Regional Oral History Office
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University of California
Berkeley, California

The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series

Edward G. Sbragia

WINEMASTER AT BERINGER VINEYARDS

Interviews Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1999-2000

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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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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Harold P. Olmo, *Plant Genetics and New Grape Varieties*, 1976

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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

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Interview History

Ed Sbragia, longtime winemaker for Beringer Vineyards and now Senior Vice President and Winemaster for Beringer Wine Estates Holdings, follows his father and grandfather as a third-generation producer of California wine. Growing up near Healdsburg, he began early working in his family's vineyards, and thought he wanted to get away from it all. But after obtaining a degree in chemistry at the University of California at Davis, he decided to get a master's in enology at California State University, Fresno. Shortly thereafter, Myron Nightingale hired him as his assistant at Beringer.

He began using French oak barrels to ferment Chardonnay, and went on to renowned success with Cabernet Sauvignon. When Nightingale retired in 1984, Sbragia took over all winemaking responsibilities, with special emphasis on the Private Reserve program.

In his oral history, Sbragia describes the major contributions that Myron Nightingale made to winemaking techniques, and outlines his own challenges and innovations. He includes much detail about the growth of the winery, its vineyards and grape sources.

Sbragia was interviewed on December 29 and 30, 1999, and February 28 and March 1, 2000. He reviewed most of the draft transcript and made substantial changes.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, and is an administrative division of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Carole Hicke, Interviewer Editor

March 2001
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD G. SBRAGIA

I BACKGROUND

[Interview 1: November 29, 1999] ##[1]

Italian Roots

Hicke: I want to start with when and where you were born.

Sbragia: I was born in Healdsburg, California, on December 11, 1948. My mom and dad were named Julia and Gino Sbragia.

Hicke: Okay, now let's back up and tell me about your grandfather--your great-grandfather, if you can get that far back. I know they came from Tuscany.

Sbragia: Well, I'm in the process of trying to go back that far.

Hicke: Oh, good.

Sbragia: I have a document someplace that goes back five generations, but both my grandparents on my mom and dad's side came from the town of Guamo, near Lucca, in Tuscany, Italy. My grandparents came over in 1906.

Hicke: Do you know why?

Sbragia: No, not exactly. I think it probably had to do with economics and the availability of food, and I guess, also, it was the end of the gold rush. The wine business in the United States had started up, and I think one of the major factors was the Italian Swiss Colony, because my grandfather came and worked at the Italian Swiss Colony, as my father did when he came back in the twenties.

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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: Can you give me your grandfather's name?

Sbragia: My grandfather and grandmother on my dad's side were named Giulio and Cherubina. I didn't know my grandparents. They died before I was born. My grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side were named Fidéle and Rosina. My dad's grandfather and grandmother were Nicolao and Carlotta. And my mom's dad was named Fidéle, and they were actually cousins.

Hicke: Fidéle.

Sbragia: Fidéle Sbragia.

Hicke: Oh, yes? So they had the same name.

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: Did both sets of parents immigrate?

Sbragia: Yes, they immigrated. And my mom's mom and dad, Fidéle and Rosina, stayed here and my father's mom and dad, Giulio and Cherubina, returned. My dad was born at a Packson Ranch in Healdsburg, at Dry Creek. It is now called Madrone Manor Restaurant and Inn. He was born on January 18, 1910. When he was nine months old, my grandfather went back to Italy to their home in Guamo.

Then my dad came back over--I guess it was the reason why the brothers came over. He had three brothers and a sister and the three brothers came over in the twenties. My dad came over in 1927 when he was seventeen years old, and he went to work at Italian Swiss Colony. That was his first job.

Hicke: Oh, interesting. So your grandfather actually moved back and stayed in Italy?

Sbragia: Right. He never came back.

Hicke: Why did your dad and his brothers come back to America?

Sbragia: Again, I think they had connections here. I guess after World War I times were tough and there was the promise of the New World and a better life. My father, one time he returned to Italy and I went with him in 1969, but my grandparents had passed away.

Hicke: What's your father's name?

Sbragia: My father's name was Gino. My mom's name was Julia.

Grandparents

Hicke: I want to hear a little bit more about him, but first, what about your maternal grandparents?

Sbragia: I never knew them. My mom grew up in the Geyserville area, and her mom Rosina died when she was thirteen, and her father Fidéle died before I was born. I don't think he was that old. I think he was around sixty.

Hicke: What did he do?

Sbragia: Both of them worked in the wine business and worked in the vineyards. My mom's dad had a ranch. Actually, they moved from Geyserville to a little bit north of Windsor and had a ranch there between Windsor and Healdsburg--they had a ranch there through the Depression. And I think he owned it until he died.

Hicke: Did they have crops or cattle?

Sbragia: Well, I think there were prune trees.

Hicke: Prune trees, yes. That makes sense.

Sbragia: Prunes--and grapes, I think there were some grapes. Most of Sonoma County was prune trees as I grew up in the late forties and in the fifties, with grapes in Dry Creek. I think it was mostly prunes. We lived near Dry Creek, along the river. Those were all prunes, almost to the freeway, in that area. It was a different place then, but I think even if you look at the Napa Valley, this whole area was prunes and walnuts and stone fruit--apples, lots of apples, and hops. I remember hops, when I was a child, growing along the river in Dry Creek.

Hicke: The Russian River?

Sbragia: Yes. And Dry Creek.

Parents

Sbragia: My dad's name was Gino.

Hicke: Let's go to your dad now. What did he do? He grew up there?

Sbragia: And my mom's name was Julia.

Hicke: Oh, thank you, yes.

Sbragia: She was born actually on December 18, 1909. She was about a month older than my dad, and because of the family, they knew each other pretty well growing up. My dad knew her when they were young.

My dad, actually his first job was working at the Italian Swiss Colony for three years. Then he and his brother Americo lived in San Francisco for two years. He returned to Healdsburg and rented a vineyard with his older brother Italo--it had to be just after Prohibition--they started a winery, then went out of business, just because the Depression was pretty tough.

Hicke: Oh, after Prohibition was over?

Sbragia: Yes. And then in the thirties, my dad worked for a winery called Montebello Wine Company, owned by Mr. Perroni, in San Francisco. Its crushing facility was where the Montebello Winery was in Saratoga--where Ridge [Vineyards and Winery] is now. He was the bottle manager/foreman in the city--in San Francisco. He worked there for a couple of years, and in 1935 he won what he called the consolation prize for the Irish Sweepstakes and won $500.

He left the winery in 1936 and bought an old restaurant/bar for $900 right along the Russian River in Healdsburg, right by the Russian River bridge, called the Ark. And that's where he and my mom got together, because he got my mom to be the cook, and she was the cook while he went away to war. When he came back, he had had it with running a bar.

During the time they owned the Ark, from 1936 to 1946, he had bought the house and ten acres I live in now--and that's where I grew up. He paid $5,000 for the house and ten acres.

Hicke: In Healdsburg?

Sbragia: In Healdsburg, in Dry Creek.

He sold the Ark in 1946 for $11,000, so that was pretty good in ten years.

Hicke: Right.

Sbragia: Then he bought twenty-three acres, so I grew up in about thirty-three acres of prune trees, back in those days. And he was a farmer the rest of his life.

Hicke: Where in Dry Creek is it?

Sbragia: If you come into town on Healdsburg Avenue and turn left on Dry Creek Road, it used to be you'd go down Healdsburg Avenue and go straight down West Grant Street and it would dead-end at the River, but then when the freeway came in the sixties, there was a frontage road, so you'd go underneath the freeway and you go south on the frontage road, and you turn right on West Grant Street and it's down between, on one of those dead-end short

pieces that dead-end on the Dry Creek. So that's the house I grew up in, and there's ten acres of vineyard there. It used to be in French Colombard, and now they've been planted to Merlot and Chardonnay.

And there's twenty-three acres as the crow flies probably less than a mile away, but to get there you'd have to cross a bunch of people's property, so keep on going west on Dry Creek Road, and just as you get down--there used to be a store down there, right there at the beginning--and just as you get down at the bottom of the hill, you turn and go towards the river on a private road, and we have twenty-three acres there. It's right next to where Sanderson is and where Keegan used to be. It was all Colombard also, and we planted to Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc.

Hicke: To back up a little bit, do you know what kind of grapes your father was growing when he had his little vineyard?

Sbragia: Oh, way, way back?

Hicke: Way, way back.

Sbragia: I don't know. I'm assuming it was Zinfandel. It was a variety that--and they made wine. The reason they went out of business is it all went to vinegar, or something went wrong with it, because when he went to sell it, they sold it for cents on the dollar. But someone bought it, so I don't know, someone may have misled him.

Hicke: They only made one vintage?

Sbragia: They just had enough money to do one vintage.

Hicke: That's unfortunate.

Sbragia: There wasn't a lot of money in those days.

Hicke: Yes, I know, but I'll bet if he'd been able to keep it up, he'd have had a gold mine.

Sbragia: Well, watching him, that's how I got into the business, because for all the years that I lived with my dad, we made wine every year. In fact, in the fifties, I remember when I was young, there were large floods in '54, '55 in Healdsburg and my house, the same house I live in now, was in three feet of water. Luckily it's about two feet off the ground, but there was still a foot of water in the house. I remember playing with my tricycle and the door was open, and my dad was using a hose during the day to get the mud out and the water would come in the front door and out the back door.

Hicke: That was before the dam?

Sbragia: That was before the dam. My mom was deathly afraid of water, because when she was a child, she was in the big flood, and she and her father were in a boat--which capsized, her

father grabbed onto a tree and put her up in a tree, she sat there two or three hours waiting for a boat to come rescue her, so she doesn't like water.

Hicke: Yes. I can imagine that.

Sbragia: So my father bought five acres just at the top of the hill. Just by the Russian River Riders, riding ring, those five acres were where we moved to in the fifties. So I actually didn't grow up in this house, totally. I was there until I was about ten, and then the new house until I was eighteen and went away to college. On that five acres my dad had Zinfandel, Carignane, and Petite Sirah--mostly Zinfandel and Carignane--and I watched my dad make wine every year. In fact, I always say that my old boss at Beringer, Myron Nightingale, taught me how to make white wine, but my father taught me how to make red wine.

Hicke: Great. Great beginning.

Sbragia: Well, I remember he always said, "Keep your barrels clean and keep them full," and that's something I always remembered.

Hicke: He was way ahead of [University of California] Davis on that, I think.

Sbragia: Yes, he definitely knew what he was doing. During and after Prohibition, you could make 200 gallons of wine in every household. I think the government did that so they wouldn't have total rebellion, because you had so many immigrants who were used to drinking wine. So he made his own wine, and he'd break it down from about a sixty-gallon barrel into five-gallon demijohns, and then he'd break a demijohn down into gallons and gallons down into fifths. He never really bottled his; he kind of just kept them full. I'd look at those wines and they were just perfectly clear, perfectly stable, and all he did was ferment until dryness, press off, and then just put it in barrels, and rack on a regular basis to get it clean.

Hicke: No fining, filtering?

Sbragia: Nothing, that's how he'd make wine.

Hicke: Did he learn it from his father?

Sbragia: Yes, I think he did. Plus both of them worked at Italian Swiss Colony with professionals. My father was the bottling manager, who kind of assists the winemaker. He tells the story about the man who owned Montebello Wine, that company at the time, was a man named Mr. Perroni, and Mr. Perroni evidently liked my dad a lot, because when my dad told him he was leaving, he took one of these old wrenches that they used to tighten up hoses and threw it halfway across the cellar, he was so angry.

Hicke: [laughter] Not at him, I hope.

Sbragia: No, in fact, he told him any time he needed help or any money or anything, just to call. That was a neat guy.

Hicke: Do you know if they were making just ordinary reds there, or what they were making?

Sbragia: Well, it's interesting because when I was at my first winemaking job at Foppiano [Vineyards], there was a guy named Henry Bugato, who was actually the winemaker from Montebello Wine Company. I guess the brand was still existing and it belonged to a distributor named Romano. It made all sorts of wines. I'm not sure what it made in the thirties. I know that I had a bottle from there that I opened in my--well, what's the right word--inexperience. It was a 1929 Chablis. Obviously it wasn't going to be any good any more, but I opened it in 1972 when I got married. It was brown and oxidized, and I didn't even keep the bottle, because you know the day you get married, you're kind of excited. I never saw it again.

Hicke: You don't have a label or anything?

Sbragia: No, and my dad saved it all those years.

Hicke: Oh, too bad. Well, it was celebratory even if it wasn't drinkable. [laughter]

Sbragia: Yes. Well, I drank it--anyway, it was my dad's wine.

Hicke: Henry Bugato. That's a familiar name, but I can't think why.

Sbragia: Well, he's worked for the distributor in the city. He must still be alive. This was 1976--'75, actually, when I was at Foppiano.

My dad ran his ranches until he was about seventy-two, all by himself. He retired, and then managed the five acres until he was in his early eighties. It is managed by Enzenauer Vineyard Management now--he manages it all. My dad started with him, and I stayed with him because he does a good job.

Hicke: Did he pass along any philosophy about vineyard management to you?

Sbragia: My dad loved being outside. I think he told me the same thing that Myron told me: "Attention to detail," and, "Don't do anything tomorrow you can do today."

Hicke: Oh, yes? That's a good one too. He didn't worry about the water and the sun and things like that so much?

Sbragia: He was constantly worrying. My dad was very high strung. Very nice man. He had a lot of Spanish laborers, Mexicans, who came and they'd call him Gino [pronounced Yino], and they all loved him. My dad died in December of 1995, and I've had people come almost every year just before harvest asking for Gino, because they wanted to come and work for him.

Hicke: That's quite impressive.

Growing up in Healdsburg

Sbragia: Let's see. My memories of working in the vineyards--one of the reasons I didn't go out for sports was I was the only child and there was an expectation that you'd come back and work at the ranch.

Hicke: You mean after school?

Sbragia: After school and on weekends. I was spoiled rotten. My mom wanted me to learn accordion, so I learned accordion, and so therefore a lot of times I'd be practicing accordion instead of out there with my dad, which actually was pretty nice, to be able to not have to go out and work. Because in the winter time--I mean, even look at today, it's pretty cold out there. You know, on a nice, sunny day in the spring it's different, but on a cold winter day when it's kind of drizzly, it's pretty miserable outside.

Hicke: Better to be practicing your accordion.

Sbragia: Yes. Go to school. But I remember suckering vines, where you're taking the excess growth from between the shoots out, and then hoeing. My job was to hoe, so probably one of the reasons I decided to go to school was those rows were so long and hoeing vines was a miserable job--cutting suckers from the bottom. I was a good hoer, but at the same time, it was a lot of work.

Hicke: Yes, and it gets old after a while.

Sbragia: I think the best times were the harvests--mostly the prunes, because school would have started by the time grape harvest came. So then that was always a hassle: you'd go to school and come back. And grape harvest was actually--as I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, I think there were wetter winters, because I remember lots of sloshing around in the mud. Back in those days, you didn't pick into bins; it went into gondolas; you picked into lug boxes--sixty-pound boxes. My job was to collect the boxes, help my dad dump them. At the beginning we loaded boxes, and we used to sell to Seghesio Winery in Healdsburg, so my job was to help them load the boxes and then go to the winery. We used to actually dump the boxes into a conveyor that brought them to the crusher. Then I had to stack the boxes. While he was dumping, I'd take the box and put it back on the truck. As I got older, I was pretty big by the time I was thirteen, I would start dumping boxes and helping him.

And then later on, probably in the early sixties, we had a conveyor and a tank, but we still picked in boxes, so we would dump the boxes on the conveyer. The pickers would pick in the boxes, drag them to the end of the row, and then we would dump the boxes on the conveyor and then that would load into the tank. My dad would drive the tank to the winery and he'd be gone for a couple of hours, or I'd go with him, but it was easier then, because you didn't have to load boxes. It was a rest.

The best times were when my dad and Ed Seghesio would be sitting inside the winery by some kind of big filter. Ed would take a little drink--I'd get water--they'd take a little bit of wine and talk about the wine. I think '71 and '72--and actually in the fifties, there were some bad years where I remember catching my dad looking at the prunes. There was water out there in the field, the boxes were sitting in water, the prunes had rotted. I think instead of picking forty tons, we'd picked four boxes, so he went to work at Seghesio doing something in the winter that year to make money to survive.

Hicke: Was he selling to anyone besides Seghesio?

Sbragia: No, in the early days, the grapes went to Seghesio and the prunes went to Sunsweet.

Hicke: And what kind of a contract? Do you have any idea?

Sbragia: I remember him saying he was selling Columbard for $90 a ton, but that was probably in the sixties.

Hicke: And that was just from year to year. The price was determined whenever--

Sbragia: Yes. Seghesio had a contract with Gallo at that time. Now they've started their own bottling.

Hicke: They did bulk wine?

Sbragia: They did bulk wine. My dad sold to Seghesio and Seghesio was selling to Gallo--bulk wine. But we only had whites, because the land was mostly low level--close to the river. I don't think it was really good, except for right on the hill where my dad lived was good Zinfandel ground. I've planted eight acres of Merlot right next to the house and hopefully that's going to come out okay.

Hicke: Is it cool enough there?

Sbragia: Yes, I think Merlot grows in a lot of different places, versus grapes like Cabernet and Zinfandel. They're more particular.

Hicke: Dry Creek is certainly famous for Zinfandel and Sauvignon Blanc. You said you have that, too.

Sbragia: Yes, it does well.

Hicke: Well, let me ask you a little bit more about your younger days. One thing I like to ask about, in view of the food and wine compatibility, is what kinds of things did your mother cook when you were growing up?

Sbragia: My mom and my dad--my dad actually was a pretty good cook himself. In fact, during the war they found out that he was Italian and that he could cook pretty good, so they grabbed

him right away. He ended up being a staff sergeant in charge of the kitchen. He tells a story that they wanted him to go cook for the officers, but he wouldn't do it. He wanted to stay with the guys. [laughter] I don't know if that was a wise move on his part.

Hicke: Probably was, yes.

Sbragia: He was in Japan during the war as a cook. Delivering meals at that time was pretty risky business--had to go with a gun. Well, actually he was on a lot of the islands as they moved toward Japan.

Hicke: That's what I was wondering. He went--oh, dear.

Sbragia: Scary stuff.

Hicke: That really was!

Sbragia: So I think that was probably why he had pretty much had it when he came back to a bar and a restaurant--which was a pretty neat place. My mom cooked and he tended bar. Talking to the old timers, as I grew up, it was the place to go hang out.

My mom and dad were great. The typical meal would be she'd take like artichokes and actually even apples and cordon--I'm not sure what that is, exactly. I think it's a stalk, like an artichoke tree, and made fried battered vegetables.

Pasta was always on the menu, but it was never a main course. Pasta was just one of the starters, and it was always with a meat sauce, unless it was a Friday back in the days when you couldn't eat meat on a Friday as a Catholic. Then it was with fish, and it was more of a fast sauce, where she'd take garlic and seasonings and tomatoes and kind of braise them and start the sauce going and it was more of a raw sauce. And those were good. The meat sauce was more serious.

And they made raviolis. My mom would make raviolis.

Hicke: From scratch?

Sbragia: Yes. It was interesting. One thing I didn't tell you before, my mom was married before, and so I have a half brother and half sister, but they are twenty-five years older than I am. My mom and sister would make raviolis, and usually after that there was either some kind of meat--you know, roast--she would stick the garlic inside and then sage and rosemary and olive oil. Salt and pepper. And then cook it to almost medium rare. That was always good.

She'd make these potatoes in the roast, I don't know how she did it, because I keep on trying to make it, but they come out soggy, where hers came out crispy. I think she'd take the roast out and then just turn the heat way up, pour the oil on to coat them, and they get real crisp. She was a really good cook.

Hicke: Did you raise any chickens or anything like that?

Sbragia: Well, that's the only thing I think that I ever had was chickens. I remember this one rooster used to chase me around--I must have been really small. [laughter] And that was scary. I'd have to go get the eggs, so somehow the rooster disappeared the next time I went out there.

Hicke: Fortunately.

Sbragia: Fortunately, yes. I was pleased. [laughter] Yes, besides a dog and a cat, or dogs and cats, chickens were the only thing we ever had.

Hicke: What kind of equipment did your dad have?

Sbragia: Dad had a D-2 tractor for as long as I can remember, and I still have that tractor. He had a big truck to haul prunes around--it's a 1950 Chevrolet flatbed.

Hicke: Something like a pickup truck?

Sbragia: Well, they didn't have a pickup early on. He had a little Willys Jeep that was cut down, that had a little kind of box frame in behind. Then he had a 1929 Chevy truck that we used on the ranch to move boxes around, so that was the one I drove. I usually didn't drive it off the property.

Hicke: You drove it by age thirteen or something like that?

Sbragia: Yes, well, actually I was probably driving it when I was seven or eight.

Hicke: Oh, my!

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Sbragia: But my job in prune season was to spread boxes ahead, so they could pick. Then help load them. We would dump the prunes in a caustic--soda and water--and what it would do is sterilize the prune and it would crack them, make a little tiny crack in them, and then they would be sorted into big ones and little ones, firsts and seconds, and then we had to dehydrate them.

Hicke: Oh, you had a dehydrator.

Sbragia: The harvest usually started in mid-August. Prunes were spread on trays and put in the dehydrator and about nineteen hours later they come out, so the rotation was that somebody had to be up all night--either my dad or my mom--usually my mom, because my dad would work all day.

Later, when they moved up to higher ground, where the chicken coop was we made a little house. We lived in that little one-room shack, because we rented out the old house.

Hicke: Oh, for prune season.

Sbragia: Yes, prune season, itself. And everybody used to come every night and visit because they knew we were always home. [laughter] It was like an ongoing party. You'd work all day long and then friends would come and play cards at night--play poker and talk, and their kids and I would run around the fields at night.

Hicke: You would have to change the trays or something?

Sbragia: They were actually like a car. It was stacked with twenty-three trays of prunes and each tray held about a sixty-pound box. They would go in spaced at one hour intervals and then you'd mark and add nineteen hours to them and then that's when they'd start coming out. They had numbers on them at the bottom. It was like a railroad. Then you'd move them over and pull them out, my mom's job.

I remember one night we caught her crying about five o'clock in the morning. She had dumped a car out--a whole car about three o'clock in the morning, and we ended up having to pick them all back up and put them on the trays. But they were dry, so it was fine.

Hicke: Didn't hurt the prunes?

Sbragia: Didn't hurt the prunes, but it was very hard work.

Hicke: But it hurt your mom.

Sbragia: Yes. Hurt her feelings.

After that you'd have to scrape trays. You'd pull them off and you'd have to scrape into boxes. We'd load the boxes of dried prunes, and then dump them into a ton box, about twice the size of a bin you see people carrying around today--these were ton bins, and you'd dump the boxes into those bins. That was a tough job, because we would stack the boxes on the little '29 Chevy and then pull it into a garage. Then we'd dump the boxes into the ton bins, and then later on my dad hauled them off to Sunsweet.

Hicke: Did you have to pick prunes?

Sbragia: I picked prunes a couple times, but I wasn't very good.

Hicke: I understand that isn't fun.

Sbragia: No. I was lucky I was the boss's son. I got to drive the truck, route the boxes, and shake prunes. You had to shake prunes.

Hicke: The tree.

Sbragia: Yes. Well, as I got older and stronger I'd shake prunes. Luckily my dad finally got a mechanical shaker, so I got to run that thing and drive the tractor. So I pretty much did everything.

Grape harvest was a lot easier because you basically picked them and brought them away. You didn't have to process them.

Hicke: Yes. About when did your father start changing prunes to grapevines?

Sbragia: I remember we planted Easter vacation of my senior year, which was '66, so he started probably with one block around 1962, '63.

Hicke: What did he plant?

Sbragia: He went from prunes to grapes, and the variety was French Colombard. I think the last vines he planted were Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc, because we had so much Colombard, and I'm the one who convinced him to use the AXR1, which [laughter] became susceptible to phylloxera. I would have been better off--to have the French Colombard, which was planted on St. George, which is resistant.

Hicke: Yes, but Davis was saying you should plant AXR1.

Sbragia: Actually, if you look at AXR1 in terms of the industry, it did a pretty good job. It took us from being a mediocre winegrowing region to one of the players of the world.

Hicke: Yes, good point.

Sbragia: It gave a good yield at a very high quality. It was a good rootstock. Unfortunately phylloxera got stronger.

Hicke: Who convinced your dad to plant French Colombard? Was it the extension people?

Sbragia: He probably talked to the farm advisor, but I think it was other farmers. They'd see who was spraying, who was planting, and they'd go over and talk and say, "What are you planting?" "What rootstock are you planting on?" The nursery guys had a lot of influence, because they were friends of my dad. He knew them all his life.

Hicke: Who were they?

Sbragia: I can't remember the name now. In Dry Creek. We usually got dormant bench grafts, so that you would trim the roots, then plant them. My job was to dig the holes.

Hicke: You got those great jobs! [laughs]

Sbragia: I got the nasty jobs.

Hicke: Do you recall which neighbors he knew and would confer with?

Sbragia: There was a guy directly behind us, who was a Foppiano.

Hicke: That's not the winery Foppiano?

Sbragia: No, actually it was a guy named Andy Foppiano. They're all kind of related, but that Foppiano is not related to the Lou Foppianos.

Hicke: Anybody else that you remember?

Sbragia: There was another grower named St. Claire right next door to us.

Hicke: Related to Maxine and George St. Claire? They live in Alexander Valley.

Sbragia: No, no, different one. And down on the flats in Dry Creek, Leroy Rasmussen was a neighbor. A guy named Logan King was a neighbor. And a guy--last name was Butts. And then later, Butts left it to his son-in-law, Bob Keegan. And Bob's son, Tim, just sold to Ferrari-Carano.

Hicke: Interesting. There are still a lot of local growers around Dry Creek.

Sbragia: Yes, there are. The Lupes were out there. My dad actually managed a vineyard for a guy named Guido Guidi. And Guido owned a store in San Francisco. It was a great Italian store with all this--

Hicke: Groceries?

Sbragia: Groceries and Italian goods. And actually Guido's brother owned the olive oil factory in St. Helena, which is still in operation. Guido's brother sold it to the new owners, and they still run it as a family. It's an Italian market, essentially. The olive oil factory is mostly olive oil and cheese and meats, and it's a great place to buy Italian goods.

My dad managed Guido's ranch and it's still owned by the Guidis, Guido's daughter, I think. It was all prunes then and now it's all grapes.

Hicke: Are there any prunes left in Dry Creek?

Sbragia: There are some. Actually there are some on Magnolia Drive, which technically I don't think is Dry Creek. It's where Alderbrook Vineyards is--that whole peninsula there.

One of the problems with prunes was a disease called gumossis, which basically killed off the tree after it was about two or three years old. It started taking the trees and so replantings wouldn't work. Then it started taking older trees, so it was kind of like dead arm or Eutypa in grapes. It was passed on by prunings. I remember my dad pruning with Lysol--dipping his shears in Lysol and similar things that you'd have to do to sterilize

between cuts with Eutypa. He always said, "You think those guys in Las Vegas gamble? I put it on the red or the black every year."

Hicke: Well, agriculture is such a chancy business.

Sbragia: Yes. It's unbelievable.

Hicke: It's really like living on the edge.

Sbragia: It is. You look at frost and weirdness during bloom and set, and then the harvest.

Hicke: And that's just nature. There's man-made price dips and market gluts and all the other--

Sbragia: Oh, yes, lots of things.

Hicke: I wanted to ask you about school. Was there anything about school that you particularly liked or didn't like?

Sbragia: Well, my mom and dad were good Catholics, but Italian Catholics are a little different than your devout Catholic. The Catholic religion is part of your life, but it doesn't tend to lead you. They were totally ready to put me into public school, but I was born December 11, which is about one day past when you could get into first grade, and I didn't go to kindergarten, so they went to see the nuns and they took me. Therefore I was the youngest kid in my class for most of the time until a guy moved into high school and his birthday was the 6th. [laughter]

Hicke: So where did you go?

Sbragia: I went to St. John's Catholic School in Healdsburg to the eighth grade, and then I went to Healdsburg High School, and graduated from Healdsburg High School in 1966. I went to Santa Rosa Junior College for two years.

Hicke: Let's back up here. What about high school? What do you remember about that?

Sbragia: Well, I guess I must have done fairly well up to eighth grade, because it was at the recommendation of the sisters to the counselors in high school that I go into college prep classes. As I remember it then, you were either tracked for college prep or you weren't.

Hicke: So you got biology and chemistry--

Sbragia: Yes, and physics and all that stuff.

Hicke: And Latin?

Sbragia: Three years of Spanish. I kept on saying I wanted to be a math major, because I liked math. My chemistry class my senior year, I just loved it, so all of a sudden I wanted to be a

chemist. I remember sitting in a counseling meeting with a lady named Mrs. Sullivan, and she told my parents, or my mom, that I couldn't take agriculture and I couldn't take shops because I needed to be in this college prep to go to college. And I think that disappointed my dad.

He was kind of building his empire and wanted to buy more land, and he wanted his son to work next to him. I think I disappointed him in that--'til later, and then he was very proud. He was happy.

Hicke: Oh, when you went back to it?

Sbragia: I kind of went back to it, anyway, and he understood what a winemaker did. I think he had worked by himself a lot of years when I was away at school.

Hicke: Yes, sure.

Sbragia: I was going to be a math major, and I did fairly well in high school. Not by today's standards--I mean, to get into UCLA, my son had to get a 4.0, I think I was a 3.6 or something like that, which was good for me. I'm the first one in our family to get a college degree of any of the Sbragias. My mom went to the eighth grade and my father only went to the third grade. But my father went back to school in night school and could read and write English and Italian perfectly.

Hicke: Sounds like they believed in education.

Sbragia: Yes, they were smart people, just not educated, because of the times. I mean, if you think about that--two world wars and the Depression.

Hicke: They were survivors.

Depression and Prohibition

Sbragia: My dad, when he worked at Asti, worked for somewhere between fifty cents and a dollar a day. He owed twenty-five cents for his living, because they used to live in the colony. Actually, that's what I forgot. My grandmother was a cook for the Italian Swiss Colony.

Hicke: Your paternal grandmother?

Sbragia: Maternal. And on my dad's side, my grandfather worked at the Paxton Ranch in Healdsburg, now a beautiful bed and breakfast, Madrona Manor. There was actually a winery back there. In fact, people complain about all the wineries in the hillsides today: he says that that whole area was clear-cut. When I was a child--just after the first rain is mushroom season, we'd be up in those hills looking for mushrooms, and there were

grapevines and apple trees and pear trees. I think they planted corn in the flats and they planted their trees and vines on the hillsides.

Hicke: Well, that's interesting. What period are we talking about? The early century?

Sbragia: Well, he was talking about when he came back in the twenties--probably from the turn of the century to the twenties. As I understand it, with the Napa Valley, there were about 20,000 acres planted in Napa Valley at the turn of the century. And there were about 120 wineries. Sonoma County was probably less, but pretty close. My dad's friend had a bulk winery at their vineyard. They never reopened after Prohibition.

Hicke: They all just made their own wine?

Sbragia: Yes. Andrew Sodini and Trentadue opened up again, but there were a number of them that never reopened.

Hicke: Did they sell this bulk wine?

Sbragia: Well, I guess they did before Prohibition.

Hicke: Where? In San Francisco, do you think?

Sbragia: Yes. My dad had some interesting stories. And that's what I forgot.

Hicke: Oh, good.

Sbragia: During Prohibition, he did manage vineyards, but they didn't try a winery, so this was during Prohibition. He was running a ranch, they would pick grapes, and then in the 1929 Chevy, he'd drive to Tiburon and go across on the ferry--this was before the Golden Gate Bridge--and he'd deliver grapes to all his old buddies or his clients in the city. He'd have to help them take the boxes down, dump the boxes and crush the grapes.

Hicke: Individual families?

Sbragia: Yes, and then he'd come back.

Hicke: I don't suppose you know how much he sold them for, would you?

Sbragia: No, I don't. I might be able to find it.

Hicke: That would be interesting.

Sbragia: My first cousin, who is Janet Pisenti, did a table top book called *Thirty-two Cousins from Italy* about the Rochioli family, which was my uncle Italo--my dad had three brothers: Italo, who was a farmer in Healdsburg; Americo, who worked in San Francisco; and then Aladino, who actually lived at the family home until the mid-fifties and then came over

from Italy. Italo married a woman named Teresa Rochioli, who was in the family of one of the brothers. That family now owns Rochioli Winery.

Hicke: Was that Joe Rochioli?

Sbragia: Well, Joe's dad was her brother. When we tried to do the same kind of book, Janet went back to the priest in Guamo and no amount of money would convince him to go into the records.

Hicke: They must have all the births and deaths--

Sbragia: The only thing is, I think there was a fire once and they had to move everything and it may be all just in a mess. They wouldn't be able to find it unless they hired somebody to go through each file.

When I talked to my cousins in Italy--because my father had one sister, Maria, who never came to the U.S. She lived there. And my cousins say, "I know who my grandfather was and that's all I want to know," so they have no inclination to go farther. But Janet did a pretty good job with the Rochiolis. She went back quite a ways.

Hicke: And they come from the same area?

Sbragia: They come from up in the hills not very far, maybe an hour from Lucca, a place called Forno Valasco.

Hicke: It strikes me that we went past Italian Swiss Colony too fast. Do you have any recollections that your father or grandfather, or grandmother passed along?

Sbragia: My dad tells a story about my grandfather Giulio. This gentleman that told the story was working with my dad in '27 and he said, "I remember your father. I was holding the ladder and he was up on top of a tank, topping the tank and filling it up. He kept shouting down, 'Stop shaking the ladder!' It was 1906--it was the earthquake." [laughter]

Hicke: Oh, that's a great story.

Sbragia: My dad also remembers there's a giant, million-gallon wooden tank --a buried wooden tank there. They used it to make blends. And it's still there, but it's a water tank now. It's divided into thirds. There are pictures of people being lowered down into the empty tank. They had a band and a formal dance inside this space. A million-gallon tank's pretty big.

Hicke: That's one to challenge the redwood tree dance platform.

Sbragia: Right, right.

Hicke: And it's still there?

Sbragia: It's still there. In fact, Beringer bought Italian Swiss Colony in 1986, and I brought my dad up there and walked him around, and he remembered a lot of things that he did, and that was fun.

Hicke: Since you mention it, did nostalgia have anything to do with that purchase?

Sbragia: No, no. The only thing was, "What shall we call the new winery?" And I said, "It has a name. It's called Asti." [laughter]

Hicke: Very good. I'm glad you've got a sense of history here.

Sbragia: And that's what it's called.

Hicke: That's great. Now let's see, we were in high school and you were just getting interested in chemistry. And if you have anything in your notes--I appreciate your having made them--let's not pass anything up.

Sbragia: Well, the teacher, a guy named Dr. Volt--well, I guess I don't know if he was "doctor"; I'll call him Mr. Volt--he was a great chemistry teacher and he turned me on to chemistry. I did well. I got an A in the class.

II COLLEGE EDUCATION

Santa Rosa Junior College and University of California at Davis

Sbragia: When I went to Santa Rosa J.C., I took two years of physics, chemistry, and English and math--calculus. I took history and a couple of other courses during the summers. Then I graduated with an AA degree from J.C. and transferred to [University of California] Davis.

