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The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

A. Brooks Firestone

FIRESTONE VINEYARD: A SANTA YNEZ VALLEY PIONEER

Interviews Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1995



Five of the six Firestone family members (left to right):
Polly, A. Brooks, Kate, Andrew, and Adam.

Photograph courtesy of Architectural Digest

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Cataloging Information

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Winery Owner

Firestone Vineyard: A Santa Ynez Valley Pioneer, 1996, vii, 64 pp.

Early career with Firestone Tire & Rubber Co, head of United Kingdom operations, resignation; Firestone Vineyard: start-up in 1972, choosing Santa Ynez Valley, weather and soil, selecting grape varieties; building the winery; purchase of J. Carey Cellars in 1987; general trends in wine industry.

Interviewed in 1995 by Carole Hicke for the Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

TABLE OF CONTENTS--A. Brooks Firestone

| | |
|---|-----|
| PREFACE | i |
| INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Carole Hicke | vi |
| BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION | vii |
| I BACKGROUND: FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD | 1 |
| Firestone Family Background | 1 |
| Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Liberia | 2 |
| Growing Up in Los Angeles | 2 |
| College and Marriage | 4 |
| Military Experience | 6 |
| II WORKING FOR FIRESTONE COMPANY, 1961-1972 | 8 |
| Sales and Production in the U.S. | 8 |
| Living and Working Abroad | 9 |
| III FIRESTONE VINEYARDS | 11 |
| Changing Jobs in 1972 | 11 |
| Evaluating the Vineyard | 11 |
| Santa Ynez Valley | 14 |
| Planning and Investment | 14 |
| Winemaking in the Santa Ynez Valley | 18 |
| Choosing and Planting Grape Varieties | 19 |
| Building the Winery | 21 |
| First Harvest, 1975 | 23 |
| Selling the Wine | 24 |
| Terroir of the Santa Ynez Valley | 28 |
| A Practical Approach to Winegrowing | 30 |
| Buying J. Carey Cellars, 1987 | 33 |
| Wine Business in the mid-1980s | 35 |
| Winemaker Alison Green | 36 |
| Family Members in the Winery | 37 |
| General Trends | 37 |
| IV MEMBER OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY | 39 |
| TAPE GUIDE | 43 |
| APPENDICES | 44 |
| A Colen, Bruce David and Mark Kauffman, "Profiles: Brooks and Kate Firestone," <i>Architectural Digest</i> , November, 1986 | 45 |
| B Firestone Vineyard brochure | 53 |
| C Firestone Label samples | 55 |

| | | |
|---|--|----|
| D | Bill SB 768 Text | 56 |
| E | <i>Wine Institute News Brief</i> Vol. 3, No. 4, August 17, 1995 | 58 |
| F | Wallace, Nora K., "A Tipple of the Hat to the Economy," <i>Santa Barbara News-Press</i> , No. 166, December 1, 1992 | 60 |
| G | Berger, Dan, "Firestone's Family Values," <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , January 20, 1994 | 61 |
| H | Firestone Vineyard News Release re. presidency of Adam Firestone | 63 |
| | INDEX | 64 |

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 reinstated as The Wine Spectator California Winemen 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; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the current chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute; 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 grape growing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of wine men. 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 Winemen
Oral History Series

August 1996
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name BROOKS FIRESTONE

Date of birth 18 JUN '36 Birthplace CLEVELAND, OHIO

Father's full name LEONARD H. FIRESTONE

Occupation RETIRED / FIRESTONE Birthplace OHIO

Mother's full name POLLY CURTIS

Occupation HOUSEWIFE Birthplace NEW JERSEY

Your spouse KATE

Your children HAYLEY, ADAM, POLLY, ANDREW

Where did you grow up? OHIO / LOS ANGELES

Present community SANTA YNEZ

Education COLUMBIA, B.A. ECONOMICS

Occupation(s) FIRESTONE TIRE & RUBBER / FIRESTONE VINEYARD /

CALIFORNIA ASSEMBLY

Area of expertise GENERAL BUSINESS

Other interests or activities POLITICS, RANCHING.

