to very much. I remember my hands after the first week--I could hardly close them in the morning until I put them into hot water, because they were really sore. It was heavy

work. I worked for two weeks, and we built three houses--framed only, not the finishing work inside.

Then I went to work for Becton-Dickenson, which were producers of syringes. My friend Joe Battiston was working there. I worked as a glass blower.

Hicke: How did you learn how to be a glass blower?

Bonetti: Oh, they taught us at the plant. All the syringes were done by hand at that time. Each one was made at a bench with the flames.

Hicke: With a bunsen burner?

Bonetti: No, it was gas mixed with air, making a very hot fire. That was the first time in my life I had some real money in my pocket.

Hicke: How long did you keep up the glass blowing?

Bonetti: About two years, I believe.

Parents' Return to New Jersey, 1948

Bonetti: Meanwhile, I convinced my folks to come over and join me. So they came over to New Jersey.

Hicke: So we're in about '49 or so?

Bonetti: '48, I believe, yes.

Hicke: Did your dad have to sell all his businesses?

Bonetti: My dad lost everything. He sold the house during the war. He was afraid, and he needed the money, and he sold the house. Then we experienced the inflation and he lost everything.

Hicke: Oh, that's awful. It must be a terrible feeling to see all that just go down the drain.

Bonetti: Yes.

Move to California, 1948

Hicke: It was 1948, and your parents came over.

Bonetti: They came over, and two things happened. First of all, it was evident that glass blowing had no future. They were already designing machinery to replace the handblown syringes. And secondly, my mother said, "Why don't you do what you were trained to do? Go to California; that's the only place grapes are grown."

Hicke: She was right.

Bonetti: Oh, yes, Mother was always on the ball. It so happened that her brother, my uncle Gaspareen, at one time had a bar in Patterson, New Jersey. So he knew the Opici family, because the Opicis used to import wine from California, and they had a distributorship in Patterson. He introduced me to them, and I asked them if there was anything in California available. And they said, "Well, we have a little winery in California. We need someone. Why don't you go to work for us?" So I took the car and came to California.

Hicke: This was '48?

Bonetti: That was in '48, I think.

Opici Winery

Hicke: This winery was in southern California, I think you said?

Bonetti: Yes. I was living in the town of Ontario, and the winery was in Miraloma, just a little bit outside Ontario. It was a small plant; it produced only red wine at that time.

Hicke: What kind of grapes were they?

Bonetti: Mostly Zinfandel, but they were all crushed together. When I got there, after a couple of days, I met the consulting enologist for the winery, Dr. Carlo Aggazzotti.

Hicke: Before we get to him, did we skip Hubert?

once in a while still. I was really well treated by the Opici. I could not have been treated better.

The sister, Mrs. Mary Nimmergut, was running the winery. A very business-like lady. She lived in Ontario and ran the winery in Miraloma. She was extremely generous to me. She invited me to the house and introduced me to young people from the church. So she made me feel very, very at home there.

Hicke: That helps a lot.

Bonetti: That helps a lot. I got to Ontario just prior to the harvest. The first thing was preparing the winery for the harvest, cleaning out everything. And then we had the harvest. At Christmastime, she said, "Aren't you going to go home to your folks for Christmas?" Mrs. Nimmergut had purchased a new car in New Jersey and wanted me to drive it to California. And I was of course happy to do it.

Hicke: An offer you couldn't refuse.

Bonetti: An offer I couldn't refuse. So I took the bus on that day, all the way across country, which was a long ride. But at Christmastime, it was fun to see the small towns with all the lights.

Dr. Carlo Aggazzotti

Hicke: You were starting to tell me about Dr. Aggazzotti.

Bonetti: Okay. When I got to the Opici winery in Miraloma, I met their consulting enologist, Carlo Aggazzotti. He was Italian. The Aggazzotti is quite an old family in the Reggio Emilia area. He went to school in Conegliano while he was in the army. He came to the U.S. before the war, just after Prohibition. He went to school around 1933 in Conegliano. Then he received an offer to come to California. As a matter of fact, I read the oral history by [Horace O.] Lanza.[1] I think Lanza was the one which got him to come over, and he worked for Lanza for a while in Healdsburg, and then he moved to Delano. He was winemaker in Delano for DiGiorgio. And from Delano he went to Cucamonga. He was

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[1]Horace O. Lanza and Harry Baccigaluppi, California Grape Products and Other Wine Enterprises, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1971.

consulting in Cucamonga. So we became very good friends; he was a very open person, and extremely knowledgeable.

He particularly liked vinegars. He had a passion for vinegar. He bought a little ranch--about ten acres in Cucamonga --with a little building, little winery, and it produced some vinegar.

Hicke: He was about fifty years too soon with the vinegar.

Bonetti: He was too soon. But he was talking about Aceto Balsamico. And at that time, no one knew anything about Aceto Balsamico. So I really enjoyed my stay in Cucamonga.

Wine Production at Opici

Hicke: What were you doing there?

Bonetti: Oh, I was working in the little winery. It was a one-man operation. I did everything which had to be done in the winery to produce the wine. We crushed the grapes, fermented, finished them, and eventually bottled it. After we finally finished the wine and bottled it, we shipped it to Hubert by rail.

Hicke: Labeled?

Bonetti: With the Opici label. His company was the American B&D. We even bottled some wine for Opici, for Hubert, when I was at Souverain.

Hicke: What kind of equipment were you using?

Bonetti: Oh, it was an old winery in a ranch at Miraloma. We had a conventional crusher, and we had redwood tanks for fermentation and for storage, and an underground tank which kept the wine nice and cool. That was a concrete tank underground, quite large. We had filters, refrigeration equipment, and bottling equipment. We had a filler, and a semi-automatic labeler, a hand corker. It was all really simple, but slow.

Hicke: One at a time, by hand?

Bonetti: Yes, one at a time--not exactly by hand, but almost. It was really simple equipment. The production was limited. I think we made about 25,000 or 30,000 cases. It was basically boutique wine, but we also bottled in gallons as well.

made about 25,000 or 30,000 cases. It was basically boutique wine, but we also bottled in gallons as well.

Problems with Brettanomyces Yeast

Bonetti: We did have a problem at one time. That was the first experience with what I think was Brettanomyces. We had some wine that Mr. Opici sent back from New Jersey--some wines which we'd shipped there--and he said, "The wine tastes funny. It is not the same as the one you sent me earlier." We looked on the microscope, and there were some funny-looking yeasts. I didn't recognize what yeast it was. But from the off flavor that the wine developed, I'm quite sure we had Brettanomyces yeast, only I didn't recognize it for what it was.

Hicke: Could you do anything about it at that time?

Bonetti: Brettanomyces? Not much you could do but filter it better. And more SO_2. We kept a fairly low SO_2 at that time. It doesn't take much for Brettanomices to grow, particularly in wines with low acidity, and the ones from Cucamonga lacked acidity.

I was there for only one harvest. And then Carlo said, "Look, the place is too small, you're not learning as much as you should, and it's time for you to move on. I hate to see you go, but I think you should."

Hicke: That was good of him.

Bonetti: He encouraged me.

IV GALLO WINERY, 1949-1955

Getting Hired

Bonetti: Then I wrote to the Wine Institute. I received a letter from Charlie Crawford at Gallo, he asked to meet for an interview. And so I drove from Cucamonga to Modesto one day, and went to the Gallo Winery on Saturday morning. I met Charlie Crawford. He showed me the winery, and then he brought me upstairs, and I met Julio Gallo. Charlie offered me a job, and I was delighted to take it.

But what was interesting was what Charlie Crawford told me at the beginning. As he was taking me through the winery, he said, "Look, here the work officially is forty hours a week. But we love our jobs so much that we stay as long as necessary." I found out later that that was certainly true!

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Bonetti: He said, "Experiment in the lab. Do anything you want." He said, "If you have an idea, try it in the lab, prove it. And if it's worthwhile, then we will proceed with it."

Hicke: That's pretty nice.

Bonetti: That was nice. That's exciting, you know, for a young man. That's the incentive you want. I started working as a technologist.

Vermouth Production

Bonetti: I played around with vermouth, but never succeeded in coming out with a better vermouth than Gallo was producing.

Hicke: What were you thinking of doing with vermouth?

Bonetti: Well, Gallo was producing vermouth, and after a while, I was put in charge of it. So I tried all sorts of combinations. I used some of the formulas which I had tried at school. They were not better than the vermouth stock which they were purchasing from Italy, but I had fun trying, experimenting. So it was an exciting place to work in '48, '49.

Hicke: You said they were buying the vermouth from Italy?

Bonetti: No, the essence, just the stock. We changed a few things: types of sugar, different acid levels, different base wines.

Analytical Laboratory

Bonetti: It was interesting, because Gallo was a fairly small winery at that time, compared to Roma, for example. So it was a very intimate group. When I started, the laboratory was divided into two sections. One was an analytical lab, and next door was the quality control and tasting lab. In the analytical lab one man ran all the analysis for Gallo: Lyman Cash. Lyman Cash was the oldest of the group. At one time, he was the chemist for Italian Swiss Colony. He was the inventor of the Cash volatile acid still, still in wide use today. He ran the entire analytical laboratory by himself for several years.

But analysis was not the emphasis at Gallo. They ran only the essential analysis: alcohol; sugar; T.A.; SO_2; volatile acids; occasionally copper and iron. What they did concentrate instead was on quality control and lots of tasting, blends, and clarifications. They tried to make the sweet wines taste smoother by clarifying and by controlling the acid. That was the emphasis.

Julio Gallo used to come to the lab twice a day, just before lunch, and toward the end of the day, about four or five o'clock. When he came to the lab, you had to present him something to taste. You didn't present him only one blend. He wanted to have choices.

So it kept us busy, because we had to produce every day something for him to evaluate. The wines were getting better, because we took the time to taste them. It forced us to taste. Then we would taste them together, blind--you didn't know which wine you were tasting. Also we had a benchmark. We knew how our

taste compared to Julio Gallo's and compared to Charlie Crawford's, who was also tasting. It was a learning experience. You worked hard, and we talked about wine all the time.

Key People: Don Sanford, Spirito Ballatore, Brad Webb

Bonetti: When I started there, the quality control lab was run by Don Sanford. It was his first job after he graduated from Oregon State in food technology. He was there for about a year or two years when I got there. He was the senior man in the lab. And Spirito Ballatore (you might have seen Ballatore brandy, Ballatore grappa, and Ballatore champagne). Spirito took care of all the records and then he took care of the stability of the wines. Then two days after I started working, Brad Webb joined Gallo.

Hicke: What was his job?

Bonetti: Brad Webb joined Gallo officially as the berry winemaker, because Gallo produced also wine made out of berries. Brad was familiar with berry wine because prior to joining Gallo, he worked in Washington state for a winery which is now Chateau St. Michel. Brad Webb was the true chemist of the group. He had a degree in biochemistry. He introduced statistics to analyze the results of our tasting.

Hicke: Charts and graphs?

Bonetti: Brad always saw winemaking as a science. I saw it more as an art. He saw the potential in many things. As a matter of fact, did you read Julio and Ernest Gallo's book?

Hicke: I haven't read it, no.

Bonetti: You should read it. Julio Gallo paid a beautiful tribute to Brad. Read his book, Julio's part. I think you'll find it quite interesting.

Brad always had new ideas, and was exploring new concepts.

Hicke: How long had he been in the business?

Bonetti: His previous job with the winery in Washington was his first job. He was a pilot during the war.

Experimentation with Filters and Different Blends

Bonetti: Brad was really innovative. For example, when we started running analysis on water, we were using a membrane filter. At that time, the membrane filters were used only in the lab for analytical purposes. But he said, "Gee, this filter filters so well. Why can't we use it in the plant?" So he was a step ahead of technology. He realized right away the potential. And membrane filtration five or six years later became a standard filtration for beer and wine.

He started working with berry wine. To make sure that there was no contamination with grape wine, he started running paper chromatography to separate the different acids. That work led eventually to his pioneer work in induced malolactic fermentation.

Winemaking at that time was very crude, really. The bulk of Gallo's business was in sherry, port, muscatel. So some of the technology which was used on sweet wine was also applied to the table wine. For example, when you're making sweet wines, the easiest way to mix a blend is to blow air in the bottom of the tank, and the air will mix the blend. It's quickly done. With the table wines, they did the same thing, mixing the blends with air. So they were taking a white wine, and then blowing air through the tank, resulting in an oxidized wine.

One day, Brad said, "Ah, let's try to use nitrogen." No one in California was using it at the time. But Brad started mixing white wine tanks with nitrogen, and then would show it to Julio Gallo and to the group. Well, the difference was obvious. He was very innovative.

Those were interesting years at Gallo. When I started, Gallo still had one barrel warehouse where the sherrys and the ports were aged. There were thousands of barrels at Gallo at that time.

Market Research

Hicke: Did they have any kind of tasting room for the public?

Bonetti: No, no.

Hicke: I'm trying to get at if there was some way, other than the market dropping, that they could get feedback from the public.

Bonetti: No. As far as I know, they had never done any public tasting.

Hicke: And no market surveying?

Bonetti: No. When I got involved into the Vino Paisano, people working at the winery would taste it. They'd bring home a bottle with a questionnaire asking which one was preferred and why.

Hicke: That's the kind of work I'd like to take home!

Bonetti: Yes. We did quite a bit of that.

Concrete and Steel Tanks

Hicke: I think I stopped you when you were about to tell me about the wine cellar.

Bonetti: Well, the barrel room eventually was dismantled, because they had to use that space for a new fermenting room. And that was, I think, the last concrete tanks built in California. After that, Gallo started building steel tanks.

Hicke: They built them, or they had them built?

Bonetti: Well, the first tanks were built by a firm--I think it was Iron Bridgework or something like that which built the first tanks--and then they were built in-house. But they were steel, not stainless. At that time, stainless was still too expensive. Coated with the epoxy paint.

When I left, they were not quite through building the last, big, one-million-gallon tank, which possibly was too large, because I don't think he ever built another one. I have a picture of the old Gallo winery; I'll show it to you. This was the concentrate tank. This building in the corner is the still. All the distilling facilities were always enclosed in a building at that time. And all the tanks were enclosed in the building. The reason those two were outside was because they were not used for wine but for concentrate.

Hicke: Do you have any idea what the date is?

Bonetti: This one?

Hicke: Yes.

Bonetti: It's between '52 and '53, I suppose.

Wine Production and Winemaking Philosophy

Bonetti: At that time, we really believed we could make everything in the plant. In winemaking, the state of the art was technology: how to have the technology to produce it, and how to control in the laboratory. We thought we could quickly reach levels of quality which in Europe took centuries to get there.

At that time, I was involved mainly with the table wines for Gallo. Practically all the table wines came from Napa, Sonoma, and Livermore. All the table wine production came predominantly from the two co-ops in Napa, the co-op in Healdsburg; also some wine purchased from various producers in the North Coast. Seghesio used to sell some wines. I remember I always used a little bit of Simi Winery old wines in my blends. They were so high in volatile acidity that they were almost at the borderline for drinkability.

Hicke: Is that right?

Bonetti: You couldn't use very much of it; 1 or 2 percent. There were always some wineries who kept their wines too long and couldn't sell it. They were not very good by themselves, but as part of the blend, they were valuable. So we had a lot of wines we could use in our blending from different sources.

Gallo at that time was making two basic red wines. One was what they called the New York blend, which was heavy, and the other was the California blend, which was a lighter blend. During the transition from vintage to vintage, we tried to make the transition very, very gradual. So as soon as we had some new wines, the new vintage was introduced immediately with the previous vintage. So the change in taste was gradual.

Hicke: So you don't disappoint expectations or change people's expectations?

Bonetti: Yes. So we were able to maintain a fairly good, consistent quality, and improve a little bit. If you made a blend which was very good, then Julio Gallo would ask, "Well, fine. Can you do it the next time?" So don't vary it. But he was very, very much

concerned with quality. He wanted to retain fruitiness in the wine as much as possible.

I do remember one time Ernest Gallo coming to the lab and there were three or four of us. I think Brad Webb was there, and Don Sanford. He said, "You people, if you really want to, you can write your tickets if you can make wine from grapes growing here in the valley floor to taste like the wines which we are getting from Napa." That was quite a challenge, and we thought we could. Really, we thought it was a possibility, that if we worked hard enough and treated the wines enough, we could do it.

Hicke: That's because of that feeling that whatever could be done was done in the winemaker's part of it, and the vineyards didn't play as big a role.

Bonetti: That was part of the whole philosophy, yes.

Hicke: That's interesting.

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Bonetti: I stayed at Gallo about five years. Naturally, you could see the winery expanding.

Vino Paisano

Hicke: You didn't really tell me about developing the Vino Paisano.

Bonetti: Oh, the Vino Paisano. Well, all table wines were North Coast wines--Sonoma and Mendocino. So was Vino Paisano. We wanted to have very low tannins, so we had to use a lot of gelatin.

Then we added some white wine with it; just a little bit of muscat went in it, some of the wine from Simi. And the wine was very, very easy to drink. It was designed to appeal to people just getting into wine-drinking.

I remember people in the industry denigrated the Vino Paisano, because they didn't understand what we were really shooting for. But it was a success in the marketplace, and we worked for at least a year in preparing different sorts of blends. We were still working on it till one day we saw a letter that Ernest Gallo wrote to the distributor saying that after so many years of experimentation, now we had achieved the perfect

blend, and we were going to produce it. We knew that Julio Gallo would finally approve the blend. It was a success.

Vino Paisano Club

Hicke: Since you're on this, what's the Vino Paisano Club?

Bonetti: Oh, those were the lighter moments of Gallo, because after we started Vino Paisano, Julio Gallo decided that he wanted to pull the group together. So once a month, a group of two or three people cooked dinner for what they call the Vino Paisano Club, the production people. Julio Gallo was the leader. We'd eat, and told some horrible jokes, and we drank.

Hicke: You drank Vino Paisano?

Bonetti: Vino Paisano, or other wine, Gallo wine, naturally.

Winery Accidents

[Interview 2: February 13, 1997] ##

Hicke: You mentioned that there were some accidents during your tenure at Gallo.

Bonetti: Yes. There were two accidents which occurred not too far apart from each other. At that time, I was assistant to Norman Braskat, the cellar superintendent.

The first accident occurred when someone entered a stainless steel tank by the distillery, and he was overcome by the fumes. That really scared us. I still remember Julio Gallo coming there in the distilling room; he took charge of the rescue. He grabbed the fire escape hatchet and started chipping on the stainless steel tank. He managed finally to cut an opening in the tank. There were sparks going all over.

Looking inside this little hole, you could see a man just gasping on the floor. It was really scary. Immediately, an air line was introduced through the hole, and later, wearing a mask, someone entered the tank and removed the man. So it was a near-accident.

Hicke: But not fatal?

Bonetti: No fatal, that one. But enough to really create a great scare throughout the winery.

Hicke: Did that change any of the practices?

Bonetti: It should have. I didn't see any real changes until the second accident occurred, not much later. That occurred during the harvesting in the evening. It occurred in the fermenting room. I had no supervision in the fermenting room; I supervised only the cellar operation. The fermenting room was handled as a separate unit.

We had underground pits where the juice was drained into it by gravity. Occasionally, the pits had to be washed. Apparently, there was a little bit of lees in the bottom of the pit, and the man entered with a ladder and started washing out and squeegeeing all the wine residue to the pump. That released carbon dioxide, and he was overcome. Immediately, another man jumped in to pull him out, and he was overcome. The third man jumped in, and he was overcome.