Hicke: Now what were you thinking about at this point?

Sbragia: At this point I was getting away from hoeing those vines. [laughter]

Hicke: I can't blame you.

Sbragia: I finished my chemistry degree at Davis in 1970, graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry.

Davis Professors

Hicke: Tell me about your professors there.

Sbragia: The closest I got to wine business was Dr. Kepner, who was my advisor. He was working with Dr. Harold Berg on wine projects, whom I met later. I walked into the wine department one time, but no one was there and I just back to the library to study.

And I met my wife, Jane, there.

Hicke: What's her maiden name?

Sbragia: Her name was Jane Lee Carr. She graduated in psychology and child development. Then we both went back to graduate school, we were in school together--poor students in Fresno.

Hicke: When were you married?

Sbragia: We were married in 1972. She was in graduate school then. Then I quit Gallo and we both were students for a year. She went to work and I was a student for one more year. She started one year ahead of me.

At Davis, I remember Dr. Friedrich, who did advanced organic analysis. That class almost killed me. It was back in the days when there were a lot of protests for the Vietnam War, and they actually closed--[Ronald] Reagan was the governor at the time--the campus. Now, I was a chemistry student, who might have attended the rally [laughter] but was on his way to the chemistry class--this was an advanced organic class where they handed me a solution that had three water soluble unknowns and another solution that had five oil soluble unknowns. I had six weeks to find out what they were. They pretty much handed it to you and said, "This is it." And the lectures had nothing to do with what the lab was. Advanced organic analysis--and the TAs [teaching assistants] were all from some foreign country [laughs] and they were barely understandable.

Hicke: Couldn't speak English.

Sbragia: I finally was able to understand the TAs. About three quarters through the class was when I was just starting to understand, and they shut the campus down for a week. So the last day of the last class, I crystallized one out: prodichlorbenzane, which I think is moth balls. [laughter] I got a melting point, and identified it at the last minute. I got a B in the class.

Hicke: They wouldn't make any allowances for having lost a week?

Sbragia: No, no, nothing. Well, this was when you finally realized that it was almost impossible to do what they wanted you to do. The only way to do it was to live in that lab, so that every waking hour was spent in that lab.

Hicke: You had to do continuous experiments.

Sbragia: Yes, just basically trying to extract, purify, and analyze somehow. If it was an oil, you'd probably do boiling point, or melting point if it was a solid--you know, a number of analyses. So anyway, it was a great education.

Hicke: Was this about the time of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley?

Sbragia: Yes, same time. 1968 through 1970. It was the time of the draft lottery. I remember washing dishes listening to the radio, and my number was fifty-nine. It was my junior year and--some people were jumping around for joy because they had high numbers; and all of us under 100 were sitting around with our heads in our hands, moaning. We had to pass

fifteen units, or you were reclassified from student deferment to 1-A, which meant you were ready and able--not necessarily willing--for military duty.

III EARLY EXPERIENCE AT GALLO

The Draft

Sbragia: They were going to give me my diploma and my physical papers at the same time--my induction notice. So I was looking at other things--the Peace Corps. Wasn't really sure about the war. I was not really sure that going out and killing people was a good thing, which I don't think anybody thinks.

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Sbragia: Well, I think in World War I and World War II it was a little more clear, at least in people's minds, whereas this one, we questioned so much as students. Then all of a sudden, people who weren't students started questioning politicians--I think, civil opinion was one of the reasons we got out of it.

I was looking at coast guard or the navy. Jane was trying to convince me to be a physical therapist. I was considering all these things and then I started interviewing.

Well, I'd interviewed with IBM, DuPont, Dow, and then Gallo came along. All of a sudden they were talking about things that I knew about, because I was a chemist, but I hadn't worked as a chemist anywhere; I worked on the ranch all my life.

Hicke: Yes. Hoeing dirt.

Hiring on at Gallo

Sbragia: The only thing I knew about working in a lab was what I'd learned in school. I didn't have any place to put all this information. When Gallo started talking about grapes and wine and analyzing wine, a light went on in my brain. I must have interviewed well, because I got called back about a month later for an interview at the winery, and during the interview, I

talked to Art Caputi. Art was head of research, and is still at the winery. He works a lot in research and is involved in the American Society of Enology and Viticulture. He was talking about Major Sanford, who was a major in a national guard unit, and I'm saying, "Well, why would you want me to get in the national guard in Stockton?" And he says, "Oh, don't you know? I forgot to tell you. You got the job." [laughter]

All of a sudden, in my senior year, springtime, not only is the black cloud of the draft lifted, but I have a job. So it was a great end of school.

Hicke: Whom did you talk to at Gallo besides this Art Caputi?

Sbragia: Well, the guy I eventually went to work with, a guy named Bruno Trumbella. He and I worked together in a lab. He was my mentor at Gallo.

Hicke: When was this?

Sbragia: This was spring of '70. After I graduated in June, I went to work for my wife's father, Ford Carr, as a camp counselor. He was famous in the camp directing business and Boy Scouts as a professional camp director. My wife has been a camp director for twenty-six years. So I went to work at an Easter Seals camp for her dad, and I worked that summer, which was great.

Hicke: Doing what?

Sbragia: Well, it was with developmentally disabled kids--cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy. It made you realize that also, you were in a different society, where 90 percent of the people were handicapped and you were the weird one, and gave you insights--how lucky we all are to be mobile and verbal.

A Trip to Mexico

Sbragia: Then I had to report for active duty. I had to go to Fort Dix, New Jersey. My only trip had been to Mexico with a high school friend when I graduated from junior college.

Hicke: Oh, you didn't tell me about that.

Sbragia: Oh, that was my first adventure.

Hicke: You had years of Spanish to draw on.

Sbragia: Well, do you want to digress?

Hicke: Yes, let's go back to that.

Sbragia: In high school, a guy named Roberto Ramirez--who later became a physics teacher at high school and now he's in Windsor, and actually got the Mesa Award, and has been given credit for getting a lot of people on the right road--came to the school. He didn't speak any English, but he'd graduated from an equivalent high school, so he knew physics and chemistry. By our junior year he spoke perfect English and became our study mentor. We were all taking physics. Roberto knew how to do it already, so we quickly developed this group, and we're still friends together: Yvonne Kreck from Mill Creek--she married Bill Kreck--is one of them. A number of the other people weren't in the wine business, but we would study every morning. And all of a sudden the group got bigger and bigger. [laughter]

He and I went through a lot of the science classes in high school, and then in junior college we were in classes together. He was more towards physics, and I was in chemistry, but we had physics classes together. When we graduated, we were going to drive back to his home in Mexico. He had a '65 Chevelle Super Sport, bright red. One night we left at eight o'clock, we set off south, and went through the valleys, stayed overnight, and then drove to Guadelajara, where my girlfriend was.

Her name was Victoria Sherard. She was spending the summer on a six-week course and living with a family, so I promised her I'd pick her up at the airport and drive her to her house. We got there at the airport, picked her up, and drove her to her house. We met the family she was going to be with, and took her and her roommate out for dinner.

Then we took off south, and drove from Guadelajara to Mexico City and stayed with Roberto's aunt in Mexico City for about a week. Then we drove south to his home town. I can't remember the name of the town where he grew up--way out in the sticks. We had a great time. We stayed with his sister, and swam in the river.

Hicke: Oh, that's great to go with somebody who's at home.

Sbragia: Yes, and then we drove part of the way with them when they took a little vacation to Oaxaca. That's when things started to happen: we broke a universal joint on the transmission and spent three days trying to find it. Finally got a guy after his work hours, a welder, and he welded it and it worked! It got us all the way home, except for a couple of minor problems. I went back to Mexico City and saw his aunt again. And his cousins were there--beautiful girls, who would just sit and watch me, so I had to learn how to speak Spanish. [laughter] I was just this oddity, I guess. So it was fun--you know, when you're eighteen and you've never been anywhere.

I think I was in Nevada once, and Fort Bragg once with my parents, because in our family we spent a lot of time together. My dad would take breaks when I was small, we'd go swimming in Dry Creek at lunchtime and have a picnic. We'd do that on a regular basis. In the evenings, family would get together. We'd go down to the river and have picnics, and they'd play cards and have a bonfire and the kids would run around and play. We'd do a lot of that. Go to the ocean, because Healdsburg's only about forty miles from the ocean; but no vacations, per se, because he'd work six days a week.

Hicke: Yes, he had to take care of the ranch.

Sbragia: So this big trip was pretty interesting. Then on the way back to Guadelajara--at that point, we went back to see Vicki and I had a date with her, and Roberto had a girlfriend in a place outside of Guadalejara by a lake called Lake Chapala. We were late. A man had stopped his car for some animals on the road.

Hicke: Domesticated?

Sbragia: Yes, range animals that belonged to people, but they were feeding everywhere. They were walking across the road, and he had stopped. We came around a turn and Roberto was going pretty fast, and we slowed just enough to just crunch the front end of the car pretty bad, so after we got towed into town, we found out it would be like two weeks of tinkering to fix it. They didn't get new parts there. They weld it and fix it.

So we spent about ten days in Guadalejara. Luckily his father had a friend who had a hotel and we stayed in the hotel free until our parents sent us money. It was a great adventure there, living in a big city--because I'd never really been in a big city for any length of time.

Our parents sent us money. Since the car wasn't ready, we flew to Puerto Vallerta, before there was a road, and spent three days in Puerto Vallerta. It was my first plane ride.

When we returned to Puerto Vallarta, we had enough money to drive home. Forty hours straight! I got home with a nickel in my pocket.

So I walk in, and my mom and dad were with their friends, and they didn't know I was coming home. I didn't call. We didn't use phones very much then. Now, you call someone over there [points across the hall] with your cell phone. [laughter]

My mom was so worried. I understand now, being a parent--I have three children, and thinking about sending someone 2,000 miles away to a foreign country, that had never been away from home--I wouldn't do it. I don't know how she did it, but she was so relieved. She gave me a bath.

Hicke: But you were with a guy who knew his way around. That makes a considerable difference.

Sbragia: Yes, and they trusted him. They knew Roberto. But it was still scary. This wreck scared them terribly.

Hicke: Oh, yes, sure. And driving all night--that would worry me. But she didn't know that, fortunately.

Sbragia: No, I didn't tell her. So where were we?

Hicke: Now we were just when you were at Fort Dix, or you went to Fort Dix.

Sbragia: Oh, I was at Fort Dix, went through basic training. And I was older than most--you know, most were eighteen, nineteen, and twenty, and I was twenty-one. Actually basic training doesn't seem that bad now. I was a little bit bigger, so I was made road guard, which means as your platoon passes on a march, you block the crossroads so people don't run over them. And then they're way ahead. You have to run up and catch up and then you block the road, and then you run and catch up. That means you're the second guy. And the whole idea is that you have the extra running, because they're running too, so you have to run twice as fast to catch up.

A Trip to Europe

Sbragia: I passed all the tests and made it through basic training and then my wife was doing her senior year in England. I was a year ahead of her because I started early, even though I'm only a month older than she is.

She did her senior year in Birmingham [England], so I jumped on a military charter for $150 and I flew into Frankfurt and then took the train to Birmingham.

Hicke: Oh, you're talking about England.

Sbragia: Yes, she was doing social welfare and psychology there. She did a whole year at the University of Birmingham.

Hicke: So you went?

Sbragia: We traveled around England then straight to Italy and stayed with my aunt. That was great because my wife got to know my aunt and my uncle. My uncle's name was Tóbere. My aunt's name was Maria.

Hicke: Did you know any Italian?

Sbragia: I grew up understanding Italian. It was because they spoke to me in Italian, and my parents said I spoke Italian as a child. But then, you know, TV and school took it away.

When my parents spoke Italian, I understood everything. So it was like this miracle, I could understand this other language. And the Italians in California are kind of funny, because they get all these Americanisms, like "la boxe," and "la fensa," and--

Hicke: "La weekend!"

Sbragia: "La weekend!" My household then was more Italian than the households in Italy today.

Hicke: You mean culturally?

Sbragia: Yes, more pure Italian.

Hicke: Or are you talking about the language?

Sbragia: No, the language wasn't, but just the household and the way we lived.

Hicke: Yes. Traditions.

Sbragia: The way we lived was almost identical to Italy. I went with my parents in 1969 to visit my aunt. It was like being in Healdsburg. I brought my kids over to Italy this year, and they saw the cousins and the second cousins. And it's much more Americanized than when I first went. Even the food. It's Italian, but I think the food was better when I was a kid. I don't know--it may be old age. [laughter]

Hicke: Well, certainly polenta has been discovered.

Sbragia: Well, there's all these things. My dad used to say that back before he came from Italy, they used to eat polenta every day and they used to be able to look at meat once a week. So that's probably why they moved. They were really poor.

Hicke: Yes, that makes sense.

Sbragia: That's one thing, though, my grandfather then had a rock quarry and they--

Hicke: In Italy?

Sbragia: In Italy, yes. And they did stones, so my father grew up on a rock quarry--not marble, but just the rocks they build the buildings with. Because the house that they lived in in Guamo had walls almost three feet wide. They're just solid rock.

Hicke: You were lucky. You just had to hoe dirt, not rocks.

Sbragia: Yes, that's what my dad said. "This is easy." [laughter]

Hicke: How did he know about making wine? Where did the winemaking come in?

Sbragia: Oh, if you go to Italy--especially then, in the seventies, and earlier, their farming was kind of interesting, because there wasn't an abundance of land. Having two acres was a lot of land. They had fruit trees, and vegetables in the flats and olives and vines on the hills. They planted tomatoes and corn between fruit trees, so they had a lot of little pieces. And they'd make their own wine, make their own olive oil. They had chickens, a goat and a cow. It was how they survived. Rural America at that time was very similar.

Hicke: So the women did a lot of that, probably.

Sbragia: Yes. The men would harvest and take produce to the market and sell it. Most people didn't work outside of their own little area. I got to know my cousins. My oldest cousin's fifty-seven --I just turned fifty--they worked in insurance and were more educated.

Hicke: When you say it's more American, are you talking about things like TV and movies?

Sbragia: TV and cell phones, yes, and travel.

Hicke: Well, some of that has to do with more affluence, doesn't it?

Sbragia: Sure. I thought I had everything I needed, but in comparison, my kids cycled through toys, while I still have some of my toys that I had when I was kid, because you just never break them, you never lose them, you took care of them. Not that I felt I was deprived. I thought maybe that my parents instilled in me that you take care of your stuff. I don't know.

Hicke: This is a throw-away society. I mean, comparatively speaking, I guess. Well, we left you in Birmingham, and traveling.

Sbragia: Yes, so that was a great respite after basic training. All of a sudden I was in Italy having a wonderful meal. It's funny then, because in England--in the sixties men had long hair, so the people who went around on motorcycles that were the bad guys were called skinheads. And here I am with a shaved head. [laughter]

Luckily I had an army coat on. I remember when I got to Frankfurt, I needed a flight to England, and I just walked up to TWA and they automatically gave me a military discount. They just knew.

Hicke: Looking at your hair.

Sbragia: They just knew.

Hicke: That's good. [laughs] Was this about the end of her year, or did she stay there when you came back?

Sbragia: She actually had an interesting time there. She traveled with me and then with one of her classmates. They traveled into Yugoslavia and they had all sorts of adventures.

Hicke: She went into Yugoslavia?

Sbragia: Yes, back in those days.

Hicke: Yes. It was totally different.

Sbragia: Then on her next break--she had large breaks, like a month break --she went and worked at a kibbutz. This is 1970.

Hicke: She went to Israel, right?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: Is she Jewish?

Sbragia: No, she was a psychology/social welfare major, so I guess every social welfare major needs to work on a kibbutz, or wants to. She worked there. She really enjoyed it. Being the daughter of a camp director, working and living in groups, she loves that kind of life; where I'm used to more family and not a lot of people.

Hicke: So she did that for a month?

Sbragia: Yes, she did it for a month. She had all sorts of adventures. She talks about hitchhiking to the Golan Heights with Arabs and Israeli troops, and being picked up by one and then being picked up by the other. Looking at her Jewish friend as they're being hauled around by a bunch of Arabs saying, "This is really stupid." [laughter] Because they would have shot him, you know, if they found out he was Jewish.

Work in Gallo's Lab

Sbragia: So then I came back and in March of 1971 went to work for Gallo.

Hicke: What were you doing there?

Sbragia: I went to work for a guy named Tom Wong, who still works for them. Tom was in charge of organic analysis of wines, so I was hired as a research chemist in the research department. I worked for him for about three days doing viscosity of wine, I remember. And he was working on projects, trying to develop materials for filtration of wine. Because what Gallo would do is not buy stuff off the shelf, but make their own, so he was working on cellulose fibers and using them to do better filtration. Then I went to work with Bruno Trumbella in the lab right next door to Tom. They had Ph.D.s working on big projects, and Bruno had worked there a long time.

Bruno had this ability to look at a problem and solve it--it was great. It was like going back to school. We were working on unroutine analysis. In every winery, you have an analytical lab which runs analysis, using the standard laboratory procedures for wineries. We were doing pesticides and preservatives analysis. Gallo was importing a lot of apple concentrate and grape concentrate from around the world--South America, Austria--for their wines. .Remember Boones' Farm Apple?

Hicke: Yes.

Sbragia: Okay, well, these were apple wines, but they'd make them out of concentrate.

Hicke: So you were looking for traces of pesticides?

Sbragia: Well, because what would happen is they'd get to the docks and then the Food and Drug Administration would post quarantine on them until they had a chance to test them. Gallo wanted to know they were clean before they got there. They didn't want to have anything turned back, because they knew how long the Food and Drug would take to get it through their labs. So they could keep their production going.

I remember talking to Julio [Gallo] in Spain one time on some red grape concentrate, and I worked until eleven o'clock at night making sure that there wasn't anything in it. My job there was gas chromatographic analysis of pesticides, chemical methods of extractions and purifications, solvent extractions, and then running different analyses with pesticides and preservatives.

Hicke: Was this any easier than your inorganic analyses?

Sbragia: It was about the same kind of thing.

Hicke: It sounds like it.

Sbragia: But then what Bruno would do is we would go back to the basic formula and then just sit and work them out. We would try to work calculations out to find out how to derive the formula.

Hicke: You did this on paper?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: The formulas?

Sbragia: Yes, it was a great education in terms of analytical chemistry and looking at what the reaction was and how many moles of this were reacting on moles of that, to make the end product. The byproduct took so much of the reactants, and to figure out how much that was, and then down to just the plain old mass of equations and weighted averages.

Hicke: So your math came in handy.

Sbragia: Yes, all that came in handy. Yes, I remember for the first time seeing electric calculators.

Hicke: Really? That was the first time you worked with calculators?

Sbragia: Yes, they had Wangs. They were pretty big. They were about eight by ten inches. When I was in college and junior college, they had calculators, but they were mechanical calculators. They would do complex multiplications and divisions, but they were like a giant abacus. You remember those big calculators. They were ridiculous. And when I was in college, I used to have to punch cards to do computing work.

Hicke: Those little IBM punch cards?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: Slide rules?

Sbragia: Yes we used slide rules all through junior college and college. That was the mode--slide rules. So when I went to Gallo, in the seventies was the first time where--basically you had something where you'd go two times three, and then it'd give you a six in big neon letters. [laughter] It was like dying and going to heaven.

Hicke: We take that all for granted now.

Sbragia: Oh, I know. I showed my kids my slide rules and they said, "What's that for?" [laughter] My daughter was working on her math homework and she's in advanced algebra and trigonometry and they're doing quadratic equations and $y=x^2$, and minimums and maximums, and the curves are parabolas. In order to get your equation right, you do it on a graphing calculator. You put your points into the calculator and it graphs it for you. You're supposed to do it on paper, if you check it on this calculator, you know you're right. Pretty amazing.

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Hicke: Okay, so here we are still at Gallo.

Sbragia: Still at Gallo. I worked there from March of '71 until June of '73. My roommate was a guy named Ralph Lonn, and Ralph still works there. He's in charge of stabilities. Stability is when you make wine, you look at heat instability, which is basically protein instability, and you look at cold instability, which is potassium bitartrate instability. For all the wines that Gallo makes, Ralph Lonn checks the stability, and Ralph's been doing that for twenty-five years.

It's probably one of the more important factors in making wine, because you don't want things to deposit in the bottle, a little bit of crystal, a little bit of haze is not going to kill anybody, but if you have just like curdled milk floating around--when proteins denature, they just basically look like white haze or flocculate, which is very unpleasant in a glass of wine.

Hicke: Yes. Does every winery have to do that?

Sbragia: You always have to check and decide. You say, "Okay, slightly hazy: I'll let it go," or "I won't let it go." It's got a couple of crystals in the bottom: I'll let it go, or I won't let it go. If it's got a half an inch of crystals in the bottom, some people decide to let it go, but that probably is a mistake because if you get a bottle of wine with half an inch of crystals at the bottom, it's not good!

I don't do anything to red wines, I just settle and rack and age. My wines will precipitate crystals after years, depending on how cold you get them. If you let them sit at 60 or 58 degrees, they will probably be fine. You drop them down to 50 degrees, which my cellar never is at 50, it's at 55, then you're going to drop out color and crystals that never would have been dropped out before.

Hicke: If you check this and you decide you can't let it go that way, can you recover?

Sbragia: What you do is you'd chill the wine in a tank, or in the case of heat instability, the most common way and probably the only good way, other than heating a wine--you wouldn't want to heat a wine --is a clay called bentonite and its proteins are positively charged. Bentonite has a negative charge, so it grabs them. It kind of traps the proteins and then settles down because it's heavy. Which is the way most fining agents work. They basically trap the molecule and then they're heavy and they drop to the bottom, and you rack or decant the clear liquid off the solids.

Hicke: And how does this affect the wine?

Sbragia: Well, it takes something out, so that's why most of us try to minimize anything that we do to the wine.

Hicke: What do you do to prevent that happening? Anything?

Sbragia: Nothing. It's a natural phenomenon of wine. In the whites I fine the juice. I add some bentonite, because I feel that I haven't produced a lot of the aromatics yet, so therefore, I'm not going to have to fine it after. In the reds, they are sitting aging for two years, they go up to 80 degrees Farenheit in fermentors, and usually after a couple of years in barrels, they're stable--all the proteins and tartrates have dropped out of the wine. Tannins are negatively charged, too, so tannins will drop some of the proteins out. The tartrates settle out over time. It's temperature and time, so usually time will do it too.

Whites are bottled in the first year, whereas reds will be a year to two years. Ralph has been doing stabilities ever since I worked there. People kind of joke with him about doing the same job for so long. I look at it as he's doing a very important job.

Hicke: Yes. He obviously knows how to do it.

Sbragia: Dr. [Richard] Peterson had worked there before me--a lot of winemakers have worked there. We used to call it the University of Modesto. A good friend of mine is head winemaker for the Gallo Sonoma operation, the old Frei Brothers Winery. His name is

Marcello Montecelli. Marcello was working for a man named Guido in dry wines. Their winemakers were in different departments--dry wines, fruit wines, the Boone's Farm Apple, the Strawberry Hill, and then they had dessert wines. Really good winemakers, but just kind of hidden away from everybody. At Gallo it's not like you work for a winery and you do all the tastings, then you go travel around, and you're spokesman for the winery. Ernest and Julio were the spokesmen. That was it.

Hicke: And you stayed in your lab?

Sbragia: And I stayed in my lab. Ralph was probably what I'd call a social director for Gallo, and being my roommate, all of a sudden, I became part of all these other people's lives. Marcello and I became very good friends. By hanging around them, I realized that what I was, wasn't really a chemist. I had a foot in chemistry, and I had a foot in farming, and the realities of it were that I would probably make a pretty good winemaker, or I would like it anyway.

Now how do you do that? I could apply there and try to get a start on my way, but talking to a couple of guys that had--a man named Mike Hardy, and a man named Mark Shauss--they both had a master's degree. One had done it one way--went to Fresno first, and then went to Davis; another one went to Davis, then went to Fresno. I went to CSU Fresno. When I got there, a man that I worked with at Gallo was moving there as director of the Enology program--Dr. Shandrelle. And Dr. Shandrelle's father had been the head of the Geisenheim Institute. Dr. Shandrelle had done lots of research on phenolics. While I was still at Gallo they would videotape all of the lectures of Dr. Harold Berg (Wine Production), Dr. Vernon Singleton (Oak and Phenolics), Dr. Ralph Kunkee (Microbiology), and Dr. Dinsmore Webb (Sensory and Production), and then show them at lunchtime. So as often as I could, I'd go listen to these lectures. It was like sitting in on a class.

My first job at Gallo was analysis--was to develop white wine standards and evaluate this new instrument called a white wine colorimeter. Dr. Angela Little developed it. I was supposed to compare the machine against standard spectrophotometry in terms of measuring different wines at different wave lengths. What it did was approximate what the eyes saw. It took into account the visible spectrum and dominant wave length--luminence and purity. So I worked on that for six months.

Hicke: Are these standards for clarity?

Sbragia: No, just color. Wines had to be a minimum color, like vermouth, which people would make light so it looked like distilled spirits. They had to be a certain color level.

Hicke: Like port?

Sbragia: Yes. And so therefore the color levels were based on things that didn't make sense when it came to wine. Myron [Nightingale] knew all this stuff. We'll talk about that later. So it was a great job. But first thing, when I got all these samples, was to pour myself a little bit

and taste them all, [laughter] so I knew that these weren't just strictly analytical. I had an interest in the product and how it was made.

An interesting thing, I was going along and all of a sudden I got to one called Twister. It was a peppermint-flavored wine and it was only sold in certain places in the country, and at certain times. That was a Christmas wine. It looked like a barber's bowl, a peppermint stick, but Bruno and I used to use it to gargle in the morning. [laughter] It was kind of like Scope.

Hicke: Well, I don't know if this is the right place, but at some point I want to talk about how you developed your palate. It sounds like maybe you were starting here. Of course you already had been drinking wine.

Sbragia: Well, just to finish this point, I was hired there and was making $700 a month in 1971, which was a lot of money. Because I remember my chemistry teacher, Mr. Volt, saying that his son was working in chemistry making $800 a month. You could build a house with $12,000 then. It was a different world.

Hicke: Sure. And that was your first job! That's pretty good, I think.

Sbragia: Yes. I worked for almost three years and saved $2,000 to go back to school. And that was $75. I think the final thing was that Jane was going to go back to school and get a master's and I couldn't have a wife who was more educated than I was.

Hicke: [laughs] Have to keep up with the people next door.

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: So what year did you--oh, let's see, you told me. '73?

Another Trip to Europe

Sbragia: Yes, so I quit in June of 1973 and actually Jane and I went to Europe for six weeks and traveled around--a belated honeymoon.

Then I worked the harvest with my dad and started school in the fall at Cal State University of Fresno. We both looked at me going back to Davis and then Jane going to Sac State [Sacramento State University] that had a master's in social work, MSW program. Fresno had a better program. It was easier for me to get into Fresno, so I went back there. With Dr. Shandrelle going back, the head of the program was a man I used to work with, so it was kind of fun.

Hicke: On this trip to Europe did you visit wine countries?

Sbragia: We went to Oporto, and went through Callun's Port Cellar, but that was it. I don't think they imported it to the United States. We traveled mainly into Portugal and Spain, and being on the beaches and eating the food and drinking the wine. Drank the wine everywhere. When Jane had finished school at Birmingham, she signed on to be a nanny in Finland and spent the summer in Finland, so we went and visited the family.

Hicke: She's really adventurous, isn't she?

Sbragia: Yes, we went to Finland, and her mom bought us a Europass. We had two student Europasses, so we went all over the place. We went back and visited my aunt again. And we had a great time. Spent an afternoon in Paris, because you could get on the train at night, and you'd get off in the morning, and then the next train isn't for six or eight hours. So it was fun.

Hicke: Yes. So now you were a seasoned traveler from Dry Creek.

Sbragia: Yes, all of a sudden I'd been to Europe twice.

Hicke: Yes, and Mexico.

Sbragia: In three years.

Leaving Gallo

Hicke: Great. Let's see if there's anything we passed up. Did you continue pretty much doing the same thing at Gallo that you had started out doing?

Sbragia: Yes. What started out to be a research project ended up being something that needed to be run all the time, so it ended up being that I was going to be doing nonroutine organic analysis. I had small projects. We'd get a red powder from a box car in Chicago and we wanted to find out what it was. We'd have to run our spectrometers on it and match it up and find out it was color crayon or something.

Hicke: It sounds like maybe it wasn't such a challenge any more.

Sbragia: It wasn't as much as when I walked in the door. You know, after two years you're ready to move on. What it did was give me a good foundation for what I needed to know.

IV GRADUATE SCHOOL, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY AT FRESNO

Chemistry and Winemaking Classes

Sbragia: I knew I wanted to get into winemaking so I went to graduate school. It was a great experience. I was well prepared for my graduate study, having worked in a winery for three years directly. I remember going into a class, having a test and getting a seventy-three, and walking out with a ninety-two by the time I was done talking with the teacher. My experience gave me the confidence to challenge and question.

Hicke: [laughs] That's great.

Sbragia: A lot of chemistry in winemaking is pretty basic. It's complex chemistry, but our analysis and how we determine things is not really complex. It's just equations of how one thing reacts with another thing.

Hicke: You said you really enjoyed graduate school. Tell me more about why.

Sbragia: Well, Dr. Shandrelle was more of a storyteller than a teacher. He told lots of stories about his dad, and about different food industries. My degree was a Master's in Agricultural Sciences, specializing in winemaking. The courses covered dehydration and freezing and canning in upper division food processing classes. We ran all over Fresno and Sanger looking at freezing and canning plants. Dr. Shandrelle would lecture, but his way of teaching was to bring in people from the industry and have them lecture. We had a lot of people come through, from suppliers to winemakers to production people.

A Summer at Gallo, 1973

Sbragia: Having only $2,000 for Jane and I both to go to school that year, I worked the harvest of 1973 at Gallo in Fresno. My favorite memory there was sitting in a lees tank--a 600,000

gallon lees tank. I worked from four to midnight, starting out at my knees, or above my knees, and in eight hours, getting down to my calves, just squeegeeing.

The funniest thing I saw that harvest happened to two of my co-workers. The wines were racked off for fermentations in lees (grape solids at the bottom of the tank). The lees were being moved with a pump called a Marlow Mudhog. It was a double diaphragm pump on a little trailer. It was used for pumping out trenches in World War I and World War II, pumping mud. I'm on cleaning detail, and two of us are cleaning the winery from one side of the winery to the other, scrubbing and cleaning, we turned around when we heard an explosion--we come around the corner and there's two people standing next to this pump and they were coated with lees. All the way up the tanks, all over the cellar floor, the pump, and all the people were coated with this brownish-gray-looking material. We looked at each other and started to laugh and run the other way, because we knew if they caught us laughing, we'd be in bad trouble. [laughter] They were so upset.

Hicke: Yes, they needed somebody to kick around, too.

Sbragia: Yes, right. Luckily it was the end of my shift and by the time I got back the next day it was all cleaned up. What happened was one of the rubber diaphragms had torn.

Hicke: Were there many accidents in the winery?

Sbragia: None. None where anyone got hurt. Occasionally a hose would break and you'd lose some wine--same thing as happens in my work today. Someone hooks up a hose to the wrong tank and pumps a little bit of something into the wrong tank.

Hicke: That's a little more serious.

Sbragia: If they pumped Private Reserve Chardonnay into the Private Reserve Cabernet, I'm in real trouble, because it would make a Private Reserve of Rosé. [laughter] But I have people who have been working here for twenty years, and started working when I started in 1976, and they're professionals. They're really good.

Hicke: Yes, it takes constant attention, doesn't it.

Sbragia: Yes, working there at Gallo taught me that I didn't want to work in the cellar.

[tape interruption]

Work Study at the University Winery

Sbragia: So then I did work study at the winery.

Hicke: At Gallo?

Sbragia: At Fresno, at school.

Hicke: The school had its own winery?

Sbragia: Yes. That was basically my first harvest that I worked. You know, I worked for my dad, but working at the university winery helped give me experience. When I graduated, I knew which side of the pump to hook up to, I knew the way a filter worked, I knew how the press worked. I knew how to work a crusher. I knew how to filter wines.

Hicke: You did everything?

Sbragia: Everything. After a day's work, we would get together in the back of the winery where we had picnic tables. We'd send out for sandwiches. A couple of the guys had gone through all the old casks and put together what we called our Hearty Burgundy. We'd sit in the back and have a couple of glasses of wine and have our sandwiches. Conversations were interesting, it was always hard to leave to go to class.

Hicke: It was sort of an ongoing thing?

Sbragia: Well, it would go on for a couple of hours, which is a lot longer than you usually spent for lunch. I think a lot of my education was gained just by sitting and talking to people. The contacts I made in graduate school continue to be meaningful for me today.

Professors and Colleagues; Winemaking Principles

Sbragia: Dr.--well, he's a doctor now--but Kent Fugelsang was the T.A. then and he was this whiz kid in microbiology. That was his field. He later on got a Ph.D. from Davis and he is now an instructor at Fresno. He was really, really good, and Dr. Shandrelle was really good.

I met Pat Heck there. His father was Paul Heck, whom Myron already talked about working with at the Italian Swiss Colony in the fifties. Patrick and I later worked together at Beringer. And then Pat and I play in a rock and roll band together.

Hicke: What do you play?

Sbragia: I play the rhythm guitar and accordion.

Hicke: Terrific! That's great.

Sbragia: Patrick worked at wineries and he now works for Scott Laboratories. Robert Scott was one of the people who came and talked to us then in graduate school. Later on when I was at

Foppiano, Steve Scott, who passed away, and a guy named Steve Lariat, who actually works for Scott Labs now, were people that I depended on to tell me whether I was doing the right thing. Was I using the right chemicals? Was this the right thing to do?

Hicke: You mean when you were working?

Sbragia: Yes, just--what were other people doing? Were people racking yet? How did they do it? What did they see?

Hicke: Is this a fairly usual type of back and forth between winemakers?

Sbragia: Yes, this industry shares knowledge. Patrick was a winemaker and a lot of the suppliers have winemakers working for them, so they function as kind of mini-consultants. Steve Scott and Steve Lariat weren't winemakers, but they were schooled enough and had been in the industry long enough that they knew what needed to be done and what people were doing. We are open with each other in terms of how we do things, what techniques we use. The ideas and the sharing are important--if someone runs out of a certain thing, a nutrient or filter pad or something, they go to their neighbor and they'll help. Then you'll order it back for them.

Hicke: I interviewed Edmond Maudière when I was working on Domaine Chandon. He was their French winemaker very early on, and he said one of the most surprising things to him was how open the exchange of information in California was as opposed to France.

Sbragia: It is funny, because now the French are very open with us. When we go over there, they tell us everything. But they won't tell their neighbor.

Hicke: They're not open with each other.

Sbragia: Take two winemakers with the same grapes, hypothetically grown on the same vine. We make decisions based on our palates, which is subjective. You might taste an apple, we don't taste the same thing. It's amazing that we can even communicate, because what my receptors and your receptors are saying are probably very different. So talking about taste is difficult. It's especially true with wine, because you have to describe it by other terms, other fruits, because nobody knows what Chardonnay tastes like or what Cabernet tastes like.