Organizations in which you are active REPUBLICAN PARTY

I BACKGROUND: FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD

[Date of Interview: July 25, 1995]##¹

Firestone Family Background

- Hicke: I'd just like to start out by asking you to tell me when and where you were born.
- Firestone: Born June 18, 1936, in Cleveland, Ohio. Lived in a little town called Macedonia.
- Hicke: Macedonia, Ohio. Now before we go too much farther, I always try to go back and get some information about previous generations, starting back as far as you know or have any knowledge of.
- Firestone: Well, our family came from Alsace [France]. We have a land grant to one Nicholas Firestone in 1814, signed by [James] Madison. They were all farmers. And then in the late 1800s, my grandfather, Harvey Firestone, worked for a buggy company and made some developments regarding the way in which the tires went on the rims. One thing led to another, and he founded the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, and the rest is history in that regard.

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

Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Liberia

Hicke: Before we go any further, I have understood that Firestone [Tire and Rubber Company] had a unique experience in Liberia. This doesn't have anything to do with your life, of course. But I think it's interesting.

Firestone: Yes. It was quite interesting. I think it was in 1927, my grandfather started a plantation in Liberia. He planted I think some 10,000 acres of trees, which was a formidable rubber plantation. He was very advanced for his time; he made sure that Liberians developed a middle class of growers. He financed locals to also plant rubber trees, so that there was a large middle class whose interests were the same as ours, namely, a good rubber crop that was brought in. A lot of people made a pretty good living on it.

Then I forget what it was, there was a revolution, killed a lot of people, including President Tubman's son, who was trying to run the country. Liberia is now in total anarchy, and the rubber plantations are overgrown, never to be recovered. It would be better to start all over again. Quite a tragedy there.

Hicke: I think the Firestone Company also did some very interesting things with the medical program there.

Firestone: Yes, we had a series of hospitals and dispensaries, and always gave scholarships. I think Liberians on Firestone scholarships came over each year and studied in America. Did everything possible to try and develop the country subsequently. It's just a tragedy what happened.

Growing Up in Los Angeles

Hicke: Okay. Well, back to Ohio. Did you grow up in that area?

Firestone: Yes, grew up there, moved out when we were--I think I was about eight or nine years old, to Los Angeles. My father took over the western states for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, so I pretty much grew up in Los Angeles.

Hicke: And your father's name was Leonard?

Firestone: Leonard, yes.

- Hicke: Can you tell me about your mother and her side of the family?
- Firestone: Mother was Polly Curtis, English ancestors, goes back to Kent. A fellow called Roger Coo was martyred by Queen Mary, Bloody Mary, for his religious convictions. There were a bunch of clergymen and publishers. She married my father, I forget what year they were married, but anyhow, she was a quite interesting person.
- Hicke: Did they meet in Ohio?
- Firestone: I'm not sure where they met. He was at Princeton; she was in school. The family lived in East Orange, New Jersey, at that time. You know, I don't know quite how they met. My mother died years ago.
- Hicke: When you moved to Los Angeles, you were in school?
- Firestone: Yes.
- Hicke: And how did you like Los Angeles?
- Firestone: Oh, it was a wonderful place to live. I didn't know any better. Lots of sunshine and friends, and it was a very pleasant place to grow up in.
- Hicke: What kinds of things did you like to do in school?
- Firestone: I was a very bad student. I liked creative things, creative writing, history, English. Hated mathematics. As I say, I was not much of a student. Ran track, did the usual things.
- Hicke: What did you do summers?
- Firestone: Summers, toward the end I worked for the tire business. I was working in tire stores. I thought that was the thing to do.
- Hicke: Selling?
- Firestone: Selling, and changing tires, and beginning to prepare for what I thought would be my career in the tire business.
- Hicke: Did your parents urge you or encourage you to go into it?
- Firestone: Not a strong encouragement. It was always kind of accepted that that's what we would do. I was willing to do it, and looked forward to doing it, so it was just kind of assumed that that's what I would do.

Hicke: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Firestone: One brother, who was more interested in technical things. He finally did go into the tire business, but he was not as active in summer work and that sort of thing as I was. And one sister, who was happy to do sister things and was not interested in the tire business.

Hicke: What were their names?

Firestone: My sister is Lendy, and my brother is Kim.

Hicke: What would you say are the most important influences on you-- teachers, or possibly friends or relatives?

Firestone: Friends, teachers--no particular mentor or no particular friend. I was always a very strong individual, and kind of went my own way. I can't think of any single thing that really influenced my life more than anything else.

Hicke: What did your family do for recreation?

Firestone: We traveled one place every year. We lived quite well, pool and tennis court and that kind of thing. Lots of local California things. Nothing extraordinary.