Finally, somebody else realized what was going on. This happened really quickly. I wasn't aware of it until the thing was practically over, even though I was maybe 200 feet away. Eventually, somebody went in with the mask and with a rope. The original man was pulled out alive, and the other two died. One drowned--he fell with his face down--and the other one was classified as a heart attack victim.

That was the first and only time I really experienced a tragic accident in a winery; it was something that kept me for the rest of my life aware of the danger involved with the fermentation. After that, of course, Gallo hired a safety expert, and practices were put in place to prevent future repetition. But that was very tragic. We have better safety practices in wineries now, and that will never occur again. We learned the hard way.

Hicke: Okay. Anything else about Gallo?

Bonetti: No, I think we should proceed.

Marriage and Decision to Leave Gallo

Hicke: Why did you decide to leave Gallo?

Bonetti: Oh, it was time for me to move on, really. So I decided to leave Gallo and look around for other possibilities. Of course, my dream would have been to move up to the Napa or Sonoma area, but there was no opening at that time.

Hicke: Might I ask, when did you get married?

Bonetti: In '55. Just around the time I was about ready to leave Gallo.

Hicke: And could you give me your wife's full name?

Bonetti: Josephine Bettina Crespi.

Hicke: And you said she was from where?

Bonetti: From Switzerland, from Bellinzona, Ticino.

Hicke: Where did you meet?

Bonetti: Modesto.

Hicke: She was living there?

Bonetti: She came over to visit an uncle in Modesto. We met, and we got married.

Hicke: Yes. So '55 was a significant year.

Bonetti: Significant year, '55, for me. We got married the last day of '55, on December 31. It was the year of the flood too, and I didn't even know if I could make it to Modesto from Fresno. I was living in Fresno at that time.

Hicke: But you made it.

Bonetti: But I made it, we made it.

Hicke: That must have been after you had taken a new job.

Bonetti: Yes.

V SCHENLEY, 1955-1961

Recruitment and Responsibilities as Senior Chemist

Hicke: What did you do after you left Gallo?

Bonetti: I had an interview with [Richard] Auerbach, the technical director of Schenley, Roma winery in Fresno. Apparently, we clicked well, and he offered me a job, even though he didn't have really anything concrete to offer at that time.

Hicke: No job description?

Bonetti: There was no job description. He just gave me the title of senior chemist, so it could be some fixed salary. I started working in the laboratory, running analyses.

Roma was a much larger plant than Gallo at that time. At one time, Schenley was the largest employer in the city of Fresno. They had the Roma winery, and they had one winery in Delano, and a winery in Livermore, the Cresta Blanca winery. They also were in the whiskey business as well, and brandy business. Brandy was an important operation. Roma also produced sparkling wine and bottle-fermented champagne. They were also in cordials and whiskeys and a whole gamut of alcoholic beverages. First they were getting the whiskey in barrels, and they aged it in Fresno, and bottled it. But later, they actually fermented and distilled some whiskey right in Fresno.

Hicke: Where did they import it from?

Bonetti: From Kentucky and Illinois, from two plants that Schenley owned. They received it in tank cars, and then moved it to barrels, and aged it in barrels. It was a really big plant.

Hicke: Did you oversee all of these alcohol operations?

Bonetti: No, I was just in the wine laboratory at first. They had a very good technical team in Fresno.

But the emphasis in the winery was mostly on analysis, making sure the wine was stable and sound. It was much different from Gallo; they were doing very little blending trials or lab clarification trials. Everything was emphasizing the analytical end of it and the stability end of it.

Hicke: Do you mean consistency?

Bonetti: No, stability in the sense that the wine will not change--it has shelf life.

It was more of a corporate climate with Schenley. You really felt it was a corporation.

Botrytised Semillon

Bonetti: At that time, Myron Nightingale did a beautiful job developing the premier Semillon. That's perhaps one of the last approaches where technology did conquer. They started producing premier Semillon with the same fungus, botrytis, which creates the great sauternes of France. After the grape was harvested, Myron spread the spores of the Botrytis cinerea on the grapes, and stored the grapes in vats under the proper temperature and humidity. The wine really had all the characteristics of the botrytised wines.

That really impressed the French quite a bit. Eventually, the production of this wine was discontinued, because the cost was too high.

Sparkling Wine

Bonetti: Schenley did develop a system of decanting the champagne, which at the time was rather unique, and it was kept pretty much secret. No visitors were allowed in that particular area. The champagne bottles were decanted into a large tank, filtered back into bottles to remove the yeast and therefore avoiding the process of disgorging bottle by bottle.

They thought the concept was completely unique, but something similar was developed earlier from bottle to bottle,

with filtration in between, for the Asti Spumanti. Professor Garino-Canina describes it in a book that I have. Think it was written in 1911 or '12. It's always hard to find something totally new. [laughter]

Other Schenley Wines

Bonetti: I was at Schenley then for about five years, in different positions.

Hicke: What kind of markets were there for the Schenley wines?

Bonetti: At that time, Cresta Blanca was still a very respected wine, and the Roma Wine Company was quite large but was declining. They had so many other things, though, which were really profitable for them. They had, for example, the Dubonnet. Dubonnet was an extremely profitable line. They had a license to produce it from the French company. Then they had the Cook Imperial champagne; it was a bottle-fermented champagne at that time. The base wine was coming from the East.

Hicke: That's carrying coals to Newcastle.

Bonetti: Yes, yes.

Microbiological Laboratory

Hicke: Tell me about the microbiological lab.

Bonetti: I ended up in the microbiological lab, and we did a lot of work on the champagne yeast cultures. As I say, Schenley emphasized analysis. So throughout the year, we continually analyzed the wine microscopically. It was very interesting, because as the spring approached, you could see the wine taking on a life of its own. You could see the bacteria level increasing, and if you're watching the wine very closely in the microscope, you can actually see the spring. [laughter] The bacteria start to to move.

Hicke: Is that a scientific fact?

Bonetti: Well, yes. During the spring, the temperature changes a little bit, and the bacteria start to multiply.

Whiskey Department

Bonetti: Then from there, I worked in the whiskey department for a while, as a whiskey chemist. I did not like it.

Hicke: That must have been different.

Bonetti: That was quite new to me, because I knew not really that much about whiskey. We were producing it, of course, in the same fermenters which we were using for wine fermentation.

Hicke: Barrels?

Bonetti: No, in concrete vats, open vats. I started running analyses and I was getting peculiar numbers--really high counts of aldehydes--and we had the whiskey maker. He couldn't believe the readings we were getting. So we sent the samples back to the central labs, and they were getting the same results I was getting.

We couldn't figure out the reason for the abnormality in the analyses. Finally, the whiskey maker discovered the reason: the concrete tank, no matter how much you washed it and cleaned it, could not be sterilized properly. That caused an incorrect fermentation. We resolved it, finally, by painting the tanks with an epoxy coating.

Hicke: It's a wonder you ever found that out.

Vineyards and Winemaking in Delano

Bonetti: Then I moved to Delano; I stayed in Delano for a few years.

Hicke: Did Schenley have large vineyard holdings there?

Bonetti: Yes, Schenley had quite a lot of vineyards in Delano, about 5,000 acres.

Hicke: What kind of grapes?

Bonetti: Well, they were all wine grapes: Semillon, Burger. Those were the two major white wine grapes they had. And then they had a very dark red grape, Salvador grapes.

It was really warm in Delano, temperatures were 100 degrees and more. So as soon as the Burger grapes were crushed in large

quantities, the juice was getting very, very oxidized--this brown color. Surprisingly, though, all that dark color precipitated in the bottom of the tank, so by the time the wines were finished fermenting, it produced a really nice, beautiful-colored wine that was really stable in color. It took many years for me to learn that oxidation of the juice at times can be beneficial to produce stable wines. But see, we had a frame of mind that you want to avoid oxidation completely.

Hicke: But also, it takes a long time for these things to appear as results, and you don't see the wine for a while.

Bonetti: Yes, and unless you're running two different tests side by side, you're never really sure if it could have been even better if it wasn't oxidized.

Labor Problems in Delano

Bonetti: I left Delano just about when they started having labor problems. It was before the big strike led by Cesar Chavez, but it was at the beginning of the labor problems.

Hicke: So 1961, I guess we're talking about.

Bonetti: Yes. I think the big strike occurred the following year. But there was already a lot of strikes and a lot of unhappy situations.

Hicke: Did that have anything to do with your leaving?

Bonetti: No.

Hicke: Was there any difference between the workers at Gallo and the ones at Schenley in how they were treated?

Bonetti: Gallo had no property in Delano.

Hicke: But they bought all their grapes?

Bonetti: Gallo bought the grapes mostly in Modesto, Livingstone.

Hicke: And they didn't own the vineyards?

Bonetti: They owned vineyards in Modesto and Livingstone, and then they bought the winery in Fresno, and they bought grapes around Fresno. But Delano was still predominantly a table grape area, except for Schenley, which had wine grapes. Other wineries in

Delano were Perrelli-Minetti, the Delano Cooperative, and the Lanza Winery. Some of the table grapes were diverted to the winery according to the market. If the market was really weak for table grapes, or for raisins, they were diverted.

Hicke: But Schenley owned so much land that they would have been seriously involved in any labor disputes.

Bonetti: Yes, Schenley was certainly a target. The two big landowners were Schenley and DiGiorgio. DiGiorgio had a large property in Delano.

Hicke: Yes, that's another thing, it's the deep-pocket theory--they were a big target.

Bonetti: Yes. So they were more vulnerable.

Hicke: Is this where the letter from DiGiorgio fits in?

Bonetti: No. [laughs] I just put that down because that was an interesting letter which goes back to the time they established minimum wages.

Hicke: California?

Bonetti: I think it was federal, and DiGiorgio's letter to the plant manager said, "There's a new law, and we certainly want to abide by it immediately. So raise the wages to the minimum wages starting immediately. However, remember to lay off enough people so the total cost will not increase by one single penny." [laughter] I wish I had kept that letter. He had a very strong personality.

Hicke: Well, that's funny, because that's exactly what people who oppose the minimum wage say will happen. They say, "Well, you'll drive all these people to fire employees." It just goes to show there's a few of those around.

Bonetti: Yes.

William Bonetti (right) with Robert Mondavi during Focus on Chardonnay, 1994.

VI CHARLES KRUG WINERY, 1961-1972

Decision to Join Winery

Hicke: Well, here we are in '61.

Bonetti: In '61, I really wanted to move north. I was going to Davis for one of those short courses, getting up-to-date courses which they had been giving at Davis at that time. [I went] for about a week. Professor [A. Dinsmore] Webb--I knew him well because he was the brother of Brad Webb--told me, "Look, I think Bob Mondavi is looking for someone, and I think he's interested in you." And Bob Mondavi was interested. He offered me a job. The job description was as a winery chemist, but I was tired of running analyses and I didn't want to be a wine chemist any longer. I wanted to be a winemaker. So I turned him down. And then he sent me another letter saying, "Oh, we have something else, another possibility in mind. Why don't we get together?" So I went up.

Hicke: At this time, he was at Charles Krug [Winery]?

Bonetti: He was the general manager at Charles Krug, plus he was taking care of all the marketing. Peter Mondavi was the production manager. So he invited me to go up and talk, and I did, and was impressed by Bob Mondavi. I think everybody who met him became impressed very easily. The American Society of Enologists meeting was in Lake County, and so my wife and I went up to Sonoma. We were guests of the Webbs overnight before reaching Lake County.

Hicke: This is Brad Webb?

Bonetti: Brad Webb. Brad took me to the winery he was running, which was the Hanzell Vineyards. He was making Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. We went to the winery, we tasted Chardonnay wines. That was really the first time I experienced a white wine in California

which was really remarkable--a wine which could compete with the great wines of the world. That was a brilliant wine, something really worthwhile shooting for. I was very enthusiastic about it, and we decided yes, we wanted to move to Napa for sure. So we very, very happily agreed to take the job.

Hicke: Which job was this?

Bonetti: The job classification was assistant production manager. My predecessor was an Australian, Rev Count, who decided to return home. It was basically running the plant, and reporting to Peter Mondavi. So I was back again supervising production and in charge of the lab and the operation.

It was very exciting. This is the letter which I am going to show you, [pulls out letter] because I think it's typical of Bob Mondavi. First of all, it was nice to receive a letter which was hand-written to start with. It shows Bob Mondavi's ability to inspire people the way Bob Mondavi always was able to. Don't you think this is interesting?

Hicke: Yes.

White Winemaking Techniques

Hicke: Before we go on to some of these other things you have listed, let me just ask you your impressions of the winery at the time you joined it.

Bonetti: Well, they were really advanced, particularly with white wines. They had two basic things which made it different than anything else in California at that time, and both of them, I think, have to be attributed to Peter Mondavi. He was the one who introduced them. At that time, the objective on the white wine was to produce something really fruity, and the benchmark were the German wines, not the French whites.

Hicke: The Rieslings?

Bonetti: The Rieslings, for instance, very much so. All the wine produced at Mondavi were practically 100-percent varietal. The wines were fermented at lower temperature, I think, than anybody else in California. Very low fermentation temperature, which retained the cold fermentation aroma in the wine, the freshness in the wine. The tanks were kept full, completely full, by frequent weekly topping of the tanks.

Hicke: What was the fermentation temperature?

Bonetti: Below sixty degrees--from forty-five to fifty-five normally, unless something happened. But definitely below sixty. Most of the white wine had residual sugar. The Johannisberg Riesling I believe at that time had about .6 percent of sugar. You'd barely taste the sweetness, but also because the sugar was retained before the fermentation was completely finished--the fermentation was arrested before reaching completion--it retained a lot of the flavor of the fruit characteristic of the grapes. So the ability to stop the fermentation before reaching completion, and retaining the original sugar of the variety was really important. He did so on the Riesling, on the Gewürtztraminer, on the Chenin Blanc, on the Rosé--on all the varieties which have some sugar in them, which was most of the white wines.

The other thing which Krug was way ahead at the time was the ability to sterile filter the wines. Even the wines which had residual sugar were sent to bottling without being pasteurized or heated in any form. That was before the development of the membrane filters, like the milipore that came later. But they had the advantage of the way they were filtering the wine. They had bought already several glass-lined tanks, old beer tanks, which could be pressurized up to 15 psi, but they were normally pressured up to 10 pounds per square inch.

So it was the very low pressure and steady, uniform pressure, which allowed them to have a very successful sterile filtration. If you do it with a pump, the chances are the pulsation of the pump pushes some of the yeast cells through, particularly if the pressure increases. Those two techniques, I think, made them on the avant garde of the white winemaking production.

Peter Mondavi

Hicke: And you attribute these techniques to Peter?

Bonetti: Peter was a really strong fan of the German technology, and he followed them. He visited Germany, and he was very impressed, both with real cold fermentation and the sterile filtration retaining the original sugar.

Hicke: Since we're on him, you've got a note about his tasting abilities.

Bonetti: He was also an excellent taster. He had a real sharp taste. So it was a privilege to be able to taste with him.

Hicke: Now, when you say that, do you mean that he had a good memory?

Bonetti: Good memory, good palate, to discern the variation between different wines, and problems. He wanted wines which were very soft, without harsh tannins.

Hicke: Seems like memory must be a really key ingredient in having a good palate.

Bonetti: Oh, certainly.

Hicke: And you said Krug had very high standards?

Bonetti: Very high standards. They were very conservative, but with a very high standard. Peter would make sure that everything was done very well, that the tanks would be completely full; there was frequent inspection of the tanks. He spent a lot of time going around to check to make sure everything was done properly.

Difficulties with the 1961 Season

Bonetti: The first year, '61, was a very difficult year.

Hicke: For you, or for the winery?

Bonetti: For the wine industry, for myself. I was new in the winery. I had to learn where things were. My predecessor stayed there halfway through the crush and then left.

Hicke: Who was that? Oh, the Australian.

Bonetti: The Australian. And then the cellar foreman, or superintendent, got sick. We crushed quite a bit more grapes at Krug than they did ever before. Normally, they crushed grapes in two different places: at Krug, and at the Sunny St. Helena Co-op which they operated. But '61 was the year of the frost, so the yield was low, and they wanted to consolidate in one single place. The crush was greater than any previous year, with the same refrigeration capacity. So we didn't have the facilities. The cooling was the most trying part: trying to keep the grapes fermenting at a low temperature, but with very limited refrigeration.

Hicke: So were you up day and night?

Bonetti: We were up day and night at that time. Then, in addition, we ended up by having a very hot heat spell when the Pinot Noir were fermenting. The Pinot Noir ferments already at very high temperature. Now we know that Pinot Noir likes high temperature fermentation for a while, but we were not quite sure then. We tried to keep it cool. It was above what we had desired.

Hicke: How did it turn out?

Bonetti: It turned out fine. But it was a trying season. I think we were working about thirteen, fourteen hours a day. We'd sleep only a few hours, and then go back and work.

Hicke: Where were you living?

Bonetti: In St. Helena, we were renting a house at Zinfandel Lane. It was a brand-new house--we were the first people to move in--but it was built without insulation. At that time, they didn't use insulation for houses. Even the dishes in the cupboards were hot. [laughter] There we were, among a walnut orchard, but it was still hot. It was a fairly small house.

Hicke: Somehow you got through the year.

Bonetti: We got through the year.

Hicke: Not happily, though.

Bonetti: And we made some very good wine, and we were happy with it.

Hicke: So the wines all turned out?

Bonetti: Oh, the wines turned out fine. That was my first vintage in the Napa Valley, finally, in what Dick Auerbach always called God's country.

Hicke: Yes, I can see why.

Bonetti: It is.

The Mondavi Bounce

Hicke: What is the Mondavi Bounce?

Bonetti: Oh, Bob Mondavi kept saying, "Well, our wine, at one time, had the bounce. I call it Mondavi Bounce." I kept thinking, what the heck could this bounce mean? And then I finally suspected what it was: They probably fermented at low temperature and kept the tank full all the time, and bottled the wine quite young, so they retained lots of the original carbon dioxide. Once I presented to him for a tasting a wine with some CO_2 added. He said, "Oh, this has the bounce." Yes, now I know what he's talking about. Since then, we analyzed for carbon dioxide in the wine, and we targeted to retain a precise level of carbon dioxide. We were quite successful.

Hicke: You can do that?

Bonetti: You can do that.

Hicke: Now you can measure the Mondavi Bounce.

Bonetti: Right. Now we know what we're talking about. It was fun.

Impact of Heightened Consumer Interest in Red Wines

Bonetti: But changes in the consumer preference started during the sixties. That was really a switch-over; people started to be interested in wines.

Hicke: White wines?

Bonetti: No, no, in the sixties it was particularly red wines. In fact, starting in 1961, there was already the shortage of red wine for the bulk market. Not for the premium, not for the Krug label. Krug had the Charles Krug label and C.K. label, and C.K. label was more like a jug wine. Now they call it C.K. Mondavi, I think. But at that time, it was just C.K., predominantly marketed in New York state.

Hicke: That was their second label?

Bonetti: Yes.

Hicke: Anyway, you were starting to talk about the changes in the consumer preferences.

Bonetti: Yes, there was a consumer appreciation of wines, and particularly for reds at that time. There was a high demand for Cabernet, so Cabernet started getting short. There was high demand for even

jug red wine, so much so that we had to try to make some red wine from white grapes, and we did that very successfully.

Hicke: Did you use a little food coloring?