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Sbragia: From the day you harvest until you put it in the bottle, all those subjective decisions color the wine and give it a signature. Myron told me a couple things. He said, "Attention to detail," and a second thing was, "To thine own self be true." And I think Jane's father said it better: "You know what's right, do it." You do what you think is right. Also the wine takes on characteristics that are similar from year to year because of your decisions. Those decisions give it a signature or identity, which is really important for a winery. So I've made wine for twenty-five years; I have been a winemaker at Beringer since '84.

The wines have a certain style and a certain characteristic. If someone would take the same grapes they would make a different wine. I think that takes the competition out of it. We have a research department--we have lots of wineries in our group. We try to get all the winemakers together, and when we taste wines, we will all have good reasons for our decisions, but we never agree.

Hicke: Oh, really! So how do you arrive at a decision?

Sbragia: I think the whole idea behind it is that we all go away with options. In other words, there are A, B, C, D variables, and these things have different effects on the wine. As a winemaker you choose whether or not you want to do one of these. If you consistently choose certain variables, then this effect becomes a smell and/or a taste on the palate, and you're putting these together to make a particular flavor. And there is no right or wrong--it's what you want a wine to be.

Hicke: So you went back to graduate school.

Sbragia: Yes, and I enjoyed people and classes, in terms of being able to sit and talk to people who were interested in the same field. I think Pat Heck was really interesting because he was a teacher's assistant and he gave a practical sense, with his background, in terms of working with his dad at Korbel.

Hicke: So Gary Heck?

Sbragia: Well, actually what happened was that Pat's father, Paul, and his uncle, Gary's father, Adolph, bought Korbel in the fifties. Paul and Adolph worked at Italian Swiss Colony, and Myron worked for Paul. They went and started Korbel, so Pat grew up at Korbel, and then later on Paul and Adolph split, and Adolph got the winery and Paul left--so Pat kind of got aced out by Gary. And that's a whole other story.

Hicke: Yes. Not an unfamiliar one, from what I've heard. [laughs]

Sbragia: Yes. I mean, I've only heard one side. It wasn't pretty.

Hicke: Yes. You told me what Pat was doing now, but I can't remember.

Sbragia: He works for a supplier, Scott Labs. And they're very nice people.

Hicke: Yes. And do they work with you?

Sbragia: Yes.

More on Gallo

Hicke: Okay, so what did you decide to do when you got to the end of graduate school, besides graduate?

Sbragia: Well, Gallo offered me a job working in that same cellar that I'd squeegied lees in at Fresno. [laughter] I was missing being home. At this point I'd been gone for two years at Davis, three years at Gallo, and two years at Fresno, so it was getting close to eight years.

Hicke: You were missing the dirt?

Sbragia: I was missing those hoes, those vines. And that was one of my ideas of going back to school to get a winemaking degree. But I thought I was going to go back to Gallo. I mean, Gallo was great. They had an engineer who came and helped me fix the gas chromatograph. For my master's thesis I did a comparison between mechanically harvested and hand-picked French Colombard and Chenin Blanc grapes.

And I was looking for Hexenal and Hexenal compounds in the wine, which would have been broken down from fatty acids, acid, that would come from leaves. A lot of the research had already been done. If I found those compounds, I would have shown that mechanical harvesting's ill effects were showing up in the wine.

Hicke: Causing a little difficulty?

Sbragia: Yes. They have green and grassy characteristics. So one thing that was happening in most cases and what was being done, was that the wines were settled before they'd started fermentation, so all the small pieces of leaf that would have been extracted in fermentation settled out. So I saw no significant differences in my analysis.

Hicke: So that was okay.

Sbragia: Yes. So if you fermented directly on it, you probably would get characteristics. Because Gallo saw differences and I didn't. Because they were doing similar analyses at the time.

Hicke: Do you think that only applies to those two varieties?

Sbragia: Since then, we've looked at mechanically harvested versus hand-picked for Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. As long as the machines are run properly and you do it on the right varieties, you have no problems. There are some varieties that don't pick very well--but mainly because the grapes are so broken up that they're getting oxidization and fermentation before you arrive at the winery. If you mechanically harvest you should harvest when the fruit is cold and bring the fruit to the winery immediately.

Hicke: Yes, sure. So you have to decide on an individual case-by-case basis almost.

Sbragia: Right. So Gallo was great--they helped me fix the machine. We had a gas chromatograph which was in the chemistry department, but it belonged to the enology department, so all of a sudden they had an enology student who was going to use a gas chromatograph, which was pretty interesting--so we had to steal it back from the poor chemistry guys. [laughter] They had lots of gas chromatographs, but in the enology department this was the only one, so he put it back together and made it run. I got samples from all over the place of pure chemicals. We made the wines--we went to Mirassou and Wente and hand-picked fruit. We collected mechanically harvested in Monterey and Fresno. We did two counties, two different locations: cold and warm, both grapes, and both machinery and hand. Made the wines, and then I analyzed it. And Rick White, my partner, did sensory evaluation, and he didn't find any differences either.

Hicke: Was Gallo convinced?

Sbragia: Gallo was still not convinced. Herb Wildenrod was the man in charge of the experiment at Gallo. He had a lot of literature and I went and found more information. My partner was Rick White, and Rick actually works for FP Packing. He was a winemaker. He worked in the wine business and then went to a supplier. The supplier made him a good offer.

Hicke: Oh, good. [laughs] Well, supplies are important.

Sbragia: He helped develop the Diemme Tank Press. He actually worked for Bücher and then went to work for FP Packing which handles Diemme Presses.

Hicke: So then was Gallo convinced?

Sbragia: Well, I was really just doing it for my thesis. They had already decided that there was a difference.

Hicke: So they didn't switch to machine?

Sbragia: No, well, I think they eventually did. Machines got better and they did it again.

V FOPPIANO VINEYARDS

Joining the Operation

Sbragia: Well, we were talking about where did I go to next.

Hicke: Yes. You said they offered you a job.

Sbragia: So I had a lot of allegiance to Gallo and I wanted to go back to work for them, but one weekend we came home and there was a job in the newspaper for a winemaker at Foppiano and a job for a regional center counselor requiring a master's degree in social work.

Hicke: Where?

Sbragia: Santa Rosa. And my mom and dad said we could move into my old house. And my wife always said that was the reason she married me, to live in that big, old, white house. She didn't know until she got in that it was all windows and doors. It would take a fortune to redo it. [laughs] So I interviewed on a Sunday at Foppiano, and she interviewed on Monday, and we both got jobs.

Hicke: Oh, fantastic. Were you interviewed by Lou?

Sbragia: Yes. Lou Senior. I'd gone to school with his two sons, Rod and Lou Junior, so I knew them. At first they didn't want to give me a job because I had a master's degree.

Hicke: Overqualified?

Sbragia: They offered me $650 and a house. I said, "Oh, we've got the house, why don't you give me $700?" [laughter] So here I am with a master's degree starting out with what I'd started out with five years before at Gallo.

Hicke: Less, unless they agreed to $700.

Sbragia: And my wife got $1,250 a month.

Hicke: Oh, ouch. [laughs]

Responsibilities

Sbragia: I worked there for a year, a great place. It was me and this other gentleman, Gus Foppiano. Gus had been working there for thirty-five years and knew that winery upside down, backwards and forwards. I did the analysis and did some of the work, and he'd come in three days a week and I'd give him a job--two or three jobs that we had to do for that day. He had no lost movement--he'd walk across and pick up a piece and drop it off here and pick up a new hose there and a clamp there and next thing I knew, everything was running. Amazing man. He taught me a lot about organization. He's an old Italian that I knew when I was kid and they went to all the Italian Catholic Federation meetings and Knights of Columbus and all the dinners.

Hicke: What relation was he to Lou and Rod?

Sbragia: He was the other side. He was related to Andy Foppiano.

Hicke: Oh, the ones that lived--

Sbragia: --down at the end of my street. In fact, my half brother, Albert, married his cousin, Andy's sister, Ada. Anyway, on a typical day there I would be working a filter, pumping wine, running the pad filter for bottling, and even maybe working on the bottling line. You'd do a lot. I would analyze wines at the same time. It was a great place to get good experience--it was a million-gallon winery.

Hicke: That's what I was going to ask.

Sbragia: Because they were buying wines--they had a Russian River label, but they were buying wines from the Central Valley and making table wines. So I got involved with people from the Central Valley, I got involved with trucking wines in and out, making big blends, and also doing premium wines. They were just starting to use barrels. They had open-top fermenters with wooden planks over the top, and you'd walk over the top and pump over the fermentation.

I had to shovel my own tanks and it was a lot of work.

[Interview 2: November 30, 1999] ##

Hicke: We left off at Foppiano yesterday and I don't know if you had anything more to say about that or not.

Sbragia: I talked about Gus Foppiano and how much I learned from him being there all the time. He had worked in the vineyards and also in the winery. It was a great job for me in that I learned a lot about structuring my time--I had time enough to do different jobs. I set up the labs and also did quality assurance. I had a breadbox for an incubator. We put a light in it. We used to turn on the light and that's how we varied the temperature of plates for incubating yeast bacterion and molds--which was a lot better than the old stove and using the pilot light. [laughter]

Hicke: Yes. Improvement in technology.

Sbragia: Yes. I had all I needed to do basic analysis. I remember when we used to do blends, Henry Bugato, who was a skilled blender who was working for the distributor that handled Foppiano, would come up with his graduated cylinders. I didn't have graduated cylinders, so he'd come up with this hundred ml [millimeter] graduated cylinder. He had a big cylinder and we'd make the blends. And all the boys would sit around--Lou and Rod, and then Lou Senior and myself and Henry, would make the trial blends, which was a pretty interesting process.

Hicke: You were tasting all of these?

Sbragia: Yes, I'd get all the components together and then we'd make and taste the trial blends, and then I'd make it happen. I think that was a learning experience from a lot of points of view. Then they'd all go off for lunch and I'd get an order for the warehouse, so I'd have to go get the order and load the truck at the same time my filters were running. It was a real busy time, but I think I learned a lot in a year.

Hicke: You were doing Petite Sirah, I suppose?

Sbragia: Yes, Petite and Zinfandel, but they also had Cabernet [Sauvignon]. No Merlot, yet. Not much Merlot around in the industry at that time.

Hicke: Yes, right.

Sbragia: Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc--I think I bottled their first Sauvignon Blanc in 1976.

Hicke: Was that your idea?

Sbragia: Actually it was a '75 Sauvignon Blanc--they had planted it, and it was just coming into production.

So I got to work with the older wines and bottle them. We bottled the '74s when I was there, and I helped with the harvest and then bottled the '75 whites. But I think that the

main reason I left was, again, because of the opportunity at Beringer. We could move on to Beringer now.

VI BERINGER VINEYARDS

How Hired

Hicke: Okay. I'd like to know how you heard about it and what attracted you.

Sbragia: Well, I had a good friend here, Pat Heck, who called me up and said there's a position open as assistant winemaker at Beringer. What happened was that Steve O'Donnell was Myron's assistant, and Eli Calloway started Calloway Vineyards down in Temecula and hired him away. So the opening presented itself and this was about February or March.

I called another friend of mine that I went through school with--Dennis Martin, who is the winemaker at Fetzer--and asked him about it, and he said, "Well, I think it's a good idea."

What finally cemented it was Henry Bugato. I talked to him a little bit about it, and he said, "Well, Nestlé is a good, good company--one of the best food companies in the world." They owned Beringer. At that point I think Schlitz had gone into wine business. I also think Coca-Cola had gotten into the wine business, Heublein had gotten into the wine business, and he said, "Of all the big companies that are in the wine business, Nestlé will probably be the one that stays the longest and does the best job." I was a little apprehensive about going to work for a big company.

Hicke: Right. Had you met Myron [Nightingale]?

Sbragia: I had met him during the Easter break of our graduate school in '73. A group of us went on a tour and one of the stops was at Beringer. I met Steve O'Donnell, who gave us a tasting. We all met Myron and he talked to us, so I was impressed with him. He was a very straightforward, honest man, and he took real good care of the people that worked for him. He had a temper, but usually most of us let that pass. He really was a very caring, loving man.

Hicke: Did you know some of these things before you came here?

Sbragia: No, I didn't. I knew that he could have a little bit of a temper, but so could the Foppianos. I figured that if I could. deal with the Foppianos, I could deal with anybody. And I think he thought that too. [laughter]

Hicke: And the fact that he took good care of the employees, did you know about that?

Sbragia: No, I didn't, but I noticed that later on. Any new person in the lab, he'd single them out and talk to them and take them to lunch and make them feel welcome.

So I essentially called him up. My family was going to Baja California on a vacation, and I called up and asked if I could come and interview. I said, "Well, I'm going to be gone for the next week."

He said, "Well, I'll be gone the following week."

I said, "Would it be okay to come today?"

He said, "If you can be here in half an hour."

I said, "Yes, sir." [laughter] So I jumped in my Volkswagen van and drove faster than I've ever driven anytime after. I got here and talked to him and we had a great talk together. Nothing happened for months.

I finally saw him at the American Society of Enology and Viticulture Convention and I said, "Hi, Myron. Have you guys made any decisions?" And he said, "No, nothing yet." So I said, "Well, I have to tell you honestly, I'm not going to leave Louis just before harvest unless you've given me enough notice." So the next thing you know, I had a second interview with a man named Guy Kay. Guy Kay was the vice president of operations.

Hicke: Their Nestlé guy?

Sbragia: Yes, he came from Nestlé. He'd been working with Nestlé a long, long time. Another great man and a wonderful man. Myron worked for him, and later on I worked for him, and Myron and he and I went out to dinner, and we had a good dinner.

Then I had a third interview with Dick Maher, who was the president at the time. Dick looked at me and said, "Do you think you can do the job?"

I said, "Well, I've got a strong back."

He said, "I didn't ask you about the back." He said, "I asked you if you could do the job," and he got kind of serious.

I said, "Yes, I can."

They essentially doubled my salary.

Hicke: I was just going to hope you didn't have to take another cut in salary. [laughter]

Sbragia: Yes, eventually I was getting close to my wife. [laughter] And so I went from $700 a month to about $1,400 a month.

Hicke: Oh, great.

Sbragia: So that was a big jump for me--at a time when I hadn't actually finished my thesis yet. And one of the requirements that they gave was that I finish my thesis in a year.

Hicke: Oh, he was interested in that.

Sbragia: So he allowed me days off, usually on a Friday afternoon, probably for about six months, which really helped a lot. I finished my literature search, wrote up all my research, and then started writing my research paper. By summer of 1977 I had completed it, so I fulfilled my requirement.

Hicke: Did you ever publish an article or anything on that?

Sbragia: We did a couple presentations, but no abstracts were published. It was a great change. I went from an old, old winery to a brand-new winery. The new production facility at Beringer was just completed in 1975, so I came in when it was a year old.

Hicke: Myron had done all that, I thought.

Sbragia: Right. Myron was doing it.

Hicke: What was the day or month?

Sbragia: I started August 9, 1976.

Hicke: That was right before harvest.

Sbragia: Just before harvest. I had given Louis Foppiano a month's notice, and he still hadn't hired anybody, so I worked both jobs for two weeks. I went to work here and then I'd go over there and work. [laughs] It was very busy.

Hicke: Hectic.

Sbragia: But finally they hired someone and I spent about a week with him and finally left. But we still stayed good friends. I'm still friends with the Foppianos.

Starting in the Lab

Hicke: Do you recall your first day at Beringer?

Sbragia: Yes, I do. I walked in, didn't have an office. There was a desk that was right by the fume hood, so when I needed to make phone calls, I had to make sure they turned the fume hood down, or else--

Hicke: The hood?

Sbragia: In the laboratory they usually have a fume hood, so that if someone's doing some kind of work that has volatile components in it, it takes it up and goes through a scrubber and doesn't let it go into the lab.

Hicke: You needed gas masks!

Sbragia: Yes, and it made a lot of noise. So I essentially went to the lab and did analysis for, oh, about a week.

Hicke: And you started doing that right on the first day?

Sbragia: Yes, just to get used to what their analysis was and you meet everybody. Then all of a sudden Myron started slowly piling the work on me.

Myron Nightingale and Winemaking

Sbragia: The nice thing about Myron is that he was a really good teacher. He was able to let you do what you thought was right just to the point where you were about ready to fall off the cliff, and he would pull you back. He gave me lots of responsibility. I think I convinced him to maybe do things more my way in terms of reds, and he taught me a lot about making whites.

Hicke: Can you elaborate on that? What did you give him and vice versa?

Sbragia: Well, I kind of alluded before to the fact that the men and women that came out of Prohibition and graduated in the forties and early fifties were working in really, really old wineries, like Foppiano, that had severe bacterial problems. There wasn't the luxury to them of allowing wine to sit on the lees or wait, because you didn't have a lab that ran every analysis. You still used your palate, but trends--for instance, if the volatile acidity is slowly climbing, 0.02 grams per a hundred mls, that's a really low level, but if it jumped up to .03 and then .04, that suggested that there is some problem going on, but you couldn't taste it.

It still tasted fine. You don't really see a VA until you get up to .08-0.1 grams per hundred mls.

Hicke: VA?

Sbragia: Volatile acidity. That would suggest that maybe your tank's leaking or someone didn't clean the tank, and when the wine was pumped into it, there was a good shot of vinegar bacteria sitting on the bottom and basically inoculated it. So you would do something before the problem existed; you would be proactive rather than reactive. And being proactive, I tend to do everything squeaky clean, so that you didn't have the problem in the first place.

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Sbragia: I think that a lot of winemakers that had been making wines for a long time tended to make wines a little too clean, they did maybe too much fining. They even fined the reds, but reds, if you tested them, were pretty stable after they'd been aged. So I kind of said, "Well, why don't we just not do anything and then we'll do this stability check for hot and cold stability and see if any fining is required," and in 99 percent of the cases, there was nothing that needed to be done.

Hicke: This came out of your previous work?

Sbragia: Yes, just watching my dad and what I felt I had seen in the last years making wine with Fresno, and making wine with Foppiano.

Hicke: And what did he teach you about whites? Or what was his philosophy about that?

Sbragia: Oh, well, attention to detail. I mean, white wines can go south on you quickly, so making sure that you pay attention to them. I was fermenting in barrels. Fermenting in barrels is something that's been done in Burgundy for centuries, but in the United States it was relatively new. I think Brad Webb at Hanzell did it in the sixties along with Joe Heitz, but we in the early to mid-seventies were still fermenting in stainless steel and then putting wine in barrels.

Hicke: Myron had just gotten all these new stainless steel--

Sbragia: Stainless steel fermenters, yes. So we were getting out of wood and going back to wood, was kind of scary for him. So we started experimenting, but just making sure that we watched the white wines and didn't let them go too far. You make sure that, in this case, they were clean and the sulfur levels were up. Later on you were able to monitor them, and we realized that, for instance, Chardonnay can be put in barrels without any SO_2 and that whatever browning that occurs in the juice will drop out with the lees, so that you end up losing a lot of those browning componants that would brown the wine later, so that by protecting them, you actually made it more difficult down the road.

And there were no negative effects in terms of the wine. In fact, actually by removing these oxidized materials early, you ended up making more fruity wines, and the wines lasted longer. And it's essentially the way they make wines in Burgundy. We moved slowly over the years from 1976--I think the first time we tried it was 1977, when we fermented in fifty barrels. We did a little more each year. Today all Chardonnay is barrel fermented.

Hicke: He let you go ahead with that even though he was reluctant?

Sbragia: Yes. Basically his and Louis Martini's favorite statement was, "If you want oak, go bite a tree." [laughter] In essence, if you look at places around the world, most wine-drinking countries don't appreciate as much oak as American public do, except for maybe Burgundy and Bordeaux. But I think what we've done in California is try to match what we thought the best wines were being made, and not necessarily make the same wine--but I'd be foolish not to take advantage of techniques that have been used for centuries that work well with the same variety and see what it did with my wine. And what it ended up doing was making good wine, but different--which is good.

Hicke: Are you talking about Burgundy, or other California wines?

Sbragia: Chardonnay has been a Burgundian wine, and using the barrel fermentation techniques and sitting on the lees, malolactic--which is one thing that they would never allow to happen to a white wine. Myron didn't want any malolactic fermentations. Malolactic's a secondary fermentation that converts malic to lactic acid, but it also produces a buttery characteristic from the Diaceytal produced. And it also softens and rounds the wine and gives it more texture. So in the case of Chardonnay, which you're trying to make richer and more complex, malolactic really improves it. And what you have in the stainless steel, where you've adjusted sulfurs up right away and cleaned it up right away, there's no chance for malolactic other than occasionally a strain would come in and spontaneously start tanks, which would drive us all crazy.

Hicke: So that would be a more austere white?

Sbragia: It's a little tighter style, and it takes a lot longer to mature in the bottle. Most white wines--the Chardonnays--go through malolactic. There are a few people today that still don't do that, and it's another style and preference. Now I like the softer, rounder wines. I think they're higher in the yummy factor.

Chabot Ranch Vineyard

Hicke: What else was evolving during these years when you were an assistant winemaker?

Sbragia: The other thing that happened in 1977, a man named Bob Pecota, who has his own winery now--he actually had worked for Nestlé before, purchasing coffee in South America--helped with the aid of a scientist that Nestlé brought over. They were responsible for all the land purchases and the land leases that we have today. We have vineyards from Napa all to way to Calistoga. Also in Knight's Valley. A little sub-appellation in Sonoma County. And he and, well, essentially Dick Maher found the Chabot Ranch, which was called the Lemmon Ranch then.

Chabot actually had a winery called Villa Remi, because his name was Remi Chabot. I'm sure they started it around the same time that Beringer started in 1870s, but I don't think it ever reopened after Prohibition. It's in that book the *Ghost Wineries of the Napa Valley*.[1]

The vineyard had been going to Louis Martini. He used it in his Special Select. And Mrs. Lemmon, who was Remi Chabot's direct descendent, wanted the name to be used. At the time she was married to Mr. Lemmon, but later on they divorced, so therefore the ranch--we called it Lemmon Ranch at first, but then changed it to Chabot.

Hicke: She kept the ranch?

Sbragia: Yes, the ranch still is owned by her. But like a lot of the other lands, they're thirty- to fifty-year leases with first right of refusal.

Private Reserve Program

Cabernet Sauvignon

Sbragia: So anyway, getting this vineyard started our private reserve program, so we bottled the 1977 Lemmon Ranch separate Cabernet Sauvignon 1980.

Hicke: As a vineyard designation?

Sbragia: As a vineyard-designated private reserve with a special label on it. We went to our marketing man, Jim Tonjum, who had worked with Dick Maher at United Vintners, along with Walt Klenz, who is now the president. Dick Maher was the president and Jim Tonjum was the vice president of marketing and he came up with this great label that we still use today.

Hicke: Oh, he did that label.

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[1]*Haynes, Irene W., Ghost Wineries of Napa Valley*, Napa, California: Wine Appreciation Guild, 1995.

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: And this was in the late seventies.

Sbragia: Yes, 1980.

Hicke: Yes, the private reserve.

Sbragia: Chabot's a very big wine: rich characteristics of cherry, cedar, and mint. And the '77 I put in tanks for six months and I put in barrels for about a year and a half.

Hicke: This is Cabernet Sauvignon?

Cooperage

Sbragia: Cabernet Sauvignon--100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1978 I realized that it needed brand new barrels for the full amount of time, which was difficult at first with Nestlé, because they didn't like oak--they used their own palates and being Swiss and having their own vineyards, they tasted with their own desires versus what the American public wanted, and they didn't like oak, like Myron. I was pushing for oak and needed oak with these wines, and I grew up in a household where my dad always put wines in barrels--not necessarily for the oak flavor, but for what happens in a barrel--slow aging at the same time extracting oak. Both the new wine and new oak aging together. It matures the flavors and condenses the tannins and softens the wine and slowly changes from this harsh, angular liquid to hopefully the ambrosia that comes out of a barrel. '77 was one of the latest and longest vintages--I think it started August 15 and ended November 15. So it was two solid months. And a very nice vintage--not as dense and rich as the '78, but a beautiful wine. It's still alive today. So that I know that our wines will last twenty-plus years.

The Nestlé Company

Hicke: Fabulous. The Nestlé officers or company people would taste the wines, too?

Sbragia: Yes, usually there was a technical person that came from Vevey, or from White Plains, where the United States division was, and we'd vary over the years from reporting directly to Vevey to being under the Nestlé USA.

Hicke: That must have been confusing.

Sbragia: I think we were such a small, company, compared to the larger companies that Nestlé was used to managing, that they didn't know what to do with us. They were involved, and they were a very far-reaching, long-ranged company. I think they were looking at what they would be selling in the next hundred years. Nestlé at the time had already been in the United States a hundred years, they were in coffee, chocolate and tea and condensed milks and then soups. It was an amazing amount of things that are made by Nestlé that none of us expected to be part of their company.

Hicke: They're selling their U.S. coffee now, I heard.

Sbragia: Oh, really?

Hicke: Yes. So maybe they're changing their philosophy a little bit.

Sbragia: Sure.

Hicke: Do you happen to know why they bought Beringer?

Sbragia: I think they thought wine would probably be an important beverage in the next century, and I think they're right. I think what finally happened was that like a lot of companies, when they finally sold us in 1996, it was that they felt they hadn't paid enough attention to us, which we didn't mind.

Hicke: Yes, I would think that would be a plus.

Sbragia: I think they also felt that they needed to do what they knew how to do, which was foods--but not alcoholic beverages.

Hicke: A whole different--

Sbragia: They do waters and fruit juices--they were a great parent. You know, they put lots of money into the winery, and essentially bought almost 2,000 acres of vineyard--bought or long-term leased--so they set us up for the future. And that's a basic philosophy of mine, that you secure your own destiny when you have your own vineyards. You think about any vineyard in the world that is great--you don't know the winemaker's name, you know the vineyard. Like the vineyards of [Chateau] Latour--who's the winemaker there? But you know that Latour is a great, great wine.

Hicke: That's an interesting point, but it doesn't work quite like that here.

Sbragia: Great vineyards are constant. Winemakers flow through the vineyards over centuries. Beringer is starting our third century, we're 125 years old with five or six winemakers. Probably the same in other countries, but who are those winemakers? The vineyard is the constant and it stays as the factor that makes a winery great.

Hicke: Yes, I can see that.

Sbragia: I think I'm lucky in that respect in that we in this country like to know who the winemaker is and and like to talk to him--which is a good thing for me, because it allows you to be known and form a little bit of a reputation as a person who does something that people like.

Hicke: A little more rewarding than hiding in your lab.

Sbragia: Yes, you get credit for what you do before you die. [laughter]

Hicke: Yes, right.

Sbragia: I think that's all any of us want, is to be able to work really hard for something and get credit for it, and have a little bit of say. So having your own vineyards was great.

But anyway, one of the things they did was make sure that we were secure when they sold us. They did a good job.

Making the Private Reserve

Hicke: Let's put off the sale for now, and go back to the late seventies.

Sbragia: Okay, so that was 1977 and 1978, and we also made Private Reserve Cabernet and we made our first Private Reserve Chardonnay. What Myron and I did was, in tasting all the inventory, we would find certain blocks that were better than others. Better means more flavorful, richer, more intensity. So we picked that group of wines and made a small lot of Private Reserve Chardonnay.

Hicke: Were you keeping the vineyards separate?

Sbragia: We kept the vineyards separate from the beginning. All the vineyards came in separate, the blocks came in separate, so we identified them by block and by vineyard, and by barrel type used.

Hicke: Whose idea was this to do the private reserve label?

Sbragia: In any winery, the person who runs the company, the president, needs to be behind it. In our company, it was either from sales or marketing--it's kind of a marketing-driven company, so a lot of the ideas come out of marketing: either instigated by winemakers saying we can do this, or they asked a question and we'd react. So sometimes it comes from winemaking, sometimes it comes from marketing. In this case I think it was mutual. We were relatively small then. Marketing would always taste with us and in conversation say it would be great to have a Private Reserve Chardonnay to go with the Private Reserve Cabernet. So that was the beginning of the whole private reserve regime.

As our vineyards grew and production increased through the seventies and eighties, the private reserve was always picked as an aftermath. When I finally convinced them that we needed oak--and this was instigated by a trip to France, actually--we got oak for Chardonnay first and they seemed to understand that people in the United States liked oaky Chardonnay.

Hicke: The company, you're talking about?

Sbragia: Yes, Nestlé.

Hicke: Yes, okay. You finally got that.

Sbragia: Actually what happened was, Nestlé didn't want to give us oak, but Jim Tonjum in 1977 and 1978 gave up his marketing budget so I could buy barrels. Dick Maher essentially said, "I'm sorry, but you told me to run this company and this is what we need. I'm going to buy these barrels."

Hicke: So he was for the barrels?

Sbragia: Yes. And in spite of what they told him to do, he went ahead and we were successful in '77. So then they understood that. And that's kind of immediate, because you need the barrels right away, whereas the reds you can let sit in tanks.

I had about 1,400 barrels then. Actually when it came in, it was about 500, but there were about 900 barrels--there was a red barn right here where the administration building stands, this was a big red barn, and they were sitting in here, but they had no place to set them up. So I said, "Well, I know how to set them up. I did it before, so I--."

Hicke: Stacked, you mean?

Sbragia: Stacked and set up and started filling them. But then we needed them for reds. I had made a Cabernet in 1980 that we bottled without barrel aging. It was rough and angular. I knew we needed barrels.

Jean Jacques Zell, at Nestlé, who was in charge of the beverages, and Guy Kay and I set off on a trip to France. We visited every first-growth Bordeaux, and so we went to Chateau Latour, Chateau Lafite, Chateau Mouton, Chateau Haut Brion, Chateau Assone, and Chevel-Blanc, and repeatedly these wineries used new barrels for every vintage of their best wine. Then they had second wines that they used about 30 percent to 60 percent new, depending on the wine and the vintage. But the big wines always got 100 percent new oak. Usually they used local coopers--the guys closest to them.

Hicke: And where was the oak coming from?

Sbragia: The oak was all French oak--usually from Nevers. I liked Limousin oak with Chardonnay but I later changed my mind and went to the Nevers with Chardonnay also.

Hicke: What year was this trip?

Sbragia: This was 1983. It was a great trip for me. Jean Jacques Zell loved to eat, and he was from Alsace, so we had to read at least three menus and then we would choose the best.

Hicke: Did you go to Alsace and do the Rieslings there?

Sbragia: No, I haven't done Alsace, yet. I spent the whole time with him, and then I later continued on to the Rhone and then into Italy and then I went home.

Hicke: Still doing wines?

Sbragia: Yes. Unfortunately my mother passed away while I was on the trip. My wife had come over and joined me with our four year-old son, Adam.

Hicke: Let me back up just a minute. Did these '77 and '78 private reserves get high marks from wine writers, or were they purchased quickly by the public? How did you measure success?

Sbragia: We were getting good marks. The *Wine Spectator* hadn't really started yet. [Robert] Parker hadn't started yet. But the reviewers had reviewed it relatively well. The reactions were not necessarily with the public, but with the trade.

Some Beringer History

Sbragia: If you look at Beringer at the turn of the century and all the way up to Prohibition, they were highly rated and the wines were great. I think they suffered during Prohibition. After Prohibition, the industry in the United States produced five million gallons of wine--four and a half million was dessert wine and 500,000 gallons was table wine. So the American public wasn't really drinking good wine, and therefore it was very different than the immigrant population at the turn of the century. The Beringers, because of that and because of the market--and also because one generation was leaving the winery to the next generation, it was slowly being depleted of capital. That's probably the reason they suffered. The winery went down in the eyes of the trade, so that we were considered in the late sixties as a big winery making just standard wine.

Hicke: And who owned it then?

Sbragia: The Beringers owned it until 1971. It was third generation, and they were getting older, and I think the younger generation had lost interest.

Hicke: Of course.

Sbragia: So when we started, Myron's job was to get it cranked up again, clean up the winery, get rid of all the old barrels, the old tanks, a lot of old German ovals in the tunnels across the street. The nice thing about the winery is it was built as a two-story winery in 1876. In 1883, they dug the tunnels going into the winery, and underneath in the mountain. What they would do is crush on the top floor, for fermentation, they'd gravity flow to the second floor to the tanks, and then they would go from the tanks to these ovals in the caves.

Hicke: Ovals are barrels, right?

Sbragia: Well, ovals are more like 100-200 gallon tanks.

Hicke: Of wood?

Sbragia: Of wood, yes. And it's Yugoslavian or German oak, similar to what they use in Italy for Barolos and for Chianti. The barrels were really for shipping, you know. I think they bottled, but they also sold wine by shipping barrels, and a person would buy a barrel of wine.

Back to Private Reserve

Sbragia: When we started making private reserves, it slowly brought up the esteem of the winery. Right around 1979, they hired a young man named Tor Kenward as public relation director. We'd had people before, but Tor worked really hard at making relationships with the wine writers who were coming in. He enjoyed that world and fit in well, and did a great job of getting people to give us the benefit of the doubt and try our wine.

I remember in 1980 we had this '78 Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon and we had the 1980 Private Reserve Chardonnay, and that's the year I saw some turning points, because we walked into any tasting and could compete with anybody in the industry. That feeling of confidence I think helped me feel like we could be better. And then I really pushed hard for better equipment.

New Presses

Sbragia: In 1980 we went and got our first tank press versus the continuous presses we used to use. Continuous presses were kind of like big meat grinders. They were a machine where the grapes would go into this screw, and this screw was basically pushing the grapes against a screen. Problem is that it would grind the skins and then the pressure was up to 100 pounds per square inch. So the tank press did a much better job.

Actually, the '78 Private Reserve--one of the best wines I ever made--went through a continuous press, but I couldn't use all the wine fractions.

[tape interruption]

Hicke: You're talking about the press and comparing that--

Sbragia: Like I said, the '78 Private Reserve came out of that press, and was one of the better wines I made, but it produced what we call hard press, and hard press was very high on the phenolic content. It was bitter. The unfortunate part about it is that the hard press also had lots of flavor. The last pressing is kind of like the meat next to the bone.

Hicke: Yes.

Sbragia: If you can save it, it's great, but in order to get the tannin content down, you have to fine it with some kind of proteinaceous material that you could use--egg whites or something that would take tannins out. But it would also take a lot of good things out. So these tank presses, rather than pressing at 100 psi, we received 90 percent of the juice at less than one atmosphere, which is fifteen pounds per square inch, so they were doing the pressing at one-tenth of the pressure that was done with a tank press.

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Sbragia: So then, this ten to fifteen gallons a ton became useable. If you think about that--at that time wine was selling for five or six dollars a gallon, and now it's twenty dollars a gallon--the press basically paid for itself in one harvest.

I soon got more tank presses. And I think that allowed us as a winery to compete with a lot of little wineries; their tank presses were just smaller. A tank press is basically a big tank, and inside it has a diaphragm. It has air on one side and a screen on the other, and the grapes are on the screen side, and the air just slowly pushes against the whole surface of the tank and essentially squeezes the grapes, but very gently. Then you'd roll it to break up the grapes and then you'd do it again, so by learning how to do it, you minimize the rolling so you don't get a lot of maceration and optimize your juice yield. You get all the juice back as useable juice.