Hicke: Okay, and one last question about growing up: did your family drink wine?

Firestone: [laughs] Well, as a matter of record, my father is a recovering alcoholic, so he drank a great deal of everything. My mother--they didn't particularly drink wine. It wasn't that prominent. In those days, one drank highballs and martinis. Wine just wasn't as much of a factor as it is now.

College and Marriage

Hicke: Yes. After high school, what did you do?

Firestone: I graduated, went to Princeton, wasn't ready for it, struggled, and transferred to Columbia College, withdrew after my sophomore year and went into the army. Spent two years in the Army Medical Corps, and then went back--I was married--went back to Columbia to finish up, graduated in economics, and then went into the tire business.

Hicke: Well, that was a fast trip through all of that. When did you graduate?

Firestone: I would have graduated in '58; I actually graduated in '61, because of my army experience.

Hicke: Okay, let me back up and ask about your meeting your future wife.

Firestone: I was interested in the arts and was kind of a romantic young guy. Three of us went to the ballet at the old Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Bribed our way in towards the end of the performance, sat in the second row. Bought a program, picked out a member of the corps of the ballet that we thought we could pick up, did so. Invited her out to dinner. My two friends and I took out three of the young ladies from the Corps de Ballet. They got along beautifully with their dates; I did not get along as well with mine.

So we made a date for the following weekend. My wife Kate [Catherine Boulton] filled in. I fell for her, and never looked back. I chased her in the ballet for two years, and finally convinced her to leave the company, and we were married. Her father was the dean of the Guildford Cathedral. It was being built at that time. We were married by him in England, and after thirty-seven years now, we have four children, eight grandchildren.

Hicke: She told me about the wine that you ordered at that first dinner was important.

Firestone: [laughs] The first date I arranged by ourselves--we went out with the group for a couple of times, but then our first date together, we went to the Grill of the Pierre Hotel. I ordered a 1945 La Tache, which is from the--perhaps one of the greatest wines that was ever made, ever. I thought it was good; I didn't realize exactly what I was drinking at that time. They had a supply on hand at the Pierre Hotel. We shared that bottle, and it seemed to do the trick. [laughter]

Hicke: She said that you went back and visited the winery in Burgundy some time later.

Firestone: Yes. I visited the Domaine [La Tache]. André Noblé was the winemaker. I was there with my daughter and a very cute young friend of hers. It was in--oh, it would be the end of December, between December and Christmas. Nothing was happening, everybody was on vacation, but I had an introduction to him. He took me around the place, and he kind of fell for

these two cute young ladies. We were having a good time, sampling quite a bit.

My daughter told him the story of courting on 1945 La Tache, and it turned out that--he was quite advanced--but as a young man, he had worked on the 1945 harvest. He knew the wine, and he knew how great it was. He kind of got charmed about this story, and he thought he would destroy an American vintner, so he took me down to the inner, inner cellar, and opened a bottle of 1945 La Tache, which was absolutely incredible. We were drinking out of glasses like kind of brandy snifters, and it just filled the room--it was great, great, great. I mean, we all do something; wine is what I do, and I was in the presence of that which has just about reached the ultimate. It was quite an experience.

Hicke: I can assume then that by the time you met your wife, you had some experience with wine?

Firestone: Oh, no, very little experience. I just happened to enjoy drinking wine. I was a little bit before my time in that regard, and knew very little about it. I think I knew the difference between Burgundy and Bordeaux, and red and white, and that was about it. I was not particularly knowledgeable. One of my friends had introduced me to 1945 La Tache, and it just seemed like a good thing to drink, so I did. [laughing] I can't say that I really appreciated it for what it was; it was a pearls-before-swine situation for this young kid. But maybe it was an indication of things to come.

Hicke: Yes. What date did you get married?

Firestone: We were married in 1958, June.

Military Experience

Hicke: And let me just ask you a little bit about your military experience.

Firestone: In the military, in those days, everybody did some service, unless you had some medical or technical deferral. It was just a question of when and how. I did what was called the voluntary draft, which was I told the draft board that, "Hey, you can take me now, any time you want." And they did so. I had two years, started at Fort Ord basic training, then went up to Fort Lewis in Washington state. I was lucky enough to get

into a medical program and was trained as a corpsman. Then they sent me back to Fort Ord, and I worked at a hospital in Fort Ord for my tour of duty.