Bonetti: No. We received some white juice and went over our red skins--the pomace--and came out with a fairly good red wine out of white grapes. Because red wine was very, very short, hard to get. Even in the Central Valley, it was short. Then years later, the industry went the other way around.

Hicke: So Charles Krug was making some of the red wine out of white.

Bonetti: Oh, sure.

Hicke: Everybody was?

Bonetti: I think quite a few people tried that. We did a very good job on it.

Hicke: What did they label it?

Bonetti: That was bottled as C.K.

Hicke: Just red table wine?

Bonetti: Yes. It was not used by itself, but was part of the larger blend. The quality of the C.K. wine was quite good, really.

Hicke: What did this red wine made out of white grapes taste like?

Bonetti: Pretty much like a red wine. If you'd gone over a large amount of pomace, and you used the right pomace--particularly if you're using, say, a Petite Syrah pomace, which was really heavy in color and tannin--it's pretty good.

Grape Pricing and Grower Contracts

Hicke: What's the Mondavi grapevine?

Bonetti: Well, I think that was part of the problem in general we had in California. Mondavi purchased grapes from growers, and each grower had five or six or seven different varieties of grapes. The winery had to have different types of wines so it could have a large display in the store shelves. Mondavi had a policy to

buy all the grapes their growers had, whether he needed that particular variety or not.

Hicke: This is still the policy at Charles Krug?

Bonetti: I really don't know. The prices were set originally by Gallo with the Napa Valley Co-op. When that was established, the Christian Brothers set their prices a little bit higher than Gallo, and Charles Krug Winery was setting their prices a little higher than Christian Brothers. So when the growers sold the grapes to Charles Krug, they had no idea what the price was going to be, but they knew that Krug would make it good.

Hicke: So they made a contract, and the price was established later?

Bonetti: No, it was not a yearly contract, it was just shake of hands. They didn't need a contract. They trusted you, and you trusted them. And that was easy. You pay everybody the same.

Now, that's not really good if you wanted the best quality grapes. At Krug, for example, we had two different labels for Cabernet. There was the regular Cabernet and the Vintage Select Cabernet. One grower, Fay Vineyard, produced only Cabernet, and he was in what now is Stag's Leap appellation. But he was getting the same price as somebody who had a really mediocre Cabernet. He had a relatively low yield per acre compared to someone else which produced a lower quality Cabernet. There was no penalty (as long as there was sufficient sugar) for lower quality, or premium for better quality.

So it was a system which didn't create any enemies, but was not really conducive to improved quality. But it was the standard procedure in California.

Hicke: When did this start to change?

Bonetti: It started to change when there became a shortage of grapes.

Hicke: Which was when?

Bonetti: Toward the end of the sixties. Then different little wineries sprung up, and they were searching for specific types of grapes. They were willing to pay a higher price than anybody else, provided they could get those grapes, and those grapes had to be of good quality.

Hicke: So there was a little competition?

Bonetti: Competition really helped. And then after a while, the difference in the prices between Cabernet and Carignane became greater and greater. In the beginning, there was not that much [price] difference between them, and a good varietal produced less, so it was an incentive to plant higher-producing varieties. But as the consumer was willing to pay premium price for a better varietal wine, then the winery could pay more for those grapes. There was more competition. Eventually, that induced people to remove the old vineyards and plant the right variety.

Hicke: So the consumer's taste played a big part in this.

Bonetti: Definitely.

Lodi Operation

Hicke: Tell me about Peter Mondavi and Lodi.

Bonetti: During the harvest, Peter Mondavi used to go to Lodi and spend the harvest in Lodi, because part of the family business was also shipping grapes from Lodi to the East, to Minnesota, Chicago, New York, for home winemakers. He used to buy a lot of Zinfandel there and ship it back East. He wanted to continue what his father started.

Hicke: That went on a lot during Prohibition.

Bonetti: Yes, it started at that time, and he continued it. During that period Bob Mondavi was taking over production as well, and I remember Bob Mondavi used to follow me, watching the temperatures, and watching the fermentation every morning. I would say, "Well, tomorrow we have to start at six o'clock," and by six o'clock, Bob Mondavi was there.

Hicke: What did he do with this information?

Bonetti: Oh, he wanted to make sure that I knew what I was doing, I think, and to make sure there were no slips.

Moscato de Canelli

Bonetti: During that time, Krug had bought a property from Ivan Shock in Rutherford. It was good vineyard. I think it was 500 acres or

so. One section of the vineyard was planted in Muscat de Frontignan, which was sold in the past to Beaulieu for their sweet Muscat de Frontignan.

Hicke: How do you spell de Frontignan?

Bonetti: [tries to spell] I didn't know how to spell it either, so I started calling it Moscato di Canelli--M. d. C.--because it is the same grapes.

Hicke: [laughter] So that's how it got to be Moscato di Canelli?

Bonetti: It was a lot easier to write M. d. C.

Hicke: Where did you get Canelli?

Bonetti: It was the same grapes. It's actually white Muscat. In France, it's called Muscat de Frontignan; in Italy, it's called Moscato di Canelli.

Hicke: Good for you. That was a major contribution.

Bonetti: Yes. [laughter] But the first year, in '61, we used that wine in the C.K. white wine.

Hicke: You mean you blended it?

Bonetti: We blended it with the standard white wine for the C.K. label. The second year I tasted some of the Louis Martini Moscato Amabile, and I kind of liked that. So I decided to keep the Moscato separate. There was sufficient quantity to ferment it separate. I stopped it very sweet, about 5 percent sugar. And then I showed it to Bob, and he said, "Oh, that's good. Let's bottle it." So we did.

When Peter came back from Lodi (he was already complaining that we had too many labels)--he was gone only two months, and when he came back, we had another label. [laughter] He was really angry. He said, "You may have to drink it all!" I didn't have to. Too bad!

It turned out to be a pretty good seller. There was not enough Moscato di Canelli wine to be on all the market, so they sold it only at the retail store at the winery for several years. Then there was too strong a demand; they had to start shipping it to different distributors in small amounts. But it was a really good wine. I thought it was one of the better Moscatos.

And when Bob Mondavi went to build his own winery, he did produce the Moscato d'Oro, which is a similar wine, and at Souverain I made a Moscato Canelli.

Hicke: You started something.

Bonetti: Yes, following Louis Martini. But Louis Martini didn't have the technology to really sterile-filter it, so he had to sell it only at the winery, because there was always the possibility that it would re-ferment on the shelf. Instead, we were able to give it a good sterile filtration; it had a good shelf life.

Hicke: I remember when we first came to California, some people took us up to some winery, and it must have been Martini, because they said, "You've got to have some of this Moscato Amabile, but it won't keep. You have to buy it at the winery and drink it." That must have been Martini.

Bonetti: Martini was the only one that was doing it at that time.

Vintage Selection Cabernet

Hicke: Let's talk about the Vintage Selection.

Bonetti: Vintage Selection. The Cabernet was always fermented keeping each individual vineyard apart. We knew which vineyard normally went into the Vintage Selection. Fay Vineyard was a steady one.

Hicke: But did they designate the vineyards on the Charles Krug labels?

Bonetti: No, no. Just called it Vintage Selection. And it usually had several vineyards in it. Frequently the Rutherford vineyard, which the winery had just purchased, was part of it. Some of Deter was frequently introduced.

Hicke: What was Deter?

Bonetti: Deter was a wine grower, a lawyer from San Francisco who had a vineyard up in the hills. It produced a wine really dark in color with a Cabernet herbaceous quality. It would frequently end up in the Vintage Selection Cabernet. At that time, California was trying to produce red wines with substance as well as some softness. Peter always wanted to go for softness. But people started looking for tannin in red wines, perhaps more so than they do today. We were getting a lot of new consumers who start drinking wine, and they wanted to have the longevity which

comes with the higher tannin levels. The Deter Cabernet offered a lot of that quality.

Frost Problems during the 1960s

Hicke: You told me about 1961, but there's something about frost in the 1960s that you didn't mention.

Bonetti: Yes, '61 was the year where the crop level in the valley was down 50 percent or so. It was a really terrible year. But during the sixties, frost occurred very frequently in Napa Valley. It occurred even in Lodi one vintage, and here in Sonoma. The Alexander Valley was completely frosted out several years. There was very little protection against frost, and we had more rigid winters, I think, than we have now.

Krug was very fortunate, because quite frequently, the frost started up in Calistoga and ended at Krug's property edge, just at Freemark Abbey. It would frequently stop right there. But occasionally it also affected the Krug property. Water protection was unknown in the early years, so the only protection which they had was smudge pots and air movers. Because of the inversion which we have in the valley, that helps if the frost was not very severe.

I remember one vintage when one grower in Calistoga stayed up all night for days and days, spent a lot of money buying diesel fuel for the smudge pots and for the air movers. Then one day, he lost it all anyway. The temperature got so low that whatever he had was not sufficient.

Toward the end of the sixties, some frost protection using water was done at Sebastiani's in Sonoma, and Forni installed water protection near Calistoga. But water was always rather scarce in the Napa region, so water protection--sprinklers--was not quite the easy alternative that it turned out to be in Sonoma, where water is more abundant. Now most of our vineyards in Sonoma are so protected.

Hicke: Did Krug then install some kind of frost protection?

Bonetti: Just smudge pots on the periphery; mostly relied on the air movers.

Hicke: And did you have losses due to the frost?

Bonetti: Not so much at Krug. But some of the other vineyards were badly damaged.

The 1962 Chardonnay

Hicke: We're now at 1962.

Bonetti: 1962, ah, my first Chardonnay. See, in '61, there was not enough Chardonnay to keep it separate. It went in with the generic white wines. But the '62, just the day my daughter was born--that was the first Chardonnay I ever made.

Hicke: Do you have a bottle for her, or two?

Bonetti: I saved a case, but we used it on special occasions. I might still have one bottle left, hopefully.

The other thing which happened in '62 was Krug started buying French oak barrels from Demptos. There were barrels made from Yugoslavian oak, some from Limousin oak, because Brad Webb always said his was Limousin, and some from Nevers.

So Chardonnay, after fermentation, went to oak barrels in '62 for the first time. I wanted to make sure the wine didn't oxidize. In using a pump, I was afraid you'd oxidize the wine, so I moved the barrels to the very top of the winery. We had an attic. In the old days, it was used to bottle wine. We moved the barrels there, and moved the wine by gravity when it was time to bottle, without disturbing the wine. It turned out to be a beautiful Chardonnay.

Shift in Winemaking Philosophy

Hicke: That was the first time you'd used this gravity system?

Bonetti: The first time I used gravity--it's a gentle way to handle wine. By now, at Krug, we started realizing that it was better to do very little to the wine. You can do more harm than good by always manipulating the wine. So we really started switching over from the "we can do it all" to "we can do more damage than good."

Hicke: A major change.

Bonetti: Yes. There was a beginning of a switch in thinking. Do as little as you can.

Hicke: How did you arrive at this?

Bonetti: I think in general all of us in the industry felt that that was the proper direction, just like we all felt that Napa Valley was predominantly a Cabernet country. It was a shame to see so many other varieties growing there, because Cabernet was the grape which can do best. So among the technical group in the valley was a general consensus that we should concentrate on varieties which do best in that particular region.

Cooperation Among Napa Valley Vintners

Hicke: You're indicating also that there was a lot of exchange of ideas among the winegrowers.

Bonetti: Oh, yes. It still exists even today. First of all, in Napa Valley, everybody realized they were competitors, but not really. Like Bob Mondavi used to say, "One bad wine in the valley is bad for every winery in the Valley. One good wine in the valley is good for everyone." They conceived the concept of Napa Valley as a unit, that we had to present a good front. So it was really an advantage to exchange ideas, rather than withholding them. Bob Mondavi, particularly, was very open.

Hicke: He seems to have a world view of things.

Bonetti: He felt that if you tell everyone what you're doing--preferably not the first year but the second year or so--it will take time before it will be copied anyway. Then, if you're smart, you don't rest on your laurels. You try to think of something else.

Hicke: Stay a couple of years ahead.

Bonetti: Keep ahead of the pack. Let them follow you. If you're too concerned of keeping your secret, whatever you're doing--and Peter was a bit too concerned--then it becomes like the old China, which built the walls around it. You don't progress. Then you stay as you are.

Hicke: You're also indicating some of the philosophical differences between the Mondavis, Peter and Robert.

Bonetti: Yes. I marked down a notation here to show the cooperation in the valley. We had at Krug at that time two presses only, and we had a lot more grapes than we could have handled with two presses. The presses were Wilmes presses with the membrane that inflates and presses the wine. During one weekend, on Saturday, one of the membranes broke. We couldn't fix it. We couldn't get in touch with the supplier either, because it was the weekend. And we were desperate because we had all those grapes coming in, and we had to process them.

I knew Beaulieu had an extra membrane. I called, and Ernie Di Gardi said, "Sure. If you want it, come down and get it. But be sure," he said, "to get it back to me on Monday morning." So we solved what really could have been a major disaster for us.

By eight o'clock in the morning [on Monday], Charles Krug was able to get the new membrane, and by nine o'clock or so, Beaulieu got it back. What is also true is that Di Gardi's superior was upset that he let us have the membrane. He said, "Well, can't Krug keep a spare like we do?" [laughter] But nevertheless, that was the type of cooperation which in other industries will not occur.

Hicke: That's a good advantage.

Accidental Discoveries

Hicke: Tell me about accidental discoveries.

Bonetti: I never realized the difference barrel fermentation makes till I fermented pressed wine from Chardonnay grapes in barrels. It was not intentional. We'd just pressed some grapes, and we had only about a barrel of the pressed wine. I just put it in the barrel, and actually forgot about it for about ten days! Ten days later, I found the wine. It was already fermented [laughter], nice and dry, without any attention. It was one of the better Chardonnays. It was a pressed wine instead of a free run wine, so it was a little bit heavier, but it was a damned good wine!

Hicke: Did you ever try that again?

Bonetti: Well, we couldn't barrel ferment at Krug because we didn't have the time or space, but I did barrel ferment when I got to Souverain.

Hicke: Pressed wine?

Bonetti: No, regular wine, regular Chardonnay.

Hicke: I guess that's something like how wine was discovered in the first place, probably by accident.

Bonetti: Yes, I believe so.

Centrifuges

Bonetti: The other thing which occurred technologically-wise was the purchasing of centrifuges. At Krug the centrifuge became almost a necessity, because the production of wines with residual sugar was increasing in quantity, particularly the rosé. It was difficult to stop the fermentation by chilling and filtration, and the centrifuge made that feasible.

Hicke: Who was responsible for bringing in the centrifuges?

Bonetti: At Krug, Peter Mondavi. The first centrifuge in California, I think, was used at Wente Bros. We became convinced the centrifuge was needed at Krug. As we went along we were disappointed in some of the wines we centrifuged.

Hicke: So there was a lot of experimentation?

Bonetti: Yes.

Refrigeration Problems

Bonetti: But then we also had problems at Krug. The problem was lack of refrigeration, which was always short. We always had to improvise. We did all sorts of things in order to control the temperatures. Some crazy things. We were desperate at times! For example, we had a room which we called a cold room, where the wine was stabilized. It was kept at a very cold temperature. So we said, Why don't we put some wine there and ferment it there? It was cold, but it was also a sealed room, and we were not able to vent the CO_2 sufficiently. We had to go in that room with scuba diving equipment. We borrowed the scuba diving equipment from the fire department. [laughter] That was fine the first time. When we asked for it the second time, they became a little bit upset.

Hicke: I was wondering if they didn't come up to see what you were about.

Bonetti: Yes. And so refrigeration was a big problem.

Storage Problems

Bonetti: We were always short of space at Krug. We relied on bottling the wine to make space to drain the fermenters. One example of the shortages we had at Krug was the day when we had a nice Cabernet. We drained the Cabernet before it was completely dry in order to retain softness. Whether it was right or wrong, that was our technique. We wanted to drain it, but had no place to go, except we had received a tank car of port wine which we had bottled that morning directly from the tank car. So I said, "Let's drain it into that tank car." I washed the tank car, drained the Cabernet in it. Then, when we went back to work the following day and looked for the tank car, the tank car was gone! [laughter]

Hicke: Somebody drove off with it?

Bonetti: Somehow the signal with the railroad went haywire. I traced it in San Francisco.

Hicke: It went on a railroad?

Bonetti: Yes, it went out on the railroad.

Hicke: Did you ever get the tank car back?

Bonetti: Oh, we got it back the following day.

Efforts to Improve Wines

Bonetti: Bob Mondavi kept telling us, "You're doing a beautiful job on white wines. They are fruity, but they are also simple grape juice. We need more complexity." He started bringing in bottles of white burgundy and so forth and showing us what we could do. He suggested that we taste the great wines of the world and try to emulate the great wines of the world, not be satisfied with the freshness and fruitiness. There's a lot more to it to really achieve greatness. Of course, French oak was certainly part of

it. But we did start to understand that we had a lot to do to achieve greatness.

Hicke: How often would you taste these wines?

Bonetti: We had regular tastings at Krug with competitive wines every week. Monday morning was the competitive wine tasting. Then we started introducing some of the European wines as well as California wines.

Hicke: Did you taste any wines from anyplace else in the U.S.?

Bonetti: No, mostly California, and some French. But it was mostly our wines versus the competitor California wines--whatever the people in marketing felt was a competitor wine. At that time, there was still a limited number of California premium wines, so it was easy to taste practically all of them.

We started seeing the changes. For many years, it was just easy to tell the Krug white wine from the other ones. You could line up, say, a dozen different bottles of Riesling, and just looking at them, most of them were oxidized. But as the years went by, you started seeing a general improvement in quality.

Hicke: Who did you feel were your major competitors at that time?

Bonetti: Souverain was making a good Riesling. I remember tasting one wine which really impressed us. It was the early Riesling from Chateau Ste. Michelle in Washington. Martini and Beaulieu and Inglenook, particularly Inglenook, produced some beautiful red wines.

Do you think we have enough of Krug?

Hicke: Okay.

VII SOUVERAIN, 1972-1981

Decision to Join Souverain

Hicke: So now we're up to 1972 or thereabouts?

Bonetti: Yes, 1972. At that time, I felt I needed a change. Actually, there was some unhappiness in the winery. There was some dissension between the two brothers, which was unsettling, you know. Because I had loyalty to both of them, and to be caught in the middle becomes a little difficult. I didn't really make any active move to leave the winery till Bud Mueller came to see me and offered me a job with Souverain. My first impression was "No, I'm not quite sure about wanting to leave."

Now Souverain Winery was founded by Lee Stewart in the Glass Mountain. He had sold the winery to a group of partners: Bud Mueller was the promoter; other partners were Fred Holmes, a very respected, established figure in the Napa Valley; Ivan Shock, another partner, was the man who sold the vineyards to Charles Krug in '61. They bought Lee Stewart out. Stewart retained a little bit of the partnership, and they were building a winery in Rutherford, off the Silverado Trail. Actually I think it was a more complex deal than I realized earlier. Fred always was very heavily involved, and I don't know all the dynamics of the deal, but the partnership wanted to find another large buyer.

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Bonetti: So they approached Pillsbury Company. I wasn't really ready to jump into it, but then I had a meeting with the chairman of the board of the Pillsbury Company, who came to see me. I was really flattered he would come all the way, particularly since it was his first day of active duty since he had left the hospital with cancer surgery. We had lunch at the Ivan Shock house.

Hicke: What was his name?