Hicke: Who makes these presses?

Sbragia: The first ones were the Büchers, which were Swiss, Swiss-German. There were presses by Vaselin, but those were French presses and those were basket presses, kind of similar to the old, old style, just they were on their sides. The old, old style would be a basket kind of like a barrel, but the slats were wide, they had little spacings between the slats. You would fill the basket up with grapes. It would have a trough underneath it that would collect the juice, and you would slowly apply pressure. That was pretty much how the Vaselin was done. It usually has a disc of some sort pressing against the grapes. It presses very gently, but you still had some maceration.

Hicke: You said you could compete with the smaller wineries in quality, right?

Sbragia: Yes, we then, had the ability with good vineyards, good equipment. We were finding out, within the 2,000 acres we owned, where our great vineyards were, and also when we found one like Chabot, we went after it.

With the advent of presses that would do fifty tons in one press load versus our continuous presses, which did twenty tons an hour, we could keep up with our vineyards. By adding more presses, we were able to process fruit in a better way, which allowed us to compete with people who had these presses, but they were smaller. We bought one, but it wasn't enough to keep up with what was going on in the vineyards, and when they developed larger sizes, we went completely to tank presses.

Hicke: This was for all the wines, not just the private reserve?

Sbragia: For everything. So it not only helped the reds, but it obviously helped the whites a lot.

Hicke: How much of the private reserve label were you making?

Sbragia: When we first started I think we were making 5,000 cases of Cabernet and Chardonnay, and today we're making about 20,000 cases of Chardonnay. In a good year I can make 15,000 cases of Private Reserve Cabernet, so it hasn't grown that much in twenty years.

Hicke: Well, it depends on the grape supply, right?

Sbragia: Right.

Hicke: And the kind of grapes.

Additional Vineyards

Sbragia: Just to follow the progression of Private Reserve. In 1986, Jim Bancroft, who's a lawyer in San Francisco in the seventies had bought a piece of land up on top of Howell Mountain, which is on the eastern side of the Valley at about 1,800 feet. He realized what potential for grape growing his land had. He started clearing the land, trying to keep as many trees in as he could. He blew up the rocks that he couldn't haul off because they were the size of a house, and planted Cabernet and Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

Bob Steinhauer, who came in 1979 as a our vineyard manager, called me and said, "I found this great vineyard. It's on top of Howell Mountain. Want to come look at it?"

I said, "Yes, I'll come look at it, but tell him I want it sight unseen." [laughter] It was great.

Hicke: How can you tell?

Sbragia: Well, it was rolling kind of hills at 1,800 feet. The vines at that point were about four years old, just coming in to their first crop, and we both had a feeling. You know, you just knew in your bones. Our first vintage off of that vineyard was in 1986.

Hicke: Which variety?

Sbragia: Cabernet and Merlot and Cab Franc.

Hicke: You didn't do a varietal for Cab Franc, did you?

Sbragia: No.

Hicke: So he had a Bordeaux mix?

Sbragia: Yes. The St. Helena home ranch was a component because at that point, we'd planted the vineyards in 1979, so by 1986, this vineyard was a component of the Private Reserve. We have a vineyard down almost past Oakville, between Oakville and Yountville, called State Lane. So Bancroft, St. Helena, State Lane, and Chabot. By that time, in reference to the Chabot vineyard, Mrs. Lemmon had divorced Mr. Lemmon. We had leased it for fifty years and one of the agreements was that we wouldn't call it by her former husband's name (Lemmon), we called it by her great grandfather's name, Remi Chabot. That's what it was known as--Chabot Ranch.

Hicke: It was the local name?

Sbragia: Yes. Actually Chabot is from the same family name as Chabot College and Chabot Lake in Oakland. Influential man.

Hicke: Yes. You had a fifty-year lease?

Sbragia: Well, usually that's how leases are, you have them for fifty to a hundred years with options to buy at that point if they last.

Hicke: Were leases that long popular then?

Sbragia: This is not a grape contract, this is we actually leased the land. So in a lot of cases, if it's an old vineyard and an old variety, we pull it out and replant it at our own expense, but it was our vineyard. The owner of the land got a lease payment for the land.

Hicke: And your vineyard manager manages it?

Sbragia: Yes, in conjunction with the finance department. So we've got 2,000 acres, and we just bought another piece of 800 acres in the Carneros region, so we have 2,800 acres.

Hicke: All this long-lease?

Sbragia: It's a combination of owned outright and long-term leases.

Hicke: Mark told me yesterday that something like 80 percent of the vineyards are owned, and he said he wasn't sure about the exact amount.

Sbragia: Yes, I don't know either. Essentially long-term lease qualifies as owned, because we own the grapes.

Hicke: Then for the rest, you buy a few?

Sbragia: Yes. For Beringer, most of it is what we own. Chardonnay and Cabernet, Sauvignon Blanc. We buy Zinfandel, a lot of Zinfandel.

Hicke: From Dry Creek?

Sbragia: All over. The addition of Bancroft I think was the turning point in terms of boosting the quality even higher. In the first year I put it in the P.R. Cabernet. Since I had Cabernet Franc, also I tried to blend some in. The rest of my counterparts were adding 10 or 15 percent and I added 10 or 15 percent in a trial blend and didn't like it. I tried 5 percent and I didn't like it, so I ended up going through 3, 4, 5 and I picked out 1 [percent], which didn't really seem enough to make a difference.

But upon tasting the 1 percent I liked it. The Cab Franc elongates the finish. It adds intensity to the aroma. We didn't need to blend too much into the Cabernet Sauvignon. If picked at optimum maturity, it's physiologically ripe. For example, a melon when it is not ripe has green flavors. But if it's too ripe, it gets soft and the flavors are washed out. Just at that optimum, you get the best flavors. Actually the Cabernet has almost a sweet finish, so that the Cab Franc adds just a little bitter component to the finish, makes the taste last longer. But if you added too much, it changed that sweet finish into something else. Then it became another wine, and I didn't want another wine. I liked that Private Reserve the way it was. The Bancroft Cabernet was a wonderful Cab from day one.

That's the year we were the *Wine Spectator* #1 Wine choice.

Hicke: Which year was that?

Sbragia: It was 1986. It was actually in 1990 when it was released.

Hicke: But it was for the '86 Cabernet?

Sbragia: Yes. The wine stays in the winery about six months and then it goes in barrels for twenty months--twenty-two months it's in bottles, so it's almost been in the winery for three years. If I bottle it then, it stays in the bottle for a year before it's released, so it's four years until release.

Hicke: And when is it drinkable? I suppose that changes.

Sbragia: I think with really good Cabernets, if you don't try them in that fourth or fifth year, you miss some of the intensity of fruit that they have, even though the tannins are still kind of rough, and they improve. The 1977 is still improving, there is still a lot of rich fruit character, and at the same time, tannins that will allow it to age for ten to fifteen years more. So it's good to try wines young and watch them as they mature. I always tell my wife, I'm really glad I knew her when she was nineteen, but she is more beautiful now than she was then.

Hicke: [laughs] She's mellowed a little?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: Oh, that's great.

Sbragia: For me it's like children. It's nice to know them when they're young and watch them grow old.

Hicke: Do you taste your wines every year?

Sbragia: Try to. When I first started, we didn't have a lot to taste. Now the last time I did a tasting, we had a vertical of twenty years. It was an auction lot that came up last February in Nashville, someone had actually taken it out of his own cellar and offered it as an auction lineup at a local auction.

Shall we continue with Private Reserve?

Hicke: Okay. But I want to go back and pick up when Bob Steinhauer came and some of those things.

Sbragia: Sure.

Hicke: But go ahead. Let's finish up the Private Reserve.

Sbragia: In the Private Reserve--we knew that phylloxera was in the Valley from 1986 on because of the big floods, and we felt we needed to start replanting. In fact, we just finished replanting Bancroft, which is a big shock to me, but luckily we bought a piece of land, real red soils, a little bit farther north on Howell Mountain. We initially called it Terra Rouge because of the red soil, but another winery has that name, so we changed it. It has three little hills, so we called it the Trè Colline, which means three hills in Italian. And that started being used in P.R. around 1993.

Hicke: What grapes?

Sbragia: Cabernet Sauvignon and Cab Franc. It has exceptional Cab Franc. State Lane is also a reserve vineyard. A small amount is bottled separately, but I use it in our Napa Valley. I use it often in the Private Reserve. Mainly the blend is Trè Colline, Bancroft, Chabot, and St. Helena.

We've gone on and planted another vineyard called Quarry, which is on the west side of Napa Valley a little bit farther south. We also contracted with the Marten property, which is an old vineyard that's been around that long and made into wine by Phil Tagni when he was at Cuvaison and made some really nice wine. It's a little bit closer to the St. Helena characteristic. It's on Spring Mountain. These are all potential reserve vineyards.

Hicke: Do you use about the same blend?

Sbragia: I use the same vineyards but it changes in composition. I've used the Cab Franc off of Trè Colline. It also depends on the vintage--which one is better, Bancroft Cab Franc or Trè Colline Cab Franc. The most of it I ever made was 1987, when I used the 7 percent. The Cab Franc was just great. I seldom go down to 3 percent.

Hicke: And it's Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc?

Sbragia: Yes. In reference to the Merlot on the Bancroft property, I make a separate Bancroft Merlot. We had Merlot in the early seventies, planted at the Gamble Ranch, which is between Oakville and Yountville. It was mainly Chardonnay and Merlot planted there, and the Merlot they had then was planted on the wrong part of the vineyard--it was light and grassy then. We did not like the quality. We pulled it out, and grafted it onto something else. I said to myself, if I ever had a Merlot good enough to blend with Cabernet, I would bottle it separate. The Bancroft Merlot is probably the most Cabernet-like Merlot I ever tasted, but compared to Bancroft Cabernet, it's softer. Compared to other Cabernets it probably could fool people that it is Cabernet Sauvignon.

Hicke: It's got so much flavor?

Sbragia: Flavor, intensity, and basically just body and strength as a wine. In 1987 we bottled our first Merlot: the Bancroft Howell Mountain Merlot. I did the same thing with Cabernet and Cab Franc with Merlot, but I settled on about 5 percent Cabernet and 4 percent Cab Franc, so the Merlot had about 91 percent. Over the years it's been somewhere between 91 and 93 percent Merlot, depending on the vintage. The Merlot actually is quite nice by itself, but the Cabernet adds a little strength and structure and the Cab Franc does the same thing it does in the Cabernet: adds a little dimension to the nose, and a nice finish.

Blending

Hicke: When you're making a private reserve, do you use various amounts from these different vineyards?.

Sbragia: Right. Now, in the case of the Bancroft Howell Mountain Merlot, it is all Bancroft.

Hicke: Oh, yes, because that's vineyard designated. But the rest of it, you blend from different vineyards?

Sbragia: Right.

Hicke: And do you blend in fairly similar percentages from vineyards each year?

Sbragia: No, we keep all the blocks separate, but there are certain blocks, like I said, you know, that are better than other blocks, and some of those blocks don't even go in new barrels, they go into older barrels, because I know I'm not going to use them in private reserve. That's a difficult thing to decide, you know, three years before, what's going in the bottle, where are you going to use it. If I have the luxury of enough new barrels, then I'll put it all in new barrels, just on the basis that one of the blocks will turn out better as it ages. I do see this occasionally, where what you thought wouldn't turn out well actually turns out really, really nice. It may not be big, but it has luscious flavors that blend well.

Usually Chabot is at least 20 percent of the blend and Bancroft came up to 50 percent of the blend and St. Helena has been somewhere between 10 and 40 percent, depending on the vintage. And Trè Colline now is coming up strong. It started small; it may have been 10 or 15 percent percent, and now it's up to 25 percent.

Hicke: It sounds like you use all of Bancroft.

Sbragia: All of Bancroft, most of Chabot--some of them are replantings now, I have the luxury that when I first got here in '77 their vines were somewhere between twelve to thirty years old. It isn't an old wives' tale that vines need to be ten to twelve years old before they are used in the big wines. I think even in the first couple of years, because it's a real small crop, grapes produce bigger wine, but then they lose a little bit, then they come back.

Bancroft, even when it lost a little bit, was really, really good, so I didn't have a problem there. But Chabot, being farther down the hill at about 800 feet, has suffered more from replanting and is beginning to come back now. What we try to do in these vineyards is not take the whole vineyard out at once, but take one block at a time.

Hicke: For replanting.

Sbragia: Yes.

Chardonnay

Hicke: What about the Chardonnay Private Reserve?

Sbragia: Private Reserve Chardonnay's 10 percent of the total Chardonnay production. I use 85 percent new barrels in the Private REserve. Our Napa Valley Chardonnay is spread over different ages of barrels. I put one fourth new barrels, one-fourth one-year old, one-fourth two-year old, and one-fourth three-year old. I take each vineyard and make sure that I have a good amount of each barrel, so that I have a choice.

What I realized is that sometimes for a certain block, all of it should go in new barrels, and other blocks would never make the private reserve and they probably should go into the older barrels.

Hicke: But how can you tell?

Sbragia: How can you tell? In 1990 I started walking around the vineyards, looking for reserve.

I go out there a couple times, before and during harvest, to see how they taste and what they look like. Besides looking for ripe grapes, look for flavor and intensity. We pick them separately. They are harvested as reserve grapes and go into new and one-year-old French barrels.

As the vineyards have been replanted, they get better. The maturity range of the old California sprawl versus these smaller trellis systems produce more uniform grapes and better maturity, better flavors.

We went to each Chardonnay vineyard, and I took ten years' worth of documentation as to where blocks were that we used, and certain blocks came up a great portion of the time. It changed from year to year, things would switch around. So I went to all the blocks that I had used and then I said, "Well, now that we've tasted all these blocks, let's go to blocks you think are really good." And we finally realized that every year it's different. Actually we went around and we tasted where we thought the best wines were going to come from, and let those grapes sit longer, rather than harvesting them right away. That's Private Reserve. I wanted a 24.5 brix for private reserve. That gives us about a 13 [percent alcohol] versus almost a 13.9--you know, right at the edge of what table wine should be. I did all the new barrels and all the one-year-old barrels that way, and so I did roughly 25 percent new barrels. I did 40 percent of the harvest that way. So not only did I get more good blocks of grapes into new barrels and one-year-old barrels, I also ended up with a surplus of wines versus having to hunt for them. I had a much easier time when I picked Chardonnay. The 30 percent I didn't use went into the Napa Valley, which improved the quality of the Napa Valley immensely. Not only did I make a private reserve with it--I made a better Beringer Napa Valley Chardonnay.

I choose which vintage of barrels, and all different suppliers and say, "Okay, I'm going to put this wine in these barrels." So I essentially assign the barrels. We fermented in 25,000 barrels last year.

Hicke: My word! And you looked at every one of the barrels?

Sbragia: Every one of the barrels and every one of the lots.

Hicke: Do you have a computer?

Sbragia: I'm trying to get it on a computer. I've done this assigning the barrels for years, which is kind of neat--I can go home now and know the lots I have to put in barrels, and I can assign the barrels and then email it in, so I've been able to do that a couple of Sundays while I was watching football. [laughter] But mainly I'm sitting here until twelve and one o'clock in the morning.

This last year we got a brand new machine that actually is an automated barrel washer and filler. They are washed and drained. Filling spouts drop down to the barrel and people fill them up. Then they pour yeast starter in and forklift them back into the barrel cellar. So rather than people running around the barrel, we have barrels moving past the people.

Hicke: They're on a belt or something?

Sbragia: They're on a belt. Yes. That increases their ability to fill more barrels every day, which made my life even more hectic.

Hicke: Hectic, yes. [laughter]

Sbragia: I had to assign more barrels, ended up being the limiting step. If I didn't assign barrels, everything came to a grinding halt. But it's been very successful. We've been able to make better wines every year.

The Sbragia Label

Hicke: I tasted the Private Reserve Chardonnay and the Sbragia label. Tell me about the difference.

Sbragia: Well, right around 1991, I found a little corner of a reserve block where the vineyard foreman said there were grapes just hanging out there, bright gold, and already at 24.5 brix. I took a little block here and there. I let the grapes sit until Mother Nature says, "You better pick these grapes or else I'm going to take them back." [laughter]

If they ferment dry on me, because the alcohols are quite high, I select individual barrels. Now you're getting to the point where the wine is a bit more woody, the flavors are of butterscotch and caramel. And I go for the caramel-vanilla barrels versus the woody barrels--smoky, toasty barrels. So I've got extract of Chardonnay in these real soft, Burgundian barrels. And that's bottled as Sbragia! This makes my relatives real happy. They think it's their Chardonnay. [laughter] But it's pretty limited. It's hard to find.

Hicke: And that takes a huge amount of time, too, I would think.

Sbragia: Yes, it does. It does. Goes back to what Myron said: "Attention to details."

Hicke: Yes, but you can only do so much. When are these wines drinkable?

Sbragia: The Chardonnays are actually good quite young--they're in barrels for about nine months, and then they're bottled in the fall. Harvest is September-October, they're in barrels all the way until the following July, and then they're pulled out and bottled in September. I release the Napa Valley sometimes just before Christmas or just at New Year's and Private Reserve soon thereafter. Usually by January or February the Private Reserve is released. The Sbragia is released in April.

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Hicke: I know you have a '97 Chardonnay Private Reserve label, is that drinkable now?

Sbragia: Oh, yes.

Hicke: They're all drinkable now?

Sbragia: They're all drinkable. I just had some '98 yesterday and it's quite nice. The Chardonnay I think benefits from about a year, a year and a half bottle age. If you like the taste of an older Chardonnay, which loses a lot of the fruit and gets a little oily tasting and a little leaner in the mouth then you would like wines that are five to ten years old. I had a '93 not too long ago.

Hicke: But that defeats the purpose of the way you make it, if you--

Sbragia: Yes, well, it depends on what you like. The older Chardonnays-- in about a year to two they are rich and full flavored and I think are probably at their optimum, up to about five years.

More on Merlot

Hicke: Just to finish off the Private Reserve, are you going to stick to those two varietals, or are you going to branch out?

Sbragia: Well, the Bancroft-Howell Mountain Merlot was kind of a private reserve vineyard designate and in that line we've started taking a little bit of each of the private reserve vineyards, and bottling them separately as kind of a reserve vineyards series. I bottle a couple hundred cases of each. We always did a little bit of the Chabot vineyard, Private Reserve Cabernet. In 1981 it went to the blend and Chabot was being used in the blend. But then when Bancroft came, it added more volume to the blend, so in order to keep the percentage of Chabot, I had to bottle less, like 200 cases. So in that line we bottle about 200 cases of each of the State Lane, the Chabot, the Bancroft, the Home Ranch, St. Helena--each one of those vineyards.

It depends on the vintage. Some years, for instance, the vineyard doesn't make the private reserve. It is light. I don't want to put it in private reserve. It's a nice wine, but it's just a little lighter in texture than what I want. But we'd still bottle a little bit separate under the vineyard series.

Then, it's funny, sometimes some of those vineyards do just as well as my big vineyards like Bancroft and Chabot. It's a matter of taste. One of the nice things about being a winemaker is that, first of all, you get all the credit, which is good, even though Bob Steinhauer does all the work. [laughter]

Hicke: I don't think I quite agree with that, but okay.

Sbragia: But that subjective decision-making allows you a certain continuity in style, the wine takes on a uniformity even though it goes up and down from vintage to vintage. I think that's a positive thing, because people can expect a certain character and a certain style and density in the wines. Also, having the same vineyards year in and year out allows us to have a certain flavor profile. Usually it's pretty consistent, unless the vintage is totally different and the wines taste different just because of the vintage. 1981 was like that. It was different from all the vintages around it.

Hicke: Oh, was it? How come?

Sbragia: It was really earthy. It was different. It just didn't have a lot of the fruit components. It had more like coffee, tea--it tasted like an older wine. And it was the first early vintage in the line of early vintages in the eighties.

Wine Reviews and Customer Relations

Hicke: I think continuity is important because from my own experience, you can't taste every bottle of wine before you open it.

Sbragia: No.

Hicke: And so if you know you've got a '96 Chardonnay that you like, you probably will like the '97.

Sbragia: Yes, because in our case, it's the same vineyards. And that's been one of the positive factors that has allowed Beringer to gain esteem and credibility with the trade. And then they get consistently good scores by not only just one wine writer, but most of the major ones.

Hicke: Yes, there are a few of them listed.

Sbragia: There's a whole list of wine publications. I think the *Spectator*, Marvin Shanken's publication, and *Wine Advocate*, Robert Parker's, are probably the two most touted and most read. There are *California Grape Vine* and the *Wine Enthusiast*, the *Wine News*--a number of them are--*Food and Wine Magazine*--and if you do well in everything, then you know you're in the pack.

Hicke: Oh, yes.

Sbragia: And then there are all the fairs. Sometimes one gold medal and a bunch of bronzes aren't as good as ten silvers. If you've consistently gotten good scores from trade people, from your colleagues, fellow winemakers, from press, and in some cases just consumers--then you know you've definitely made a wine that is one of the top-rated that year.

Hicke: Do you think those fair judgings have a lot of impact on the buying public?

Sbragia: I think they used to. I think that with the trade today, since there are so many fairs, unless you get like ten gold medals, a comment and a high score from Parker and the *Spectator* will do a lot for us.

Hicke: Yes, I would think so.

Sbragia: Which gives the *Spectator* and Parker a lot of power.

Hicke: Well, since we're on that, that's kind of an interesting topic. Do you think that rating the wines has added to the knowledge of the public?

Sbragia: When we look at people enjoying wines, I think that the trade is really the front line. It's not the distributors, but the actual retailers. They're the ones that interact with the public,

and their saying, "This is a good wine because Parker said, but also because it is really a good wine," then it's conveyed to the public. And I think that's where the exchange is.

Now there are a lot of wine enthusiasts that read the *Spectator* and the *Wine Advocate*, but in terms of percentages, it's probably less than a fraction of a percent. How many people drink premium wines? Probably 10 percent of the wine-drinking population. The wine-drinking population is a fraction of the percentage of people in the United States. It's a small amount of people who are talking and that the *Spectator* and the *Wine Advocate* reach.

I think that the larger population is reached by people who are influenced by the writers. They're invaluable in what they do, because they publicize wine. They promote wine, they give people a way of discerning what is supposedly higher quality versus lower quality. They also describe them, and someone may look at a description of a wine that gets an 85 and say, "Wow, if the price is right, this is something I would want to buy versus these other big wines," because you taste these big wines and they're full of oak and you might want a softer wine that's not so intrusive on your meal, just something that you enjoy drinking.

Hicke: One thing I think those fairs do, if you go in a grocery store, where you're not going to get the kind of help that you talk about, they put a hanger on some of the wines--

Sbragia: Yes, the medals.

Hicke: And they got a gold medal in some--like the Orange County fair, something like that.

Sbragia: Right, and usually it separates the wines. I've been a judge at Orange County, I've been a judge at Riverside, and I was fortunate enough to be invited to an international tasting in Paris that happens every other year, and I'm a judge there. And what does happen is the judges cull out the really bad wines. I like big, rich wines, so I'm always trying to give them medals. But there's a whole group in the middle, that in the fairs sometimes gets a consistent silver in lots of fairs, that is sending the message, "That's a nice wine." It's a good system.

I think also it's kind of like the rating system in France. The First Growths get to charge more, so supply and demand basically drives the price up. In California, a vineyard that consistently gets in the nineties every year, for example Kistler [Vineyards] Chardonnay or the Williams Selyem [Winery] Pinot Noirs--those prices have just gone skyrocketing. Diamond Creek [Vineyards] Cabernet, I'm hearing, are approaching $200.

Hicke: I think he sells one of his vineyard-designates for $300.

Sbragia: And that's scary. My dad always said when a wine costs more than a bottle of whiskey, it's overpriced. [laughter]

[tape interruption]

Alluvium and Other Wines

Sbragia: I really think that the price sometimes separates who's going to buy the wine. Myron was making Sonoma Cabernet when I got to Beringer, and the first bottle of Knights Valley as a vineyard was in 1976, which was my first year, so I kind of grew up with that vineyard.

Hicke: Does Beringer own that?

Sbragia: Yes. It's our vineyard, and when Merlot was planted there, nobody knew what to do with it, because I at the time wasn't really enthralled with Merlot. But then with the success I had with Howell Mountain Merlot, I said okay. So I think it was in 1991, I started making a Merlot-based wine called Alluvium from Knights Valley. And I made it the same way as the Howell Mountain Merlot.

Over the years we've had people I like using as consultants. They tell you what they think and then they go away and you do what you want. [laughter] With Cabernet we used a man named Patrick Leon, who was the winemaker for Chateau Lascombes. He worked with us. He went on to be the winemaker for Chateau Mouton and with their relationship with Mondavi, we both felt he needed to move on. He had a friend named Jean Louis Montreaux, who worked for Latour for ten years--1976 to 1986. When Patrick left, he convinced Jean Louis to come and consult. Jean Louis had his own estate in the Entre Deux Mers, Chateau de Mazarde. He became a farmer again--like I think some of us may do when we retire. His advice for Merlot was to pick it one brix higher than you pick Cabernet Sauvignon. You pick Cabernet Sauvignon at 23, and you always pick the Merlot with a brix higher, so I did the same thing here and it worked. That's a little secret I'm giving away. [laughter]

Hicke: It's not going to be a secret anymore!

Sbragia: So the Knights Valley Merlot turned out quite good.

Hicke: Were you doing that at Howell Mountain before that?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: It just turned out good?

Sbragia: Yes. The industry term for Bordeaux blend was Meritage. It was an attempt to go from varietal designation, which we'd established as the criteria for bottling in the United States, to appellation like in Europe. It was a category for these blended wines. The laws require 75 percent of a varietal to be labeled as that varietal. When I first started it was 51 percent varietal. It went up to 75 percent, 75 percent of the varietal and 25 percent of the blender. But say you wanted to go to a 60-40 blend, say 60 percent Cabernet, 40 percent Cab Franc? Then you couldn't call it a varietal. It would have to be called red table wine. In a

competition it would be grouped with the jug wines. That was not good. So the idea of a category of blended wines called Meritage (Bordeaux blend) made sense.

[tape interruption]

Hicke: You were talking about Meritage and why this new idea was established--Alluvium, and about making Merlot.

Sbragia: We entered the Meritage category with our Knights Valley Meritage Red, being mostly Merlot.

[tape interruption]

Sbragia: The Merlot turned out quite well. What happened with the Alluvium was that we went from making a Meritage, which I wanted to make different from Knight's Valley Cabernet, so we made it at least 75 percent Merlot, which means it could qualify as a Merlot, but then it took about 14 to 20 percent Cabernet. Then we added some Cab Franc, about 5 percent by volume, to the total. There was a little bit of Malbec and Petit Verdot--1 percent of each.

Hicke: Is this the Alluvium now?

Sbragia: Yes, so what happened was we changed Knights Valley White Meritage. It was Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc. And before Meritage it was Knight's Valley Sauvignon Blanc. The progression is that I wanted to put more Semillon in it--it went to Meritage white. Then I wanted to add a little Chardonnay, so what do you do now? Because you have a Bordeaux variety and you want to add a Burgundian variety into it, and on top of that I wanted to add a little Viognier--a small percentage, like 3 percent--and that's a Rhone variety, so all of a sudden Meritage didn't qualify any more. So we had to come up with a proprietary name. They didn't want to go with Ed's Big White. [laughter]

Knight's Valley is an old river bed. There's a belief that the Russian River used to come through that area and run off into the Napa River into the Bay. Then some upheaval twisted it and it went to the ocean out by Jenner. It is all gravel beds with little rivers running through it. It is very shallow soils. According to geologists, it's an old dejection cone, where a glacier kind of spun around and ground out this long, wide, sloping area and ground up all the rocks into small stones. Then with rivers running through it, you'll have a lot of deposit. It is pretty restrictive. The grape crop usually is at three to three and a half tons per acre. And it produces some really intense wines. We mentioned alluvial fan to a marketing person, and thus Alluvium arose. So Alluvium is the red wine and Alluvium Blanc is the white wine.

Hicke: Do you grow all of the grapes there?

Sbragia: The grapes are all Knight's Valley grapes.

Hicke: Is Alluvium also the vineyard?

Sbragia: No, it's not. Alluvium is just a proprietary name. Actually when I first started, we had two proprietary wines. There was a Riesling--essentially a Riesling, which was called Trabengold. And a red wine called Bärenblut, blood of bear. Before my time, it was a blend of Pinot Noir and Grignolino. When I got to Beringer it was a blend of Zinfandel and Gamay.

Hicke: It's discontinued?

Sbragia: We bottled it into the early eighties. But varietal labeling became so strong and everybody was so 100 percent crazy, proprietary names kind of fell from favor. The trend is very interesting, though, because in the mid-eighties we wanted these blends, and we didn't have a way of doing them with varietal labeling, so we went to names like Meritage, which I think still exists, because of the desire to blend varieties that normally go together from Europe. But we're not tied to those traditions. If it grows well, and you want to put a Sirah in your Cabernet, what do you call it? Well, you come up with a proprietary name. So here we're back again--it's a full cycle--to the way they were doing it before.

I think the Italians have come up with the same concepts with Chianti, where they have Sossichia and Tignanello. These are all Sangiovese-Cabernet-Merlot blends. So it's funny how the wine industry went full circle there.

Hicke: Yes, that is interesting.

Sbragia: Another thing: since we're a relatively young industry, with this little gap in the middle of Prohibition, people don't know where Knights Valley is. For instance, Ridge [Vineyards and Winery] have a wine out named Ridge Lytton Springs. They bought Lytton Springs, which is a little winery, and they produce a Zinfandel, and the last labeling I saw, it just said Ridge Lytton Springs; it didn't say what variety it was.

Hicke: That's unusual.

Sbragia: Yes, but we all know it's Zin. So eventually there'll be a Knight's Valley. It'll be obvious it's a red wine, or a white wine. The wine consumer will be familiar with the location and varieties grown there. Kind of like in Bordeaux, it's the Cabernet varieties. In Burgundy, it's Pinot varieties and Chardonnay.

Essentially it's a wine associated with an area, which I think has merit, because they are so different. Just comparing the Cabernet from Knight's Valley versus the Private Reserve, the Knight's Valley's is very fruit-forward, almost ripe-cherry fruit, whereas the Napa Valley Cab is much more intense in terms of spices and some of the herbal components--cedar, more the bright cherry flavor versus a ripe cherry. Which is another strange thing about our wine industry: how we try to describe wine.

Hicke: Don't they do that in France?

Sbragia: Yes, they do. You use every term under the sun, from old wet socks to all sorts of fruits and spices. Someone who really has good ability to pull out what spices smell like and flowers smell like has an advantage in this. When I make comments about wines, I tend to be more brief in my descriptions --because you're doing so many, you can't do a two- or three-page dissertation on each wine, it's a couple of comments and a score.

Hicke: So you have one or two flavors that you think are most descriptive?

Sbragia: Yes, unless there are defects, where you smell vinegar or you have odd smells that you try to identify.

Hicke: Well, maybe is this a good place to stop?

Sbragia: A good place.

Myron Nightingale's Colleagues

[Interview 3: February 29, 2000] ##

Hicke: I'm just going to start today by asking you to go back and talk about a few of Myron Nightingale's associates. One of them was Harold "Hod" Berg?

Sbragia: Yes, Harold Berg was one of the mainstays of the wine industry. He taught at the University of California at Davis, and all my generation going through school had classes from him. I actually didn't take any of his classes because I was in the chemistry department. Later on, when I went to Gallo, they had video-taped all of his lectures.

Hicke: What did he teach?

Sbragia: He taught wine production. And he had actually made wine. I can't remember the winery he worked for, but--

Hicke: Is that the same thing as enology, wine production?

Sbragia: Yes, rather than sensory evaluation or microbiology. The professors at Davis specialized. Dr. Singleton was more specialized in oak, Dr. R. E. Kunkee in microbiology, and Dr. Berg was the production specialist. He taught winery techniques and about different instabilities and binding agents and what happens in fermentation.

Myron Nightingale was good friends with--if you look at your book[1] here, [laughter] he was good friends with all his men; he knew them all. Dr. Olmo was a really good friend of who did a lot of early research on viticulture and propagation. Dr. Burg and Myron used to go on houseboat trips on Lake Shasta. They would spend two weeks there. They'd load up with wine and Myron would fish and Hod would read books, Myron said. I never was privileged to go on one of those, but it sounded like a lot of fun.

Hicke: You mentioned Phil Possum.

Sbragia: Phil Possum, when I came into the business in the mid-seventies, was running a company called Sierra Wine Company in Tulare [County]. Phil was entrenched in the wine business there and was one of the winemakers that made really good wines there, sherries and dessert wines. Then Beringer had Los Hermanos, which was an everyday-priced wine, and a lot of grapes were sourced in that area south of Fresno.

Hicke: What kind of grapes?

Sbragia: Chenin Blanc and French Colombard for the whites, and Zinfandel and Carignane for the reds, and Thompson's Seedless, which they called Valley Chardonnay. [laughter] Anyway, he was a really nice man and a really good winemaker, and we had very good success with working with Sierra. It was bought out by Golden State Vintners.

Hicke: Did you buy bulk wine from them?

Sbragia: Yes, we bought bulk wine, and they made wines on contract for us.

One of Myron's philosophies that I've adopted is that it's good to make wines close to where they're grown--trucking grapes too far is not good.

Hicke: Okay, shall I just run down the names here in the book?

Sbragia: Sure.

Hicke: Bruno Bruscellia.

Sbragia: Bruscellia. Actually, I think that Bruscellia's family initially owned the building we call Greystone. It was Christian Brothers for a long time and is now the Culinary Institute of America. Bruscellia had a small winery--I think it was near Manteca, and it was used to make something called "light sweet white."

What you would do is basically take juice and then fortify it to 14 percent alcohol. You could have both the sugar and alcohol high enough, which would inhibit yeast fermentation.

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[1]*California Wine Pioneers: Profiles of the State's Wine Industry Leaders*, sponsored by the Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

Then if you have wine that you want to add a little bit of sweetness to, but you don't want it to ferment cold and arrest [fermentation], you could add back this light sweet white. They used to make light sweet white for us.

Hicke: Bottle it?

Sbragia: No, we would just buy it--again, it was another source of bulk wine. These were all people that we had dealt with that Myron knew for a long, long time that had worked in the wine business. They'd been in business, I guess, since after Prohibition.

Hicke: But they aren't well-known names, so I'm really pleased that you're telling me about them.

Sbragia: Myron also talked about Colonel Burtor, who was his boss at National Distillers, and Schenley. He was a major influence.

Hicke: He was another winemaker?

Sbragia: Yes. Actually, someone to talk to about that is Alice Nightingale. Alice is still alive.

Hicke: Is that right? I didn't realize that.

Sbragia: Yes, and she would probably know a lot of things about Myron and the past and the people involved. Myron used to talk about when the American Society of Enology and Viticulture started, and they used to meet at a place called Hobart's up in Lake County. It was probably about fifty people who got together and had a party once: "I think we should start an organization." And right now, I think the last ASEV we had was in Sacramento, which 6,500 people attended.

Hicke: That small beginning really started something. Okay, the next name I have is Lee Stewart.