I finally wound up in the emergency room as the corpsman on duty. It was pretty good duty. I was on from midnight until eight o'clock; that was my shift. I just waited for some disaster to happen. There were a couple of ambulance drivers and clerks that were working on records all night. I just sat around there, and nothing happened and that's not very interesting.

II WORKING FOR FIRESTONE COMPANY, 1961-1972

Sales and Production in the U.S.

Hicke: After you graduated in '61--

Firestone: In '61, we had a delayed honeymoon, and toured--went to England. We had a daughter by then; she stayed with my wife's family. We drove around Europe. I remember very well in Yugoslavia being detained by the Communists for about a half an hour. They thought we were spying on their military works; that was a dramatic experience. Had a lovely trip, went down to Greece and over on a boat to Italy. Came back, end of honeymoon: went to work in the tire business.

Hicke: What were your responsibilities?

Firestone: I started out in sales. I went through retail training, which everybody does, for a few months. Then I was put on a territory for working with private dealers, and did that for a couple of years.

Hicke: Where were you living?

Firestone: Lived in Monterey at that time. Then the Salinas factory was to be built. It was really quite a break. I went from sales into production, and spent about three years in the tire plant, working in the various departments of the factory.

Hicke: Did you like that better than sales?

Firestone: Yes. I found it very interesting. I liked the idea, and then I went from that to a national quality program called Zero Defects. I managed that for a time. From there to a development department, worked on the development of tires, and

then about a year and a half in private brands, making tires other than Firestone.

Living and Working Abroad

Firestone: And then went overseas, spent a year in Italy, and about three years in England was my last assignment, for about twelve years altogether in the tire business.

Then decided to leave that and strike out on my own.

Hicke: Were you enjoying wine at this time, drinking it occasionally?

Firestone: Well, you know, yes. We did enjoy wine, again not as some people who make a particular hobby out of it. It was just something that one did. One entertained with wine. In Europe in those days, it was expected that one would know something about wines for entertainment, either going out to dinner or entertaining at home. And yes, I had a cellar, and would go to a wine merchant. I wouldn't say I was particularly knowledgeable, but it was something that I enjoyed and something that I followed a little bit, read a little bit, and tried to entertain with something that was worthwhile and sometimes interesting.

Hicke: Where in Italy did you live?

Firestone: We lived in Rome. I was the director of the Cyberlin Company, which was headquartered in Rome at that time, overseas company.

Hicke: So Rome and England.

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: You weren't exactly out in the wine districts.

Firestone: No. I remember one time, my first brush with wine [as a business interest], we had some people who had come in and helped us clean up, peasant types.

Hicke: This was in Italy?

Firestone: In Italy, yes. One time they brought--I think it was a five-gallon jug of this absolutely spectacularly good rosé from this village called Giubbio. It was just really good stuff. Kate

and I thought, this is too good to be true. We would go into a sideline and bottle it and sell it and make our fortune.

So we asked for some more of it, and they brought the next batch of it, and it was just awful. [laughter] So the quality control in Giubbio was not exactly outstanding!
[laughing]

Hicke: And there went your early retirement.

Firestone: Exactly.

III FIRESTONE VINEYARDS

Changing Jobs in 1972

Hicke: Okay, so it was some time in London that you decided to--

Firestone: Well, yes. I was frustrated with the situation. The family didn't really know what its position was in the tire business, and the tire business was run by professionals, really. They didn't know quite what to do with the family. There was some confusion. Kate and I looked to the future to see if we wanted to spend our life in the tire business in Akron, Ohio. We decided we really didn't. Made the decision just gently but firmly to leave the tire business. It was a little bit traumatic, and I was thirty-five years old, and I didn't know any better. Thirty-four maybe, I don't know.

I thought that I could do something better for the family. Kate and the kids stayed in London, and I went traveling to seek the next position. Came to California, looked at various companies and situations, and wasn't all that brilliant. Worked on [Richard M.] Nixon's campaign. Always was interested in politics, which is what I'm doing now [member of the California state legislature].

Evaluating the Vineyard

Firestone: But I was just lucky enough in my travels--do you want to get into the wine thing? My father had bought some land in Los Olivos, and he had been sold this as an investment. The Dart Industries owned the land, and he was very friendly with the people that were selling it. The idea was to develop a vineyard there.