Bonetti: I can't remember his name. He brought along the president of Pillsbury, and he was really frank. He said, "Look, I'm going to die. But this is Dave Chapman, who is going to be my successor, and I want before I die to get Pillsbury involved in wine." At that time [Richard M.] Nixon was president, and there was talk about price freezing. He said, "We are in a business--flour and bread and food--and if they freeze prices we are going to be frozen first because we deal with necessities. But I don't think it will interfere with wine, which is a luxury. So I want to move the company into the wine business."

I told him, "Well, look, it's going to be very costly. You're going to lose a lot of money. It's going to be capital intensive." He said, "Don't worry. We are in for a long pull, and we understand that. We don't know anything about wine, so we're not going to interfere in any way with what you people are doing there. But we want to be in the business. And I'd like to have you part of the group." Flattery goes a long way, you know!

Hicke: Ah, yes [laughing].

Bonetti: He said, "After a while, we want to build a winery in Sonoma County, a larger winery than what we have here in Rutherford. It will be the same marketing entity, but it would be two different wineries, Souverain in Rutherford, and a new label, starting from scratch." I kind of hesitated: "I'd have to move to Sonoma then." He said, "Oh, you don't have to." He said, "We will have a winery in both places, so you'll be in charge of the winemaking facilities. You can live here, you can live there. It's up to you." That made it easier to say yes, particularly having been in the valley for twelve, thirteen years. There are very few places in California where people are so attached. Napa Valley people have a very strong belief that Napa is paradise on earth. Sonoma is a nice place to live, but I didn't think so at that time.

My daughter didn't want to move. She had friends at school, you know. But anyway, I finally accepted the job.

Hicke: He sounds like he was willing to have you at any price, so to speak.

Bonetti: Yes. And he gave me a five-years contract. The pay was twice as much as I was getting from Mondavi.

Hicke: Yes, that helps, too.

Bonetti: That helps. Then he said, "Pillsbury has a good retirement plan. Stay there ten years or so, then you have a retirement that is equal to 75 percent of the higher of three years' salary."

Hicke: I don't see how you can turn that down!

Sonoma Wine Producers in Early Seventies

Bonetti: I knew we could make good wine in Sonoma County, but Sonoma County didn't have the reputation at that time yet. There was Hartzell Vineyards in Sonoma Valley. Italian Swiss Colony was not making that good a wine. It was the early years of Windsor Vineyards. At Krug we did make a lot of wine at the Fredson Winery. Fredson made the wine for Krug, and he did produce some decent, nice red wine, mostly Zinfandel and standard varieties. Particularly the Zinfandel was quite good. So I knew the potential of Sonoma. Also it was very appealing to get involved in a new area. It's nice to see what you can do, starting from scratch.

Hicke: A challenge.

Bonetti: It was a challenge. I told Peter I would stay with Krug for the 1972 harvest. Peter agreed that I could, in my spare time, work designing the new winery.

Design of New Winery

Hicke: So you were designing the winery?

Bonetti: Yes. During the 1972 harvest we did produce some Grey Riesling at the Rutherford plant, and some Zinfandel for the new winery at Simi. We really wanted have a little bit of wine of the '72 vintage. Then, as soon as the vintage was over the first of December, I left Krug, and I started working at Souverain, designing the new winery, which we wanted to build in the spring. It became a very hurry-up type of a situation. We didn't have enough time. I should have gone to Europe, but I didn't have the time. I had to really get the design done. In spite of that, I think we came up with a very good design.

As a matter of fact, we designed a winery which could have been duplicated. We designed one-half of it and we could

duplicate everything on the other side, leaving the barreling room and the bottling facilities in the center.

Hicke: Who were the architects?

Bonetti: The architect was John Marsh Davis of Sausalito. The engineer was Schaaf-Jacobs-Vinson, Inc., of San Rafael. The architect was mostly concerned with the aesthetics. I was working with the engineer, which designed the layout. We left open the possibility for expansion. We did provide a lot of things we wanted to do. We wanted to do, for example, carbonic maceration for the Beaujolais, so we designed a way to bypass the crusher and go directly into the fermenter with whole clusters. It was difficult to operate. But we had the possibility. We did produce some Beaujolais with carbonic maceration on the first year.

Hicke: Whose idea was it to do the Beaujolais that way?

Bonetti: Mine. I wanted to produce Beaujolais with carbonic maceration because of what I read. I was very intrigued. I wanted to have something new.

But we had to rush and get the design done quickly. Then, to make it worse, it seemed like a sure thing that Nixon was going to put in a high import tax because there was an imbalance in the trade. They were talking at the time of a really high, maybe 20 or 30 percent tariff, to block imports. So that caused us to rush the orders for equipment, because we had to have it right now, they said.

Hicke: Buy your equipment.

Bonetti: "Buy your equipment. Buy anything you want to, but do it today."

Hicke: You were buying it in Germany?

Bonetti: We were buying from local importers, but most of the equipment for wineries was produced in Europe. We finally selected a site for the winery. Joe Phelps was the contractor.

Hicke: Did you work with him at all?

Bonetti: Oh, yes. I used to come up twice a week or so when construction was going on, to make sure everything was done right. Joe Phelps gave me a blue hardhat to wear. He said, "Don't go on the site without it." I still have the blue hardhat. I use it when it rains.

Barrel Purchasing

Hicke: Tell me about barrel purchasing.

Bonetti: I purchased the barrels two years later, when I went to Italy. I bought most of the new barrels for the Souverain Winery from an old school friend of mine in Conegliano. His father was a cooper, and then he--Damiano--took over the business. We were grammar school friends and high school friends. He gave me a terrific price. We bought it for practically nothing. I think it was thirty, forty dollars per barrel! Yugoslavian oak. They were not hand-split; they were sawed wood, but they were good barrels. They were a little bit smaller than the classic Bordeaux or Burgundian barrels. They are the Italian barrels with 200 liters instead of 235. And we bought from him the upright, 3,000-gallon tanks.

Hicke: Made out of wood?

Bonetti: Yugoslavian oak. Gallo one day gave me a call about those tanks, and I gave him the address, both of my friend, Damiano, and another school friend, Garbellotto. Gallo's tanks were a little bit taller than ours, but the same diameter and the same construction. At that time, he wanted to have oak, like we did at Souverain, but not barrels, just tanks. He bought hundreds and hundreds of them.

As a matter of fact, he was also looking for a cooper, and our cooper went to work for Gallo. He was a Spanish cooper. When he got to Gallo I didn't see him any longer. He was tied up for years.

Frank Schoonmaker Import Business

Hicke: Tell me about Frank Schoonmaker.

Bonetti: Very early, the first year, as soon as Pillsbury entered the picture, Bud Mueller wanted to set up a marketing department. He had an expansion in mind, and he wanted to have imports as well. He finally convinced Frank Schoonmaker to sell his import business.

At that time the Almaden back label was signed by Frank Schoonmaker. Frank Schoonmaker had been involved with Almaden since the end of Prohibition. As a matter of fact, he claimed to

be the one responsible for getting Almaden into the varietal wines. He said it was his idea to start the varietal trend in California. His reason was that in Europe, one variety of grapes predominates in one region, giving the wine its distinctiveness. In California, since we grow multiple varieties everywhere, regional differences don't matter. The only thing that makes a difference is the grape used in making the wine. So he started labeling their wines with the name of the grape variety used: Grenache, or Cabernet, et cetera.

Hicke: That was a whole divergent way of labeling wine.

Bonetti: Yes. And he claimed credit for it. But Schoonmaker was a very conservative marketing person. He didn't buy any wine till he sold it. So everything he brought from Europe was already pre-sold. I never lost money, but he didn't make a huge amount of money, either. Bud Mueller thought he did so because he didn't have the capital to do it. Now we had the money, so Mueller and Ivan Shock and Fred Holmes and Schoonmaker went to Europe, and they bought whatever they found available. They really went wild.

Confusion over Souverain Labels

Bonetti: There was another implication on the Schoonmaker purchase. As I will be showing you later, the first label was Villa Fontaine. Fontaine was the maiden name of Bud Mueller's wife at that time. Almaden used to own the Fontaingrove label, so anything which had the name of a fountain was included in their batch of trademarks. So in order to terminate the contract with Schoonmaker, the Almaden Winery asked us to drop the Villa Fontaine label. The name of the winery was then changed to Chateau Souverain.

There now became a confusion between Chateau Souverain and Souverain of Rutherford. Somehow, Chateau Souverain became a second, lower-price label than Souverain. Many of the wines were of the same varietal. There were Zinfandel and Cabernet and Chardonnay in both places. The one in Rutherford was higher priced, but the image Chateau Souverain projected was of a cheaper wine. If you start conceiving it of second quality, no matter what you put in the bottle, it's very difficult to achieve recognition for it.

Development of Colombard Blanc

Bonetti: So when it was time for me to design the lineup of the wines, I tried to have something which was distinctively different from the old Souverain wine. And we had some success with that concept.

Hicke: Well, that was one reason for the Beaujolais, for instance.

Bonetti: That was the reason for the Beaujolais. Actually, I thought the carbonic maceration might contribute even with other varieties, so we did carbonic maceration on Carignane, with mixed results. We concentrated on red wine in the new facilities up here because, first of all, most of the grapes planted in Sonoma County and Mendocino were red grapes. It was just at that point when the consumer preference switched from red to white. That was the time when the white wine boom occurred. People started using wine as a substitute to an aperitif. Instead of having a martini before dinner, people switched to a glass of wine, and naturally a white wine made a lot more sense than the red wine.

We were still basically using as a benchmark the German wines, and after the success that Krug had with the Chenin Blanc, we wanted to have something comparable, but distinctively different. Based on my experience at Krug and the potential of the Colombard, and based on the fact that Colombard was extensively grown in this area, we wanted to have a wine including the Colombard grapes. But Colombard by itself is a little tart. The acidity is a little bit too high in general, and it doesn't have much finesse. We thought we could do better by including some Chenin Blanc with the Colombard. Particularly Chenin Blanc press, which had fullness and blended in well. It was very well received.

We called it Colombard Blanc, because it was not 100 percent Colombard. Actually, I toyed with the idea of calling it Colomblanc, with the dove in the picture. (Colombo is Italian for dove.) But it was a little bit far out. I wish we did, though, follow through with that name.

Hicke: That would have been a good idea.

Bonetti: Colombard Blanc was very similar to the Chenin Blanc but with higher acidity and with lots of the fruitiness of the Colombard. It was extremely successful. It was the best-selling wine we had from the beginning.

Hicke: How was it priced?

Bonetti: It was priced competitive with the Chenin Blanc of Krug. A little bit less, possibly.

Hicke: Do you remember the actual price?

Bonetti: I couldn't give you prices. But down in the wine library at Healdsburg, they have a price list on their Souverain folders.

Hicke: Yes, okay. I'll get that. [See following pages]

Bonetti: Colombard was really our mainstay of the whites.

Beaujolais

Bonetti: The other wine which succeeded quite well at the beginning was the Beaujolais, which was made from the Pinot Noir, with carbonic maceration, in '73 and '74. I think it was the '73 which placed first among the Beaujolais in the Los Angeles Times competition. Once a year, the Los Angeles Times was doing a competition, selecting only one or two wines for the competition. That year was Beaujolais, and we came out first by far. The tasting was conducted at the Souverain Winery. I remember Charlie Crawford was on the panel. And Charlie Crawford said, "Well, the Beaujolais was by far the best." It was tasted blind, so there was no question.

Hicke: Good.

Bonetti: I still have a few bottles of the old '73 Beaujolais. It was designed to be marketed within the year, but surprisingly, it is still drinkable. I remember one time Justin Meyer came to the winery. I met him as he was leaving the restaurant, and he said, "Oh, I tasted some of your Beaujolais. It's good wine, but it won't last, of course." But twenty years later it's still drinkable.

Hicke: We can't call that Nouveau Beaujolais [laughter].

Bonetti: It doesn't taste like it did.

Hicke: Why did it hold up so well?

Bonetti: Well, it was barrel-aged, it was 100 percent Pinot Noir clone of Beaujolais. And the barrels were of Yugoslavian oak. You don't taste the carbonic maceration any longer, but we had it the other day, and I thought it was drinkable.

* RETAIL PRICE LIST

WHITE WINES (750 ml.)	PER BOTTLE	PER CASE
CHARDONNAY	$9.00	$103.00
FUME BLANC	6.75	77.27
CHABLIS	3.75	42.93
CHENIN BLANC	5.50	62.96
GREY RIESLING	4.50	51.52
JOHANNISBERG RIESLING	6.25	71.55
GEWURZTRAIMNER	6.50	74.41
COLOMBARD BLANC	4.50	51.52
DESSERT WINE (750 ml.)		
MUSCAT CANELLI	6.50	74.41
ROSE WINE (750 ml.)		
PINOT NOIR ROSE	4.50	51.52
RED WINES (750ml.)		
GAMAY BEAUJOLAIS	4.75	54.38
BURGUNDY	3.75	42.93
MERLOT (1978 Vintage Selection)	8.75	100.17
ZINFANDEL	4.75	54.38
ZINFANDEL (1978 Vintage Selection)	8.25	94.45
PINOT NOIR	6.75	77.72
PETITE SIRAH	6.00	68.69
CHARBONO	7.25	83.00
CABERNET SAUVIGNON	7.75	88.72
CABERNET SAUVIGNON (1978Vintage Selection)	13.75	157.41
WINE LIBRARY RELEASES		
1974 VINTAGE SELECT CABERNET SAUVIGNON	30.00	no discount
1976 VINTAGE SELECT CABERNET SAUVIGNON	25.00	no discount
MAGNUMS (1.5 liters)		
CHABLIS	6.75	38.64
COLOMBARD BLANC	7.50	42.93
PINOT NOIR ROSE	7.50	42.93
BURGUNDY	6.75	38.64
ZINFANDEL	7.00	40.07

* All case prices include a 10% discount, plus 6% sales tax

POST OFFICE BOX 528 GEYSERVILLE CALIFORNIA 95441 (707) 433-6918

SouveRain

AWARDS WON IN 1980

1980 SONOMA COUNTY HARVEST FAIR

Silver Medal	1979 Fume' Blanc
" "	1979 Gewürztraminer
" "	1979 Gamay Beaujolais
Bronze Medal	1979 Grey Riesling
" "	1978 Dry Chenin Blanc
" "	1979 Colombard Blanc
" "	1977 Charbono
" "	1976 Petite Sirah
Bronze Medal	1979 Pinot Noir Ros
" "	1977 Burgundy
" "	Calif. Table White
" "	Calif. Table Rose'

1980 26TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL WINE JUDGING, LJUBLJANA, YUGOSLAVIA

Grand Gold Medal	1975 V.S. Cabernet Sauvignon
" " "	1977 Zinfandel
" " "	1977 Charbono
" " "	California Table White
Gold Medal	1978 V.S. Zinfandel
" "	1978 Gewürztraminer
" "	1976 Pinot Noir
" "	1976 Petite Sirah
" "	1979 Colombard Blanc
" "	1979 Pinot Noir Rose'
" "	California Table Red
" "	California Table Rose'
Silver Medal	1976 Cabernet Sauvign
" "	1978 Dry Chenin Blanc
" "	1978 Gamay Beaujolais
" "	1978 Grey Riesling
" "	1979 Chablis
" "	1977 Burgundy

1980 ORANGE COUNTY FAIR

Gold Medal	1976 Petite Sirah
Silver Medal	1976 Cabernet Sauvignon
" "	1978 Gewürztraminer

1980 LOS ANGELES COUNTY FAIR

Gold Medal	1979 Pinot Noir Rose'
Silver Medal	1977 Charbono
Bronze Medal	California Table Rose

1980 SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS WINE AWARDS

Silver Medal	1977 Zinfandel
Bronze Medal	1979 Colombard Blanc
" "	1976 Cabernet Sauvignon

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Pinot Noir

Bonetti: I think we were doing a good job with the Pinot Noir. When we moved here, I immediately arrived at the conclusion that the Pinot Noir in Sonoma is better than the Pinot Noir in Napa. The soil is heavier. It produces wine with a little bit more texture and much more color than what we do in Napa.

Hicke: Where in Sonoma does it grow best?

Bonetti: I think it grows best in the Russian River Valley.

Hicke: The lower sort of region.

Bonetti: Yes, the cooler region. We didn't have much choice, really, on where we could get it, because it was hard to find suppliers at the time. It was not perhaps the best clone of Pinot Noir we could get, but we succeeded quite well with it. Again, we used a different technology. To concentrate the flavor, I made a Pinot Rosé. Pinot Rosé was really a byproduct for us of the Pinot Noir. As soon as we crushed the grapes, we drained part of the juice and produced a Rosé from it. Therefore, the remainder of the Pinot Noir, with all the skins but only part of the juice, came out fuller, richer, and with more flavor.

It was one of the wines which Henri la Maire, which was a wine producer in the Jura district in Arbois, France, imported to France. I found it years later on a visit to Beaune in a restaurant.

Hicke: That must have been really fun to see.

Bonetti: Yes. But, of course, that venture in France didn't work out either. It was a total disaster because there was a Souverain winery in France. So Henry Maire was sued; I assumed he didn't want to talk to us any longer [laughter].

Hicke: Oh, dear.

Bonetti: Finding the right name at times is not that simple.

Hicke: You're right. But now it can't even be close to something well known.

Bonetti: Right. There was a winery in France with a Souverain label.

Hicke: In Burgundy?

Bonetti: I don't know where it is. It must not have been very well known because Henri Maire, who is a large negótiant and producer in the Jura district, wasn't aware of it.

Other Wines Made at Souverain

Bonetti: We had many other wines. Being in Sonoma, Zinfandel was the main thing. We had some beautiful Zinfandel from the Dry Creek area. We bottled even some Merlot at one time and Moscato Bianco, very similar to the Moscato Canelli of Krug.

We experimented with the botrytised wine. There was one vintage where the entire vineyards in the Dry Creek flatlands was 100 percent botrytised. The grower asked me, he said, "Do you want to let it go and see what happens? Or do you want to do harvest it now?" The vineyard was owned by a doctor in San Francisco. If it was my vineyard, I would have let it go, but I felt I had no right to jeopardize one year's production of somebody else's grapes.

So we harvested most of it, except for a small amount. Nice weather followed the rain. Those grapes dried beautifully to about 32 to 34 percent sugar. The botrytised, late harvested Riesling would have been magnificent had we waited.

Hicke: And you and the good doctor are kicking yourself.

Bonetti: Yes.

Hicke: But you can't count on those things.

Bonetti: We made some Chardonnay with barrel fermentation, some of which was quite nice. It looked like we were doing quite well at the winery. We were able to attract many of the good growers in Sonoma. Entering a new area, it takes time, really, to know which growers are the best, and had we stayed on our course we could have done well.

Seventy-four, for example, was a magnificent year for Cabernet. We produced some very outstanding Cabernets. At the Los Angeles Times tasting, our Cabernet came out second after Robert Mondavi premium, his best Cabernet. There was really no statistical difference between the two. So we had the potential to grow.

Marketing Problems

Bonetti: However, things were starting to unravel at Souverain. Our worst problem on the marketplace was probably because of the confusion between the two wineries. The second problem was they thought the name Souverain would carry a long ways because Souverain--Stewart's wines--were really well known and really appreciated among a limited number of wine buffs.