Sbragia: Lee Stewart was a winemaker in the Napa Valley. He started Souverain, and Souverain made wines here, I guess, in the sixties and maybe before. Souverain was up where Rutherford Hill is. Lee Stewart used to come and visit Myron when I was here in like '77 and '78. He was a relatively older man at that point, and I'm not sure when he passed away, but those old wines that he made at Souverain are still regarded as some of the better wines from the Valley.

Hicke: Cabernets?

Sbragia: Cabernets and Petite Sirahs and Zinfandels.

And then I think what happened is that Pillsbury bought Souverain and then they had Souverain of Napa and Souverain of Sonoma County, and later Souverain of Sonoma became Chateau Souverain. It went through various owners and then was a co-op and then Beringer Wine Estates bought it.

Hicke: That is interesting. Okay, Louis Martini.

Sbragia: Well, Louis M. Martini and Myron Nightingale both graduated in the class of 1941 from the University of California School of Agriculture at Berkeley. Myron was in microbiology and Louis, I think, was chemistry, but they specialized in winemaking. There was a very famous teacher of viticulture, William Vere Cruess, and of enology, Dr. Winkler.

Louis M. Martini's father was Louis P. Martini, the founder of the Martini Winery--he was still alive when I was here. I know Myron knew him, but he and I together never had any interaction with Louis P., who passed away in 1974. I'm very good friends with Mike Martini, Louis M.'s son. He and I play in a rock and roll band together, "Private Reserve."

Hicke: Yes, [laughs] you told me about that before, but I didn't know that Mike Martini was in it also.

Sbragia: Louis and Myron were always good friends, and Louis had stories about Myron, about his study habits and how intense he was about getting everything done on time.

Hicke: And you apparently sat around listening to stories occasionally.

Sbragia: Yes, I can't remember right now old stories about Myron and Louis together. I remember Louis was very fond of Myron and they were good friends. Louis Martini was one of the most prominent people in the wine business in terms of his dedication to making selections of varietals, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Those selections live on today, because they became the selections that Davis used in their trials. Both Myron and Louis were very close to Davis in terms of all the professors. In the the fifties, Napa Valley only had twenty-four wineries. It was a pretty small industry then. There are over 200 today.

There were twenty-four people, and the university had four, and those people got together on a regular basis--socially and also for business, trying to work out some problems. The whole wine business had been shut down over Prohibition and there were problems that arose from that. When Prohibition hit, I think most of the people with the old knowledge from Europe left. The people who started up after Prohibition were also immigrants, but they really weren't hard-core wine people. They were more farmers than winemakers.

Hicke: Grape-growers.

Sbragia: Yes. So Myron's generation started developing wine technology from all the good techniques the university was developing and suggesting ideas about cold fermentation and sanitation techniques. Stainless steel came in, and that was kind of a nirvana; you could have a container that was really clean, it could be sanitized. A lot of the old ways weren't as clean, and produced more complex wines. We were making very clean very simple wines. I think you have to give Myron and Louis credit for coming through the difficulties of post-Prohibition to modern winemaking. Another man would be Charlie Crawford, another graduate of the class of 1941.

Hicke: He's the next on the list.

Sbragia: He was at Gallo--they deserve credit for developing the foundation business. Charlie started at Gallo as winemaker in 1942. He was key to the success of Ernest and Julio Gallo.

Trips back to Europe were few and far between. I know Myron used to talk about going on a business trip in the U.S., and you just didn't fly back East; you would go by train and you worked your way across the U.S. You took a couple of weeks and you stopped at major markets and worked your way back, and that was the public relations trip for the year. He'd be like a politician going across country. [laughs] What's that called--barnstorming?

Hicke: Yes, yes. Right.

Sbragia: It was very tedious and hard, but it was at a slower pace than today's trips. A train gives you more time in between stops than an airplane.

Hicke: Yes. What was Myron doing? Selling?

Sbragia: Yes, usually. He did what I do now. You talk, first of all, to the trade. You're talking to your distributor, because they want to see the guy who made the wine, and you talk to the accounts, the key accounts. And then I'm not sure whether there were wine writers in the fifties. I'm sure there were.

Hicke: [laughs] Not very many, though. Not like now.

Sbragia: Myron would stop and talk to them and tell them what was new and have them taste wine. He'd have cases of wine, so people could taste his wines.

Hicke: Winemakers' dinners, do you think?

Sbragia: Yes, I'm sure that he hosted people. They had dinner together, but it was probably smaller groups, which I tend to do now, myself. I think it's more efficient. You get to know people better than just having a hundred people in a room.

Hicke: I want to go back to something you said that made it sound like Myron and Louis Martini influenced U.C. Davis.

Sbragia: I think they did. I don't think the professors worked in wineries very much, so that a lot of the input to Davis was from people like Myron and Louis. Louis obviously influenced Davis in terms of fruit propagation and the development of the heat resistant, virus-free

rootstocks. What we now have, which is planted throughout California, are Louis Martini selections.

Hicke: Is that right? I had never heard that either. I always got the feeling that Davis was telling the winemakers what they should be doing.

Sbragia: In many instances, they did, and it was good advice for the time. It is still good advice today, but we have more control. That is where things have changed. We used to say yeast didn't matter. That's because you had all these variables in the winery. There were so many more strong variables--you had to be careful of bacteria in the wood, and no controlled temperature, and probably not as good of yeast strains that would be strong against all the different environmental predators that stop a fermentation. That made it necessary to be very clean. Today we have great equipment--we are more in control. We can afford to take more chances. We pick by hand, it's probably about the same as it was, but we know not to haul in gondolas that are made of metal. The acid in grapes would extract metal and get metal impurities in the wine that cause haziness and precipitates. This was a big problem.

In my first job working at the Foppiano Vineyards, we had an iron crusher bolted to a copper mustline. Iron and copper cause haze and precipitates. They won't kill anybody, but they look bad because you get this cloud and sediment on the bottom of the bottle. They had iron tanks that were coated with glass or epoxy. They had cement tanks that as they got older, the iron bars, the rebar inside the cement, would leach out metals.

So you had all these, and when you finished making a wine, you usually were above five or six parts of iron. Anything above a half part of copper is potential--well, you could get three parts copper and twelve, fifteen parts iron on a regular basis.

Hicke: It's like you're saying they had to clean up the process to the bottom line and then start refining it and adding other improvements.

Sbragia: Like brass valves. They had all sorts of things because those were the metals available. Stainless steel didn't come until later. It was probably available, but way too expensive. When it finally got to a good price, or the wine industry got rich enough to be able to afford it, they bought stainless steel tanks. They were a godsend. Because all of a sudden all of these instabilities created problems. You had to do very careful fining and then a filtration. It was all more work and more processing. Today, the way we pick, the way we crush, the way we press, the juice is so pristine that I just put it in barrels.

And we're using new French oak and new American oak, so they're clean, new barrels, they're temperature-controlled cellars. We don't have cellars that go up into the seventies and eighties during the summer, and we have humidity controls so the wood doesn't crack. All of a sudden, what you could get in a tunnel fifty feet below the ground in a French cellar could be approximated anywhere in any winery.

We have tunnels dug into the mountains, so I think the Beringers had a leg up on most people. But that was only a couple hundred barrels. As you grew, you couldn't just dig a tunnel anywhere, and it used to be very expensive in the fifties and sixties to dig a tunnel. They didn't have these tunneling machines that they have today that were developed to dig the channel, the chunnel.

Hicke: The chunnel. Oh, yes, the tunnel between England and the continent.

Sbragia: Those machines now come in and dig a tunnel and it's still expensive, but it's cheaper, or more comparable to building a building.

Hicke: Are you saying a tunnel is the ideal way to store it?

Sbragia: Well, if you look at insulation, they're making sod houses now, with grass roofs.

Hicke: [laughs] That's true.

Sbragia: The insulation capacity of a tunnel maintains humidity and then temperatures in our tunnels are 55 to 58 degrees all year round. So trying to approximate that, it wasn't possible. They didn't have those capabilities. Now I have them.

The wine is fermented, aged in barrels. I can control temperature by the temperature of the room and by how much yeast I put in, because the yeast are very active, the cultured yeast that we have today.

Hicke: You choose the yeast, too?

Sbragia: Yes, we use multiple yeast and because the process is so uniform and controlled, now the difference of the yeast is very observable. As a winemaker, I can make a difference in the wine by choosing a different yeast. Myron knew about those yeasts, but he never tried to use them. He just used the yeast that fermented fast. He didn't want a slow fermentation because if he did, he had a hot cellar and other microorganisms would ruin his fermentations. Options weren't available to him, from a technological point of view.

Their philosophy said that oak wasn't necessarily a good thing in wine, and there are some wine-drinking populations that still believe that. The Italians don't like a lot of oak in the wines. I think that it was an interesting time. It was a time of rebuilding.

Hicke: That's a nice, encapsulated, little history of how the industry evolved.

Sbragia: Yes, and when you look at it, the renaissance really didn't happen until around the late sixties, early seventies. That's when we went from twenty-four wineries to I think we're over 200 wineries now. We were over a hundred wineries at the turn of the century, when they were all little wineries built like a model of what they were in Europe. When we started growing, we got bigger wineries, big estates.

Hicke: Big tanks.

Sbragia: Bigger tanks, and equipment. I think as that progressed in the seventies and eighties when equipment allowed us to go back, we did start traveling back and forth. I might have already said this, but I remember Dick Graff was telling a story about going to a cellar in Burgundy and a guy told him all the things he did about barrel fermentation--that he stirred the lees to encourage the end of alcoholic and for malolactic to complete, and it also added some thickness and body. He really liked that process. In the end he just bottled it right out of his barrels, because it settled down really nicely. Dick said, "Well, why haven't you ever told anybody this?" He said, "No one ever asked."

A lot of countries didn't think of us as competitors and still don't, because we can't make a really good French wine in California. [laughter] No matter how hard we try, it's impossible.

Hicke: Why try? I mean, California makes really good wines.

Sbragia: That's the whole idea. I can copy techniques and combinations of varieties and knowledge that apply to my situation. That gives me a head start at making a wine that is good. The final wine is always different than the wine I had in mind.

When we started doing that, our wines went away from the clean, squeaky clean kind of simple, nondescript to wines that demonstrated the vineyard and the techniques of the vintner and the quality of the soil. It happened slowly--the universities used to say the soil was just a container for minerals and water and really didn't make a difference. I think that whole philosophy has changed; *terroir* means, I think, the whole thing: climate, soil, and the people who work on it, the varieties you choose, everything that makes the wine. It's a funny thing that we kind of went from the old to the new, but then the new kind of embraced the old. We still have all the toys, just in case we need them,--if Mother Nature decides to throw us a curve, which she does all the time.

Hicke: Agriculture is a risky business. There's no question.

Sbragia: Yes, my dad always said, "You think those guys in Las Vegas gamble." [laughter] He said, "We put in on the red or the black every year."

Hicke: Well, you mentioned Charlie Crawford, who's the next guy on the list. Is there more about him?

Sbragia: Charlie! It's interesting about Charlie Crawford. The first time I met Charlie Crawford was when I went to work for Gallo right out of school at Davis. He was in charge of production and research. The man who worked for him was Art Caputi, who ran the research department. So I met Charlie various times when I was working at Gallo.

Interesting thing--my wife said that Charlie Crawford grew up in Antioch, as did my father-in-law, and they picked prunes together when they were kids. It's such a small world.

He was one of the graduates of the class of 1941 from Berkeley. He went to work for Ernest and Julio quite early, in 1942. He was one of the reasons Gallo has been such a success making wines from all over the state and producing products that were always clean and saleable.

Hicke: So he deserves a lot of credit.

Sbragia: Yes. And he just passed away. He was the last of the class of '41 to die.

Hicke: The last one I had was Eli Skofis.

Sbragia: Eli worked with Myron back in either Schenley or National Distiller or both. I'm not sure who bought who. He was a winemaker. When I got in the business, Eli was a vice president of production for Guild Wineries.

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Sbragia: So Eli Skofis was a vice president of production for Guild and very associated with the Wine Institute technical committees. One of the things that Myron used to have me do for him when he couldn't was go to his wine tech committee for the Wine Institute, and Eli was very verbal on that committee. Louis Martini was on that committee, and Charlie Crawford, Art Caputi, and John Franzia. The committee basically decided how we interrelated with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. It was kind of a liaison, and it also decided on what research projects we would support at the university.

Also, when I went back to school after Gallo to Fresno to get my master's degree, Eli taught a winery production class at Fresno. He gave me my only B in my postgraduate career. When you're that age--I was twenty-five and I felt I knew everything. Today I feel like I know a lot less than I did then. I was a lot smarter when I was twenty-five, and I had this philosophical disagreement in terms of how Eli was teaching. I wouldn't back down and he wouldn't back down, so instead of getting an A on a paper, I got a B, and it was enough to drop my grade.

Hicke: Oh, well, I don't think it deterred you much. [laughs]

Sbragia: No, it was all right. Here I was thinking, wow, you know, going through Davis, I think the highest grade I got was a couple of A's, most of them were B's and a lot of C's, so having almost straight A's was a real kick.

Hicke: And to get a B in wine production.

Sbragia: Yes, something I should know.

Hicke: Then I have down that "The addition of tank presses, refrigeration, and stainless steel changed the way we made wine and allowed us to question the old ways." Well, you've talked about that a little bit.

Sbragia: Yes, I think it's pretty much it. There were the old, old ways. I saw a lot of them going to Europe in the seventies and traveling around to various wine producing regions. One thing about Europe was the tradition--until it changed in the late seventies or early eighties, when I think the New World--Australia and California--proved themselves in the eyes of the world and produced some great wines, so that Europe said, "We'd better pay attention to what these people are doing." We had always been in awe of what Europe did, and how good those wines were--especially in some cases, like wines from regions where it was pretty hard to grow grapes.

If you look at Burgundy, it is a difficult growing environment--it is cold and rainy. In Bordeaux off the coast it is warmer, so they get a lot of rain all season long. That's probably one of the reasons they don't have to irrigate. The industry usually regulates itself with rules that adapt to their particular growing environment. For instance in California, it's against the law to add sugar, whereas you can add sugar in Burgundy.

Travels

Hicke: Well, actually the 1969 trip to Europe was on your list of things you wanted particularly to talk about, so can you tell me about that?

Sbragia: Yes, actually I'm wrong. It wasn't 1969, it was 1983. The '69 trip was with my parents, going back to Italy and visiting family. We really didn't do any wine-related things. It was more visiting family and where we lived and where my dad grew up. I did that with my kids again this summer. We rented a house near Lucca and visited my cousins and the old family home.

My first wine trip was in 1983, and I went with the man who was Myron's and my boss when I first came to Beringer in 1976, a man named Guy Kay, and a guy named Jean Jacques Zell, who was in charge of beverages for Nestlé International.

We were owned by Nestlé. Nestlé bought Beringer in 1971, and hired Myron. Guy had been a production guy for Nestlé for almost twenty years.

Hicke: In what area?

Sbragia: In every area. He was a microbiologist and then he worked in chocolate production, he worked in food production, he worked in beverage production, almost everything.

Hicke: That's impressive.

Sbragia: I think Nestlé had plans for us to grow. We had lots of good vineyards. They weren't in the grape-growing business; they wanted to make wine. The Swiss are one of those countries

that don't believe in oak, like the Italians in those days. They all are kind of embracing it now, but I think the Swiss are still a holdout.

They didn't think we needed oak, and one of the things that we were all seeing in that age, learning some of the old knowledge, is that a lot of wines benefited from barrel fermentation: Chardonnay and then reds need barrels to age. Especially because we were in a premium region. It wasn't a light, delicate region. These were pretty big wines that needed maturing, and the best place to mature was in a 225-liter barrel, which is roughly fifty-nine and half gallons. They were not the American barrels that you could buy for fifty dollars in those days that we used for whiskey; they were handmade barrels that were designed for wine because the quality of the wood was different. They had aged the wood longer. That made the wood not have a strong, harsh taste, but very soft, subtle tastes.

Hicke: You're talking about European wines and having discovered this--

Sbragia: Yes, so it was basically an oak tour. It was a great trip! We went to Bordeaux and we went to every first-growth chateau. I think we started out in Margaux. I met the winemakers. There were a lot of Californians starting to come, so they were very interested in meeting us. We went to Margaux and then we went to Latour, we went to Chateau Lafite, we went to Auson, and Chevel-Blanc. We visited Petrus, which mostly made Merlot. What we found was that they bought brand-new barrels for their big wines, and they used to age them for two years in barrels, and that's something I still do today. Through the trip I met Jean-Louis Montreaux, who was the winemaker general manager. He left Latour in 1986 to run his business. He is our consultant now. He comes and tastes wines. So those relationships developed way back then are still helping me today.

Hicke: Did you develop your palate then, or did your palate change?

Sbragia: Well, I grew up tasting wines with my dad. He made Zinfandel and I drank Zinfandel at home. That was kind of the wine of Sonoma County, the best wine at that point. His wines were pretty big. He had the old knowledge. It wasn't technical knowledge, but he did it the way he had learned from his dad and his grandfather, which is crushing the grapes and punching them down, fermenting totally to dryness. When they were totally dry in the skins, he would drain the juice and press the wine, and actually put it all together and then age it in barrels. I got used to wines that had lots of density and lots of flavor.

I didn't like very light wines. The first time I had a Gamay Beaujolais, I thought, "What's this? This is too light." And same thing with Pinot Noir. I think that's what was one of the problems with the early days of Pinot Noir; most people were used to Zinfandel and Cabernet.

So Bordeaux Cabernet just fit perfectly into that mold. I liked Cabernet from the first day I tasted it and I liked Bordeaux wines and I really appreciated their style. They're different, but they're really good. Tasting the wines, and tasting the best wines, and seeing their cellars and seeing what they did really opened up my eyes in terms of realizing that my dad wasn't too far off. [laughter]

Hicke: Most children come to that knowledge sooner or later.

Sbragia: I also felt that maybe what we were doing wasn't really the right way to go. Just keeping our wines in big tanks and later putting them in barrels for a short amount of time wasn't really making wines that we wanted to have.

Hicke: So this was really a crucial trip.

Sbragia: This was. And it also convinced Nestlé that we should buy barrels.

Hicke: Oh, good.

Sbragia: So at that point we went to Switzerland and sat down in the office and said, "Okay, how do we tell you this? How do we write it down?" We came away with agreement about how long our wine was going to be in barrels, and when they were to be delivered.

Hicke: You must have been persuasive.

Sbragia: Yes, since Jean Jacques Zell actually had been a winemaker and a brewmaster in Alsace, and was one of their own, his opinion carried a lot of weight. Jean Jaques *loved* to go eat at wonderful restaurants. And in Europe menus are posted outside of restaurants. We always had to read three menus first and then we decided which one we wanted. At the end of the day this was a great process. You couldn't gain weight because you'd walked. [laughter]

I think we developed a better relationship with the parent company because of the relationship we developed with Jean Jacques.

Hicke: Can I interrupt you a minute? In Bordeaux did you go into the vineyards?

Sbragia: Yes, we walked through the vineyards, too. They're very different. They're very close-spaced and because they're so close, they have to be lower to the ground. Bordeaux during the growing season is actually warmer at night but colder during the day--they don't have as much daytime solar radiation, and they have a little bit lower acid and higher pH, which means they don't get to the maturity that we have, and so they do a lot of aerative racking to modify the phenolic compounds, the tannins they have, and soften them through oxidation, slow oxidation in the barrels. They rack every ninety days, the first year; then maybe twice the second year.

Hicke: Shallow soils, too, and pretty rocky.

Sbragia: Yes. The two rivers Vardone and Gironde meet there. The have covered the whole area, so it has a lot of gravelly soil.

Hicke: Okay, I interrupted you just after you had persuaded Nestlé to follow this program of more barrels.

Sbragia: Then after that, it was just a matter of developing our program for every wine. Not all wines got 100 percent oak. Like our Knights Valley Cabernet gets about 30 percent. The Chardonnay, the reserves, get a lot. They get about 85 percent, but our Napa Valley gets 20 percent. It depends on the wine and what you're trying to make, and what you're going to sell it for. Economics comes into play.

A winemaker's primary job is to focus on quality. That's what he should do, and if he has another hat--I mean, if he owns the winery, then he definitely has to watch the economics, or else he's not going to be able to make wine again. In a winery of my size, well, you're not in charge of finance, but you have to understand the limitations of wines and then work within that. If it's totally wrong, then you have to jump up and down and yell and express yourself, because if you don't put it in the bottle, in the long term, you're not going to be a winery. So I think from a winemaker's standpoint, you have to demand quality--in a vineyard and a winery.

Cost of Wine

Hicke: I'd like to ask you a question that people sometimes ask me and I don't have any good answer--I have my own ideas, but I'd like to hear it from a professional, which is: why does wine cost so much? Some wines, particularly.

Sbragia: I think it starts from the point of view of what the land costs and what it costs to plant a vineyard and build a winery. There's certain overhead to grow and--

Hicke: Yes, capital investment.

Sbragia: And I think that gets a wine into the ten- to twenty-dollar range, like right now, vineyards just sold for over $100,000 an acre, when you used to go buy land for $3,000 and plant it for $5,000 and it was less than $10,000 an acre. So that's ten times the cost.

Hicke: But Beringer has had some of this land for--

Sbragia: For forever.

Hicke: Yes. So it didn't cost much.

Sbragia: The other thing, I guess, is because the places where grapes grow really well in the United States are limited. It's basically the coastal region of California, up into Oregon and Washington--but it's a little more difficult to grow grapes up there. So I think supply and demand, economics, come into play.

Hicke: I hadn't thought of that. Yes, okay.

Sbragia: I think you can overprice your wine to the point where nobody buys it. Then you're in trouble, but if you underprice it, sometimes people look at it and say, "It's so low priced. All these other highly rated wineries are selling their wines for $50 a bottle, so this wine must be a cheap imitation." That's not good! So a lot of times you have to get your wine sold to the people who would appreciate it. If you sell it for five dollars, people who would buy it wouldn't like it because it's too big and harsh and heavy because it's made in a big style. So that gets it up into the twenty- to fifty-dollar range.

But now we're seeing wines that are being sold for $250 and $300. I think that is because today it's a boom time and we have a lot of people to whom dollars and cents really don't make a difference on a daily basis. So if something is limited and rare, then they'll pay anything to get it.

Hicke: The first thing that usually comes to my mind is it's so labor-intensive, you go around and look at each bunch of grapes, I guess, in a really good wine.

Sbragia: Oh, yes, I think if you look at, say, our private reserve, it's seventy-five dollars, and when I first started in the seventies, it was about twenty. Well, twenty in the '70s was a lot of money. From then to now, inflation would have brought it at least to forty or fifty dollars, and then supply and demand has doubled it again. My dad used say, "Well, when wine gets more expensive than a bottle of whiskey, it's getting way too expensive." But when you think about the raw materials and how the grower can lose everything in one night of frost. In the wine business, you get one shot a year, one shot, only.

Hicke: Okay, that's good. Thank you. I have more ammunition now to answer those questions. Let's see, there are a couple other things. You wanted to talk about the fact that most people who made wine about 1900 were immigrants. You just mentioned that.

Sbragia: Yes, I went over that in terms of how they set the standard.

Bob Steinhauer and Vineyard Practices

Hicke: Then what I'd like to do next, if you're comfortable with it, is to go to when Bob Steinhauer came and the impact that he's made.

Sbragia: People who really pay attention to wine are probably less than 10 percent of the population. A very small number of people really are into who made it and what vineyard it comes from. But for those people, the winemaker is very important, because we are the person who made the wine and we've taken on a status. People are in awe of what we do, which is kind of neat. I don't think winemakers have discredited that feeling. I think they like it a lot and want to encourage it.

Hicke: Rightfully so.

Sbragia: One person who probably has as much responsibility for the quality of the wine if not more than the winemakers is the person who grows the grape--and the location, the vineyard itself, the actual vineyard. So Bob Steinhauer's been very important to me. He came in 1979.

[tape interruption]

Sbragia: Walt Raymond, Sr., was the winemaker before Myron. Walt had married a Beringer. He had two sons, Walter and Roy. Walter, Jr., worked with his father. They started their own winery a little later. Roy was working for us, running the vineyards. They got so busy that he left us and went to work for his own family winery, Raymond Vineyards. Bob Steinhauer was working for Napa Valley Vineyard Company for Mr. [Andrew] Beckstoffer and had actually early on grown grapes for Schenley and knew Myron Nightingale. They worked together. They used to talk about Colonel Burton.

Bob ran some vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley south of Fresno. He is one of the most renowned grape growers in California.

Bob is totally determined to make quality wine. He isn't just trying to make a profit for the company. He works well with me and my assistants to look at every vineyard that we planted--every varietal, every block, to find out whether it made wines that we liked or that we didn't like. Then he'd find out why we didn't like them, and we'd try and develop how he could improve that lot. It's kind of like compound interest. In twenty years, I saw that every year wines in total got better.

I think we got better in terms of getting better equipment and better techniques, and the vineyard got better at the same time. We got that feedback and the ability to handle the fruit better. We made better wines!

One of the great things that Myron did when he first came was to build thirty-six 1,000-gallon tanks. For a winery our size, that's a lot of little tanks, but we were able to keep all those vineyard blocks separate. In 1984 we started a research department to evaluate not only winemaking experiments, but vineyard experiments. Then about five years after that, we started a sensory department, because we would get these research experiments--you've got to taste everything and we were already too busy to taste the wines you have; how do you taste experiments?

So having someone who was totally responsible for the experiments was critical. In the heat of battle when you're doing all these vineyards, you try to keep all the blocks separate and all of a sudden you've got a block of grapes that have to come in. You need to press two tanks off and there's only one tank. But there are two partial tanks that have the experiments in them, so you say, "Well, I'll take a couple of demijohns of each, put them together, and now I've got another tank." And about in March, right about now, you'd look over where those demijohns are stored and it was all brown and gone bad because you forgot about them. We have a research department that is responsible for good experiments that give good data.

Hicke: And you had all these small tanks that you could use.

Sbragia: Yes, but we actually got little fermenters. We do demijohns, five-gallon demijohns. We do statistically valid experiments. Bob started embracing all that and doing lots of experiments, statistically valid vineyard experiments. We got good vineyard data and we also got good winemaking data. We could taste to see whether or not these vineyards produced quality wines rather than just making more grapes. Bob was instrumental in helping us produce better wines.

Hicke: Can you give me an example of how he impacted, or what he changed in the vineyard to improve it?

Sbragia: One of our major accomplishments was when phylloxera came and attacked our vineyards in the late eighties. When we replanted, Bob had already looked at different rootstocks, because one of the things you need to fix the problem of phylloxera is a replacement for AXR1. AXR1 made really nice wine and was very compatible with all different clones of each variety, so you didn't get any mismatches. Now we are using rootstocks that have different characteristics that can be matched to the location. He was able to match the right rootstocks to the right soils and actually put two or three rootstocks in each location so if one rootstock had a problem, we wouldn't lose the whole vineyard.

Looking at different clones, we liked maybe two or three, so we again had two or three clones that would give different layers of flavor. You wouldn't get exactly the same uniform flavor, you get more complex wines.

And then a major thing was Bob went from 8x12 spacing into tighter spacing, but not as tight as French. It's 6x7; 8x7 down to maybe 5x6, and with trellising that is different.

We also looked at trellising. The old system was what we jokingly called California Sprawl. The vine grew out on a couple of catch wires. On top where the shoots came [the vine] sprawled over. When the fruit ripened some were totally exposed and some were way inside the vines where they didn't get sunlight. The new one, the vertical shoot positions, VSP system, has a wire for the cordon to come up along about thirty to thirty-six inches above the ground. The vine is at thirty-six inches, the shoots come up, and they grow straight up. There are two catch wires, and the catch wires keep the shoots in place as they grow. You're actually making a hedge. All the fruit is down by the cordon, rather than being all over the place. It's actually relatively exposed to sun and airflow so you don't have problems if it rains, you have less problem with botrytis.

Because of its uniformity, you have fruit higher, at the same height. You minimize dominance of fruit that is higher up--the higher fruit, getting more sun, gets riper sooner. Being all uniform, the fruit all ripens uniformly. The range is probably plus or minus one degree B, whereas in the old system it was plus or minus four degrees B. Say I wanted twenty-four degrees B, now I probably have twenty-three to twenty, versus in the old system, in which I would have had a range of twenty to twenty-eight degrees B. That impact alone is very important.

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Sbragia: The under-ripe fruit was green and it didn't have the flavor development, so you'd have this combination of over-ripe and under-ripe and perfect. Now when you get really close, the benefits of maturity are such that I think that the quality of flavor in the wines is much more rich. Actually being able to get grapes at optimum maturity means that you don't get the jammy character that you used to get because they were over-ripe or dehydrated..

I think drip irrigation is important also. It is really beneficial in producing quality fruit. We are making a much better wine.

Hicke: You have much more control if the fruit ripens all at the same time, too, I would think.

Sbragia: Right, and because of our climate--it doesn't rain all summer--the vine is a plant like any other plant and for it to ripen its fruit, it'll survive without water, but it won't ripen its fruit to optimum maturity. So what we used to do is, well, we needed the vines to be under stress like they would be on a little hillside that has water running underneath it, so the roots get enough water to mature the fruit. Sometimes, in a vintage where it doesn't rain, it's really hot, those vineyards just shut down. It happened to one of my private reserve vineyards in '79. I didn't have a private reserve. All the leaves fell off, it just quit growing because the vine is very efficient at protecting itself, so the fruit doesn't ripen.

Hicke: So do you irrigate on demand?

Sbragia: It's like when you're trying to ripen tomatoes. For the really best tomatoes, you don't just give it a bunch of water and then stop two months before you pick. You give it a little bit of water every day, and in some cases, more than once--you know, on a really hot streak, you might water in the morning and water at night, to minimize evaporation.

The techniques of irrigation on the vines and the soil--there's still no substitute for going out and looking at the grapes, for looking at the vines and seeing if the shoot tips are still growing. You don't want that to happen. You want the vine not in its growth phase but in its maturing fruit phase. You just keep it alive, but you don't keep it growing. You're just at that edge, and that balance allows the fruit to actually get mature. Physiological maturity, not dehydrated. I am able to pick grapes at a higher maturity and get more flavor out of them, whereas in the old days when I got that Brix, it wasn't through maturity, it was through dehydration.

I'm getting much softer tannins, which make it more interesting as a young wine. And that's one of the other reasons I think California wines today are respected and enjoyed. People ask, "Did you change your style of making wine?" "No! I think we changed the way we grow grapes."

Hicke: That's fascinating.

Sbragia: And the winemaker still gets all the credit. [laughter]

Hicke: I love it!

Sbragia: I always give Bob credit and the people who work for me. You don't make wine in a vacuum.

Hicke: Are all your vineyards irrigated?

Sbragia: Not every one. Some of them have plenty of water and you wouldn't want to add any more. It depends on the vineyard. It comes with experience. Every vineyard is different. There are no generalities. It's all site specific, and style specific. It depends on what people want to make. The vineyard can adapt to a certain point. You could probably make a lighter wine if that was your goal. It would be a travesty. I tend to think we need to go for it, with every vineyard, every wine.

Hicke: Does Bob supervise all the vineyards?

Sbragia: Yes, he does.

Hicke: And all the vineyard managers then report to him?

Sbragia: Yes. Beringer has about 2,800 acres; we just bought a 600-acre piece in the Carneros region--to make good Pinot Noir. When I started, we had about 1,800 to 2,000 acres. We have Chardonnays from about Yountville south. I have a Cabernet vineyard in that area called State Lane that I sometimes use in my reserve. Most of the Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc are from vineyards from Oakville to Yountville. There's a block of Sauvignon Blanc in that Chardonnay vineyard, but it's pretty grassy.

There are Cabernets all the way to St. Helena. State Lane is the most northern vineyard for Cabernet. Napa Valley's kind of different--because of the bay, the coldest part of the valley is in the south and the warmest part is in the north.

Hicke: Yes. Does each vineyard manager then decide when to irrigate?

Sbragia: Well, the way Bob Steinhauer set it up, each sub-area of the Napa Valley has a manager. Two or three vineyards would be managed by one man. The manager has a lot of authority over his or her own vineyards. He has an assistant manager and they work the vineyards with a crew. They also usually pick the vineyard with a harvest crew. We try not to put two crews together, because when they are hired, they feel they have a claim on those vineyards, so you have to watch the psychology of the harvest.

We also have a vineyardist who works with the managers. He keeps up on all the latest techniques and pesticides. He's kind of like a mini-consultant.

Hicke: Full time?

Sbragia: Full time.

Hicke: And does Bob taste the wines?

Sbragia: We try to taste as much as we can. The problem is that as we grew, everybody is busy. I feel it is necessary for us to get together multiple times a year and look at every location and see how we're doing. Bob knows exactly what I want now because we've been together for such a long time. Working together as a team makes us better than we would have been by ourselves.

Hicke: And you developed this early, I take it?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: So that you are very close.

Sbragia: We are planting a new vineyard, so we are going to walk that vineyard a lot to figure out what we want to do.

Hicke: Who decides on the new varieties to plant?

Sbragia: I think you have to look at the vineyard and what it can produce. In the past when I first got to Beringer, we had every variety on every vineyard from Napa to Calistoga. What we found is that in certain places certain varieties grow well and certain varieties don't. Over the last twenty-five years, I've seen a fair amount of change with T-budding and grafting over to the right varieties. Planting is also tied to what people want to buy. For example, if you make 100,000 cases of Viognier these days, you probably won't sell it because nobody knows how to say it and it's a new variety.

Hicke: [laughs] Let alone spell it.

Sbragia: Early on, nobody knew Merlot; it was just a blender. Now, next to Chardonnay, it's the most popular wine. The challenge is to find the right place to grow it, to make a really good wine. You can plant it in the wrong place and make a mediocre wine, and I feel that with time only the good to excellent vineyards will survive.

In the late eighties and nineties, we have had to replant because of phylloxera. It was an economic burden, but we were able to plant the right grape variety in the right place. For instance, at Bale Lane, where the Bale Mill is, we used to have Chenin Blanc. It was a good place for Chenin Blanc, but we needed a warmer place for Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc, so we replanted it to Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc. It's one of our major vineyards for our Napa Valley Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc.

Hicke: So first it's market driven, and then it's--

Sbragia: If you have a great piece of land on Howell Mountain, you've got to plant Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc--Bordeaux varieties--or maybe Zinfandel. You could put in Chardonnay, maybe, if you were short on Chardonnay and you needed Chardonnay, but it would be a travesty. There are great Chardonnays coming off the mountain, but it's kind of like: what do you want to make, the best Merlot ever made, or a pretty good Chardonnay?

You need to plant what is going to make the best wine. Now, if you make the best Gewürztraminer in the whole world, then you're probably planting in the wrong place. [laughter] Then again, a Gewürztraminer is real good, if you wanted to make it, and we want to be able to sell up to 100,000 cases. It's very difficult to do that without a lot of promotion, so it all depends on what the winery wants to sell. I think in a lot of cases where people have done it well, either they concentrated on what they did really well, and just waited it out, and produced a niche for themselves, or they sought out the locations that made what they really wanted make, and that's what I see today. People wanting to make very good Pinot Noir are planting near the Sonoma Coast, a new area along the ocean.