- Hicke: This was your father's idea, or had they sold it with that in mind?
- Firestone: Well, he had been sold this as an investment, and it had a very advantageous tax write-off in those days.
- Hicke: What year?
- Firestone: We're in 1971, '72 maybe. He asked me to take a look at it, to see if it would work out--not to be involved, but I just had time on my hands, and this was not that far away. And frankly, I was kind of interested in a farming venture, and something that he had going. So I looked at it, and met the people who at that stage were just clearing the ground for planting the grapes.
- Hicke: Did he hire someone to manage the vineyard?
- Firestone: Oh, yes, it was all professionally managed. He wasn't to be involved at all personally. It was just a technical investment, like one would start a shoe company or a retread shop or--this was a farming venture.
- Hicke: And he already knew it was going to be planted to vineyards?
- Firestone: Yes. He had bought the land with that in mind. He just asked me to look it over. I did, and met the people that were to be the farmers, and they seemed to be glued together and know what they were doing, and I read all the research. Professor Vince Petrucci from the state university in Fresno was a consultant, as well as various other technical consultants. There was quite a body of research on this particular land.
- A neighboring fellow, Dean Brown, was a very intelligent farmer-rancher. He had accumulated a ten-year weather study on land immediately adjacent to my father's property. He developed a pretty good body of knowledge about this particular microclimate. So we had the research in terms of the soil and the rainfall and every aspect of--I mean, they looked into the wind patterns, they looked into the history of agriculture in that area, the competing crops and bugs and that sort of thing. But mostly, the soil, which was very good.
- Hicke: What kind of soil?
- Firestone: It's a kind of a chalky, gravelly soil. I am now convinced that in addition to the chemical composition of the soil, the structure and the drainage is as important as anything else. This had a gravelly drainage just as far down as we ever went.

I think that was one of our great benefits. It doesn't have a hard pan, it doesn't have a rich, farmy loam, it just has this gravelly drainage, as deep as the roots can go.

So anyway, I looked over this with kind of a businessman's but amateur eye, and I said, "Hey, this is interesting." But I had some friends in the wine business, Donn Chappellet particularly. I knew him, had known him for years and Chapallet Vineyards. Russ Green, who at that time owned Simi Winery, and a fellow called Bud Van Loben Sels, who at that time was running the Oakville Winery and the Van Loben Sels label.

So I began to read about grapes and wine, and talked to my friends, and it became apparent to me, an outsider, that there was a problem that's just typical of California agriculture, and it was this. Grapes were the fashionable venture. People were investing in vineyards and planting more grapes than they were building wineries. Here we were, down in Santa Barbara County, and the grapes had to be sent north at that time to Napa or Sonoma or somewhere, a long haul. No wineries down in our area. We were kind of at the end of the chain in terms of selling our grapes. If there were so many grapes going on, obvious question: how would we sell our grapes?

The price at that time, Cabernet [Sauvignon] was going for \$1,000, \$1,100 a ton. But if the commodities grew, the price would go down accordingly. I mean, just a matter of economics. I went to my father and said, "Wait a minute. The projections for selling, and selling at these prices, may not be right. But, if the research is as good as it looks for this particular microclimate and area, soil structure, so forth, and if there are no wineries here, and southern California is the greatest wine market in the world, maybe it would be good to have a winery here. I'll just look into that."

So I did so, and started to work with some other experts at that time. Of course, enter André Tchelistcheff, and I began talking with him, and Justin Meyer, who perhaps you know him, a brilliant winemaker. He was with Christian Brothers at that time. He had bought wine from the Nielson Vineyard in Santa Maria, bought grapes from them for Christian Brothers, so he knew the area somewhat. We brought him down to consult with us.

One thing led to another, and I started to put together the structure of a winery investment.

Santa Ynez Valley

Hicke: What did these people have to say about the Santa Ynez Valley?

Firestone: Well, interesting. Justin Meyer liked the area very much, but his experience was twenty-plus miles away in Santa Maria. But he liked the Central Coast.

Hicke: For grapes or for a winery?

Firestone: For grapes. And that was the chance: were these grapes going to be special, to be the foundation for an interesting winery? André Tchelistcheff also liked it. He liked the research, he liked the area, he liked the soil, everything, but he was a total bear on the economics of wineries. He'd seen too many come and go and fail. I remember one time he said, [with accent] "So, you want me to consult for you? Very good. How much money can you afford to lose?" He just didn't think the thing would succeed. But that was my job.