But when we went on to the large marketplace where we wanted to sell our wines, we found no name recognition whatsoever. So it was just like starting with a new label. Actually, it was worse than starting with a new label, because the very people who liked Souverain wine were really turned off because Lee Stewart sold out to a large corporation. So either they didn't know us or they didn't like us. Period. [laughter]

Hicke: That is a challenge!

Bonetti: We had no marketing expertise. Pillsbury stayed out, you know. They said, "You people run the place." Which was good. Bud Mueller was the CEO, but Bud Mueller was a banker. He knew where to get the money and how to finance and so forth, but he thought of himself as a marketer, so he wanted to run the marketing department. He engaged a couple of marketing people and then he fired them right away. He came up with the design of the label and the name of the winery. The first name because it was his wife's maiden name.

We went with a dealer in Los Angeles. That dealer went broke.

Hicke: [chuckling in sympathy] Another challenge.

Bonetti: There was a also a problem with the corporate office. The chairman of the board died. However, the one who took over, Peterson, was quite good. He liked wine. He really was supportive. At least he wanted to stay in the wine business. But then he was fired.

Meanwhile, there was an oversupply of imported wine, the bottom fell out of the imported wine market. And here was Souverain or Frank Schoonmaker with all this large inventory of foreign wine. So everything had to be sold at a loss.

Hicke: A fire sale.

Bonetti: So there were a lot of things happening. Meanwhile, Pillsbury acquired some restaurants. I think it was Steak 'n Ale, and in many states that caused a conflict of interest. You could not have a license for the restaurant if you were also in the wine business. That at least gave Pillsbury a good excuse to say, "We want out." I think the real reason was because they no longer had any reason to be in the wine business. It was evident that they lost interest.

When that became known in the marketplace, it got even worse. Nobody wanted to handle the wine.

Hicke: Did you find it pretty discouraging during these times?

Bonetti: Yes, it was very discouraging, because no matter what you did, you knew there was going to be a change.

Hicke: You could make the best wine there was, but it wasn't going to--

Bonetti: There were many buyers visiting the winery. They sold very easily the one in Rutherford.

Hicke: I think that went to Freemark.

Bonetti: It went to Freemark Abbey. Brad Webb was partner in Freemark. I remember a gentleman that visited the winery. He was the owner of a large Eastern winery. He tasted the wine and said, "The wines taste fine. There's only one thing I see wrong with it. First of all, you have a cork in it. And that has to go. Who wants to pull a cork? You need a screwcap. Secondly, your bottle is like everybody else's glass. Why not have a nice, fish-shaped bottle? So you can make a lamp out of it [laughter]. Then you have something you can sell." I said, "Oh, my goodness!"

Hicke: Now we have the other extreme.

Bonetti: Yes. So quite an interesting experience.

Hicke: Yes. Well, it's funny looking back, but probably not at the time.

Bonetti: About then we were selling a lot of wine for private labeling, which is, you know, an unprofitable type of business to be in. But we had to move some of the inventory which had accumulated. Sales were not up to the level we expected. We started off with one hundred thousand cases off the bat, and you just can't do that with premium wine.

Unfortunately, we didn't do what we should have done. If the winery was going to stay in business, you can plan. You can take losses. But in that unsettled situation there was no way we could have done the right thing. We had some magnificent '74 Cabernets, which we were giving away for a dollar a gallon.

Hicke: Oh, no.

Bonetti: We sold the Cabernet for nothing, and the extra inventory of Pinot, the extra inventory particularly of Carignane and Zinfandel. We just gave it away. The market had changed. The market for red wine was oversupplied.

Hicke: People were wanting more white?

Bonetti: So we had to go to private label and dispose of it in that manner.

Sale to North Coast Grape Growers, 1975

Bonetti: Well, eventually the winery was sold to the North Coast Grape Growers. At that point, they just wanted to have a place to absorb the excess production of grapes for their members. The ones which joined the winery and became partners in the winery had the right to bring there so many tons of grapes. And when you start doing that, instead of actively searching out for the best vineyard, it becomes a problem. Usually it's grapes which they could not sell.

I had signed a contract for five years with Pillsbury, and I wanted to stay for five years. My daughter was just starting high school. I didn't want to change, attempt to move, until she was through high school. So I signed with Pillsbury, and I stayed with the growers.

Hicke: Was Gene Cuneo the head?

Bonetti: Gene Cuneo was a member of the board of directors, but the man who made all the moves was from Mendocino, Charley Barra. He was the man behind the scene. I'm pretty sure he was the president of the North Coast Growers.

Joe Vercelli retired from Italian Swiss Colony, and the growers hired him as a CEO with a three-years' contract. He did a good job as far as maintaining costs and so forth. As a matter of fact, by 1980 the winery finished with a small profit rather

than a loss. Joe and I disagreed somewhat on winemaking, because our point of view was somewhat different.

The marketing, which Souverain was gradually building up, was turned over to Standard Brand. But Standard Brand's long-term objective was to purchase not just the right to sell the label but the label itself, which eventually they did. Eventually they wanted to buy the winery as well, and they made several offers and were always turned down. So there was a conflict of interest in many ways, and there was no possible way to succeed.

By 1981 I finished my contract, and I was ready to get out. Happy to get out.

Key People

Hicke: Before we leave Souverain, let me ask you about some of the other people. What was Robert Young doing?

Bonetti: Robert Young was one of our growers from the very beginning. Cuneo/Saini was too, even before the North Coast took over. Sorocco was a good supplier. Sorocco had some beautiful Zinfandel in Dry Creek.

Hicke: You mentioned somebody named Johnson?

Bonetti: Johnson owned the upright harvester machine company. He had a vineyard in Dry Creek, and the first Vineyard Select Cabernet was from Johnson's. The vineyard manager was the gentleman you met yesterday, Jim Westfall.

Johnson died in a car accident, and at that point Jim left to join Sonoma-Cutrer. But particularly the first year, the grape buyer for Souverain was able to select some good growers, which was really difficult, because that time was a seller's market for grapes in '72 and '73. Then in '74, '75, it become a buyer's market. And that is the time when you can really do your selection. If you are really interested in quality, then that's the opportunity to get rid of all the ones which are mediocre and really concentrate and buy the very best. But we were not there any longer for that purpose.

Hicke: The best were the ones that we've been talking about?

Bonetti: Yes, pretty much.

##

Hicke: There are a few other people I want to ask about. I'm especially interested in Frank Woods, because I'm going to be interviewing him.

Bonetti: I think you will find him a very interesting person. I think you'll enjoy Frank Woods. I enjoyed my association with him. We made all the early white wines for Clos du Bois at Souverain.

Hicke: That's right. I think I knew that. Clos du Bois.

Bonetti: Clos du Bois. He approached the business in an entirely different way. Instead of building the winery and developing the label later, he bought the vineyard, developed the label, and then eventually built the winery. That's the safest way--and correct way, I think--you can possibly do it. By the time he was building his own winery, he had the label already established. He was very particular on his package. It was a very complex package, a very expensive package, and beautifully packaged wine. But he also had good grapes. I think we made some decent wine for him in the first few years. He was a good man to work with. Frank Woods came originally from Nashville, Tennessee. When I was there, everybody talked about Frank Woods.

Hicke: Interesting. What about Zelma Long?

Bonetti: I never really had any close association with Zelma Long, except when she was very young. Before she entered the wine business, she was asking if there was an opening at Krug. There was no opening at Krug at that time. She joined Robert Mondavi a few years later. But I knew that she was going to develop a little winery up in the hill with her husband, the Longs Vineyard. Very capable person.

Building a Reputation for Sonoma Wines

Bonetti: Do you know the thing that might be interesting is the Sonoma County Fair competition, because I was involved the first year or so.

Hicke: When was this?

Bonetti: Oh, it was '75 or '76. I felt what we needed was not to compete between each other in Sonoma County. I felt that what we needed was really to compete with the Napa wines, because that was what

people looked up to at that time. I was convinced that our wine, at least our Souverain wine, could compete at a par or beat most of the Napa Valley wines.

I wanted to have the competition held in Sonoma, because Santa Rosa is the center of the North Coast winegrowing region. I wanted to have a competition only with wine made from grapes of the area, including Napa, including Mendocino. Only premium wineries.

I thought what we needed was to prove to ourselves that we were as good as Napa or better. However, at that time, most of the group felt differently. One person said outright, "What do you want? Have Napa come out with gold medals while we're getting nothing?" So there was a lack of confidence of our own capabilities in Sonoma County at that time. As it turned out, the fair worked out very well, because little by little it established our reputation. I think that is a serious competition, well-attended and so forth. But I still wish at the start we could have competed with Napa.

Hicke: You could have.

Bonetti: I was confident. As we proved later at the Los Angeles Times tasting, where we had our Beaujolais win over the ones in Napa. We got a Cabernet in second place, which could have been first by a split--one taster could have reversed the tasting. The other wines at that time could have competed well with Napa's.

Hicke: Scared, though, I suppose.

Bonetti: Everybody was scared. As far as the county was concerned, they said, "Why should we spend our money to promote Napa wine?" That was not my point. The point was to prove that we were as good as Napa.

Hicke: But they didn't think that would happen?

Bonetti: They didn't think that would happen.

Hicke: It just took twenty more years.

Bonetti: It took a little bit longer, but now finally people in Sonoma realized their potential. But, you know, that's what was then the difference between Napa and Sonoma: a self-confidence in Napa, and a low-key, almost an inferiority complex here.

On the other hand, that's why this area is the most pleasant, because of its lower profile.

Hicke: Anything else about Souverain?

Bonetti: No, I think we have pretty much covered it.

William Bonetti at Sonoma-Cutrer, late 1980s.

VIII SONOMA-CUTRER VINEYARDS, 1981-1997

Brice Jones's Concept for the Winery

Hicke: We're now in 1981.

Bonetti: Nineteen eighty-one. At that point I was just about tired of Souverain, and Brice Jones started building his facilities at Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards.

Hicke: Did you know him?

Bonetti: Yes, Brice Jones is one of the young men which came to the winery to see if it was worthwhile buying it. He spent several days there, went through all the books, line by line; a good MBA from Harvard.

Hicke: I remember. Wasn't he the one, you told me, who looked at the books, not at the winery?

Bonetti: Yes, precisely. He really looked at the books and said no. I remember, though, many years earlier, just as I moved to Sonoma County, for some reason I was involved on a presentation to the grape growers, and he was there. I was talking about Pinot Noir being the wine which we should make in Sonoma County and let Napa be known for the Cabernet. At that time, he asked a question. "How about having a winery exclusively for Pinot Noir and one winery exclusively for Sauvignon Blanc or one for Chardonnay?"

Hicke: A single varietal.

Bonetti: His concept always was, apparently, being a single-varietal winery.

Business Partnerships and Vineyard Purchases

Hicke: I interrupted you when he was building his winery.

Bonetti: Yes. Brice had started planting, I think, in '74. At that time, he had set up several limited partnerships, with himself as a general partner. He bought the land in Sonoma, the present site of Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards, which was at the time a quarter-horse ranch.

Brad Webb was consulting with Brice on the design of the winery. When I joined, they had laid the foundation of the winery already, and it was decided to produce nothing but Chardonnay. Now, when Brice bought the land, the only land available at that time was marginal land. All the fertile land in Dry Creek and Alexander Valley was already bought and put in vineyards. The one which was available was land which was considered a little bit too cold for grape growing.

Originally, he started to plant Pinot Noir. Fortunately, he planted the flat land first. As he went up on the slope, he ran out of Pinot Noir cuttings, and he started planting Chardonnay. Later he bought the Shiloh Vineyard, which is located just south of Santa Rosa, southeast of the highway.

Hicke: On Shiloh Road?

Bonetti: Just off the Shiloh Road.

[telephone interruption]

Hicke: You were talking about buying the Shiloh Vineyard.

Bonetti: It was a different partnership group. Brice had organized several vineyards besides Sonoma-Cutrer.

Hicke: What is Cutrer? Is it a family name?

Bonetti: Yes. I can only repeat what Brice told me about how he got the name of Sonoma-Cutrer. When he went to the bank for the loan, the banker asked him the name of the partnership. He hadn't thought about it, but being a very quick thinker, he thought, "Well, I need something substantial, big." So he called it Sonoma. But then as he had just put down his mother's maiden name on the loan application, and the mother's maiden name was Cutrer, so it became Sonoma-Cutrer [laughter].

Hicke: Just like that.

Bonetti: Yes. The original partnership was Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards Inc. So he bought that ranch, plus the Shiloh, plus Kent Vineyard, which is the one off River Road, just by the traffic light as you come off Highway 101. Les Pierres was the only vineyard Brice, himself, did not plant. The original owners planted the vineyard, and then got into trouble managing it. It's pretty rocky soil. So Brice and his group took over the management, and then eventually purchased it.

All properties were in a cool climate, and therefore the grapes which offered the best opportunity were Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Changing Market for Premium Grapes

Bonetti: Brice was really successful in selling his grapes because the way to sell grapes had already changed. Small wineries were looking for premium grapes. Brice, being thorough as he is, produced clean, nice fruit. He did not try to overproduce. Most of his vineyards did not overproduce even if he wanted to because they are not in a rich soil. So he had very good quality and was willing to do whatever the wineries wanted. He was very flexible.

Hicke: Do you know who he sold to?

Bonetti: Oh, he sold to Kistler, to Landmark, to Fetzer. He sold to Chateau St. Jean. He always was able to sell it at a premium price to the best wineries.

However, as the years went by, he realized the real future was not to only grow grapes. He knew his grapes were good because the wine produced from them was good. Some of the wineries were labeling it with the vineyard name. Chateau St. Jean used to carry the Sonoma-Cutrer name, and I think also Kistler's and Landmark's carried the Sonoma-Cutrer name on their labels. So he knew the quality of the grapes, and he felt that he could do better if he established a label of his own.

So he proceeded to build a winery, to be built in several stages, two or three stages. In the first stage, Brad Webb was consulting.

Decision to Join Winery

Bonetti: Brice claims he put an ad in the paper which was just tailor-made for me. Whether it was true or not, I don't know. But it certainly was the only ad I ever answered [laughter]. I never applied for a job except through the Wine Institute for Schenley and Gallo.

But that ad stated that the winery would be producing only one wine. At Souverain by then we were making twenty, thirty, forty different types of wine. I mean, it was a nightmare.

Hicke: It sounded pretty good to you?

Bonetti: It sounded wonderful. One premium wine. Boy! That was very appealing. We met. I put on a jacket, a good shirt, and went there on the ranch. He was in jeans. I thought, What am I doing here so dressed up? But I thought, This is the place I would like to be. He immediately impressed me as a winner. He was straightforward. So it was a good rapport. That's what you need, you know. Not too much fluff, but substance. I liked him immediately, and I said yes right away. I didn't even think it over twice. He said, "We want to produce the very best wine in the world. Don't worry about expenses. We'll do what is necessary to make the very best. We will not spend a penny for frills, but we'll spend all that is needed for quality."

Design of Winery

Bonetti: So I started asking myself questions. What would be the best way to make the wine? I said, "Really, we'd like to have the grapes at very low temperature." He said, "No problem. Chill it." "But that's expensive." "Don't worry." The winery was already under construction. We looked at the blueprints and found where we could build a tunnel. A refrigeration engineer calculated how many tons of capacity we needed and what would be the most efficient way to cool the grapes, what kind of fans, what air movement.

Grape Conveyors

Bonetti: Originally, we started picking the grapes in lug boxes.

Hicke: Before we pass it up, let me just say, because I saw this conveyor yesterday, it's right where the grapes come in. There's a front door, and the grapes come in in these boxes.

Bonetti: Yes. The first year we did it all with lug boxes. We thought the lug boxes would have been a more gentle way to handle the grapes. It turned out we can do just as well with the quarter-of-a-ton bins that we are using now.

Hicke: You cut these bins in half?

Bonetti: Cut them in half. Now it's only a quarter of a ton, instead of the standard half-ton, which would be the Davis bin.

Hicke: What I'm asking is: let's get a complete description of the conveyor system.

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Bonetti: The first year we used a roller conveyor, and the boxes were installed on pallets and pushed through the conveyor by hand. There was absolutely no time to design anything else. Then the second year we designed a motorized chain conveyor, which worked to some extent, and we used it for several years. But it was getting jammed frequently and was not really strong enough to do the job we wanted. Then we finally built what we're using now, which is a much stronger, heavier construction conveyor, designed in different stages so the operation is semi-automatic. You're removing one set of bins, and that starts the entire conveyor, and makes the operation easier, with less manpower.

Hicke: The bins of grapes coming in are stacked up four high?

Bonetti: Yes, stacked four high, so it would be a ton per pallet. They move through the cooling chamber, which consists of a long tunnel with several large fans blowing cold air at a high velocity, almost like being in a tornado when you're in there. The fans blow chilled air through the grapes. Within an hour the temperature of the grapes drops twenty to thirty degrees. The grapes start at seventy degrees; they end up at about forty-five, forty degrees.

Hicke: So you can cool it quickly.

Bonetti: So we can cool it very quickly, and in a continuous process.

Hicke: I think you said you can do twelve tons an hour?

Bonetti: About twelve tons an hour, yes.

Grape Inspection

Bonetti: And then, from there, we wanted to have the cleanest grapes to make the best possible wine. Regardless of how careful you select the grapes in the field, there's always leaves and some rot, which is not desirable. Most wineries had inspectors who measured the quantity of junk in the grapes. But that was just a number. We said we don't want any junk. So let's remove it.

I remember when I was a kid, I spent at least one day a year in a ranch helping with the harvest. And the farmers used to say, "Well, look, if there is rot, cut it off, and get only sound grapes in the bucket."

It's pretty hard to do it in the vineyard in our conditions, but we can do it very effectively with the proper facilities. So we designed a culling table, which I think helped a great deal.

Hicke: And those are culled by hand?

Bonetti: By hand.

Hicke: You were explaining to me that almost every grape is looked at.

Bonetti: Yes, and we can do, as I say, about ten, twelve tons an hour, so it's a pretty good pace. You don't waste anything because then the culls are pressed at the end of the day and fermented apart. We always find a market for that wine in bulk, but it doesn't go in our label.

Crushers vs. Presses

Bonetti: Then the next decision was what crusher to get. But then I realized, why do we need a crusher if we go directly to the press? In particular, at low temperature, you have less tannin. You don't have many solids. Every time you crush the grapes you always create a great deal of miscellaneous materials, just junk. So we decided to eliminate the crusher and go directly into the press. We then realized that that's exactly the process which the old Burgundians were practicing! Particularly in the old days. Their standard technique was to go directly to their press and then, as the time went by, they started to use crushers, too. Now they are back to going directly to the press.

Hicke: That is fascinating, isn't it?

Bonetti: Yes.

Barrel Fermentation

Bonetti: I knew we could make better wine if it was fermented in the barrels, but I never was able to do it before with an entire production. But here we were producing only premium wine. So all the fermentation from day one was done in barrels, except for the culls and the pressed wine and what we knew was not going to go in our label but sold in bulk.

That was a lot of fun, doing something correctly, and to do it right the first time. So we produced the first wine. It was a good vintage, the 1981 vintage. It was particularly good because of its low yield. It was very windy and warm at harvest. Good sugar and good acid. It was the best acid I ever saw in Sonoma.

Hicke: Does that mean the highest?

Bonetti: Highest. So the grapes required little or no acid correction.