Hicke: Russian River?

Sbragia: No, it's actually called the Sonoma Coast. It's about two ridges back from the ocean, probably three to five miles, up on the ridgetops. Cool climate, but it doesn't really freeze, so it is suited to grapegrowing.

Hicke: Right. But not a lot of sun, probably.

Sbragia: Well, I don't know. There's a lot of fog, but then there are days when it's raining here and it's clear at the ocean.

Vineyard Properties

Hicke: That leads into one thing I wanted to ask you about, which was your vineyards and the acquisition, how they were acquired, why they were acquired--the ones that have been newly acquired since you came. I have a list of the vineyards, if you want it.

Sbragia: Yes, well, if you go through the list--

Hicke: And also, what's important about the vineyard? Like the soils and the--

Sbragia: Well, where they started was Home Vineyard, here.

Hicke: Okay, that's in St. Helena.

Sbragia: Yes. St. Helena. That's been ours for 125 years. They founded Beringer Brothers on the St. Helena property in 1876.

Hicke: What's on it?

Sbragia: It's all Cabernet. When I got here in the seventies it was Cabernet, but scattered through the vineyard were some Zinfandel and Petite Sirah.

Hicke: Carignane?

Sbragia: Carignane, or early Burgundy--all these varieties. But it was predominantly Cabernet. It tasted like Cabernet when you crushed it, so it was probably 80 to 90 percent of one variety, but they interspersed other varieties throughout the vineyard.

Knight's Valley has also been a vineyard that was the Beringers' for a long time. I think they bought it in the sixties.

Hicke: And that's huge, isn't it?

Sbragia: Yes. Knight's Valley was on the west side of Highway 128. The east side of 128 used to be called the Foote Ranch, which we leased from the Footes. They were a family from Knight's Valley. We bought the vineyard in the early eighties. We have made a Knight's Valley Cabernet Sauvignon since 1976.

Hicke: Why did you buy it?

Sbragia: A lot of times we start with a long-term lease with an option to buy if they decide to sell. So there's still a lot of those leased, with options to purchase.

Hicke: It's the individual who owns it?

Sbragia: Yes, or sometimes a vineyard is a combination of four or five leases. Big Ranch Road is three or four people that own but have leased us the land. It is a long-term lease. Basically you lease the land and the grapes belong to you, but when the lease is up, the improvements go back to the owner. Usually the leases are thirty-five to fifty years. All ours have been thirty-five to fifty-year leases.

Hicke: And are the grapes replanted regularly on all these?

Sbragia: Yes. For instance, State Lane was one of ours that I talked about.

Hicke: Yes, did you acquire that?

Sbragia: No, we actually didn't acquire it, the person who owns it decided not to sell. He planted grapes, but he was going to sell us the grapes. So, of the 2,800 acres, we own about half of them and half of them are long-term leases.

Hicke: And you can make all the decisions, if you've got a long-term lease? You own the grapes, as you say.

Sbragia: Yes. You control. So starting at the top, Bale Lane is, as I talked about, Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. It's relatively deep soil and warm climate and does really well. The fruit has got a lot of this tropical character and ripe melon characters. It doesn't have the grassy, herbaceous character that you get out of colder climate Sauvignon Blanc.

Moving up the valley here, Chabot. Chabot was our first private reserve vineyard. It was called the Lemmon Ranch when they first got it. Actually it used to go to Louis Martini and it was in their Special Select. The reason we got it was that we were looking for a vineyard to use as a private reserve, and we said we'd put the name on the label. Chabot is about a mile and a quarter northeast of the winery, off of Glass Mt. Road. It's in a place called Glass Mountain, with huge black obsidian deposits.

I remember going there with my son. My son was born in 1979, so he was about eight. He had to make a prehistoric tool, and I said, "I know a good place," so we went up there. He wanted me to get these big boulders, so we dug out these boulders and brought them home. Then we tried to make a prehistoric tool, and after about four hours of chipping, knocking, and throwing, we chipped out a wedge and I said, "This'll work." But it gave me a whole new respect for prehistoric man. Making a tool was not that easy.

Hicke: I often wondered what they used to chip off the chips. The same thing?

Sbragia: Harder rocks, I think. But what the obsidian does is the black rock absorbs the heat during the day and then lets it off at night, affecting the temperature of the vineyard. It is pretty restrictive soil. The crop is very small and wines intense. It produces really good, rich Cabernet Sauvignon.

It's still owned by a woman named Suzanne Bucherey, who I think is Remi Chabot's great-granddaughter. Remi Chabot started a winery called Chateau Remi there, which did not reopen after Prohibition. They are also the Chabots of Chabot College and Chabot Lake in Oakland. Chabot has always been called Chabot. But we called it Lemmon Ranch because of Mr. and Mrs. Lemmon. They divorced many years ago. She continued to sell us the grapes. In the mid-eighties she signed a long-term lease.

Hicke: Is it hillside?

Sbragia: Yes, it's hillside. It's about 800 feet. It's rolling foothills. This is another long-term lease.

Hicke: Yes, okay.

Sbragia: Bale Lane is the Sauvignon-Sauvignon Blanc we talked about.

Then going south, I think the next vineyard is Gamble Ranch. Gamble Ranch is mostly Chardonnay. There was a lot of Cabernet when I first got to Beringer, and that was one of those mistakes.

In 1968, Bank of America did a report and I think it's one of these reasons that the wine business got jump-started, because everyone planted a vineyard. At that point I remember Cabernet being as high as $1,000 a ton. The price dropped down probably four or five years later, in the mid-seventies. I think it was down to $300 to $500 a ton. There were huge surpluses. Gamble was more suited to Chardonnay than Cabernet. It was too cold, and they planted the deeper soils on the property. Now we've planted Merlot and Cabernets in the real rocky parts of it and the Chardonnay is in the deeper soils. It produces my best Chardonnays. Rich butter, citrus wines.

Hicke: The Bank of America report was over-optimistic about wine consumption, right?

Sbragia: It was over-optimistic, and they also pushed Cabernet. So people planted Cabernet everywhere. Again, you know, you've got to grow it in the right place, if you plant it in the wrong place, it makes a herbaceous, nasty wine. That also happened in the Central Coast; they planted in the wrong places in Santa Barbara County. They planted Cabernet, it had bell pepper flavors. It was just too cold for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Hicke: No wonder there was a surplus. [laughs]

Sbragia: The next one, Dos Rios, is a relatively new vineyard. It is owned by Silverado Partners. One of the members of Silverado Partners is Mike Moone. I have mentioned him in this book. Mike was the president when I became winemaker here. He left in 1990. He had been a sales manager. He and his partners started an investment group. They buy vineyards and this is one of them. It is similar to Gamble Ranch. It is younger, so it's still improving.

Hicke: What's planted there?

Sbragia: It's got Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet, and Cab Franc. The Chardonnay is really good, the Cabernet is good, because just down the road is State Lane. It's interesting. As bedrock comes down from the mountain on the east side of the Valley, in certain areas you'd dig down two or three feet and hit rock, whereas other places you can go twenty feet. So I think a lot of the deep soil is alluvial from the rivers and the shallow soils are where the mountain ends.

Hicke: Yes, but you don't know until--

Sbragia: Well, again, it goes back to being site-specific. You really can't make assumptions of what you want to plant. You have to look at the soil and the climate and the location and really look at what people are doing around you. If you're the first person in there, you almost need to really do some testing before you just indiscriminately plant.

There's another vineyard called State Lane and it has Chardonnay on it. It is very much like Gamble--rich soils. There's Cabernet on a portion of it, too. The property was sold so we will now buy off the property.

Moving south, you get to Yountville Ranch, a Beringer-owned property. It's all Chardonnay. It and Gamble and State Lane are the mainstay of our private reserve. Occasionally a little bit of the Sbragia Limited comes from either State Lane or Yountville. All three--Gamble, Yountville, and State Line--have made the Sbragia Limited Reserve. Those are what I call the warmer vineyards. They produce a butter, citrus character, and a more dense, more viscous mouth feel. When I tasted the Chardonnays twenty years ago, that was what I expected from a Napa Valley Chardonnay.

As we move south, the next vineyard we'd hit would be Big Ranch Road and then the Hudson Ranch, which are relatively close to each other. Big Ranch is on Big Ranch Road. The climate is colder. They have more fruit, more of a tropical character--pineapple and pineapple-apple characters. They are more elegant.

Hicke: Chardonnay?

Sbragia: Chardonnay. These are all predominantly Chardonnay. Recently Merlot was planted both at Gamble and Big Ranch Road. We also planted some Pinot Noir at Big Ranch Road. There was Pinot Noir there when I first started at Beringer. We just weren't very happy with it. So we stopped making Pinot Noir in '84 and we just started again in '96, I think for the same reasons as Cabernet. They're all planted in the right place, and what I get now is much better. We bought land in the Carneros and are planting it to Pinot Noir.

We have Hudson and Big Ranch, and they produce more tropical Chardonnays. Big Ranch Road is a little colder, a little more tighter-knit.

Hicke: You're talking about the soil or the wine?

Sbragia: The wine.

Hicke: Okay.

Sbragia: I think it's mostly climatic differences, just the way the air flows down that valley.

Hicke: It's interesting, those microclimates.

Sbragia: As you swing around to the west side of Napa, we have a vineyard that is very similar to the Carneros, called Linda Vista. That's all Chardonnay also, and it produces more of a Carneros style wine: a little tighter structure, a lot of that green apple and pineapple characteristic. It has made some very fine wines.

Hicke: Is that a vineyard designate?

Sbragia: No, it's not. Linda Vista is also leased property. One I forgot is a new vineyard, just south of St. Helena on the Silverado Trail. It is about the same height as Chabot, 800 feet. It is named Quarry. It got its name from the old stone quarry on the property. Quarry is a leased vineyard, and it has white soil--volcanic, tuffa. It is planted to Cabernet and Cabernet Franc. The young Cabernet is very aromatic. It will be a reserve candidate when it gets older.

Hicke: And no grapes were planted on it when you bought it?

Sbragia: There were grapes planted on it. It was an old Zinfandel vineyard.

Hicke: Yes, so you didn't worry about the grapes that were on it.

Sbragia: Right.

Back to the Carneros. The next vineyard would be Stanly Ranch. Stanly is predominantly Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, with just a little bit of Merlot. Stanly Ranch was purchased from Martini Winery. It was bought about five years ago. It is the vineyard where Louis Martini did all the propagation of his selections of Chardonnay. We saved all his selections.

Hicke: Why did they sell it?

Sbragia: If you go back to the early nineties when we were at war with Iraq and in a recession, money became very tight and banks stopped loaning companies money for operating expenses. The family needed cash so they sold a vineyard.

Hicke: Are you making any use of the selections, or are you just saving them?

Sbragia: We're saving them. We are planting new clones of Chardonnay from the Dijon clones. They are coming in from Oregon. The nursery has done all the propagation and studies to make sure they don't have viruses. We planted multiple rootstock--multiple clones.

The last vineyard is a new piece that we're developing now. It has never been in grapes before. The Grace-Benoit property in Sonoma Carneros.

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Sbragia: The northeastern corner of the property is going to be planted in Chardonnay, and it's one parcel away from the Durrell Ranch, which is already a pretty renowned Chardonnay vineyard. We're planting Pinot Noir, mostly, and then one little block of Syrah.

Hicke: Plain old Syrah?

Sbragia: Plain old Syrah. [laughs]

Hicke: Have you made any wine from that, yet?

Sbragia: No, it's just--it's just being planted now, it's just being staked, actually. And I forgot a couple of vineyards. We didn't go up the top of Howell Mountain, and we didn't go to Spring Mountain.

So right around St. Helena, we've leased the Marson Vineyard, which is on Spring Mountain. If you go essentially from St. Helena and you go up the hill on the western side, it is Cabernet and Merlot and Cab Franc, and one little hill of Syrah. The first vintage of Syrah will be 1997. We will bottle some Marson Cabernet separately. It was a component of the 1997 Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

Two of our best vineyards are Bancroft and Trè Colline Ranches. They are situated directly east up at the top of Howell Mountain. Bob Steinhauer just happened to inquire about the ranch at the right time, when the grapes were just ready to be sold. We contracted it and first crushed fruit in 1986. That first crop, small as it was, went into the Private Reserve. It has made the Private Reserve ever since.

Then in 1987 I started bottling the Merlot separately, the Bancroft Howell Mountain Merlot. It's one of the most intense Merlots that you'll find from the Napa Valley. I use the Cab Franc as a blender in Merlot and Cabernet.

For the millennium I blended some of the Cab Franc from there and from our Trè Colline vineyard. The blend is 95 percent Cab Franc and 5 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. We called the millenium wine Third Century, since we started in the 1800s and went through the 1900s and now we're in the 2000s. We've been in operation in three centuries. Walt Klenz, the president of the company, came up with the name Third Century. We were all scratching our heads for a name and when we heard it, we all liked it immediately.

Hicke: Yes, it's great.

Sbragia: So it's a Cab Franc, and I'm going to keep on making Third Century.

Hicke: How is it received?

Sbragia: Quite well. The wine was bottled in an Italian bottle. It looks like it's a bigger bottle, and it's so thick and heavy that when it's empty you're not sure. If you're in a dark room, you can't see through it. You're saying, is it empty yet? Is there more wine? We may lighten up the bottle a little bit but use the same design.

Hicke: Who chose the bottle? And how was that decision made?

Sbragia: Actually one of the people in marketing.

Hicke: It's a marketing decision.

Sbragia: Yes. I try to stay out of those decisions.

Bancroft is interesting in that the front part of the property is tuffa soil made of white volcanic ash. It's not the red soil or the decomposed volcanic lava flows, it's actually the ash that fell down and has turned into rock. The surface has worn and formed a shallow layer of topsoil. It's two to three feet deep. The rocks cracked so the vines can go deep and get water. The vineyard is drip irrigated, but it is mainly used to get the vineyard growing in its first two or three years. In contrast, Trè Colline is this bright red soil--iron deposit soil. Trè Colline is a little tighter and more angular. The back half of Bancroft, where the Merlot is planted, is also red soil.

Hicke: Does every vineyard on Howell Mountain produce outstanding wine?

Sbragia: Yes. It's just a perfect place to grow Bordeaux grapes.

Hicke: Too bad they can't clone Howell Mountain! [chuckles]

Sbragia: Yes, one of the challenges for the wine business is that as environmental concerns increase, it becomes almost impossible to clear mountainsides to plant more vineyards. The local population doesn't want to see big houses on the hillsides or a lot of vineyards. If you could tuck the vineyard into a little valley, and not cause any erosion, probably you can get a permit for a vineyard. Today, you're not going to be able to knock down trees any more.

It becomes increasingly difficult to develop a vineyard. You have to do environmental impact studies and see what it does to the water table and what it does to the little streams and even if the guy who owned it before you dug that ditch, now Fish and Game [Department] is going to take control of that ditch. There are multiple agencies involved, and it's not an easy thing to plant vineyard any more. People have made mistakes and made the situation worse. They didn't pay attention to the environment. It was just an eyesore and they turned the public against them and the rest of the industry.

Hicke: So everybody pays for that.

Sbragia: And then they polluted the water supply or erosion filled in reservoirs that the municipal governments had paid lots of money to build, and they angered the local politicians, so all the city environmental groups and local politicians were all up in arms from a couple of guys that made a mistake.

There was one man who planted a vineyard on West Dry Creek, and it was a big pasture. It had been cleared before, and there were a couple of stands of trees, so it didn't look as big as it was. He cut down all the trees and just planted vineyard and stuck a big house right in the middle of it. He broke all the rules. And it's very ugly, actually, I have to agree, because I see it from my back yard.

If he had just left the tree lines that were there already, he could have probably had 90 percent of the vineyard and he could have put his house behind one of those tree lines and

still took a couple of trees out so he had a view off his deck, and no one would have noticed.

[tape interruption]

Sbragia: Bancroft and Trè Colline, Chabot and St. Helena Ranch, are the core of the Private Reserve program. Howell Mountain vineyard is 50 to 60 percent of the Private Reserve.

In '94 we started bottling single vineyards. I used to do it for myself--only a couple of cases each. We bottled each vineyard, 200 cases of each, so it's our reserve vineyards series. As nice as the individual vineyards are, the Private Reserve is our best wine. That's what private reserve's all about, but having the little vineyard bottlings is really interesting.

We have an open house at the winery twice a year, one in the spring and one in the fall. People have come religiously the last four or five years. We call them the wine openers.

Hicke: Is that the stock owners?

Sbragia: No, that's different. We send out notices and the event sells out. Last April we had 500 people at the winery. I keep the single vineyards in barrels for two years and in the bottle for two years, rather than a normal, one-year release, so they're much anticipated. People can buy them only at the winery. There are such small amounts, it really doesn't make sense to send them out in distribution, because everybody wants them. This way everyone can at least buy one bottle of it. They can try them first with the great dishes prepared by our chef, Jerry Comfort.

Hicke: This is for wine club members or something?

Sbragia: We don't have a wine club yet. It's an open house party.

Hicke: Oh, so anybody can come if they can get on the internet fast enough?

Sbragia: Yes, if they know it's going to happen.

Hicke: So you have another one in September, October, or something like that?

Sbragia: Yes, in September. It's a great way of getting wines to the public. It gets people to come and see the winery. I know from my point of view, when I visit a winery, I always remember it. From that point on I always looked on a wine list for how much they're selling for, and if there are any articles I'll always be sure to read about them, because I know the people there. So when they visit and taste our wines with the food, they go away friends of the winery.

Hicke: There's a halo effect from those wines. They're looking for other Beringer wines, too, probably.

Sbragia: Sure. These vineyards are definitely added to the private reserve and I think the new ones, Marston and Quarry, possibly could be in the future.

Hicke: Okay. We'll stop for the day.

Ed Rossi, Jr.

[Interview 4: March 1, 2000] ##

Hicke: We want to go back one more time and talk about Ed Rossi, Jr.

Sbragia: Right. Ed Rossi, Jr. I personally knew Ed Rossi, Jr., at church when I was growing up in Healdsburg. His kids and I went through St. John's Catholic School; he was a member of the parish. Pietro Rossi started the Italian Swiss Colony, I don't know, probably the same time Beringer started Beringer in the 1870s. The interesting thing is in the late 1800s, early 1900s, my grandfathers on both my mom's and dad's sides came over and then brought their families over. Mom and Dad were born here. My grandfather returned to Italy when my father was nine months old. He returned with his two brothers in 1927. His first job was at the Italian Swiss Colony. Pietro Rossi had just died. He died in an accident with a horsecart, run over with a team of horses.

My father went to work there in 1927. Myron Nightingale, my mentor at Beringer, was the winemaker in the fifties. Beringer purchased Italian Swiss Colony in 1986, so my history is tied to that place.

Hicke: You definitely have to read that little book by Jack Florence.[2]

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: I'm sure it's around somewhere.

Sbragia: Pietro had two sons, and one was Edmund--Edmund, Sr. Edmund, Jr. was the man that Myron knew and worked with when he worked there. I think it was the time when National Distillers owned Italian Swiss Colony and Myron worked for National Distillers and later Schenley. He had always been a very kind and gentle man, and also he ran the research program for United Vintners. When I got into the wine business it was United Vintners, and it eventually sold off to a grape co-op--Allied Grape Growers.

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[2]Jack W. Florence, Sr., *Legacy of a Village*, 1999.

But United Vintners at the time was a big company, as big as Gallo. For instance, we used to call them the universities: either you went to the University of United Vintners or the University of Gallo. [laughter] I chose to go to the University of Gallo.

Hicke: They trained a lot of people in the industry.

Sbragia: They trained a lot of people. A lot more people than you'd think went to work at either one or the other. It was a good place to get a job and work cellars, winemaking, the labs or the production. It was a good starting place for a lot of people.

Back to Ed Rossi. I remember my first tour of Asti; we went up and saw the laboratories, they were researching champagne closures. I remember seeing corks stuck in the ceiling. They were looking at the pressures in bottles and everything to do with quality control. But I was amazed. I think it was probably one of the first times I'd walked into a winemaking lab, and I was impressed. He was always very kind to me and gentle.

Hicke: Stimulated your interest a bit, maybe?

Sbragia: Yes. One interesting note. I was a good Italian boy, I learned how to play accordion from the time I was seven, so by the time I was fourteen I was pretty good, and once during harvest they were having a big family reunion.

Hicke: The Rossis?

Sbragia: Yes, Ed Rossi called me up, said, "Could you play the accordion for us?" So I went, and all the Rossi clan was running around. In fact, I later became good friends with Carlo Rossi, the other brother's grandson. I sat there and played the accordion while they all had the party; they even danced and sang songs. I played a lot of old Italian songs. Later I heard the great-grandmother lean over and say, "Whose little boy is he?" [laughter]

Hicke: Yes, that's great. Just one of the Rossis.

Sbragia: Ed Rossi died not too long ago. He was a gentleman, and Myron always talked of him in very high terms. He was a good man.

VII WINEMAKER AT BERINGER

Assuming the Responsibility, 1984

Hicke: I think I might go back again to 1984 when you became the winemaker. Tell me how that happened and then what changes.

Sbragia: I was interviewed and hired by Dick Maher, the president, after Guy Kay, the vice president-operations, and Myron Nightingale, winemaster, interviewed me. I got the job as assistant winemaker on August 9, 1976. I worked for Myron. Just before Thanksgiving in 1983 Dick Maher called me. He said, "I thought you might want to tell this to your wife, Janie, as a pre-holiday present. I'd like to congratulate you on being winemaster for Beringer Vineyards."

I was totally surprised--I had no idea they were going to do that. Myron hadn't told me he was thinking about retiring.

I was a little saddened in that I already had the best job in the wine industry. Working for Myron was great. He let me do a lot of things on my own. I got to go on a couple of trips to Europe. I went on P.R. trips, places where you got to stay for three or four days and just pour wine and do a couple of seminars, instead of being in two towns a day for five days. And I got to do a lot of hands-on winemaking. It was just a great time for me, but all of a sudden, my life changed.

Hicke: But the good news is you probably were up with your wife in salary when you made winemaster!

Sbragia: Finally. [laughter] Finally caught up with her. And actually at that point we were just starting to have kids. We had two. My little boy was born in 1979.

Hicke: Adam?

Sbragia: He is at UCLA his third year. My daughter, Gina, was born in 1983, and so my wife basically stopped working full time. She runs camps for developmentally disabled children

for Easter Seal, so she still works in the summers only. The kids grew up on camps during the summer, which is a great life.

That first year was actually very rough, because I didn't have an assistant, and the person that had been kind of my right-hand person as an enologist was the lab manager, and we needed to hire a new lab manager before we could bring him in as assistant winemaker.

Hicke: Who was that?

Sbragia: That's David Schlottman. David later went on to build a brand called Napa Ridge, which actually the company just sold.

Hicke: Yes. We can get into that later.

Sbragia: Yes. That first year also I had to do management reports and they were all handwritten and I didn't have a secretary. I had to travel probably ten weeks that year just because Myron and I traveled together a lot to make sure everybody knew that things weren't going to change. A lot of people had seen me before, but they didn't really know me very well, and trust is built in the trade by someone just showing up on a regular basis and doing events for them and coming in when they need you to come in.

Hicke: You're talking about distributors?

Sbragia: Distributors and retailers in markets. After a while they get to know you. Myron had been in the business over thirty years. They know the name, they know the man; they know when he says something, he does it. If he doesn't think he has a good wine, he won't talk about it. He won't tell them he has a good wine. That credibility is something that is not easily given, so we had to start earning credibility. I got out there and started talking a lot.

At the same time, two of my other enologists that had been around for a long time decided to leave. One went to work at Buena Vista as winemaker and another one went to work at Souverain. This was before we bought Souverain.

Hicke: You were training a few on the side, yourself.

Sbragia: So all of a sudden I had two new enologists. The harvest of '84 was difficult. I felt like I did it all by myself, though that wasn't true. It felt good. It felt good because we did it and we got by and the wine was good.

Hicke: Looking back on it, that is?

Sbragia: It felt good at the time. But then I settled in, David came in as assistant winemaker, and he's an excellent winemaker.

Napa Ridge Brand

Sbragia: In 1984 we started Napa Ridge, and came out on the market with it in 1986.

Hicke: Was that his idea or yours, or a combination?

Sbragia: It was actually a combined idea between all of us and marketing. At the time there was a lot of bulk wine on the market, from all over the North Coast; I remember Chardonnay was selling for three dollars a gallon. Now it's twenty dollars a gallon. So you could put together a very decent wine from coastal valleys, a premium wine, but sell it at a lower price. That was an opportunity that we jumped on, and David had quite an influence as the winemaker for Napa Ridge.

Hicke: We might as well follow that through to the end.

Sbragia: I told him, "David, you worked with marketing and you developed it and I just came in and tasted once in a while; it's yours, you make it."

Hicke: So that was his.

Sbragia: Yes. At a certain point then I hired another assistant winemaker, because David was very busy.

Hicke: Yes, and who was that?

Sbragia: I promoted a man named Tom Peffer. Tom came out of research. In 1984 we had started a research program, and I had hired a man named Ron Bunnel as research enologist. Then in 1985 Tom came as assistant research enologist. It took a year to get David out of being a lab manager, and in 1985 I promoted Tom to assistant winemaker.

Ron actually went to work with Myron, who was still doing Los Hermanos; his title was winemaker emeritus after he retired. Myron taught Ron Los Hermanos and eventually, when we bought Souverain in 1986, Ron went to Souverain as assistant winemaker and he took Los Hermanos with him.

Los Hermanos was a jug wine brand that was very popular and helped the winery to stay profitable in the late seventies and early eighties.

Tom was Ron's research enologist. Then he went from research enologist to assistant winemaker, it was it was a big jump. He just left a couple of years ago. He went to Kendall Jackson, and he's going to be the red winemaker for Cordonelle, or whatever name they come up with for their property in Napa Valley. He's a very good winemaker.

Changing Ownership

Hicke: Yes, good training, again. Whom were you reporting to?

Sbragia: In 1984, Dick Maher decided to go to Seagram's. We were owned by Nestlé, and a man named Jim Biggar, the president of Nestlé, interviewed with the top management of our company, three people. And a man named Mike Moone, who was vice president of sales, got promoted.

I was winemaker for a month or so, when Mike called me in and said, "Ed, you're the guy. I'll tell you one thing. I'll never let you down, but don't let me down, either." That was the only thing he said. It was a great time, because Mike was instrumental in purchasing Souverain and Asti in 1986 and also getting Chuck Ortman to come and work for us. In 1984 and 1985 Chuck had been tasting wine with me. He was consulting with me on Chardonnay. I was transitioning from steel fermentation to total barrel fermentation in the Chardonnay. Chuck Ortman was one of the first winemakers to work in what we called a boutique winery in the early seventies. He was the winemaker for Spring Mountain, and that same year Freemark Abbey started up. They were the first two new little wineries to pop up in the Napa Valley.

Chuck then left there and was consultant for twelve different wineries including Far Niente and St. Clement. I figured if anybody knew different techniques of small lot winemaking, Chuck was the guy. He was actually very conservative, and I was a little bit more open to change.

One of the things that you worried about in Chardonnay is that if it sits on the lees too long, you end up with reduction H_2S. But if the juice is relatively clean and there's nothing bad--like botrytis or rot--the yeast lees actually are a preservative. Yeasts break down, they use up oxygen. The enzymes that are naturally present in the yeast are actually a protector. They add a little bit of viscosity, especially if you stir the lees. They also add a yeasty-nutty character. I wanted to leave the barrels on lees until December and then rack them off. It would be nice to leave them until they finish malolactic, which is usually in the spring. We kept on trying these things and eventually I found that I could leave the barrels on lees until it was time to pull them out and blend the wines in July.

This really made sense now! We could press, settle the juice, put it in a barrel, ferment and age. Leave it in that barrel the whole time, take it out, blend it, put it in the bottle. So the barrel is the container the white wine is in for most of its life in the winery. It makes a lot of sense for production. The wisdom of the old Burgundian techniques became clear to me. They didn't have stainless steel; they had a press, and the only thing they had to store in was the barrels. The juice went directly from the press to the barrels, and from the barrels directly to the bottle. They didn't have any tanks to blend in. This technique saved a lot of resources, at the same time making a better wine.

We had a lot of stainless steel. Common practice was to ferment clean juice in temperature-controlled jacketed stainless steel tanks. We realized that maybe we didn't need to do what we thought was going to be squeaky clean, but maybe we could get by with leaving wine on its yeast lees, which was unheard of. If the yeast lees were clean, and you stirred the lees, you wouldn't get an anaerobic situation at the bottom of the barrel. It's the same thing that happens in a pond--putrification and a lot of odor--so you would actually keep it aerobic. But the excess air would be taken up by the yeast, so the wine would be protected.

It is a great way of making wine. I eventually came to the conclusion that I would go beyond what Chuck had suggested. Mike Moone came to me and said Chuck had a brand called Meridian. He wanted to buy the brand and hire Chuck to be the winemaker. The Meridian brand's new home was to be at the recently purchased Estrella Vineyards in Paso Robles in the Central Coast. We had our eyes on about 6,000 acres of grapes in the Central Coast to buy for this new brand, Meridian. I said, "Go for it." You know, "You've got my blessing, not that you need it. You're the boss." [laughter]

Hicke: It's been a huge success.

Sbragia: Chuck worked for me for a couple of years, but then he reported directly to Mike Moone. It's grown into a huge winery.

Hicke: Yes, another brilliant pupil.

Sbragia: Really high-quality wine.

Hicke: Yes, it's really good and it's not all that expensive, either.

Sbragia: No, they make some expensive wines, but most of their wines are in the ten- to twelve-dollar range.

Hicke: Yes, a wonderful buy.

Sbragia: It's great wine and the vineyards are just gorgeous. Santa Barbara and Paso Robles are really pretty: rolling hills, and there are some vineyards where you can see the ocean. White Hills is only seven miles from the ocean--very cold climate, really fruity, because you get warm afternoon sun but cold evenings.

Hicke: Chardonnay and--

Sbragia: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Hicke: Pinot. Okay.

Sbragia: And what Ortman is actually planting is Pinot Gris or Pinot Grigio, which would be interesting.

Mike Moone started the Camelot Period, because he really expanded the vision of our winery. What we could do and what we could be.

Hicke: Was this under the name of Wine World Estates?

Sbragia: It was Wine World. It was that until just recently. Mike Moone left in 1990. His right-hand man was Walt Klenz. One of the reasons that Mike could do so much was because he had Walt in the background making sure that everything was right. Walt became president in 1990.

Walt is the third man I've worked for in twenty-four years. He has been really good to work for. He has his own style, but he knows everything that's happening in the company at all times. He's a genius. He's able to coordinate and control multiple things at the same time. Knowing wines, he's an excellent taster. That kind of brings you up to the present. In 1996 we bought St. Jean, right after we were sold to Mike Moone and his partners at Silverado Partners and Texas Pacific Group.

Hicke: I'm a little mixed up. When did Nestlé sell to somebody else?

Sbragia: In January of 1996. Mike Moone left Beringer and became the president of Stouffers Foods in 1990. He retired and started this group called Silverado Partners. Since he was way up in Nestlé, he knew that Nestlé was thinking about selling us, he intervened, because there were a lot of people vying for us. He had an investment group called Silverado Partners that I mentioned before. They actually owned a portion of the winery, and they got Texas Pacific Group to be the financier and the major stockholder. Together they bought the winery from Nestlé.

Hicke: Why did Nestlé sell it?

Sbragia: I think, like a lot of companies, Nestlé was trying to concentrate on what they did best. They are experts in food and juices. Wine was something they loved--especially the people in Switzerland. They loved having a winery. We were just out here doing our own thing, which we liked a lot. They gave us money and left us alone, which was great, but I think the days of just letting things go aren't happening any more.

Businesses are controlling their assets pretty tightly. Wall Street expects a certain return on investment capital. We are expected to make a certain percentage profit. The wine business is highly capital-intensive. You have to own land and vineyards,--especially in the premium sector,--to have the successes we have. So Texas Pacific, when they bought us in 1996, also bought St. Jean. In 1997 they bought Stags' Leap, and we went public a year and a half ago.

Hicke: I have 1997.

Sbragia: Yes, October 1997.

Hicke: Was Beringer making a profit?

Sbragia: Yes.

Hicke: Part of it was profitable?

Sbragia: Nestlé bought Beringer in '71, and for the first fourteen years we weren't making a profit. They supported us. In 1985, when Mike Moone was president, was the first year we turned a profit.

Hicke: Okay, just to finish this up, how did that IPO [Initial Public Offering] go, and what changes if any happened?

Sbragia: The IPO process was very interesting. From a production standpoint I don't think it changed us at all, other than there was an increase in available capital. In July of 1999 we bought San Clement. We bought more land in the Central Coast and started another brand called Beringer Founders Estate.

Hicke: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that.

Number and Quality of Wines

Sbragia: Land values and cost--we talked about how come wines are so expensive. Knight's Valley Cab, which sold for about ten dollars for almost my whole time here, is up in the mid-twenties now. Our Chardonnay, which was about the same price, is now sixteen dollars. So we had basically vacated a position where you could have wine by the glass, a banquet wine. Beringer had always had a lot of business in those areas. People were saying, "Well, why don't we have a Beringer wine we could drink every day?" I mean, I don't allocate twenty-five dollars a day for a bottle of wine and I'm a winemaker. Even in a boom time I think people are relatively more wise with their money than that. I may occasionally splurge on a twenty-five or fifty-dollar bottle of wine, but I don't drink those wines every day. They're looking at more value wine, so it is an opportunity, again, with all the vineyards we have, and the expertise and experience that we have in making wine to start another brand.

Hicke: You wanted a lower price niche?

Sbragia: Yes, we started on a nine- to ten-dollar wine called Beringer Founders Estate. It's California, so I could take grapes from all the coastal valleys like Monterey and Santa Barbara all the way up to Mendocino County. We make a Chardonnay and Merlot and a Cabernet, a little bit of Zinfandel and Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc, it's a full line. We're working on a Syrah, which will be fun. It was a new challenge and a lot of fun and a lot of work.

Hicke: And that came out of the IPO somehow?

Sbragia: Well, not necessarily. The IPO--I just think that since 1985 we've essentially been growing about 10 percent a year in volume. We've just steadily grown, and I think that's one of the reasons that we were considered a good investment. Our stock I think came out around twenty-nine and its been floating around forty for the last year or so, so it appreciated relatively quickly.

I think the stock market doesn't understand the wine business. It's an agricultural product and you just don't crank things out. It has seasonality and it has pests. It has disasters from mother nature, so it's not something they truly trust. They don't understand it, so any little thing that comes out like phylloxera or Pierce's disease they all start panicking and downgrading the wine business. Chalone, Beringer, Mondavi are the only premium wineries that are public now.

Hicke: Wine business can't respond to supply and demand, either. I think that's an interesting aspect. You only have so many grapes and so much wine, and that's it.

Sbragia: Yes. There are quality levels. And you know, one of the things that I think our focus is on, is that Beringer has been allowed by the consumer to make a five-dollar white Zinfandel and it's considered one of the best, all the way to a hundred-dollar Private Reserve. Having wines in all the different categories allows Beringer, because of its credibility, to give customers a choice. As long as I'm here, if it's in the bottle, it's going to taste good!