The more I got into it, the more fascinated I became. I began to realize in my mind that it could work. So I sat down with my father and said, "Hey, not only is it better to make wine than just grow grapes, it has a chance for a success. But it's something I'd like to do, and I'd like to pursue this." Of course, he said, "Fine." I mean, the fact was, I was unemployed at the time.

So I started to work on it.

Planning and Investment

Hicke: Where did you start?

Firestone: Well, really--and I don't think there still is--but certainly at that time there was nobody who could sit down and consult on a winery venture. I remember there was a fellow who worked for a management consulting firm, and I went to some seminars, and he was the guru. Arthur D. Little Company it was. But they had a very cursory knowledge of the winery business. It just wasn't the sophisticated--

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Firestone: So I started on the basis of my tire business experience and general business experience to fill in all the dotted lines: what would it cost to build a winery? How long would it take? What could the wine sell for? What would it cost to make the wine? And the more I talked to people, the more I realized that people's ideas were all over the lot. Most people didn't know what they were doing.

Hicke: Yes, there was nothing to go on because there were no wineries.

Firestone: Yes. But even in the north. I mean, they were doing it, they were making money, but it was still a farmer's business, and almost an amateur businessman's business. They grew grapes, they made wine, they sold it, and they made a profit.

Hicke: So they weren't making accurate evaluations for it.

Firestone: Yes, and they didn't know quite how. But putting together a twenty-year projection and that kind of thing, well, nobody really approached it that way. They were just beginning to. It was becoming more sophisticated, and of course, the majors--the Gallos and the Heubleins and the Mondavis--the more sophisticated people did, but they didn't share all the figures. There was no body of knowledge.

One of the, perhaps the crucial moment for us was my wife Kate and I went up and visited Donn Chappellet. I had stayed with him for a few days, and then the two of us went up there. Molly and Donn Chappellet were just wonderful to us. We were able to see what the lifestyle was, what it meant to live on a vineyard and with a winery and pursue that business, what the challenges were, what the personal aspects of it were. And we thought that it would be something that we would want to do.

And this is important, because the wine business is unlike most businesses. Nobody is going to get very rich in the wine business, unless there's some big breakout or sale of a crop or something like that. But it's a tough economic business. It's also a very long-term business, and it's also a very, very difficult business. It goes on day after day. It has its romantic aspects, but the economic realities are cruel. There are lots of things that can go wrong, and ultimately you have to make a good wine, you have to sell it, collect your money, and you usually don't collect enough. The bills are always there, and it goes on day after day.

You have to like it. You have to enjoy doing it, because if you don't, you're going to be frustrated. People who get into it for reasons of making money or technical business

reasons usually fail, because they find that they're just too frustrated doing it. Very long-term program.

I put together a twenty-year project. We approached it in a purist way, that we would plant our grapes, grow our grapes, harvest the first harvest, and build the winery to accommodate those grapes. We would not buy outside grapes or have somebody else make the wine for us; we would do everything in natural progression ourselves.

My instinct, and I can't say that I was that sophisticated, but my instinct was that if we did everything purely from our vineyard and did it ourselves, ultimately we would succeed, rather than buying in somebody else's grapes, or having somebody else make wine from our grapes, or doing a lot of the shortcuts that would have perhaps made more economic sense but would have hurt the image of the winery and the long-term development of the program.

So I put together a study, and this is just amazing to me, I can hardly believe it, but we demonstrated that starting in 1972, when we planted the grapes, we would not have a positive cash flow until 1981, nine years later. Now, in something like the tire business, that is absolutely unheard of--to have to wait nine years for a return on investment. It's just insanity.

But there were a couple of breaks. First of all, the tax laws in those days allowed for write-offs that are more aggressive than at present. And then the big break: along came the Suntory [Ltd.] Company. My father knew this character called Keizo Saji, who was a very pleasant man whom he played golf with, and they got along. He of course was the principal of the Suntory Company, which is one of the largest spirits and beer and wine manufacturers in the world, very big in Asia.

It happened that Mr. Saji was interested in investing in America. The idea of going into partnership with this character he'd known, Leonard Firestone, he seemed to enjoy, and being part of this venture just kind of appealed to him. So I then started dealing with the Suntory executives, who were far more precise and clinical about the whole thing. They wrung out the whole project and applied their expertise to my projections and my figures and my hopes and dreams. They brought a beverage managerial expertise to the table, which was very welcome.

So we sort of hit a partnership. I was going to be the guy on the spot and devote my career to this. My father would

devote the land and the grapes. Suntory would devote their expertise and technical help. We put together a partnership. I was the general partner.