Variations in Chardonnay Vineyards

Bonetti: We kept, of course, not only the vineyards separate but as much as possible the blocks of the vineyard separate, so we'd learn where the best grapes came from. Because by then we were convinced there is variation within the same vineyard, as well as between different parcels. And indeed we found enormous variation between a Les Pierres and Cutrer and Shiloh and Kent and Mirabelle. Each one had a character of its own. We actually wanted to have more than one wine, priced perhaps slightly different.

Hicke: More than one Chardonnay?

Bonetti: More than one Chardonnay. Then, which one was the best of the different vineyards? That was a decision we had to make. I was convinced Les Pierres was distinctly different. I liked better Les Pierres because it was almost steely and a little bit more elegant, a little bit less California-like in quality. It had backbone, but at the same time the light structure that I liked. So after repeated tasting and going back and forth, we bottled

the Les Pierres separate. We bottled the best section of Cutrer separate. The first Founders Reserves were the Cutrer Vineyard. It was a couple of barrels of Cutrer Vineyard, which we thought was the best wine we had of that particular vintage. So now we got to the point where we knew we could differentiate the vineyards.

Construction of Barrel Cellar

Bonetti: We started designing the second phase of construction, which was the barrel cellar. We wanted to have a new barrel cellar for the second vintage.

Hicke: Was this the Grand Cru?

Bonetti: No, not yet. That was the first one you saw.

Hicke: Oh, that's right. I remember that. Yes.

Bonetti: Again, when we got to that part of the construction, we wanted to have a cellar which we could keep cold without air conditioning for most of the time, but we wanted to have refrigeration during the fermentation to control the temperature of fermentation. And an exhaust system to remove the carbon dioxide.

More on Presses

Bonetti: If I may go back, in the first part of the design, when we thought about pressing the grapes, we decided to choose what was then the state of the art as far as pressing, which was tank press.

Hicke: But you had to modify it a little.

Bonetti: We modified it slightly. It was used previously for beets. It was an old beet press. It was originally used in Oregon to extract the color--you know how darkly colored beets are. At that time there was a problem with the red food coloring, and they wanted to have red food coloring made of natural ingredients. Beets were the solution. It didn't work out for them, so they wanted to sell it. So we bought it.

Hicke: No color left, I trust!

Bonetti: No color left. We changed the membrane first thing. Threw that one away. And washing, washing, washed the press! At the beginning, you could smell the odor of beets. [laughter] But after sufficient washing, the press was okay.

Hicke: You didn't have a blush wine?

Bonetti: [chuckling] No blush wine!

More on Barrel Cellar

Bonetti: But going back to the cellar, we wanted to have a cellar which had good temperature control, and we felt an underground cellar was the desirable way to go. The one we built was not really underground, but on one side of the cellar there is a big hill, so it was just dirt on one side, and we built large brims on the other two sides of the cellar. One side faced the winery, which is always cool. We asked the refrigeration engineer what insulation was required, and he gave us the specs and then Brice said, "Good. Let's just double it." [laughter] It worked beautifully. The cellar stayed at sixty degrees summer and winter. There was very little variation between summer and winter, maybe two or three degrees.

We also wanted to have humidity in that cellar, because we felt the best cellars are the ones with dirt floors. I remember seeing the beautiful cellars in Bordeaux, where gravel was spread under the barrels. Lafitte had something similar. We decided that would be desirable. A dirt floor. That would give us the level of humidity which we desired. But we were concerned about what the Food and Drug Administration thought if it was not a standard construction. So we felt compelled to take a drive down to Sacramento and meet with the powers that be to explain our purpose and why we wanted to have a little leeway in our construction, and permission to build it this way. He listened very nicely, and when we were through he said, "It makes sense to me, so go ahead and do it."

Hicke: That's a hard story to believe, you know? To have it rubber-stamped immediately.

Bonetti: Yes, we got it rubber-stamped immediately and started building it. And the cellar worked beautifully. We started using a very rigid system for maintaining the barrels full. The standard in California was to tap the barrels every two or three months. We decided to do it twice a week. Every Monday and every Friday we

went out and tapped the barrels, washed it down clean. And the resulting '81 wines were beautiful.

Efforts to Minimize Oxidation and Sulfer Dioxide

Hicke: How about the gravity?

Bonetti: Every movement of wine from the barrels was done by pressurizing the barrels with inert gas and forcing the wine out of the barrel by pressure. So we were able to move wine from barrel to tank without picking up any oxygen.

Going back in the presses, we did modify the presses a little bit, because we wanted to be able to maintain some carbon dioxide or nitrogen in the presses themselves. So we just drilled a hole through the press and attached a little valve, and then every time the press was getting depressurized, we let some inert gas go in and blanket the pomace. So the pomace we got out of the press was still nice and green. Normally, the pomace, being richer in tannin, is very easily oxidized. We were able to get a nice, clean juice without requiring a high level of SO_2, resulting in a very low level of sulfur dioxide in the wine as well.

The first vintages were really the lowest SO_2 level of all the California wines. Then, later, other people started using lower SO_2 and similar techniques.

Hicke: What's the effect of that?

Bonetti: Well, low SO_2 during fermentation produces lower aldehydes in the wine, and SO_2 always has a certain amount of harshness. It's a softer wine, more natural wine.

Hicke: Then there's the filler that was a prototype.

Bonetti: Yes, the filler was a prototype, but that came a little bit later. The first few vintages we used a hand filler, because we wanted to have a filler which would pick up no oxygen whatsoever during the operation. We wanted to have a long spout so it would fill from the bottom of the bottle by gravity. But the kind of filler we had in mind was not available. Production the first few years was limited. I think we had less than five thousand cases in '81. So we had the luxury to use a hand filler, and we rented one for a few weeks.

The wine we produced in the '81 vintage was bottled in '82, but we really didn't enter into the market until toward the middle of '83. So they had from six months to one year of bottle age before we entered the market.

The first introduction of our wine was in San Francisco--the California Wine Experience. That was a fun night: everyone from the winery was there in a tuxedo. [chuckling]

Hicke: I'm sure they remembered you.

Bonetti: They remembered.

Nui Nguyen

Hicke: Tell me the story of Nui's employment.

Bonetti: Nui? He's really what an employee should be. He came with us in '81. He had just arrived in Sonoma from Vietnam. He escaped. Originally, Nui was a fisherman in Vietnam, and after the war, he didn't like what he was experiencing there, and he took off in a boat with his two brothers and sailed across till a ship picked him up. He eventually was permitted to come to the United States. He came to work at the winery, and he immediately started performing well, doing everything he was asked to do and more. He stayed late, and we thought for a while he was doing it to get the overtime.

After the season was over, we told him, "Look, Nui, now we can't afford to pay overtime any longer, so you have to work only eight hours a day, and then you have to leave." And he said, "Okay." Except when it was time to leave, he said, "Oh, I'll stay till you guys leave." [laughter] "Don't pay me." From the very beginning, he was the last one who closed the door. Period. Then after a while we said, "We can't go on like this. We can't keep the guy working for nothing." So we put him on salary. And since then, Nui has been the one who sets the standard for Sonoma-Cutrer work.

He's the type of a person who really makes a winery because no matter what you do, you need that type of dedication and the type of reliability.

Hicke: It seems like it wasn't just a job for him. It was a life.

Bonetti: It was a life. It was a perfect match with Sonoma-Cutrer, because if he was at another winery he would have been an employee like everybody else. But here he was appreciated. So it was a good match of Nui and Sonoma-Cutrer. He typifies some of the values. He had left his wife and his children in Vietnam, and he never went back because first he was afraid, I think, of being detained. Then later he was able to have his family join him.

Hicke: Here?

Bonetti: Yes.

Hicke: What is his job now? Do you know what his title is?

Bonetti: I don't know. Sonoma-Cutrer has never been really much for titles, but he's the right-hand man of the assistant winemaker. When there's something to be done, Nui is always there.

Sonoma-Cutrer Sparkling Wine

Hicke: Let's talk about the expansion of the winery.

Bonetti: We were starting to build the second phase of the construction, which included the new barrel cellar. At the beginning, we were also toying with sparkling wine. Because the original idea was, "Do anything you want to as long as it is made from Chardonnay grapes." We thought champagne could possibly offer an opportunity.

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Bonetti: I had an opportunity to go to France and study the champagne method of Epernay and talked to champagne producers there.

Hicke: Whom did you talk to?

Bonetti: Oh, to everybody--Möet-Chandon, Bollinger, Roederer. Practically everybody there. Champagne in the old days was produced from barrel-fermented base wine, and we decided also to barrel-ferment our champagne base. We wanted to make a champagne and age it sur lees for at least three or four years before we marketed it. So we barrel-fermented, using older barrels, and then produced the champagne.

The champagne was beautiful, except we realized that the demand for our Chardonnay was so great, and the champagne is not only time-consuming but space-consuming. To keep it in the bottle for three or four years takes an enormous amount of storage space, and economically it was not viable.

Hicke: I think the market for champagne has been dropping.

Bonetti: I completely misread the market. I thought that champagne was going to be the next explosion in California. Bone dry champagne is excellent for dinner. Like the salmon we had today? A bottle of champagne would have gone very well with it. But as yet, at least, it never took hold. People still drink champagne as a celebration, before dinner or so forth. Well, it could be very desirable with food. Maybe someday it will.

Hicke: Sounds good to me!

Bonetti: So after a while, we decided to drop that program. That was a wise decision. We decided to drop it at the proper time. We realized that what is important is to stay focused on what you are doing best and really concentrate on one wine, Chardonnay, but keep studying the vineyards. Get rid of the vineyards which were of inferior quality, such as Mirabelle. Buy land that has the potential to produce better wine. And focus on improving the quality of the grapes we have.

Malolactic Fermentation and Origins of the Grand Cru Concept

Bonetti: It has always been my dream and everybody's dream, I guess, to bottle wine unfiltered. We found that the wine which is not filtered has a more natural quality and bigger nose, bigger aroma. When you are filtering, you are stripping something from the wine.

Hicke: You pointed out to me that you need a clear wine.

Bonetti: Yes, you need a clear wine. The wine must be brilliant in the bottle. It also has to be biologically stable, because we don't want to have a malolactic fermentation taking place in the bottle; that would be a disaster. We were somewhat reluctant to get into the malolactic fermentation in the early years, because many of the earlier California malolactic-fermented Chardonnays had off characters--the wines were not quite right.

That was the goal; only how to get there was the question. So we established a little experimental winery, and the research went on for a couple of years. We had now a research chemist at Sonoma-Cutrer, Grady Wann. You know, it was difficult to get the malolactic fermentation going. Then in 1984, we started seeing the wines changing in the cellar. Not only in the experimental cellar, but changing in the main cellar. By golly, we had a natural malolactic fermentation occurring. But it was a nice, clean malolactic fermentation. Really clean. So we liked what we got, and we cultured the bacteria and preserved it. As far as I know, it is the same culture which we are using today.

Since then we have experimented with the different types of culture and found out that ours is not only more efficient, but capable to work on wines with higher alcohol and lower pH. At that point, then, it became feasible to think about bottling the wine without filtration.

Terry Adams for the past four years or so is bottling all the Cutrer Vineyard without any filtration but with prolonged aging and with very minimal clarification, but sufficient to result in an acceptable clarity in the wine.

Hicke: That's an interesting story.

Bottling Operation

[Interview 3: February 14, 1997] ##

Hicke: We were just talking about aging and filtration, and you have very kindly made some notes about where we should go from here, so I'm just going to let you use your notes.

Bonetti: Okay. One thing we didn't talk about is the bottling operation. The reason we didn't purchase an automatic filler in the very beginning was because we could not find a filler that met our requirements. We wanted to be able to fill the bottle with a long spout, reaching the bottom of the bottle, and wanted to do it by gravity. We wanted to do it in such a way as to minimize the oxygen pick-up. None of the fillers which were available on the market at that time met those prerequisites.

We finally found a German manufacturer which was thinking on the same lines we were. He wanted to have a new filler. He just bought this company, and wanted to come out with something different and better.

Hicke: Do you know the name of the company?

Bonetti: Winterwerk Streng. He was interested. And so we made an agreement. He produced the prototype machine, shipped it to us, and it did all what we dreamed of and more.

It was a prototype, and prototypes always have bugs, naturally. The most serious problem was the time when we were sterilizing the filler with steam and the operator just left the room for a few minutes. It was a safe thing to do. It was an empty filler rotating. All of a sudden the filler gasket expanded and the filler could not rotate any longer, and the entire thing twisted. Then the machine stopped because of the overload on the motor. We really panicked at that time. We had all the wine yet to be bottled. We were getting close to the harvest. The wine had to be bottled. We had no space otherwise. So we made a rush phone call to Germany, and the man was here within forty-eight hours.

Hicke: He came over?

Bonetti: He flew over. And then he explained what happened. The type of gasket material used, they realized--now [laughter] they realized--was a type of plastic material that had a tendency to expand as you heat it. It expands very, very little, but it continues to expand. So that was replaced. But it was a well-built machine, and as he relieved the pressure, the entire axle of the machine just returned to its perfect original condition. It was perfectly straight and there was no real damage done. That was a relief, yes. In a day or two, we were back in operation. The machine has been operating very well since '84. So now it has been going for twelve years and is still going strong.

As a matter of fact, since that time similar units were sold to several other wineries in California. I think Beaulieu has one, and I think Freemark Abbey has one.

Hicke: Another pioneering move.

Bonetti: But only to an extent we went back to the basic philosophy of winemaking.

Hicke: And this was established by Brice Jones and you.

Bonetti: Yes.

Sonoma-Cutrer Winemaking Philosophy

Bonetti: Jones gave me, really, carte blanche on winemaking. Except he encouraged me not to worry for the pennies, which I really needed, because if left by myself, you know, I always evaluate the benefits and the costs. It's a good system to have, but if you're shooting for the top, you cannot do that. I really needed Brice Jones to set the standard of no compromise, period. I never had experienced anything like that before. I don't think too many people had the opportunity to do that.

Hicke: That's true. That's quite an opportunity. And a challenge.

Key People

Bonetti: Well, do you think we should talk about people now?

Hicke: Yes. The only one we've mentioned so far is Nui.

Bonetti: Nui, who was a key element.

Terry Adams

Bonetti: The first person who joined me at Sonoma-Cutrer was Terry Adams, who now is the present winemaker at Sonoma-Cutrer. I had worked with Terry for many years at Souverain. Terry graduated from Humboldt State [University], majored in science, and then worked in hospitals as a technician. I don't know precisely what job description he had there, but working in a hospital apparently was not very uplifting.

So he wanted a change in his life, and he came to work at Souverain and started working in the cellar. He had technical training behind him, and he was immediately outstanding.

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Bonetti: When I moved, he came over to Sonoma-Cutrer. I was very delighted to have him.

Hicke: So this was '81?

Bonetti: That was in '81. We have worked together ever since. What is particularly gratifying to me is the fact that when I left Sonoma-Cutrer, when I retired, I was able to pass on the baton, if you will, to somebody I knew. I was afraid if a new winemaker took over, he might change the entire operation around, and change the philosophy of the operation. I was so pleased to see Terry take over because I knew his philosophy, I knew his character, and I knew his capability and his great tasting ability. But I also knew what he would not do. He would not drastically change the directions. But he will not stand still either. Because the other danger is to say, "Sonoma-Cutrer is doing fine. Let's not change a thing."

But, you know, as Bob Mondavi always used to say, "If you don't progress, if you're standing still, in reality you're walking backwards." Even in an industry as old as wine--thousands and thousands of years old--and still we have a lot to learn. So I was delighted to have Terry carry on; he's doing a magnificent job with the wine now.

Hicke: It's interesting that you said, "We have a lot to learn," but you also mentioned some examples of where what you are learning actually was known a long time ago. You are perhaps relearning your part of it.

Bonetti: Yes. We are relearning.

Hicke: Yes, you have to keep moving.

Bonetti: You have to keep moving. First of all, in winemaking, the grower in the vineyard is the one who creates the wine. If you go back in history, the Romans, for example, were talking about <u>where</u> the vines were grown. That was the key.

Hicke: They already had vineyards designated.

Bonetti: Right.

Robert Haas

Bonetti: The other man Sonoma-Cutrer I'm sure is very grateful to is Robert Haas. Robert Haas was the first general distributor for Sonoma-Cutrer wines. This is one man I always admired and I always liked. His father established the business just after the Prohibition, and Bob continues the business now from Vermont. He

is considered one of the most knowledgeable Americans on Burgundian wines today.

When I was at Souverain, he established the Willow Creek label. We made the wine at Souverain and bottled as a private label, and of all the private label people, Bob Haas was the one I most enjoyed working with. He came several times a year to the winery and tasted blends which we prepared for him, and he purchased the wine. When he said he was going to buy "x" number of cases, he bought precisely that number, and he never had a complaint. He never argued on prices or anything. He was just a gentleman to work with.

So when I moved to Sonoma-Cutrer, Bob gave me a call and said, "I would like to represent your wine." We were still far away from getting the wine ready for market; we didn't even have the wine bottled at that time. But I arranged a meeting with Brice, and Brice liked what he saw in Bob Haas. He liked the person, and he signed a contract for the first three years. Since he sold most of his wines to the restaurants and had a good reputation, he helped us a great deal to establish the name of Sonoma-Cutrer.

Hicke: To get the label out there.

Bonetti: He had a group of salesmen working for him who were all very knowledgeable. I benefitted from Haas in many other aspects. For example, he sponsored my membership in the Academie International du Vin, which gave me an opportunity to meet many of the Burgundian producers. I already knew a few of them. I knew the Marquis d'Angerville from my Souverain days. And that gave me the opportunity to go to France very frequently and visit the different wineries in Burgundy, as well as taking trips with the Academie du Vin. I went to France almost every year until I retired. The president of the Academie was Jacques Puisais, a true artist on the art of tasting.

Hicke: He's written some books?

Bonetti: Oh, quite a few books. One is Le Gout Juste.

Hicke: He's the president of the Institute of Taste.

Bonetti: Now he's the president of the Institute of Taste, and he strongly believed that children have an inborn taste ability which should be cultivated. So he's teaching children or teaching teachers how to teach children how to taste. Because taste is one of the enjoyments of life, and unless it is cultivated, you're missing part of the pleasure of life. So he's trying to teach children

to taste, to use a language for taste, descriptions and observations. He's a remarkable man.

Also, with Robert Haas I had the opportunity to go on various trips to different producers in Burgundy, particularly the white Burgundy producers, so I had an entrée into their cellars, and I took copious notes every trip I took. You learn, and you learn a lot. Some of the French later came to see us, and they learned from us, because I think learning is a question of exchanging ideas, and good ideas come from everyone. So that was Bob Haas.

Hicke: We'll get to both of those people again, when we talk about the Focus on Chardonnay.

Bonetti: Great.

Grady Wann

Bonetti: Another person we should mention, because he also typifies what we were trying to do at Sonoma-Cutrer--what we are still trying to do at Sonoma-Cutrer--which is not to live in the past but to progress. Very early on we had some problems with corks, and Grady Wann came to take samples of the corks, and I liked what I saw in Grady. Grady had a Ph.D. in chemistry from Stanford. He was young and very open to research. He was working with Marianne Graf at that time, and I asked him to join us, and he did. So now we had a research chemist with the group. When Grady joined us, he wanted to gain some experience with Chardonnay, and he ended up staying very many years. He left just prior to my leaving.

Hicke: That was '91?

Bonetti: Yes. He is now working in Healdsburg, in Dry Creek, at the Quivira Winery, doing a beautiful job, particularly with Zinfandels.