Hicke: I think that you must have one of the largest range of varietals and different kinds of wine of any winery.

Sbragia: Beringer does make a lot of wine, but now I have a lot of help. I have a winemaker who is responsible for the plant. She also has responsibility for the Beringer wines. She and I work together.

Hicke: What is her name?

Sbragia: Laurie Hook. She's really good. And we have an assistant for Beringer called Frank Johns. Ron Schrieve is winemaker for Founders Estate. He has an assistant for Founders Estate called Hughes Ryan. We have three enologists in the lab that are being trained to do more winemaking, so one enologist does stuck fermentations, one enologist does topping of barrels, and the third concentrates on methods of analysis. One of the things Myron told me, and I might have said it before, is "Attention to detail" and "To thy own self be true." That means if you know what's right, you've got to do it. So attention to detail is the first thing. What my dad said was, "Keep your barrels and tanks clean and full." That advice has always served me well.

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Sbragia: The basics of winemaking are sanitation and topping. Even with the best grapes in the world, you can make a bottle of vinegar or a bottle of sherry.

So with great vineyards and good people, we've been able to make good wines. I've been very happy being here.

Hicke: You have a lot of management responsibilities as well as winemaking.

Sbragia: Yes, after being here for twenty-four years, you do get some credibility in the company. I found that if you just hide in the winemaking lab and never come out, other people are going to make decisions for you as to what kind of equipment you use, what kind of people you get, and what kind of vineyard you buy. If you're not out there being part of it, someone else is going to do it. So at a certain point you take ownership of what you do if you want to be part of those decisions. So yes, I do have to do some of that. I think if you talked with the people I worked with, they say that I'm actually a fairly decent guy, [laughter] just hard to get hold of.

Other Beringer Brands

Hicke: I would subscribe to all of that. Let me ask you about some of the other things. You told me about most of these labels, but Maison Deutz, what's that?

Sbragia: I didn't have anything to do with that one; it was a champagne house we had. One of the things that happened just before we went public was we changed the name from Wine World to Beringer Wine Estates so that the identity of Beringer could rub off so people knew who we were, because no one knew who Wine World was.

Hicke: Yes, the Wine World name is so amorphous.

Sbragia: Yes, and we wanted people to know who we are and what we own, the whole group of wineries.

Part of Beringer Wine Estates is imported wines. We import wines from Italy, Gabbiano and Traveglini, a Chianti, a Gatenara. We also have a brand called Campanile, a Pinot Grigio.

Hicke: Those are Italian?

Sbragia: Yes, and we used to import Deutz Champagne, but they were sold, and so when they were sold we didn't get the line. But we had a partnership with Deutz and a landowner, so somebody owned the land and planted the grapes, Deutz did the winemaking, and we did the marketing. It was started in Santa Barbara--Maison Deutz. It was a really good

champagne. We sold our portion out, and then Duetz sold their portion, and the landowner bought it all and he changed the name and turned it into a still wine winery.

Hicke: I think, since we're on imports, you have some interests in Chile?

Sbragia: Yes, we also import a brand called Terapaca, and the winemaker is Sergio Correa. When I first met him I was invited to be an international judge at a wine competition, Vinale Internationale in Paris, which is part of an international organization of enologists. They do what they call *concours*, or tastings. They are worldwide tastings, so the judges come from all over the world. There are six or seven wine judges per table; it's very interesting.

My first jury or tasting group was with Sergio. There were people from Uruguay, Spain, Italy, and Greece. The president or the person who directs the group is usually French, and he or she keeps the notes.

We were speaking Spanish and Italian and French, my French is poor. [laughs] I can ask what is the variety, and that's about it. My Italian and Spanish are a lot better, so he translated the French back to me.

About a year later, we took on his Chilean brand, Terapaca. Sergio was a good friend. The winery is located in the Maipo Valley in Chile, a gorgeous place.

Hicke: Have you been down there?

Sbragia: I went last year. My first time. I really don't need to go. David Schlottman is in charge of outside winemaking. He usually goes. He has hired a traveling winemaker named Aaron Pott who now has been promoted to winemaker at St. Clement.

David doesn't make many trips; he has another job--exports. Usually we take what the supplier has to offer. Tarapaca was interested in what we like versus what they make for their own market. They wanted us to come and help them make their wines. We consult, we go in, but they do what they want. That's what I do with my consultants. [laughs]

Hicke: What does Beringer actually do with these? You buy it in bulk and bottle it?

Sbragia: No, no, the wines come in bottled, we're their importer.

Hicke: Oh, okay, and you distribute it.

Sbragia: And we market it. It goes through us to the distributors in the United States. We support the three-tier system.

Hicke: All right. Let me see what else we have here. Is there anything more to be said about Stags' Leap?

Sbragia: We bought it in 1997, and it was started I think in 1850. It's a pretty old winery. It was a stagecoach stop and then it was a hotel. It's in the Stags' Leap District.

Hicke: Who's the winemaker there?

Sbragia: The winemaker's name is Robert Brittan. He has been there for ten years. He's a really good winemaker. I think the wines are very, very distinct. It's a beautiful location.

Hicke: Well-known appellation.

Sbragia: Yes. It has a small cave that we are expanding; the caves are going to be gorgeous. I think one of the things we were able to do is help him upgrade the winery and the vineyard. We helped him replant because of phylloxera. We also helped him put in more stainless fermenters and storage. We upgraded the winery, because the past owner was thinking about selling and so wasn't spending much money.

It was very difficult for Robert. I think he's a great winemaker, and I see good things happening at Stags' Leap.

Hicke: Great. Now back to Napa Ridge. That was sold; do you want to tell me about that?

Sbragia: Well, with Meridian and Founders Estate, it's hard to focus on too many things that are at the same category. Meridian and Founders were about the same, and Napa Ridge was taking grapes away from us. We had limited resources, we felt that we couldn't do all three.

Hicke: Napa Ridge was coming in for a lot of criticism, too, I think, wasn't it?

Sbragia: I don't know if that was part of it. I think we could have handled that, but the major part was we just didn't have enough fruit to handle all the different brands, so we felt that we would be able to take that fruit and apply it to Meridian and Founders Estate.

Hicke: What about Castelo di Gabbiano? You mentioned that.

Sbragia: Yes, well, that is interesting. Gabbiano is in Tuscany, and it's an old estate. The castle was built in 1100 AD. Reno Arccieni is the owner. Reno and Ronelle, his wife, have two children, Annia and Ariella, and he has a wine named after each.

It's in the heart of Tuscany and produces Sangiovese; the vineyard has Merlot and Cabernet planted also. He does the super Tuscan, which is called Annia. They have a Reserva, a Chianti Classico, and a Chianti. They have the same kind of agreement with us as we have with Tarapaca. We import and sell their wines.

It's a gorgeous area. Since my family's from Lucca, about an hour from there, I go on a regular basis, and I'm kind of the California consultant--not that I know how to make Chianti, but I know how to make a red wine, so we're working on a super Tuscan. The

winemaker there--his name is Giancarlo Roman. He and I came up with a blend of Sangiovese and Merlot with just a little bit of Cabernet.

Hicke: There are some interesting things going on in Tuscany, aren't there?

Sbragia: Yes, and I think the laws have loosened up so that the wine doesn't all have to go through the Slovenian Bette. It's possible now to use barrels to make a more classically Bordeaux style. Not to say that that's the right way to make it. I think Chianti should still be made the same way, but if you're trying to make a little bit of a separate kind of wine from the property, then maybe you need to use more classic techniques that the Bordelaise would use.

We've had a couple of nice vintages--'95 and '97--and '95 is in the bottle, so it's been fun, going to make wine in another world.

Hicke: Yes. And then you just bought San Clement, which you mentioned.

Sbragia: Yes, San Clement has a very distinct style, very soft, accessible wines, beautiful wines, rich. We felt that it would be a good addition. With the replanting of all the vines in the Napa Valley, there will be more fruit available. It would be great to be able to run some of this fruit through San Clement, mainly a little more Chardonnay.

Hicke: It's on a hill, I think.

Sbragia: Yes, it doesn't have a lot of extra room.

Hicke: Is Beringer going to keep expanding like this?

Sbragia: I think they're looking at opportunities for wineries and vineyards. We just leased that Grace-Benoit property I talked about. It is in the Carneros region. We just bought an adjacent property in the central coast called Cat Canyon. We planted more Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. We are always open for more high-quality fruit.

Hicke: Then it will be Beringer Worldwide wine!

Sbragia: [laughs] Well, I think that there are a lot of opportunities, and as a company that is responsible to its stockholders, I think it wants to gain more value as time goes on. By adding little jewels, it adds value to our holdings. It actually gets more people in the system, and more people are tapped in terms of its funding.

All the winemakers and assistant winemakers get together twice a year. The last time we got together at Stags' Leap. They have little cabins there; it was a bed and breakfast at one time. They don't do that anymore, but we all stayed on the property and tasted wines. We brought out André Porcheret, a grand master from Burgundy. We all tasted Burgundy and talked about Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. We had a little symposium.

We had another man come over, Jean Louis Mondraux. He did a presentation on Bordeaux. Then a research enologist, Jane Robichaud, did a whole presentation on research wines. We tasted a number of experiments.

So it's a great meeting. We did one just recently at the Hudson House, our culinary center. It's a nice, big room with lots of windows. We got everybody together and actually did a lot of different tastings. I finished the day with a tasting of first growth Bordeauxs. Most people never have a chance to taste these wines. It was a great opportunity, so I got everybody to stay 'til the last minute.

Hicke: [laughter] Very clever.

Sbragia: That's right. So in total, we probably have as much expertise as you could find anywhere, and getting people together in a non-work situation where they're a little more relaxed, I think conversation starts to flow and a lot of learning happens.

Hicke: Also, it's such a large company, I should think it would be really helpful for people to be part of everything.

Sbragia: Yes, because Steve Rieder at St. Jean may be short a little Sauvignon Blanc, and we may have a little bit extra that we know we're not going to use, but we're just holding it. So he'll send an email saying, "Anybody got a Sauvignon Blanc that I can have? I need something that's a little grassy, or I need something fruity or I just need to finish it off," so I'll send him a sample and if he can use it, then we'll ship it over to him.

Hicke: Oh, that is really interesting.

Sbragia: Most people have their own grapes from harvest all the way through, but every once in a while there's an opportunity like this. In most cases everybody has their own wines. We don't go out and post guards on our blocks, but everyone respects that this is your block. No one is going to come in the night before and pick it and bring it to their winery--[laughter]--which I've heard happens at other wineries. So it builds friendship and camaraderie. And that's what it's all about.

Challenges of Winemaking at a Large Company

Hicke: That's great. I have an article here which was in the *Economist*, I don't know if you're familiar with that magazine.

Sbragia: I've heard of it.

Hicke: It was the Christmas edition that was about global wine industry, and their thesis is European winemakers believe in tradition and regulation; New World producers are keener

on technology, innovation, and consumer research. The New World approach is winning. He says--let me read you another paragraph: "Traditionalists assume that the growth in market share of large global wine companies is simply a depressing reflection of their large marketing budgets and an ability to supply wine in the quantities demanded by supermarkets. But there's another more encouraging explanation. Companies such as South Corp and Beringer are doing well because they are making good, consistent, reasonably priced wine, carefully tailored to consumers' tastes."

And so the question as a topic is: big companies versus boutique wineries and what are the challenges for you?

Sbragia: The distribution channels have consolidated, so instead of having ten wineries, they may have 400 wineries. To be important to them you need to put bread on their table. It's helpful being a little bit bigger and being in multiple locations. Then the distributor knows no matter where he is trying to sell your wine, he has a good shot of walking in and saying, "This winery has supply, it's consistent, it's not going to run out. It has wines at all levels--from a hundred-dollar bottle of wine to a five-dollar bottle of wine." It gives them a lot of options to sell.

Now, in our case, when we chose to enter the nine- or ten- dollar market, it allowed us to get on wine by the glass in restaurant and to get into multiple locations in that ten-dollar range where the upper end doesn't allow you. They market it differently. You almost need different sales forces. So being big allows you to do that, and when you're small, you can't. You get lost.

Hicke: Yes, sure. That's what they call branding?

Sbragia: Yes, so the whole success of Founders Estate is based on the fact that Beringer did make really good white Zin and also made really good private reserve Chardonnay and private reserve Cabernet. We're making really good wines that the consumer wants to drink.

Hicke: Yes, I think so.

Sbragia: The same thing applies with being in Europe. We're actually quite small outside the United States, but I think it's a goal to grow in terms of exporting wines, because we're turning into a global society. If you don't, someone else is, and then they'll be bigger than you and have more clout.

That's where the other little wineries come into play, too, because they all add up as a portfolio. It really is a whole package for the trade. When they walk in to a retail or on-premise establishment, they have little boutiques to bigger wineries that make really good wine. We have five-dollar white Zinfandel, ten-dollar wines, twenty-five-dollar wines, to hundred-dollar reserves.

Hicke: You don't have any jug wine.

Sbragia: No jug wines. I think jug wine is less than five dollars now. Those are box wines, and bag in a box and that kind of thing. That market is crumbling. I think we look at six and above as being the premium market. So I think when you look at the wine business, the luxury sector--around fifteen-dollar and above--is probably selling to maybe 10 percent of the wine drinkers. I look at the population and I don't know how many people drink wine, but it's not a huge percentage, it's not a majority, so therefore, the mass of people out there who drink wine are probably drinking the ten and under. If you want to sell wine to people that want to drink wine, I think you have to have wines in all categories.

Hicke: My question is that it's a very large company that makes very good wine. And a lot of people tell you that can't happen.

Sbragia: But it can. Kendall Jackson's proven that. I think we've proven that, that it's just a matter of attention to detail--having people pay attention to the little things every day.

The other thing: to be in a business like this in a company like ours, you must have a passion for wine. Personally, I have to make what I like, it has to come from the heart. It is really hard to make a wine that you don't like. So people with passion have to be in the business. A lot of the time, I can't make them go home. [laughter]

Hicke: They are very motivated.

Sbragia: I am always telling my staff, "Okay, you have to have another life. You've got to watch your kids grow up. You need to go home and take care of the pets. You can't live here."

I've had to make those same decisions because of my three kids. My little one is thirteen--Kevin.

Hicke: Tell me about him.

Sbragia: I didn't tell you about Kevin. Kevin went to my boss, Walt, the CEO, one day and he said, "You know, Walt, when I'm winemaker at Beringer, can my dad stay for a couple days to show me around?"

Hicke: [laughs] That is terrific.

Sbragia: He looked at me and said, "Great story."

Hicke: That is super.

Sbragia: He's a great kid.

Hicke: Well, another thing this article brought up was the so-called cult wineries like Screaming Eagle and so forth. Do you have any thoughts about how long they're going to be around or what happened there?

Sbragia: I think it's interesting. It's probably a product of a boom economy where there are some people with more money than they know what to do with. For instance, I think Screaming Eagle sells for about a couple hundred bucks.

Hicke: It tells in there. I think one of their bottles sold at auction for four thousand and something or other. I don't remember how much their wine is normally.

Sbragia: I think that they are charging rather high prices, but a lot of people are charging in the $150 to $200 range for a bottle of wine.

I've had some good cognacs that cost that much, too, so I think there's value in them. They're from specific little vineyards. They have really good winemakers that are making wonderful wines. The winewriters write sterling reviews and so now everyone wants to buy this wine. I was in Seattle in January and they were retailing Screaming Eagle for $1,200 a bottle. And they couldn't keep it on the shelf!

Hicke: That can only be for somebody to stand it on his coffee table or something!

Sbragia: It is the city of Microsoft!

Hicke: [laughs] That's true, so stand it on their computer.

Sbragia: They have lots of money to spend. I think that if those winemakers can take those vineyards and make them--over ten years, they can definitely establish a crown jewel.

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Hicke: So the key is how long they will stick around?

Sbragia: Yes, for the old-timers looking at these wines, one year we are not impressed, but if they can do it consistently, then we have to be impressed, because they have definitely made a wine that a lot of people want, that the wine writers love, that truly is a good bottle of wine. I wish they cost fifty dollars rather than $200.

I guess it goes back to how much money we allocate to something to drink? Ultimately wine is a great thing to make and it's a wonderful thing to talk about, but it is just something to drink. You know, we're not saving the world. If nothing else, we're kind of recreational therapists. A glass of wine with a good meal and a good friend can make the quality of your life go way up. If you do that on a regular basis, the stress level every day comes down and you live a lot longer, happier life and that's what wine's all about.

Oak Chips and Corks

Hicke: Yes, great. Well, I have a couple more questions. Oak versus oak chips is another discussion.

Sbragia: Oak is extracted at the same time as the young wine is beginning to age. It's young oak and young wine. Now the wine and the oak tannins both need some maturing, aging. When they do it together I think that it works really well. So however you add the oak, it has to be with a young wine. When you add it at the end, it kind of tastes like you've sawn a piece of wood, then thrown it in the tank.

The best place to get oak is from a new barrel. Oak chips and inserts, pieces of wood you slip inside the barrel, are cheaper alternatives, but not as good.

There are different flavors from different forests, from locations both in France and America. What's better, I think, it is a subjective choice. I'm used to French, so I tend to like French better than American, but if someone likes the taste of American oak--.

French is a lot more subtle than American. American's a little bit more heavy and more heavy-handed. Chips are the same thing. It's harder to control extraction. With a barrel you've got about the same extraction all the time, depending on how the staves are cut and the quality of the wood; whether or not it's been air-dried. It has a big effect on a barrel, so I'm sure it has a big effect on the wine.

There are no free lunches in this business. You get what you pay for. But as an alternative in a wine that you're selling for six dollars, maybe, it works well.

Hicke: Better than no oak at all.

Sbragia: Right, right. Or the oak is extracted and then you put it in the older barrel. That smooths out the extracted oak while the wine is aging in the barrel.

Hicke: So another level on a continuum.

Sbragia: Yes, it's not a new trick. There are even some really good brands that have used it with success. American oak's gotten better, alternate oak sources are getting better, people are spending more time making oak alternatives. They're taking good wood and air-drying it and then chopping it up. The new products are much improved.

They're making improvements in all levels, but I think that traditional winemaking techniques make the best wine. High-quality wine from a high-quality vineyard requires high-quality barrels.

Hicke: Yes. I'd like to ask you about corks, too.

Sbragia: I've been using corks for twenty-five years and they are a pain because of cork taint. There are multiple levels of corkiness. One cause is corks being bleached with chlorine. Chlorine binds with a cyclic compound, producing trichloralazanol, CA. It smells like moldy, musty water, and that's what corkiness is. That can happen if you use chlorine in the barrels or wooden tanks. In fact, people had corky wines that weren't in the bottle, it's the same process. That's why you don't usually use chlorine in association with wood.

Another cause is mold that gets in between the pores of the wood and has a pure moldy smell. Sometimes a very light case of corkiness makes the wine half the intensity it normally is. That's the most horrible type, because it just seems like the wine is not very good. When it is obviously corked--someone smells it, "Oh, my god," and they'll bring you another bottle. If there are a lot of them, we have to send them another case. I think as long as it's less than 1 percent, it's a pain, but you put up with it. We do a lot of cork controlling. We take every bale that comes in and statistically sample it.

Hicke: Every bale of corks?

Sbragia: It comes in bags of a thousand corks at a time. We are in a partnership with a cork-producer, so our quality control person goes all the way to Portugal and works with the people who actually buy the corks. We still buy from other companies, too.

Hicke: After you get done with corks, I want to hear about building your own barrels.

Sbragia: I didn't tell you about that?

Hicke: No.

Sbragia: That's just started in the past year. To finish corks, in the last ten years we've seen all sorts of plastic corks and synthetic corks and composite corks and ground-up corks that are bonded with glue. The major problem is that the synthetics don't seal as good as cork does. Cork has a certain compressibility that comes back, and if you compare it under a microscope, the number of pores in cork compared to those synthetics is a fraction--synthetic has a fraction of the pores. Cork has a lot more than the synthetics, so when they are compressed by the corker jaws, they don't seal. A major reason to cork wine in a bottle is to seal it so that air doesn't get in and wine doesn't get out. If they can't do that, then I don't want them. I'll just go with cork. We just work really hard at screening out the lots that have high levels of cork taint.

Cooperage

Hicke: Cooperage?

Sbragia: When I first got into the business, there was a guy named Keith Roberts working for Mondavi, and his brother worked for me and he was the cellar manager. Craig. Keith then went on to start Demptos Cooperage. He was good friends with Phillippe Demptos, who later passed away. They started a cooperage in Napa, which still exists, called Demptos Cooperage. Keith ran that cooperage.

He then left that place and started his own company. They worked on shaving barrels and retoasting them. As the barrel got older, it was possible to shave the inside and then re-fire it, exposing newer wood. But the non-colored material of the wine goes in a lot farther, so I found that you'd have this cooked wine smell, and because of the thinner stave when we stacked them up six-high, the bottom rack would leak. So I stopped doing that.

Keith then went to work for Fetzer and started making barrels for Fetzer. Fetzer was bought by Brown-Foreman, and Brown-Foreman also owned Blue Grass, Kentucky, which was one of the major suppliers of fifty-gallon, fifty-dollar bourbon barrels, or whiskey barrels. All the big American whiskey barrel suppliers now are actually making wine barrels, but they're making them on assembly lines, so they're kind of a combo. They cost about $180.

Hicke: Considerably less than--

Sbragia: Keith, for $250, was making handmade wine barrels when they bought Fetzer. They sell barrels to the wine industry. Eventually they stopped making their barrels for wine in Kentucky and transferred all of their wood up to Keith. Keith now had wood supplies that he hadn't chosen, and he didn't like it, so he left there. About a year ago he called us up and said, "Hey, would you be interested? There are a lot of people who want me to start a cooperage. But I'd like to come work for you guys." We hired him and we're in the process of buying wood and buying equipment and next year we'll start making barrels.

Hicke: You have a plant or something?

Sbragia: It's going to be in Cloverdale.

Hicke: What kind of wood?

Sbragia: French, American, and Hungarian. Probably mostly American to start, because that's what he did before. As far as I'm concerned, he had the best American barrel on the market. He was outstanding with American barrels. I haven't had any of his French barrels--he's bought some wood from all around, and he's actually bought some wood from Hungary, so we'll have a little bit of everything to try.

Hicke: You're going to be totally vertically integrated here, pretty soon.

Sbragia: Well, it's not going to be for all our barrels, because we buy a lot of barrels company-wide. It would be a fraction of the total, less than half. Then Keith would also be an advocate to our other barrel suppliers, because they all know him really well. He could actually go, if

we wanted something special, to the cooper and make sure that we got what we wanted. He would work with the cooper, because the whole idea is to tailor the wood to the wine. We will tell him what we want out of the wines and taste, what other people are doing and what we think they're doing, and he would try and make it. We'd taste what he made and say, "Oh, well, we need a little more of that," we all have a common language of wood, "and we need a little more vanilla spice and less of astringent wood taste." There are sugars in the wood and when a barrel is made, the heat from the wood fire-bonds the staves. This gives the wood a toasty caramel-vanilla character.

French oak has to be split because it leaks if you don't split it. It'll split parallel to the vertical rays. Vertical rays don't have xylem, so that they're like a straw. American wood, the rays are full of xylem so you can saw it across the rays and it doesn't leak. So American wood makes a good barrel, in terms of the container. That's why French barrels are so expensive, because due to splitting you get a lot of loss.

Once you get the staves, the cooper forms the barrel to make a tepee, puts an iron hoop on the top and starts a little fire in a brazier. They put a cable around the bottom of the barrel, and they crank it by hand or they have a little motor. The heat slowly modifies the structure of the wood so that it'll bend without cracking. It slowly forms into a barrel. Then they'll take a wet rag and wet the staves a little and keep it on the fire either a long time for heavy toast or shorter for light toast.

I like medium to medium-plus toast the best. It's about twenty or thirty minutes on the fire after the barrel is formed. Heavy toast gives a strong smoky toasty smell and flavor.

Hicke: So more oak flavor?

Sbragia: Usually it's real burnt, kind of like bacon-hickory smell. Some people like that for some Chardonnay, for Pinot. I don't particularly like the smoke character. In order to get the heat, they have a lid on top of the open barrel, the lid keeps all the smoke inside, so a lot of times what I do is I say I want a medium-plus toast without the lid. No smoke. I want a little more toast, but I don't want the smoky smell. I want the caramelized-sugar taste,--the butterscotch. It is hard to describe wood flavors. But we need to convey what we want to our own outside cooperages.

That's kind of what Jane Robichaud, our research and sensory director, is doing: she'll get standards of all these oaky smells and flavors the best she can. We'll all sit down and say, "Okay, here are the different woods, and they have certain tastes; now what do they taste like and what are we going to call it?" So we all speak the same language. That's a lot of what she does in the Sensory Department.

Hicke: You have a lot going on.

Sbragia: Keith, working with all winemakers, will slowly make custom barrels made specifically for our particular wines. That will be a great opportunity to make better wines.

Hicke: That's really great.

Sbragia: It's a lot of fun. It's a whole new challenge. Keith reports to Tom Peterson at Souverain in Sonoma County. So I get the benefit, I don't have to manage it. [laughs]

Hicke: You have a few other things.

Sbragia: Yes, I do.

VIII PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Hicke: Before it gets too late, I want to hear a little bit about your professional community activities. Do you belong to any winegrower associations?

Sbragia: I belong to the American Society of Enology and Viticulture. But I haven't jumped into the melee involved with managing the organization, just because I still have kids in school and I can't do it all. I make wine and try to go to all my children's school sporting events. Also, I belong to a musical group.

Hicke: Tell me about that. You've told me, but I don't know if we've gone through it.

Sbragia: Well, it's called Private Reserve and we started about, oh, 1988. It was in response to this particular organization, the American Society of Enology and Viticulture, having a yearly conference. For the June symposium in Reno, at the banquet they wanted a band, and they didn't have money for a band, so we said we'd play for free.

But we didn't have a band yet. [laughter] One guy in our group belonged to a band, and he kind of got us together and guided us as to what instruments we should buy, because we all had acoustic guitars. I play accordion, so we worked up a couple of songs with accordion and then we played. It was a lot of fun so we decided we would stay together.

Back then we were called "Oakey Bung Hole and the Lactones." Lactone is one of the phenolics in oak, so it was kind of an in-joke. But we thought once were going to play for real that we should be called something else, so we changed our name to Private Reserve.

Hicke: Much classier.

Sbragia: Much classier, but the Lactones is our alter ego, you know. [laughter]

The band members are Mike Martini from Louis Martini Winery, George Bursick from Ferrari-Carano and Pat Heck. And then a lawyer in the industry named Steve Buhel, and John Hawkins, who works in wine marketing. We have played ever since that Reno symposium.

We just had our high point when George Bursick's boss, Don Carrano, who owns the El Dorado casino in Reno, asked us to play. The winemakers went up for a day and did a winemaker dinner together and then the next night the band played at the lounge at the El Dorado. We made the big time in the Babinga Lounge, which is the wood that they used. It's an African wood they used, they called it that name.

Hicke: I'll bet you even got paid for that one.

Sbragia: We actually got paid, and he put us up in the hotel and bought our dinner. We had a really good time. So it might be a yearly thing now.

Actually I don't encourage us to play a lot. I think the most important thing is for us to get together and play music and sit down and talk. We usually have pizza and everybody brings a bottle of wine and about eleven o'clock we go home. That's usually every Wednesday night, so it's kind of like rather than having bowling night, I have rock and roll. [laughter]

Hicke: A better choice, I would say.

Sbragia: In terms of community involvement, my wife has been involved in Little League for the last three or four years and I've kind of assisted her. My youngest son likes baseball.

Hicke: Kevin?

Sbragia: Yes, with Kevin, and my wife is the coach. It has been a lot of fun.

Hicke: Now, you said her name was Janie?

Sbragia: Yes, and her maiden name is Carr. Her father's name was Ford Carr. He was a camp director and she followed in his footsteps. But in terms of belonging to organizations other than that, my kids and my work keep me pretty busy.

The band volunteers for various causes once in a while, and I'll do winemaker dinners for Easter Seals on occasion. I try to do that as much as possible. I belong to the local Catholic church, since I'm a good Italian Catholic boy, and we support that as well.

Hicke: And you said you had been judging at this French competition.

Sbragia: Well, I've actually been a judge at the Riverside County Fair, the Orange County Fair. Then when I was invited to do this judging, I think it was about six years ago now, I just went to my fifth one, they did two in a row because it was the millennium this year. It is really interesting, with international participants from all around the world, people that you wouldn't ever get a chance to meet otherwise. One of these days when I have time I'll start visiting all these people and seeing their winegrowing regions.

Hicke: Because you already know people there.

Sbragia: Yes, so I guess that's the nicest thing about it all. When we talked about Myron going to New York, taking two weeks to get across country, now, in ten hours you're in another world. The world is smaller. They come and see us; we see them. The world of wine is actually quite a small world now. It's fairly tightly knit. Everybody almost knows everybody if you've been in the business for a while. You know a lot of them or you've met them personally at least once, so it's nice to keep in touch and be a part of the world as a global organization rather than just your own little winemaking region.

Hicke: I have a list of some things down here. Just take a quick look and see if anything there is something you want to talk about. They're not really crucial to the story of Beringer and Ed Sbragia, but--

Sbragia: The people I went through graduate school with and where they went is pretty interesting. When I decided to go back to school after being a chemist at Gallo in 1971-1973, I got to be really good friends with a guy named Marcello Montecelli. Actually, Julio Gallo used to call him Mario. Recently Marcello just got promoted to vice president of the Sonoma County operations.

Hicke: At Gallo?

Sbragia: At Gallo, and he's a really good winemaker. I tasted some of the Gallo wines--Gallo-Sonoma wines--and they're actually quite good, they're actually very good.

Hicke: Yes, they've been getting good ratings.

Sbragia: Yes, so I'm really proud of them and we've been friends for years.

Dennis Martin is another person I went to graduate school with. When I went to graduate school, one of the professors that was a major professor there was a man named Dr. Shandrelle. He actually had worked at Gallo when I was there, so we both had started school together, he being professor and me being the student. His father had been the head of the Geisenheim Institute in Germany. So he had published and was quite a famous man. He gave the Fresno program new life. Davis always gets all the credit, but Fresno actually has a vineyard and a winery. In fact, they just were able to start producing wines commercially in the United States. So the wine sales will benefit the agriculture department.

It's really great. They can use their grapes commercially now.

Our graduate group bonded and I'm still friends with them. When we started having kids, we were meeting on maybe a weekly basis. When we all had two or three kids, we kind of all spread apart. Now the kids are leaving, and we're going to get back together again. But Dennis Martin--

Hicke: Where is he now?

Sbragia: He is the vice president and winemaker at Fetzer Vineyards. His son Remy and my son Adam essentially grew up together as brothers because we lived close together. Ken Deis of Flora Springs was also another really good friend and he's been a winemaker at Flora Springs for twenty years. There's another one, Jerry Hamolka, who's a winemaker in the San Joaquin Valley. Who else? Oh, and then Pat Heck, who's in the band.

They're all still some of my best friends, so it's a neat thing that you were able to watch your friends proceed and climb the ladder of success in the wine business.

Hicke: It was a good class.

Sbragia: It was a good class, very good class.

What else have you got? I think it's become more difficult to grow grapes in the Valley in terms of agriculture preserves, pesticides, erosion. You'd think everybody would want grapes, but a lot of the newer developments in the peripheries of the wine business look at grapes as not necessarily conserving the environment, but actually raping the environment. I don't know if I want to talk about that.

Hicke: Let me turn this over.

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Sbragia: I think that there are some challenges to the wine business in the future in that, as Napa Valley and actually Sonoma county--I still live in Sonoma County and also grew up there--that they had been primarily agricultural. There has always been the philosophy of the right to farm. As more people move in closer to the vineyards and as the wine business is actually in a boom time trying to find other places to grow grapes, the two clash. I think that it's finally hit a head where grapegrowers haven't been smart enough to realize that they can't just clear-cut the hillsides again like our forefathers did. You have to leave some trees here and there. You have to be responsive to the fact that you can't just have your soil eroding to a stream and filling up reservoirs.

Farmers are really conservationists. They want to maintain their land or else they lose their natural resources. So I think we're all talking the same language, but then again, there are real predators in terms of pests. The public would like to be able to walk on anybody's property and walk through the stream, and at the same time, have equipment and things like that. People shot holes through gas tanks to see if it exploded on a tractor. There are two sides to private property and all that. As we grow and become more populated, it's going to be more and more difficult to grow grapes.

Currently there are laws and regulations that require replanting to have set distances from streams and from roads. What you grow will need to minimize uses of alternate materials and try to look at natural ways to control pests and minimize pesticide usage.

If you have a vineyard today, it's probably the greatest investment you ever made in the North Coast. If you want to start a vineyard, it's going to be more and more difficult. And unfortunately or fortunately, depending on your point of view, a lot of the best land is up on top of the mountains where it's going to be almost impossible to plant any vineyards. In building big houses on hillsides, people don't want to see mansions on a clear-cut piece of land. They're protecting the viewshed. It's becoming more restrictive in terms of being able to take and use the land you think you've bought to make what you want. It's harder and harder, but that's because the population's increased in this area and everybody wants to live in the Napa or Sonoma County. They don't understand that it's still an agricultural community, so we'll all have to learn to live together.

Hicke: Well, maybe that's a good note to end on.

Sbragia: Okay.

Hicke: And I thank you so very much for spending the time to do this.

Sbragia: Oh, you're welcome!

Transcribed by Amelia Archer
Final Typed by Shannon Page, Julie Allen

ADDENDUM TO ED SBRAGIA'S ORAL HISTORY

Subject: Sale of Beringer Wine Estates to Foster's Brewing Group

On August 28, 2000, Foster's Brewing Group of Australia offered to buy Beringer Wine Estates at a price of $55.75 per share, or approximately $1.2 billion (U.S.). The sale was completed in October, 2000.

Foster's is a premium beverage company that produces and markets beer, wine and leisure products worldwide. Mildara Blass is Foster's international wine division and a leading premium wine producer in Australia.

Mildara Blass is actually older than Beringer Vineyards. It began in the late 1850s, when they established the original Mildara winery. Now they have nine wineries and 8,500 acres of vineyards in their control. The company was bought by Foster's in 1996 and now has more than 30 premium and super-premium brands in Australia, California, and France. Some of its brands are Australia's best-known labels, including Wolf Blass, Black Opal, Greg Norman, Yellowglen and Jamiesons Run. They are also a leader in the consumer direct area. They operate premium wine clubs in Australia, Asia, and Europe.

The sale merged Beringer Wine Estates with Mildara Blass, creating a new company called Beringer Blass Wine Estates. This partnership began a new chapter in our company's history and established the largest premium wine company in the world. The existing Beringer management team was left intact to operate the company.

I think the sale was really positive for our company. It's a great merger between two great premium wine companies, one from Australia and one from the U.S. They will help us sell our wine worldwide and we will help them distribute in the U.S.

Oral History Closing Statement

"I'm always asked what my best or favorite vintage is, and with all that's happened, my favorite vintage is always in the future. Maybe next year, who knows? That's what keeps me interested, the possibility of what the future holds. I love the challenge!"

Ed Sbragia
Winemaster, Beringer Vineyards

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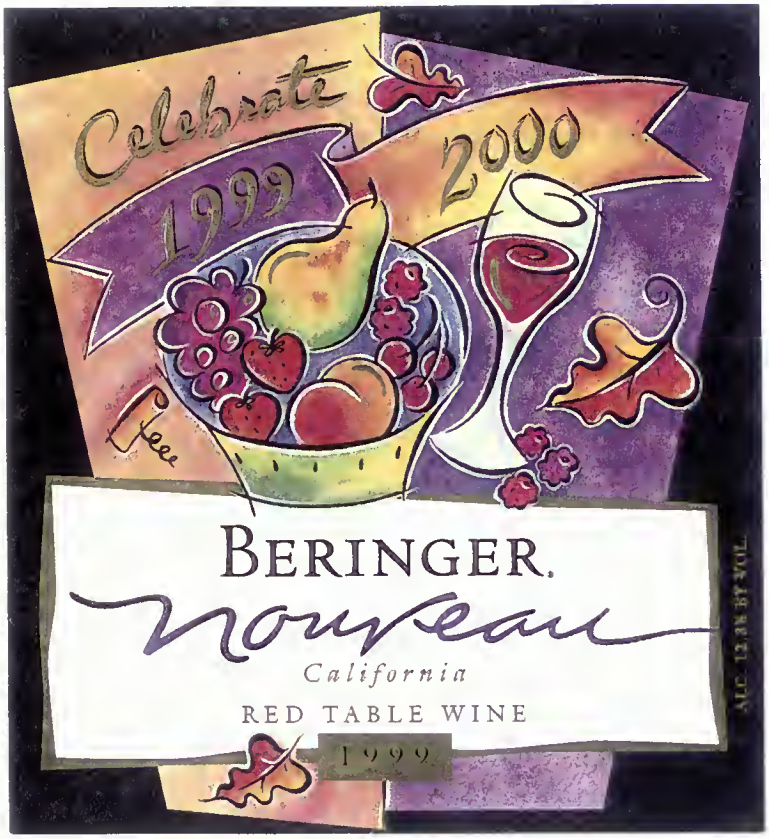
Celebrate
1999
2000
BERINGER.
Nouveau
California
RED TABLE WINE
1999
ALC. 12.5% BY VOL.

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BERINGER VINEYARDS

ED SBRAGIA
WINEMAKER

When Ed Sbragia was growing up, wine meant both livelihood and quality of life to his family. Ed's grandfather, an immigrant from Tuscany, had naturally gravitated to the wineries flourishing in California at the turn of the century. According to family lore, he was standing at the top of a ladder topping off a tank of wine when the 1906 earthquake hit. "Stop shaking the ladder," he yelled to his coworker on the ground.

Ed's father acquired his own vineyards near Healdsburg, growing Zinfandel grapes for sale and home winemaking. "He made excellent wine," says Ed, "and he taught me that making wine is a very natural process—that good grapes and good techniques will make good red wine."

In the Tuscan tradition, good red wine was a part of every family dinner. "I thought of it as a bitter liquid until I was about 14," Ed recalls. "But it was a natural part of our meals and our life. My mom was a great cook, and we would sit for hours having long philosophical discussions."

The vineyards meant hard work for young Ed—pruning, thinning, harvesting and crushing. "By the time I went to college, I wanted to get away from vineyards. The rows were too long, and I had hoed too many vines."

Ed majored in chemistry at the University of California at Davis, headed for a career in science. But his family background made him the top candidate for a job in a winery laboratory upon graduation. Quickly realizing that the winemaker's job was the one he wanted, he returned to California State University at Fresno for a master's degree in enology. After a year working at a Sonoma County winery, he learned about an opening as winemaker Myron Nightingale's assistant at Beringer.

"I just called Myron up and asked if I might be qualified for the position. I started on August 9, 1976. Myron was a great teacher. He was the most intuitive winemaker I've ever known. He understood that winemaking requires subjective input—a feeling, a major preference—just like painting or sculpture or any work to which you dedicate yourself."

Ed was named Beringer's chief winemaker on Myron's retirement in 1984 and has been, along with vineyard manager Bob Steinhauer, the keystone of Beringer's Private Reserve program. He is proud of the partnership that he and Bob have formed—"Bob always says he gives me diamonds, and it's up to me to polish them," says Ed.

BERINGER VINEYARDS

THE OLDEST CONTINUOUSLY OPERATING
WINERY IN THE NAPA VALLEY

Jacob Beringer left his home in Mainz, Germany, in 1868 to start a new life in the United States. His brother, Frederick, had preceded him by five years and wrote home constantly of the grand opportunities to be found in the vast new world. Frederick had settled in New York, but that life did not appeal to Jacob. Unlike his brother, Jacob Beringer enjoyed toiling in the cellars in his youth in Germany. He had heard that the warm, sunny climate of California was ideal for growing wine grapes, so in 1870 he traveled by train, first to San Francisco and then on to Napa Valley. To his delight, he discovered rocky, well-drained soils similar to those in his native Rhine Valley.

The volcanic soil was ideal for growing the varietal grapes of Europe's winemaking regions, and, best of all, the hills could be dug out to provide storage and aging tunnels that would maintain the constant temperature needed to produce fine wines. Jacob bought land with Frederick in 1875 and settled into producing wines comparable to the premium wines he had developed in Europe. In 1876, they founded Beringer Winery.

The tedious task of hand-chiseling the rock tunnels was completed by Chinese workers returning to the San Francisco area following completion of the Trans-Continental Railroad. The tunnels took several years to complete but rewarded the brothers with an extremely effective storing and aging facility that maintains a mean temperature of 58°F. Today, Beringer Vineyards continues to age fine wines, including its Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, in the tunnels they built.

While the winery was being built, Jacob took up residence in a farmhouse on the property built in 1848, now referred to as the "Hudson House." Meticulously restored and expanded, the Hudson House serves today as Beringer Vineyards' Culinary Arts Center and home of the School for American Chefs.

In 1883, Frederick began construction of the 17-room mansion which was to be his home—a re-creation of the family home located on the Rhine River in Germany. Frederick's "Rhine House," now on the National Register of Historic Places, serves as Beringer's hospitality center.

Beringer Vineyards is the oldest continuously operating winery in the Napa Valley. Jacob Beringer's foresight in recognizing the quality and potential of grape growing in the Napa Valley is part of the living heritage of Beringer Vineyards. With the present use of state-of-the-art technology applied to age-old traditions, Beringer Vineyards' wines continue to reflect a single-minded dedication to the making of memorable wines from great Napa Valley vineyards.

BERINGER VINEYARDS

PRIVATE RESERVE PROGRAM

In 1971, in a push toward building the quality of its wines, Beringer hired veteran winemaker Myron Nightingale, Working with his wife Alice, Myron was the first California winemaker to produce a botrytised wine in the style of the great French Sauternes, and Beringer's Nightingale, a dessert wine made in very small quantities each year, is named in his honor.

Myron modernized the winemaking facility, bringing in temperature-controlled steel tanks and replacing the winery's old barrels with new French oak. With long-range vision, he also insisted on upgrading and expanding the vineyards because of his belief that great wines begin on the vines.

To recognize the better quality of fruit becoming available to him, Myron began making limited production wines, including a 1973 Centennial Cabernet Sauvignon and a 1974 Centennial Chardonnay. Both wines were released in 1976 to celebrate Beringer's 100th birthday.

Edward Sbragia joined Beringer as Myron's assistant in 1976 and, with his mentor's blessing, began experimenting with fermenting Chardonnay in small French oak barrels and other techniques not widely used in California at the time. And when Beringer first acquired Cabernet Sauvignon grapes from the Lemmon Ranch (later called Chabot Vineyard) in 1977, Myron and Ed knew they had the makings of a distinctive Cabernet Sauvignon in a big, rich style, and they kept the lot separate.

After two years in French oak barrels, the wine was still dark, chewy and tannic. Even bottle aging didn't seem to soften its intensity. With some trepidation, Myron, Ed and Bob Steinhauer, who had joined the company as vineyard manager in 1979 with the mission of further developing the vineyards, entered the wine in competition in the 1981 Orange County Fair. It won a gold medal as the best Cabernet Sauvignon in the show, and the limited amount produced was released as Beringer's first Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

The 1978 Private Reserve was released in the same year, to even greater critical acclaim. But the upward spiral of the reserve wines was stopped by the 1979 vintage, when the Chabot Vineyard's dry-farmed Cabernet Sauvignon vines went into photosynthetic shock and shut down before the grapes ripened. No Private Reserve was bottled from that vintage, in keeping with Ed and Bob's determination to reserve that designation for the product of the finest grapes from the finest vineyards and the most exacting winemaking techniques.

In subsequent years, Beringer has achieved a Private Reserve with every vintage. Since Myron's retirement in 1984, Ed and Bob have continued to learn the lessons of the vineyards and the wines that grow in them. Each vintage has produced different fruits, different flavors and a different challenge to the team as they make their critical decisions about viticulture, fruit maturity, oak selection and assemblage.

After nearly two decades producing these reserve wines together, Ed and Bob's common goal remains unchanged: to make the best Cabernet Sauvignon the Napa Valley can produce—an achievement that has surpassed even Jacob Beringer's ambitious early vision.

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BERINGER VINEYARDS

OAK AND TOAST: THE WINEMAKER'S SEASONINGS

Ed Sbragia, Beringer Vineyards' winemaker, uses wood primarily from French oak forests to add particular flavors, or "seasonings," to his wines. The oaks themselves vary in character: "French oak from the Nevers forest has a denser porosity than oak grown near Limousin," Sbragia states, "and the flavors that each wood imparts to a wine can be distinctly different just as oak grown in Kentucky may have a different flavor than Oregon oak.""

After 22 years of working with French and American coopers, Sbragia has formed distinctive opinions on the seasonings he gives each wine at Beringer. "The cooper's signature," he points out, "is the toast level he gives to the barrel, or the amount of fire the barrel sees as the cooper assembles the barrel. If he wants 'smoke and toast' he simply puts a top or lid on the barrel, exposing the oak staves to more smoke and less fire. I prefer a medium toast and work closely with my coopers to reach just the level that allows for a vanillin, toasted-bread or hazelnut character to develop in the wine. A heavy toast can impart a roasted coffee or chocolate character that, for me, is too much for a Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc, two wines I like to ferment and age in small French oak barrels."

The age of the barrel is of equal importance to Sbragia. "For my Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon I use 100% new oak, since the huge fruit extract of the wine can handle the new oak. For the medium-bodied and distinctive fruit I get from our Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, I like a combination of new and used barrels. The art of the winemaker is to enhance the wine with an experienced, judicious hand, select the right barrels and use them for the right amount of time, or maybe not use barrels, focusing entirely on the fruit of the wine. Our Gamay Beaujolais, for example, is not aged in oak because I want the fruit to dominate its flavor spectrum, while I barrel-ferment and age our Napa Valley Chardonnay in oak, carefully balancing fruit and oak. Balance may be an overused word, but it does say a lot about what I'm trying to achieve in wine with oak flavor."

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BERINGER VINEYARDS

BERINGER'S VINEYARDS

Each Beringer vineyard, with its own distinctive soil, climate and terrain, lends itself to particular varietals. These vineyards have become recognized as primary sources of Beringer wines.

BALE LANE VINEYARD

The well-drained soils of this vineyard, located in the warmer, mid-valley climate area of Napa Valley, have produced excellent, full-flavored Sauvignon Blancs and Sémillons.

BIG RANCH ROAD VINEYARD

Located in the southern sector of the Napa Valley, this vineyard has soils with limited depth and low fertility. The area's Region II climatic conditions produce Chardonnays and Merlots with full, rich flavors and excellent structure.

CHABOT VINEYARD

These gently sloping, obsidian-laden hillside vineyards are located on the eastern slope of Napa Valley near St. Helena. The low-yielding vines produce superlative Cabernet Sauvignons of deep color and a rich flavor with a suggestion of mint.

DOS RIOS VINEYARD

The gravelly and clay loam soils of this Yountville appellation are well-drained, producing distinctive Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Chardonnay fruit.

GAMBLE RANCH VINEYARD

Emanating from the Rector Creek alluvial fan near Oakville, the rocky soil of this vineyard produces grapes of maturity and intensity well-suited to our barrel-fermented Chardonnay. Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are also grown here.

HOME VINEYARD

This is the area that first attracted Jacob Beringer to the property more than 100 years ago. The Cabernet Sauvignon planted on the sloped alluvial fan of this vineyard has been a key component of our Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon since 1982.

BANCROFT RANCH VINEYARD

A beautiful, mountainous vineyard at an elevation of 1,800 feet on Howell Mountain, Bancroft Ranch produces intense Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc for use in our Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. Merlots from this vineyard are dark and intense in varietal flavors and have also been bottled separately since 1987.

HUDSON RANCH VINEYARD

Benefiting from foggy mornings and afternoon sun, this vineyard has a cool microclimate and gravelly soils, and produces some of our finest Chardonnays as well as our Viognier.

KNIGHTS VALLEY VINEYARD

Located 17 miles north of the winery, this vineyard has volcanic, well-drained soils that are perfectly suited to Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Since 1976, our wines from this vineyard have carried the Knights Valley designation on the bottle.

LINDA VISTA VINEYARD

This vineyard has soils with low fertility and enjoys the cooling influences of San Pablo Bay. It produces rich Chardonnay fruit with high acidity.

QUARRY VINEYARD

The volcanic soil (tuff) of this vineyard in the Rutherford district produces exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon fruit.

(continued over)

MARSTON RANCH VINEYARD

Volcanic in origin and low in fertility, the soils of this historic mountain vineyard have for decades been highly regarded for both Rhône and Bordeaux varietals, primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah.

STANLY RANCH VINEYARD

Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Viognier are grown in this historic vineyard in the cool-climate Carneros district. The vineyard's shallow soils produce fruit with high acidity, low pH and intense fruit flavors.

STATE LANE VINEYARD

Located in a prime cool-climate region for Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley, this vineyard has relatively low, shallow bale loam soils, and the sub-soil is a rocky gravel. The vines are small and low-yielding, producing small berries with intense flavors. This vineyard's Cabernet has been a component in most Private Reserve bottlings since 1980.

TRE COLLINE VINEYARD

At an elevation of 1,800 feet on Howell Mountain, this vineyard of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc enjoys cool mountain temperatures and high solar radiation above the fog. The volcanic red soils are low in fertility and yield berries with intense flavor.

YOUNTVILLE VINEYARD

This vineyard in the Yountville appellation in the southern sector of the Napa Valley features clay loam soils with limited depth and low fertility and produces Chardonnays with full, rich flavors and excellent structure.

BERINGER VINEYARDS

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1997 NAPA VALLEY CHARDONNAY
SBRAGIA LIMITED-RELEASE

THE VINEYARD

The grapes for this very limited production wine are grown at Beringer's Gamble Ranch Vineyard, located near the town of Yountville in the southern part of Napa Valley. The climate in this region, influenced by nearby San Pablo Bay, includes cool, fog-washed nights and mornings alternating with sunny afternoons during the long growing season. The Chardonnay grapes are situated behind a large hill in the middle of the vineyard, where the conditions remain cool into the late afternoon, according to vineyard manager Bob Steinhauer, helping to preserve the grapes' balancing acidity. Over the years, Bob Steinhauer and winemaker Ed Sbragia have learned that specific blocks of Chardonnay in this vineyard are capable of achieving the "fatter, richer, thicker" character that Ed seeks for this limited-release Chardonnay, and these grapes are earmarked for this wine from the moment of picking.

HARVEST

The 1997 growing season began and ended exceptionally early in Napa Valley. Beginning with bud break in the spring, every stage of vine growth and fruit maturation occurred up to two weeks ahead of normal. For example, 95 percent of our Chardonnay grapes had reached veraison—the stage at which the grapes turn color and soften—by the end of the first week in July. The weather remained moderate through to harvest time, allowing the grapes to achieve full physiological maturity. The grapes for this wine were handpicked on September 4 and 5, and the flavors were, according to Ed Sbragia, "incredibly intense, and complex yet balanced."

WINEMAKING

Because of the bold, concentrated flavors of the grapes used to make this wine, Ed Sbragia chose brand-new French Nevers oak barrels to ferment and age it for almost nine months. "Fruit of this intensity can stand up to all new wood," he explains. Following fermentation, the spent yeast cells were stirred back into the wine once a week. This technique, the traditional French *sur lie* aging, integrates the creamy, slightly nutty character of the yeast into the wine and subdues the tannins of the new oak. Ed also put the wine through 100-percent malolactic fermentation to enhance the fruit's characteristic butter aromas and create an even creamier mouthfeel. The result is a full-bodied, almost viscous wine, with rich aromas and flavors of creamy butter, citrus-tinged Golden Delicious apples and toasted almonds with back notes of caramel, spice and sweet vanilla. The finish is long and lush, continuing the layered interplay of citrus, butter and spice.

Suggested retail price: $40

BERINGER VINEYARDS

BERINGER VINEYARDS' WINES IN CURRENT RELEASE	RHINE HOUSE RETAIL PRICE
In National Distribution:	
1997 California White Zinfandel	$ 6
1997 North Coast Limited Vineyard Selection (LVS) White Zinfandel	$ 8
1997 California Chenin Blanc	$ 7
1997 California Gewürztraminer	$ 7
1997 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc	$ 11
1996 Knights Valley Alluvium Blanc	$ 16
1997 Napa Valley Chardonnay	$ 16
1997 Private Reserve Napa Valley Chardonnay	$ 36
1997 California Rosé de Saignée	$ 16
1998 California Nouveau	$ 8
1997 California Gamay Beaujolais	$ 8
1996 North Coast Pinot Noir	$ 16
1995 North Coast Zinfandel	$ 12
1995 Knights Valley Alluvium	$ 30
1995 Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon	$ 25
1995 Howell Mountain Merlot, Bancroft Ranch	$ 50
1995 Napa Valley Pinot Noir, Stanly Ranch	$ 30
1994 Private Reserve Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon	$ 75
Available at the Rhine House only:	
1997 Napa Valley Viognier	$ 20
1995 Rhine House Selection Chardonnay	$ 20
1996 Sbragia Chardonnay, Limited Release	$ 35
1993 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, Chabot Vineyard	$ 100
1994 Late Harvest Johannisberg Riesling	$ 15/375ml
1994 Nightingale	$ 25/375 ml
1995 Port of Cabernet Sauvignon	$ 20

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GINO and Julia SBRAGIA

Gino Sbragia is the third child of Giulio and Cherubina Sbragia of Guamo, Italy. He was the second child to be born in America during their short stay in Healdsburg, California from 1906 to 1910. He provided all of the following information from his home in Healdsburg, when this interview was held in the spring of 1994.

Gino Sbragia, brother of Italo, Rico, Aladino and Maria Sbragia, was born on Jan. 18, 1910 on the Packson Ranch while his parents were living and working in Healdsburg, CA. from 1906 to 1910. The Packson Ranch, owned by _____, was part of the present-day Madrone Knoll Rancho, located west of Healdsburg. His brother, Italo, had been born in Italy and his brother, Rico, was the first child born in America. Gino was the second one born in America and was only 9 months old when the family was called back to Italy to continue running the grandparents's farm.

Of course, Gino could not recall that first trip across the Atlantic Ocean since he was just a babe in arms, but he did recall growing up in his parent's hometown of Guamo....the big, two-story stone house with the wall around it, his parents and grandparents and the local school about a quarter mile away. "We used to walk to school," he recalled, "and I only went to school for 4-5 years, until I was 10 years old. Then we'd get a certain paper (certificate) showing we'd completed that much school and if we wanted to go on, we'd have to go to Lucca. Well, we couldn't afford that, so that was it."

Most of the time, Gino worked on his father's farm and rock quarry. "I used to work with my father, delivering rocks to people in the area for building their homes and walls," he recalled. Nicolao, my grandfather, lived with us. He was a nice man, very ambitious. He lived upstairs and my grandmother, too (Carlotta Tambellini Sbragia). When my father went out to work with the horses and the cows, the "old man" - he wanted to feed the animals when my father returned. Only he could do it best!! He was a tall man and was 91 years old when he died. He had a lot of hair. I remember he had a little pail in his room, where he washed himself and then he would come downstairs to eat...he was always well-groomed. He owned the house."

"My grandmother, Carlotta, used to do lots of reading...all religious books. And my other grandparents, the Cantieris....I never met them. They must have died young. They lived in Verciano and I did see their home." A descendant of the Cantieri family, Luigi "Louie" Cantieri, immigrated to America and settled in Hawthorne, Nevada. His nickname was "Veluto," meaning velvet. "Louie was a bachelor," Gino continued, "and he also had two sisters in Italy. I used to call him my 2nd cousin."

"Giulio, my father, had two brothers - Fedele and Giuseppe Sbragia. They worked together and I worked with them. They worked hard. I remember them cutting one-quarter acre of grass by hand with a sickle before the sun came up! Nicolao, my grandfather, owned everything, but then the three boys took over. Giuseppe was single and Giulio and Fedele were married. Giulio eventually bought out Fedele, who immigrated to America. And Giuseppe left his share to Giulio, too. Italo and I bought

out Fidele's share and later we gave our share to Aladino, who was having a hard financial time trying to raise his large family back in Italy. He later sold the place."

"Giuseppe, my father's brother, came to the United States at one time and he went to Brazil, too. I think he came here about the same time that his brother, Giulio, came, but Giulio sent him back. He had some problems."

"My father was a good man. He thought about his kids. . . always came from Lucca with oranges and candy. My mother, Cherubina, was a good cook. She gardened and we had chickens. She would sell some in Lucca and then with the money, she'd buy other things. They were good people."

1927 - Gino joins his two brothers - Italo & Rico

Beginning in 1921, when Italo left for America, Giulio and Cherubina Sbragia had to say goodbye forever to their first three children. Rico was the second one to leave in _____ and Gino was next, leaving home on April 8, 1927. When Italo left home, Gino was only 11 years old, but it must have made a strong impression on him. As time progressed, he knew that this was going to be his decision, also, and that he would leave his dear parents and his country of generations of ancestors.

The first item he needed was his birth certificate, so Italo sent him his American birth certificate, signed by the doctor who was present at his birth, Dr. Swisher. "I met Dr. Swisher many years later," Gino recalled. "Italo also sent me $305 to come here. Otherwise, I had no money! The night before I left, I remember there were a lot of people around and we were playing bocce balls with my cousin, Pete Tambellini. Pete said, "Maybe I'll come over, too." And Pete did come to America after I did. We used to visit his family often on Pomona Street in El Cerrito. We were related through my grandmother, Carlotta Tambellini."

So, at age 17, on April 8, 1927, Gino said goodbye to his parents and his younger brother, Aladino, who was 15 and his younger sister, Maria, who was 12. And he boarded the ship called "Duilio," with his Italian passport, which he still has in safekeeping. His profession was listed as : "bracciante," meaning "laborer." "Braccie means your hands and arms...what you use to work with," he illustrated. "The Duilio made its last trip to the United States that year and followed it with a trip to South America...and then it sank!!"

"I came first class...nice food...nice beds...everything. I arrived in New York on May 1st, 1927. I was a minor, so I had to have an escort. And when I got to New York, I lost him! He just left me on the ship! They told me that I could not get off the ship without an escort and that I had to go back to Italy. I was sure scared. So, some guy overheard this conversation and he decided to help me. His name was Mr. Lombardi and he was a milkman in San Francisco, so he said that he knew the address where I was going and that he would help."

"In San Francisco, my brother Rico, who was a bachelor, was boarding at someone's house and I went there. I stayed there a few days and then I left for Asti (which is approximately 80 miles north), where Italo was living and working. I stayed there three years...lived in the barracks there...one big room...a bunch of beds...like working in the Army. I worked in the vineyards and then I left for San Francisco."

Meanwhile, Gino renewed his acquaintance with his uncle, Fedele Sbragia,

who had left Italy many years before him. Fedele lived in Healdsburg, Geyserville and then in Windsor. "Fedele was tall, about 6 feet, and pretty husky. He did not speak much English. He owned a ranch in Geyserville by the river, sold it and then owned a ranch in Windsor. His daughter, Julia, sold the farm after he died to a fellow named Mr. Camacho." When they lived in Geyserville, I remember them saying that his wife, Rosina, got scared one day during the flood. She was watching from the shore, when Fedele and his daughter, Julia, were stuck out in the water. A boat went out to rescue them and the boat then tipped over, with Julia in it. Fedele grabbed Julia and they grabbed a branch along the river and there was a snake there and Julia started playing with the snake!!"

"Rosina died before I arrived, but I remember that she worked at a hotel in Healdsburg called La Svizzera Hotel (the Swiss Hotel), near the railroad depot. She was the main cook."

Returning to Gino's leave from the Italian Swiss Colony in Asti: "In San Francisco I worked where Rico was working at an incinerator plant, where they burned garbage. I was there two years and then I returned to Healdsburg and leased a farm with Italo, which was a part of the Lawrence Mora ranch in the Windsor area. It adjoined our uncle Fedele's farm. And we helped him, too. There was a little house there that Italo and I lived in...we cooked for ourselves. We worked that place for 4 years and meanwhile, Italo got married and left. I stayed a couple years by myself. In 1932 Italo and Gino bought the 26-acre prune and grape ranch in Geyserville that Italo would continue to live on for 38 years and then Gino sold Italo his share. Italo did not move onto the ranch until 1934.

"Then I left for San Francisco again and went to work for the Montebello Wine Co. on Bryant Street. I worked in the bottling department and became kind of a foreman. We shipped wine to New York and I took care of orders, checked wine clarity and so on. I rented a house and lived alone, on Elizabeth Street. That's where I met Rita Andreatta. Her husband was Domenic....called "Meneghin." Rita and Domenic came to America from Venice, Italy and they had two children, Bruno and Alfred. Rita remained a friend of the Sbragia family until her death in December of 1993. She had lived on Elizabeth Street, a one-block street near Guerrero Street all her life.

"One time I bought a ticket to the English-Irish Sweepstakes and I won the consolation prize," Gino went on excitedly, "100 pounds, which was $500, and I bought the Ark!! I bought the Ark for $900 and sold it for $11,000....so I did pretty good. I had a whiskey license, which people couldn't get at that time. I bought it from Mr. Perucci in 1936. 'Sold it in 1946 to Glenn Smith, who used to own the Silver Dollar in Santa Rosa. Then the place burned down."

The 1940s - W.W.II, A Marriage, Property Bought & Sold

The 1940s arrived and Gino was still managing the Ark on a daily basis, but had also purchased a _____acre piece of farm property on West Grant Street west of Healdsburg. Part of the property included a large, white Victorian house near the road, built in 1906 or thereabouts. Occupants of the house were_____

There were many events swirling around in Gino's life during this period of time, one being the marriage of Gino to Julia Sbragia Pippi, a cousin who was the daughter

of his uncle Fedele. Fedele had welcomed Gino to America back in 1927. Julia helped Gino manage the Ark Inn by tending the bar, making sandwiches for hungry customers and dinners on demand. She was a welcome addition at the Ark and her children, Dolores and Albert, also helped. And many family gatherings took place at that little old place by the edge of the Russian River, right near the Healdsburg bridge. (I have always been reminded that I took my first steps, as a child, across the barroom floor!!)

None of us have forgotten the Ark. . . the bar itself, where Gino served drinks for the adults and "tamarindo" or tamarind, a sweet brown liqueur, to the kids and grenadine and 7-up, called "Shirley Temples," to the kids, also. . . the family gatherings and the enjoyment of eating food prepared by Julia and Dolores in the tiny old kitchen near the dining room. . . the river below the deck. . . the Healdsburg bridge next door. . . sights and sounds of swimmers. . . shouting and laughter from the beach across the river. . .music from the jukebox..... and visits from city relatives and friends.

One of those "distant relatives" happened to be Joe Sbragia from Modesto, CA, who came up to the Ark several times. "Joe used to come here with his friends to visit his cousin, Fedele," Gino continued. "They used to look like twins...unbelievable! He was a big man. And he and his friends used to go to Calistoga for the mud baths. I remember his sons and their wives. I went to Modesto several times and remember their ranch. Frank had a ranch by the schoolhouse and was Gallo's biggest rancher. Gallo bought from him. Ed went to visit them when he worked for Gallo."

In 1942, "Uncle Sam" called. The U.S. Government wanted Gino in the Army. And away he went, leaving Julia to tend bar and run the place. Gino still has a small spiral notebook of his first day to last with the U.S. Army, including other soldiers' names and addresses, beginning with the date June 5, 1942.

. . . . Presidio, Monterrey. . . Camp Rucker, Alabama. . . Florida. . . Camp Tennecy, Arizona. . . Camp San Luis Obispo, CA. . . Camp Beale, CA. . . Camp Stoneman in Pittsburg. . . Honolulu, HA. . . 'Crossed the International Date Line on 8-17-44. . . . . 'Crossed the equator on 8-23-44. . . Guadalcanal, Anguar Island. . . then Peleliu Island. . . Admiralty Group - Manis Island. . . New Calidonia (At this point, Gino went to the hospital for 'jungle rot", a skin condition where mold forms on the skin from being in foxholes "I had shots, but came out clean," he said proudly.). . . 1945 - arrived in the Phillipine Islands - Leyte Island. . . arrived in Japan on Honshu Island - Aamari City. . . Left for Yokohama on 11-45 for Seattle - Fort Lawton. . . Left there 3 days later for Camp Beale, CA. . . Left there 3 days later for HOME!! Nov. 28, 1945 AT 6:30.

'About 18 destinations in 3 years. "I felt like I was in the Navy instead of the Army, I was out at sea so much," he replied. "When Gino came home from the war," his stepdaughter Dolores remarked, " we were so happy to have him back, we literally flew down to the San Francisco bus depot to pick him up." After his return, one more year was spent at the Ark before its sale and Gino's return to farm life.

* * * *

(Following is an article which appeared in a local historical journal regarding Gino and his family's years at the Ark.)

VIEW FROM THE ARK

Commentary from a feature article in the Russian River Recorder
as told to Fern Naber by Dolores & John Naber

MY DIDN'T IT RAIN! We welcomed this season's bounteous rain after the many years of drought! We remember the many storms of '86, floods in the '60s and the winter of '55. However, according to old timers in Healdsburg, the flood of 1937 was THE FLOOD!

Dolores and John Naber, as youngsters, lived beside the Russian River along Healdsburg Avenue. John viewed the river with his parents, John and Clara Naber, managers of the Merryland Auto Camp and Dolores and her mother (Julia) and stepfather (Gino Sbragia), proprietors of the Ark across the river.

The Ark was built above the river across the road from the Plantation on Kennedy Lane. Both food and drinks were served. Delicious Italian food included spaghetti, steak, cioppino, polenta and fresh fish from the river. As the river crested in December, 1937, the Ark was truly an ark, surrounded by water - Russian River and the flooded Basalt Bridge on the east, the Old Redwood Highway on the west, Magnolia Drive on the south and Front Street on the north.

Most of the people watching from the Ark were standing on the porch on the river side. No one thought of the maximum weight or the number of people the building and its underpinnings were supporting. Fortunately, the structure stood firm.

One thoughtful person had brought a huge metal cable, tied it to a tree on one side of the Ark, pulled it around the entire building and "secured" it to a tree on the other side. Theoretically, if something happened, the cable would save the Ark.

People came to witness the scene of rising water, dangerously close to the railroad bridge, just under the rails. Loaded railroad cars were put on the bridge to hold it down. Logs floating on the river would splash water up on the tracks.

The flood of '37 brought the demise of Leonard Avila's ferry boat rides. During the summer, vacationers and locals enjoyed the ten-cent rides. In the winter, the ferry was pulled up on the beach next to the skating rink, as high as it could get. During the night as the water rose, the ferry turned on its side and was badly damaged. It was later repaired and thrived for awhile in Lake County at Clearlake.

One casualty near Grant Avenue, south of Healdsburg, was a fish company's truck. The chain-driven Mac truck, which made daily trips from San Francisco to Eureka, turned over in approximately four feet of water in a low spot where the freeway crosses over Redwood Highway (Healdsburg Avenue today).

NABER UPDATE--In the 1940s, John's parents (John and Clara) retired and Dolores folks sold the Ark. The Ark later burned. John served in the Merchant Marines during World War II. Dolores stayed in Healdsburg. This year they celebrated 43 years of marriage. Dolores remarked that John had traveled all over the world, then came home to Healdsburg and found her. Then she added, "I was here all the time!" Thanks, John and Dolores, for sharing some of your memories.

Fern Naber - Correspondence Russian River Recorder - 1993

Continuing with Gino's story: "I went back to the Ark after the War, sold it and went into farming again. I had the West Grant place before I returned and I moved to that house in '46. 'Used to be 40 years old then...almost 90 now. Then I bought the Dry Creek place and this present place on Kinley Road. 'Used to be the Pryor place - a house and vineyard."

Life went on and in 1948, Gino and Julia's only child, Ed Sbragia, was born on Dec. 11, 1948 at the Healdsburg Hospital. Ed spent all his growing up years in the town of Healdsburg, attending St. John's School, the first one in the family to attend Catholic school, since it had only been established in Healdsburg in 19___. Ed later attended Fresno State College and graduated with a ___Degree in Enology, the study of wine-making. Now he enjoys the distinguished title of Winemaster of Beringer Winery in Napa. Ed has traveled to Italy and France many times in connection with his profession and is always involved in public relations for Beringer Wines. And he still helps his father with their Sonoma County vineyards, the land where he got his first training in the wine and grape business.

Gino and Julia were also fortunate to witness the marriages and births of grandchildren, including the families of Julia's children, Albert and Dolores. Additions to the family include: Ada Foppiano, who married Albert Pippi during the 1940s. Their son, Terry Pippi, married Gayle Laughlin and they have a son, Mario Pippi. Julia's daughter, Dolores, married John Naber in 1949 and they had three children: Mary Ann, John and Sandy Naber. Mary Ann is married to George Neal. John has a daughter, Jessica Naber. And Sandy, now called Kara, is married to Mark Andrews III.

Ed Sbragia is married to Jane Carr and they have added to the Sbragia family with Adam, Gina and Kevin Sbragia. Gino and Julia's children all continue to live in Healdsburg not very far from Gino's house on Kinley Drive.

Julia Sbragia died of a heart attack on May 26, 1983 in Healdsburg and is buried at the Oak Mound Cemetery in Healdsburg. She is missed by all the family and friends she left behind.

* * * * * *

On July 12, 1986, Gino married the second time at St. John's Church to someone, coincidentally, with the same surname, Eleanor Edith (Fambrini) Sbragia. Eleanor is the daughter of Fred and Julia (Puccioni) Fambrini of Mill Creek, where Eleanor was born in 1916. Eleanor was the widow of Duilio Sbragia (coincidentally the name of the boat Gino came to America on). John was the son of John and Elena (Magnani) Sbragia of San Francisco. Eleanor and John had three sons: Don, Jerry and Larry Sbragia, who are married and have children. They reside in the Bay Area.

Gino and Eleanor reside on Kinley Drive in Healdsburg, surrounded by children and grandchildren and by relatives and friends. Eleanor's mother, Julia, who is 9_ years old, also resides nearby.

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