Jim Westfall

Bonetti: The other person I'd like to mention was the vineyard manager, Jim Westfall. Jim joined Sonoma-Cutrer just a few months after I did. I knew Jim for a long time, because the first vineyard

selection wine we produced at Souverain was a Cabernet from grapes which Jim managed.

Hicke: He was a vineyard manager?

Bonetti: He was the vineyard manager for Johnson Red Winery Ranch, and he produced some beautiful Alexander Valley Cabernets. Jim was an innovator. You know, he would just come up with good ideas. He's a wonderful person to work with. He retired from Sonoma-Cutrer recently, as well. He's still doing some work for the vineyard. But he's important because we finally learned that what really counts is the vineyard, and Jim was the key of that program.

He also passed the baton to a young man, a graduate from Fresno State, who was with Sonoma-Cutrer when Jim took over the management of the vineyard. His name is Kirk Lokka.

Sonoma-Cutrer Work Culture

Hicke: You've got a lot of continuity there.

Bonetti: Precisely. There's a lot of continuity. So this is really quite unique in the wine industry, where people go from place to place.

Hicke: Musical chairs.

Bonetti: Musical chairs syndrome is very prevalent, but not at Sonoma-Cutrer.

Hicke: Do you have something to attribute that to: the fact that you were able to keep these good people?

Bonetti: Oh, yes. Good people enjoy to work for a high goal. So that is the key.

Coast Sonoma Appellation

Bonetti: Let's see. We said the soil is important, we saw that the climate is important, that leads us to discuss appellations. Sonoma-Cutrer was somewhat responsible, or one of the moving factors, to establish the appellation of Coastal Sonoma.

We thought it was very important to distinguish the cooler part from the warmer part of Sonoma. The cooler part is influenced by the coast through the channel provided by the Russian River or from other entries.

Hicke: It comes in through the Russian River, where it makes a gap in the Coastal Range.

Bonetti: Yes, but also coming through Petaluma, cooling the Carneros part.

Vineyard Appellations

Bonetti: But more important still we felt was the vineyard appellation. In California, even more so than Europe, we have tremendous variation of soil from place to place. There is essentially no difference in climate between Shiloh and Cutrer or Kent or Mirabelle. But still the wine is substantially different because that soil is different.

Hicke: You mean the wine is different, as it comes from soil that is so different.

Bonetti: Exactly.

Vineyard Experimentation and Improvements

Hicke: I'm glad that we are going to get to the vineyard itself.

Bonetti: In there we find many things which influence the quality of the wine. We found soil fertility certainly to be an important factor. We had a vineyard--it now has been sold--the Mirabelle vineyard. The Mirabelle was at one time a very high producer. We sold a lot of grapes. It had very vigorous vines. There was plenty of water because Mirabelle was just next to the Russian River. Particularly the lower part had a high water table. It had also a very rich soil, very high in nitrogen, and that vigor gave the wine an herbaceous quality.

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Bonetti: By reducing the nutrients in the soil, we were able to change the quality of the wine. Jim seeded some rye grass, which has long roots, and was able to reduce the moisture, and also part of the

nutrients and the nitrogen, particularly. It cut down the yield, but we lost that herbaceous quality in the wine. More to our liking.

If you go to a vineyard and you taste the grapes which are exposed to the sun and taste the grapes which are shaded by the leaves, the grapes taste different.

Hicke: Grapes from the same vine?

Bonetti: From the same vine.

Hicke: Just one under a leaf.

Bonetti: Yes. Southern exposure or northern exposure: ones which are facing the sun and the ones which are shaded. And the wines will be different; the one which was exposed to the sun tastes fruitier and more open, and the other a little bit greener and a little bit tighter. The color, even, is different. So now we're removing leaves, exposing the bunches to the sun, and we're producing a riper-tasting wine.

You can control the quality by the amount of fruit you leave on the vine. You can achieve that certainly by pruning. If that doesn't do it, frequently you find it necessary to cut the excess fruit and drop it on the ground. You can go overboard and get negative results.

Hicke: Too much sun?

Bonetti: Too much sun or too little fruit for a particular vine. The correct way to reduce the vigor of the vine, of course, is to plant the vines where the soil is not too fertile. And secondly, to use clones less productive, and possibly changing the rootstock or changing the density. We tried several density variations, and they're still experimenting with it.

Hicke: You've increased the density of the vineyard in vines?

Bonetti: Plants per acre.

Phylloxera and Rootstocks

Bonetti: But the other very important element is to select the rootstocks, which brings us, then, to the problem we had in California with the phylloxera. A very costly problem, because so many acres had

to be replanted, and that is a costly process. But, you know, that also forced us in California to look at the rootstocks. One of the folks at the Focus on Chardonnay program said, "Well, you in California don't pay any attention to the rootstock. But here in France we think that's important."

Hicke: What's the date of that?

Bonetti: This was a Focus on Chardonnay in France in 1990.

Hicke: So seven years has made a difference in what he was saying.

Bonetti: Yes.

With the phylloxera, now we are looking at the gamut of rootstocks, and how they interact with the various soils and clones. It becomes really complex. So, you see, what I'm saying is that we always have something to learn. We have a lot yet to learn about producing the very best wine we possibly can.

Now Kirk planted several rootstocks. He has one group of rootstock with different clones and then different rootstock with the same clone.

Hicke: It's an experimental crop?

Bonetti: Yes. I think that is the most exciting avenue of study today in California. And, of course, the solution you have in this parcel doesn't apply to the next.

Hicke: You really need a computerized system.

Bonetti: Research can get really complex.

Hicke: You said you'd go in the lab and you would look around and you'd say there's not much I could or should do. But then you can go out of the lab and there's a lot to do, as you said all along. So it's not that there's nothing you can do, I think.

Bonetti: Exactly.

Cork Problems

Bonetti: Well, shall we talk about problems, as well?

Hicke: I think we should. There are always bound to be a few of those, and they add to your learning experience, I guess.

Bonetti: Yes, they certainly do. The only real problem at Sonoma-Cutrer was with corks. You buy the best cork possible, the highest priced cork possible. In one vintage--I think it was 1984, or '83--in the Les Pierres we found some corky problem. Then we traced it to one batch of corks.

Hicke: Are the corks all kept together?

Bonetti: They come in a package of ten thousand corks.

Hicke: But they had already been in the bottles, right?

Bonetti: They have been in the bottle already.

Hicke: I guess what I'm saying is how do you know which corks are in which bottles?

Bonetti: Oh, because we marked the sequence of bottling.

Hicke: Okay.

Bonetti: The bottles are aged in wooden bins, in our case, not yet labeled. They are just bottled, laid down in the bins, and then aged in the cellar for six months, a year, and then labeled. But the bins are sequentially numbered, so you'll find number so and so and so with the corky problem.

Hicke: Okay.

Bonetti: In California corks were a problem for a period of time.

Hicke: One bad cork can do a lot of damage.

Bonetti: We had one corky wine out of three.

So we decided to pull every single cork out and smell it, and if it was corky, remove the bottle. After a while, it was pretty hard for the men to sit there and smell a thousand corks [laughter]--you couldn't catch all of the corky bottles.

Well, the corky problem is something we thought we could really avoid in the future. We set up a very strict protocol for cork testing. Every cork coming through the winery now is going through a screening test.

Hicke: I guess that's what I mean by a learning experience: you're going to prevent those.

Bonetti: You still occasionally have a cork which might be moldy.

Paraffin-Treated Corks

Bonetti: However, we had another major problem with corks, which was a bit more interesting. We ordered corks to be treated with paraffin. And the producer said, "Yes, we'll treat them as you wish with paraffin only." The first year I received a good amount of corks, and it worked well. I was satisfied with it.

The following year, the cork for the Cutrer Vineyard worked well, no problem. Then we started to bottle the Russian River Ranches wine. We ordered the same corks, and when we started bottling we noticed they were a little bit tight. They didn't come out too easy. But nothing really serious. They still came out. As our wine was going to be aged another six months, in the six months' time normally the cork loses a little bit of its memory and it comes out much easier. It was perfectly acceptable, so we continued to bottle.

But after six months the corks were still hard to pull. They were a little bit hard, but we started shipping the wine. Most of our wine goes to restaurants. And we started getting complaints.

Using the waiter's corkscrew, the cork was so tight that as you pulled, it would break in half. What could we do? Well, as usual, we had all the bins' numbers. We said, "Well, maybe it's just a few bins." So we went through every bin and tested, and there were a few bins which looked better than the others. So we shipped some of the better bins. Same complaints. And they let us know. They didn't like it.

Hicke: Yes, that's kind of scary for you.

Bonetti: We had just established the winery and we could not afford a setback. Oh, we tried everything in the plant.

##

Bonetti: Nothing worked. It became evident that the only answer was to pull the corks and replace them. So we did--about half a million bottles.

Hicke: That was an expensive project.

Bonetti: That was an expensive and time-consuming process. But we solved it. And we didn't know what caused the problem.

Hicke: You still had the problem?

Block Paraffin vs. Emulsified Paraffin

Bonetti: But we had to find out what happened. The only thing I was sure about was the paraffin was not the cause, because I had used paraffin all my life before, and paraffin never presented a problem in pulling the cork. It lubricates, if anything. At the time it was a general belief in the industry that what caused the problem was excessive amount of paraffin.

Quite a few other wineries had problems with corks, too, at that period. But we did find out that our supplier was using emulsified paraffin, rather than block paraffin. Paraffin in liquid form is easier to use. I was able to obtain a sample of that emulsified paraffin they were using. As a matter of fact, they sent me a letter from their supplier certifying that it was a first-rate product.

It took us some time to treat with measured amounts of paraffin, small amount in corks. The final answer was that the emulsified paraffin was harder to pull than the block paraffin. And we got the answer just prior to our day in court.

So we had evidence. Then Professor Webb gave us a possible, theoretical reason why that could occur. So anyway, we finally won the case in court.

Hicke: What did he explain about this?

Bonetti: Well, it was caused by the polarity of the different compounds, polarity between the glass and the polarity of the compound which was used to emulsify the paraffin.

Hicke: Is this magnetic polarity are we talking about?

Bonetti: No, chemical polarity.

Hicke: Okay. Within the molecule. I see.

Bonetti: Within the molecule. The glass, which contains silica, has one polarity. What was used to emulsify the paraffin changed its polarity and caused the cork to become glued to the bottle.

Hicke: That really is an amazing story. What do you do about your corks now? Do you still buy them?

Bonetti: We don't use the emulsified paraffin anymore.

Underground Barrel Cellar

Hicke: What have we got left here now?

Bonetti: The Grand Cru might be interesting.

Hicke: Yes, we want that.

Bonetti: Sonoma-Cutrer now is producing two single-vineyard-designated wines, the Les Pierres and the Cutrer Vineyard, as Grand Cru.

Hicke: When you say Grand Cru, is that what somebody else would call a private reserve or the very best of the best?

Bonetti: Yes, the very best vineyard.

Hicke: Okay. So you've got this new cellar, and you said it's going to be ready.

Bonetti: We wanted to have the same humidity provided by the dirt floors, except it will be deeper underground, with about eight feet of dirt above the cellar and dirt all around it, so it would be a real underground cave.

Hicke: But when you say cellar, it's really a building that's going to be covered by hills, more or less.

Bonetti: Yes, an underground building. The minimum temperature you can achieve by going underground in California is about sixty degrees. You can't get much lower, and we wanted it lower than that. So this new cellar will have a chilled ceiling and chilled pavement. We think we can keep it down to fifty degrees Fahrenheit, possibly even lower, if we wish.

Hicke: It has three separate rooms?

Bonetti: Three separate rooms. One room will have also an air conditioning unit if it will be decided to have fermentation in that room. And it will have an exhaust system so if there is any CO_2 produced it will be vented out. But cold can also be maintained without any air movement. We want to have the temperature as steady as possible in order to have perfect settling in the barrels.

Hicke: The advantage of the water cooling is that there is no air movement involved?

Bonetti: No air movement. Just lowering the temperature of the cellar naturally. With a lower temperature, then, you can age in barrels longer, without getting excessive woody character. I think it will be an additional improvement in the quality.

Barrel Program

Bonetti: The other direction which the company is going is with the new barrels. We always recognized the importance of wood in winemaking. It was a tremendous step forward when in California we started using European oak instead of American oak. But we found it is very important also how long the staves are aged. If you don't age the wood sufficiently, you're getting a harshness in the wine, a resinous type of a character.

But you're never sure when you buy the barrels from a cooper, so we feel that it is important to go to the very source, buy the wood. That is a program started a couple of years ago. We have a person in France who buys the wood, cuts it, splits it into staves, and stacks it and seasons it. Then we know exactly how old the wood is. There will be no guessing. And if we have a good person there, he can also select not only the right forest but, better yet, the trees in the forest which seem to be best suited. I think that will be a great, great step forward.

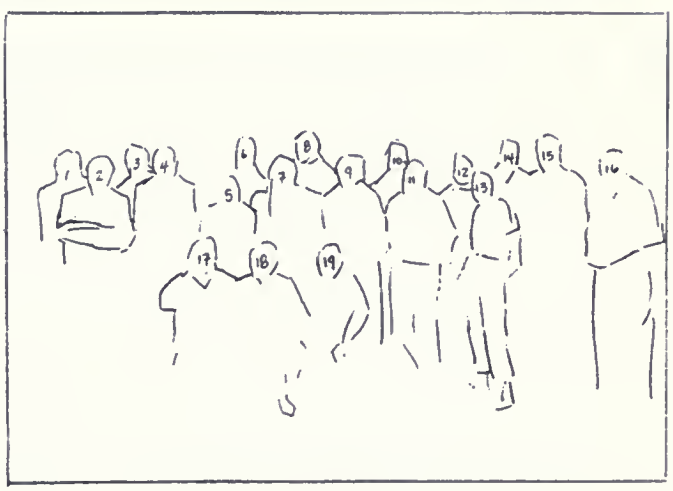
Vine Hill Vineyard

Bonetti: The other thing going on at Sonoma-Cutrer is, of course, the new property purchased near Forestville, again in a very cool region.

Hicke: Does it have a name?

PICTURED IN PHOTOGRAPH:

1.	Louis Carillon	Domaine Carillon
2.	Gerard Boudot	Domaine Etienne Sauzet
3.	Thierry Matrot	Domaine Matrot
4.	Jacques Puisais	
5.	Pascale Matrot	
6.	Jerry Luper	Rutherford Hill
7.	Vincent Leflaive	Domaine Leflaive
8.	Jed Steele	Kendall-Jackson
9.	Bill Bonetti	
10.	Steve Kistler	Kistler Vineyards
11.	Bob Haas	
12.	Vincent Dauvissat	Domaine Dauvissat
13.	Francois Dauvissat	
14.	Dick Arrowood	Arrowood Vineyards
15.	Noel Leneuf	Guest Professor
16.	M. Matrot (senior)	
17.	Brice Jones	
18.	Bernard Morey	Domaine Albert Morey
19.	Dick Graff	Chalone Vineyards



Focus on Chardonnay, 1990, in Beaune, France.

Bonetti: Vine Hill Vineyard. It's not planted, so there's an opportunity to plant the right clones, the right rootstocks, with the right spacing. It's a great opportunity.

Hicke: Is the spacing going to be changed in the new vineyard, do you think?

Bonetti: It would be spaced closer than the old California spacing, for sure.

Hicke: But compared to, say, the Cutrer Vineyard?

Bonetti: It might be different, with even tighter spacing; there's still some experimental work to be done on the spacing.

Hicke: When are they going to plant that?

Bonetti: It has started already. It will be several years before it will be completely planted.

Hicke: You didn't actually tell me why they sold the Mirabelle. I assume it was because it was overproducing.

Bonetti: No, the Mirabelle did not produce the best wines.

Focus on Chardonnay Colloquiums

Hicke: I want to just talk for a few minutes about Focus on Chardonnay. Can you tell me how that got started?

Bonetti: Well, yes. It got started because Brice thought it was very important to have an exchange of ideas between Chardonnay producers in California and Chardonnay producers in Burgundy. We both had something to give to each other, and he wanted to do it in a non-academic setting. He wanted not academicians, but producers themselves to speak about their wine in a forum where they could speak freely, without being afraid that what they said would be reported by the press.

Bob Haas talked to his Burgundian producers, and they were enthusiastic. They wanted to know what was going on in California. It took some time to get it organized. We had two moderators, Jacques Puisais and Robert Haas.

The first Focus took place in 1986, with good participation.

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Bonetti: At our first meeting, Brice Jones talked about the history of Napa and Sonoma County. I talked about the California Chardonnay, past, present, and future. Mike Grgich talked about the importance of balance and complexity in a Chardonnay. Dick Arrowood talked about the effect of the skin contact on wine and the effect of fermentation temperature on wine quality. Richard Graf talked about barrel fermentation in aging sur lee. Tim Mondavi about malolactic fermentation. Brad Webb about prevention of oxidation. Zelma Long on the use of SO_2. Jerry Boucher on California Chardonnay, does it age as well? This was the California group.

From the French group, Jacques Puisais, naturally, gave the keynote speech. Then Vincent Le Flaive talked about the controlled appellation in France; and William Fevre from Chablis about climatic influence on wine quality; and Jean Jacques Vincent on the optimum maturity at harvest; and Vincent Dauvissat about microclimates. We had Jacques d'Angerville on clonal selection. Thierry Matrot on choice of fermenting containers. Jean Marc Boillot on Botrytis cinerea in Chardonnay. Also Bernard Morey, Louis Carillon, Gerard Boudot, and again Jacques Puisais.

So you see the top Chardonnay producers and winemakers in California, with a long history of Chardonnay production. And from France, those are perhaps the [laughter]--

Hicke: Creme de la creme.

Bonetti: Of the white Burgundy producers.

All the participants really enjoyed it. There were a lot of questions being answered at the end of each presentation. There was an extensive tasting of the different wines, both California and French. It was something that really took hold. Four years later, we had one in France. In 1994 we were back at Sonoma-Cutrer, in California.

Hicke: Every four years this will be happening?

Bonetti: Yes. They are already working on the next Focus on Chardonnay, which will take place in '98. Again we'll be in France. Most of the participants return. There have been a few additions. Some of the sons take over from the fathers, as well.

Hicke: Do you find this has been very productive?

William Bonetti (left) at his retirement dinner in Boston, 1991. At right, Ritz Carlton manager.

Bonetti: I think it's very productive because it stimulates thinking, and you can talk openly. No questions are silly, as you will notice from some of the question and answer remarks. And along with it, we at Sonoma-Cutrer, in conjunction with the Practical Winery, did a survey of the California practice for Chardonnay, and we got a good response every time. We tabulate the results, and we find that the trends occurring in California are similar to the trends occurring in France.

Trends in Chardonnay Winemaking

Hicke: Can you just briefly tell me a couple of the most significant trends?

Bonetti: One of the most significant trends, I think, is pressing the grapes in whole cluster. [Looking through book]

Hicke: It might be right there on the right-hand side, the lower paragraph. Is that where you summarize the trends?

Bonetti: Yes. The whole cluster pressing, I think, was one of the most significant. I think it's shown on the table. Let's see if I have the table here. [Going through papers] The whole cluster pressing went from 5 percent in '86 to 30 percent in '94. Also the use of indigenous flora, rather than a cultured yeast. That increased substantially, as well. It was only 2 percent in '86; it was 12 percent in '94.

Barrel fermentation changed substantially. [Looking through papers] And one which increased tremendously would be the malolactic fermentation. In 1986 only 9 percent had completely malolactic fermentation; 76 percent completed in '94.

Again, if you stand still [laughter], you'll be overtaken. You have to do it better.

Hicke: That's a fascinating survey. You've been wonderful to give me all this information and a great interview. I think I've gotten most of the answers to the questions I had. Thank you very much, Bill.

Bonetti: Oh, you're very welcome.

Transcribed by Shannon Page and Mim Eisenberg
Final Typed by Shannon Page

TAPE GUIDE--William Bonetti

APPENDIX

People

—Chris Dawson

WILLIAM BONETTI

Meet the winemakers

Winemakers of Sonoma and Mendocino counties will meet the public Nov. 17 at the second annual wine tasting to fund the Richard T. Torkelson Journalism scholarship. The event, 5 to 7 p.m. at Santa Rosa Veterans Auditorium, will be an opportunity to taste premium wines, meet the winemakers and shop for wine-related books and gifts.

Members of the sponsoring Sonoma County Press Club, The Press Democrat, and Santa Rosa unit of the Newspaper Guild are selling advance tickets, $2.50 including a complimentary wine glass. Tickets also will be available at the door.

Winemaster Bill Bonetti is particularly proud he has been able to develop a fine Pinot Noir at Souverain of Alexander Valley at Geyserville. The winery won a gold medal for it at this year's Sonoma County Harvest Fair.

"We finally found a home in California, with proper climate and soil, where we can really produce a fine Pinot Noir," the American-born wine expert said.

The fact that Bonetti has produced a winning Pinot Noir grape in California may come from his European background, where the Pinot Noir traditionally does so well.

Bonetti, 52, was born in New Jersey, but raised in Italy. He attended winemaking school in Conegliano, a wine producing area north of Venice at the foot of the Dolomite Alps, the Bonetti family's home.

He returned to the U.S. in 1947. He has worked for vintners in Fresno, Delano and Modesto. He moved to the Napa Valley in 1961 and Charles Krug Winery in 1961.

He became winemaster for Souverain in 1972 and helped design and construct the new winery.

His experience there has been a good one. The winery received eight ribbons at the recent Harvest Fair and was number one in last month's Los Angeles Times competition.

Bonetti lives in Healdsburg with his wife and daughter.

Souverain

PINOT NOIR

NORTH COAST COUNTRIES

Jamais peut-être les Caves SOUVERAIN n'ont autant mérité leur nom qu'en produisant ce Vin de qualité, né du cépage Pinot Noir récolté dans le NORTH COAST COUNTRIES, au coeur de l'un des plus beaux vignobles du monde, à 120 kilomètres au Nord de San Francisco.

Lorsque l'automne est chaud et sec, cette terre de Californie, déjà privilégiée à plus d'un titre, donne des raisins parvenus à parfaite maturation. Ils seront à l'origine d'un vin fruité et élégant dont le bouquet naturel de PINOT continuera à se développer au cours des années.

Le Chef Caviste de Souverain vous conseille de déguster ce PINOT NOIR légèrement frais et de déboucher la bouteille quelques minutes avant de servir. Que vous décidiez de l'apprécier tout de suite ou après deux ou trois ans de vieillissement normal en cave, vous constaterez que ce vin de souche noble est le compagnon idéal des plats de belle gastronomie, plus spéclalement des viandes, gibiers et fromages de nos Provinces.

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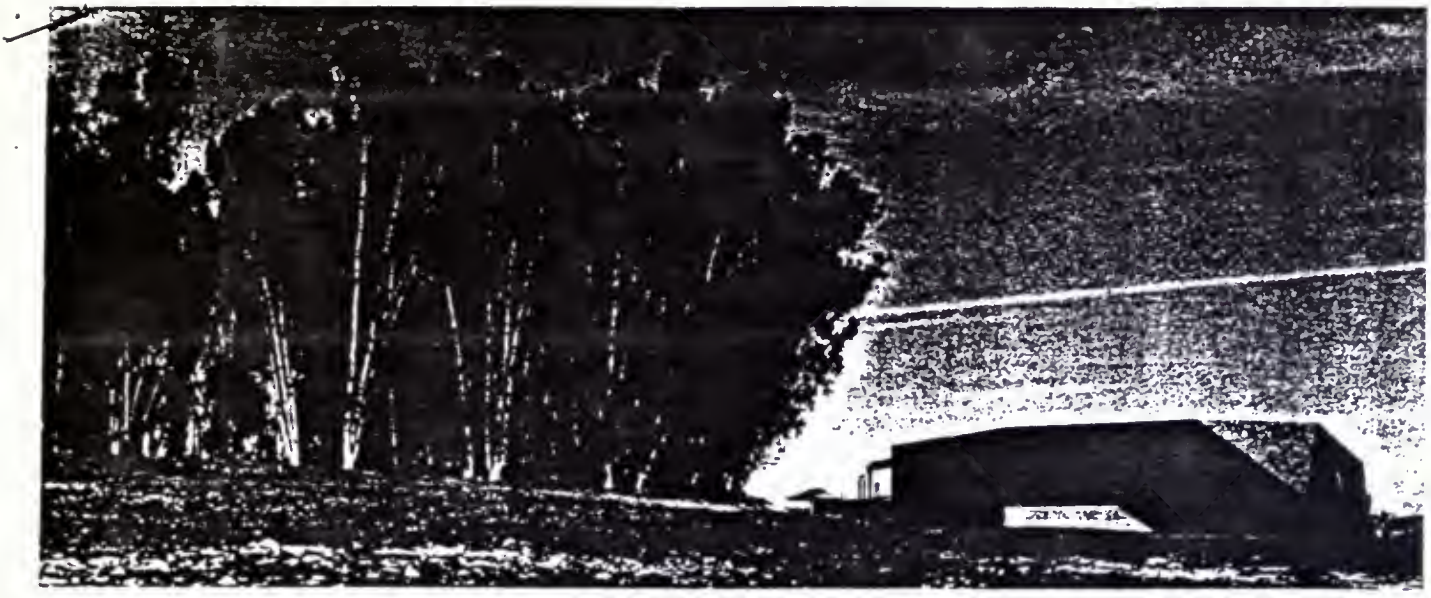

Roland/Miller of Santa Rosa designed Sonoma-Cutrer; the firm also built the cruciform winery for Sonoma Vineyards.

It's Chardonnay only for new Sonoma-Cutrer

A winery banks on a single grape

JOHN N. HUTCHISON

SONOMA-CUTRER is a new California winery fine-tuned to make estate-bottled Chardonnay. Nothing else. Except—down the road—a vintage champagne, also Chardonnay.

It may take 10 more years to show a profit, said Brice C. Jones. He is not your typical winegrower. His state-of-the-art winery taking shape in the spectacular Russian River Valley is the product of 10 years of supplying grapes for a long list of wineries in Sonoma and Napa counties.

Jones is chairman, president, chief executive "and welder and truck driver" in an enterprise that is virtually his own creation —800 acres of premium cultivars in microclimates from Healdsburg to Sonoma to Forestville. His grapes bring the top prices essential to support the winery project until it can find commercial footing.

Jones is a son and grandson of career Army officers—West Pointers. "Cutrer" is his mother's name, Americanized generations ago from the "Couturier" of her Huguenot ancestors who migrated from France to South Carolina in 1675. A graduate of the Air Force Academy in 1961, he became an F-100 fighter pilot and saw service in Vietnam.

He resigned in 1970 (by then a captain) to enroll at Harvard. After two years he had his MBA and the determination to be a winegrower. "In the Air Force overseas I had developed an interest in wine. I bought at Christie's auctions, and I came to know a bit about French wines." With his Harvard training on how to structure, launch and finance a business, he was able to interest a Wall Street investor in obtaining the capital needed to underwrite a vineyard venture. In 1972 he began his search for good land.

The going North Coast price in the early seventies was $3,000 an acre, but the estimates used by the University of California at Davis—that another $5,000 to $7,000 would plant and bring such an acre to full production—were unrealistic, he found. With a year needed to prepare new land for planting, and four years for a new vine to come into maturity, the cost has been well above the Davis formula and now, "if we bought new land and developed it to the level of our present vineyards, we would have to look at $20,000 to $25,000 an acre. That makes 100 acres of grapes worth more than $2 million." His figures are supportable; 20 acres of Napa Valley grapes were for sale recently for $600,000.

Jones prefers not to put a price tag on the Sonoma-Cutrer total investment. But a rough calculation suggests that its 800 acres of grapes, the extensive acreage occupied by the old buildings, a spacious modern house and the super-modern winery must represent an outlay of nearly $10 million and an intrinsic value at least twice that. The stockholders have had to keep their cool through some white-knuckle financial strains of the sort the industry has seen in these inflation years.

"A lot of wineries got over-extended, and there were foreclosures as a result of data bases that didn't look past the three-year formula, and unexpected high interest rates. We got stretched, too, and had to go to the partners and say we either had to quit, or keep the venture afloat. They were very understanding." The investors hung in there.

Tasting at Sonoma-Cutrer, from left, Brice Jones, Bill Bonetti and Terry Adams. Bonetti is determined to coddle the Chardonnay.

Everybody in '72 was looking for land to grow Cabernet. In Napa county, all the land that looked feasible was taken. So I explored Sonoma county."

There, as he acquired land in 1973 and began planting he chose varieties expected to perform best in each microclimate. Now, on seven parcels, he is still altering the original plantings. A hundred acres of Pinot Noir and White Riesling, for example, are being budded over to Chardonnay.

"All the vineyards are cool—Region I—and all are under marine influence. But they have great diversity of soils—clay, clay-loam, silt, and some very rocky ground."

The company expects to continue to grow a varietal range to supply its winery customers because its own winery is not laid out to use all 800 acres. Varieties include Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Merlot, Gewurztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc and White Riesling as well as several parcels of Chardonnay. Customers include Chateau St. Jean, Joseph Phelps, Kenwood, Landmark, Dry Creek, Sequoia Grove and Buena Vista.

Besides his close attention to microclimates, soils and cultivars in choosing vineyard sites, Jones also has involved himself thoroughly in soil preparation, cultivation practices and vine training.

"We started out ripping the soil about two feet. As time went on we began ripping deeper and deeper . . ." to a full four feet, ripping in three directions with a D8 Caterpillar. "We're even thinking of using a D9." The land is disked several times before water is laid in. "We're going more and more to drip irrigation in addition to overhead sprinklers." Although sprinklers are essential for temperature control, drip keeps the vines growing during hot, dry weather when excess overhead water might foster molds or disease.

Jim Westfall, vineyard manager, with special lug boxes.

He believes the standard stake, six feet out of the ground, is too short and has gone to seven feet, with cross arms, to give the vines more light and air. Rows are spaced at 12 feet, but he does not contemplate mechanical harvesting. Most varieties are cane-pruned, including the Chardonnay from which he will supply his own winery, but cordon pruning is used for Zinfandel and Chenin Blanc. In charge of pruning is Arturo Robledo, assistant vineyard manager.

The vineyard superintendent is Jim Westfall, educated at California Polytechnic College at San Luis Obispo. Westfall had a long background in hay, grain and cattle

ranching, mainly in Oregon, before taking over the viticulture and cattle operation at the Redwood Ranch and Vineyards, near Healdsburg, of Wallace Johnson, the late head of the company famous for the Up-Right grape harvester. Westfall was there eight years before joining Sonoma-Cutrer in 1981.

"The vineyards at Redwood were concentrated in one area," he said, "whereas Sonoma-Cutrer vines are widely separated with a tremendous variety of soils and microclimates. In most of them, stress is a factor." They vary from slopes and hillsides on the northern outskirts of Santa Rosa to deeply-silted bottom lands of the home ranch near River Road and a stony area south of Sonoma town.

The complex of vineyards and the developing winery belong to Jones and one other majority investor plus several minority holders. The home property of 400 acres lies among hills and river bottom northeast of Santa Rosa, part of the old Slusser Ranch which grew hops until about 1950. Three tall roofs of an elderly hop kiln dominate the homely buildings of the temporary winery headquarters. Even taller are the sheltering gum trees.

A half mile away the new winery snuggles into the foot of a tree-clad knoll. It stands on 80 scenic acres unsuitable for grapes and so to be developed into a park, with picnic facilities, a soccer field, croquet grounds, a small decorative lake and plantings to include redwoods and oaks.

"It's an unusual setting," said Mich Painter, San Francisco landscape architect. "You rarely get the dimensions and the topography to bring off what we designed. It will look natural and casual." An 11-acre lawn, or meadow, will be the centerpiece through which winery visitors will pass.

"We want to make the place one that visitors can enjoy," Jones said, looking across the forested ridges west of the Russian River to distant peaks on the north where a column of steam rises from The Geysers. He doubts if a small winery making high-priced special vintage Chardonnays can operate a public tasting room, but he expects to accept visitors by appointment.

The winemaking building is complete, except for more stainless, jacketed Mueller tanks to be added to 10 now placed on an acid-resistant ceramic tile floor, and two more Willmes presses to go alongside one already in place. The tile runs up the walls in an eight-foot wainscote; the whole place can be rinsed out like a bathtub.

The water supply comes from an aqueduct which originates in the Russian River and serves large areas of the county. It runs along a boundary of the home ranch. Water for the vineyards comes from a reservoir of 30 acre-feet, supplied from two wells and supplemented by aerated waste water which flows by gravity from a hilltop pond above the winery.

Nearby, an excavation into the hill is ready to receive the first phase of another structure to be developed over the next three years or so. The first level, probably to be complete this year, will be the aging cellar, enclosed on all sides by unsealed walls banked with earth, and with an earthen floor. Jones said this cellar will remain adequately cool and will change little—and very gradually—between seasons. Above the cellar will be two floors for offices, laboratory, case goods handling and other facilities. The external design is modern, but borrows from the lines of the farm structures of the area. The winery is insulated, with a roof of concrete-bonded foam panels made by Dow and rated at R-36, several times the usual insulating protection.

In a reference to the construction the architect remarked to *Wines & Vines:* "If Sonoma-Cutrer makes wines the way it made the building, they will be the best around." He is John Miller of Roland/Miller Associates of Santa Rosa, the engineering and architecture firm which built the unusual

Wine evaluation never ends for Bill Bonetti (L) and Terry Adams.

Addition of casegoods storage, bottling line and offices is the plan for Sonoma-Cutrer this year. Site is at left of the existing building.

cruciform winery for Sonoma Vineyards at Windsor, and which is completing the big new Sonoma-Piper champagne facility there. Active in early planning were Brad Webb, the winery's consultant, and Bill Bonetti.

Bonetti is the vice president and winemaker. Born in New Jersey, he was taken to Italy by his parents as an infant. A product of the prestigious wine school at Conegliano, he returned to America more than 30 years ago. Five years at Gallo, five at Cresta Blanca and 12 at Charles Krug prepared him to take on the winemaking at Souverain in 1972, where he had a strong hand in the design of that handsome winery near Geyserville. In 1980 he left Souverain to join Sonoma-Cutrer, an enterprise unique in his experience—a one-variety winery.

Encouraged by Jones, he has already put his mark on the first, experimental vintages now resting in Demptos oak from the Limousin. Bonetti is determined to coddle the Chardonnay from the moment it leaves the vine. Picked into small wood boxes designed to minimize damage to the berries and permit air circulation all the way to the press, the grapes will enter a chilling tunnel at the winery. Refrigerated air will reduce their temperature as much as 20 degrees in an hour. Then they will emerge to pass along a vibrating table where they will be hand-culled for bad berries and material other than grape.

"When I grew up in Italy, the harvest was almost a family affair, and we culled as we picked," Bonetti recalled. "We actually trimmed the bunches with scissors. That is impractical here; the hand sorting will take its place."

A visitor is soon aware that a conventional winery element is missing; there is no crusher. The cold grapes go straight into the press on the stems. It is jacketed for glycol cooling and equipped for the injection of inert gas to drive oxygen from the pressing. Rated at 24 tons of stemmed, crushed grapes, the Willmes will take only 10 to 14 tons of fruit still on the bunch.

"This procedure makes a tremendous difference in quality," said Bonetti, noting that it reduces the crushing effect on seeds and stems and moves the grapes with the least oxidation. "We don't lose much yield by pressing stems and all and the action of the stems in the press gives us something a bit like the effect of treading."

He has experimented with rotating the press to produce a gentle crushing action and some free run, and has also let the chilled grapes rest in the press for varying periods, even overnight. He expects to ferment most of his wine in small cooperage.

The 1981 vintages were subjected to a remarkable range of handling. With Jones,

Ex-Air Force Fighter pilot Brice Jones and old hop kilns on the property.

Bonetti, and Terry Adams, assistant winemaker, *Wines & Vines* tasted perhaps two dozen samples. Among them were two wines of identical harvest, one from stemmed, crushed grapes, and one bunch-pressed. The former had a coarser flavor with detectably more astringency, although Bonetti thinks judgment should be reserved on the two wines while their character matures.

Two samples from identical picking, one batch-pressed at once and one after an overnight rest in the press, differed noticeably. The first was softer, more refined and reticent; the other was more aggressive.

Bonetti made some of the '81s with Montrachet yeast, some with California champagne yeast and some with a low-foam yeast. In some he used two or all three. He made a barrel of an '81 in which the yeast was allowed to settle, to work itself out undisturbed. In another barrel of the same wine the yeast was stirred once a week. The stirred sample had more flavor, even after centrifuging. He rang these and other changes on wines from four of the estate vineyards

"If we think something will give us quality, we do it."

—Shiloh, Cutrer, one yet unnamed, and Les Pierres. This last sample, from a rocky, low-production vineyard of 70 acres of Chardonnay south of Sonoma town was, despite its youth, a lush, soft, full-flavored wine, pleasant now. Chardonnay is remarkable for its potential for subtleties and variations. It produces in Burgundy at least four distinctively different important wines—Chablis, Meursault, Montrachet, and Pouilly-Fuisse. What style does Bonetti seek? He will not try to duplicate any style, he said, but:

"I would like a full, rounded flavor without pronounced oak. In particular, wines that will age well in the bottle without oxidation." The low-temperature handling, the culling of defective berries and foreign material, the need for very little SO_2 and the displacement of oxygen by inert gas in the press itself are techniques to inhibit formation of oxides.

Obviously, Jones and Bonetti are in agreement on the kinds of Chardonnay they want. "We can produce several different styles from the variety of vineyards we have," said Jones, "but certainly we want to produce wines we can lay down for long periods. We want quality. We produce top-of-the-market grapes, even though that means top-of-the-market costs. If we think something will give us quality, we do it."

As for the champagne, only a few cases have been turned out thus far. This much is clear: when the sparkling wine project really gets under way the *methode champenoise* will be employed, the product will be vintage-dated, and it will be 100% Chardonnay—just as the still wines are.

When Jones and his colleagues began the search for a winemaker, they drew up a list of several whose work they respected. At the top of their choices was Bonetti.

"We didn't want to be accused of raiding, and we didn't approach any of them. So we took a quarter-page ad in *Wines & Vines*. One of the responses came from Bill. *Wines & Vines* brought us together."

INDEX--William Bonetti

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Interviewer/editor/writer, 1978-present, for business and law firm histories, specializing in oral history techniques. Independently employed.

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Editor (1980-1985) newsletters of two professional historical associations: Western Association of Women Historians and Coordinating Committee for Women in the Historical Profession.

Visiting lecturer, San Francisco State University in U.S. history, history of California, history of Hawaii, legal oral history.