Hicke: How did you persuade these businessmen to invest in something so monetarily distant? You said yourself it was difficult to project.

Firestone: Oh, well, the Japanese have a different philosophy than the Americans or Europeans regarding long-term strategy. It fits their program much better, and I think that appealed to them. But more than that, in 1974, which was when we concluded our partnership with Suntory, under tax law at that time, I was able to pass to my father and to Suntory a portion of my losses. We knew that the losses would be guaranteed. Because of the credit rating of the people, the principals involved, we were able to leverage this and borrow most of the money to found the business--

Hicke: From a bank?

Firestone: From a bank. So we were guaranteed very substantial losses. My father and Suntory could use those losses, but a higher percentage than their ownership, because I passed--essentially it [ownership] was a third, a third, a third. So Suntory and my father each enjoyed a third of the losses. But I just took 10 percent and gave it to each, so I took--in round numbers--13 percent of the loss and passed 10 percent, so here was my father and Suntory getting 43 percent--these are rough, round figures--of the losses, and writing them off against their income or profits, which was perfectly permissible in those days.

The ingredients for that kind of a deal are two. First of all, there has to be a great deal of trust and mutual understanding between the general partner and the limited partners. And secondly, it has to ultimately succeed. So they had to trust the business and the master plan and the fact that I would get out there and work like a plow horse day in and day out to make this thing work. And I did. [laughs]

In this history, one thing I want to make clear: winery businesses are very tough work. You start in the farming, and it's farming like anything else; whether you grow corn or peaches or apricots, everything has seasons, it needs water, it takes a lot of labor, there is all kinds of--

Hicke: Subject to disaster.

Firestone: Subject to all kinds of disaster, and the experts don't know everything. It just takes day in and day out, people doing things and doing them right and doing them consistently, because the grapes will never forgive you if you don't. So that was the first element.

Second element was building the winery that works, that is reasonably economic and can function correctly at an economic basis. A lot of people make mistakes in that. They design them incorrectly or spend too much money on them.

Winemaking in the Santa Ynez Valley

Hicke: Let me stop you just a little bit: I want to get into that, but I want to go back also; did you go into the history of the Santa Ynez Valley at all? There had been winemaking there very early on, or vineyards going back?

Firestone: Yes. There was no transferrable history. The Mission [Santa Barbara] had made some wine, but of course, that was a totally different thing altogether. There had been a couple of hobby wineries, but that was a different thing. There had been no commercial wines.

Hicke: Since Prohibition?

Firestone: Since ever, yes. I mean, there had never been a commercial winery based on Santa Barbara County grapes. There was a winery called the Santa Barbara Winery, and that was in Santa Barbara, but they brought in grapes from around the state and made wines that were essentially table wine, and made a couple of fruit wines. They're a very serious winery now; they were not in those days. So there really wasn't anything to go on in our county.

Hicke: How about vineyards?

Firestone: Well, we had the information on the grapes that were sold to the north, particularly the Nielson vineyard. There was nothing in the Santa Ynez Valley, nothing at all. This Dean Brown was one year ahead of us in planting, and we had something to go on there because he'd done it. But of course, he had no grapes, and he was not selling any.

So we took a chance.

Choosing and Planting Grape Varieties

Hicke: How did you decide what to plant?

Firestone: Well, the state of the art then, and really I think now, the experts can take a look at every aspect of a piece of ground--the soil, the chemistry, the composition, the structure, the weather, the water, the wind, the agricultural history in the area, and every other aspect that might have influence on the grapes, and they can say what would be wrong. They can cancel out a place; they can say, "Hey, you're not going to make it here," for this reason or that reason, it's too hot, too cold, the drainage isn't right, whatever. But they can't say that it will be good or great.

All the experts on our piece of ground were able to do that. They would say, "Everything is here. There is nothing wrong with what you're doing. You will make acceptable good grapes." Now, whether they will be great or not, the state of the art was not, and I don't think even now, is such that they could say, "This will be great." What makes the Domaine Romanée-Conti that much better than a quarter of a mile away, where you have far lesser grapes? There is still some magic in it.

And frankly, that appealed to us. Because at that time--in the early seventies--there were a number of wineries being built in Napa and Sonoma counties, even in Monterey County, but nobody was doing it where we were doing it. We would be different. It was a crapshoot, but we would have the first franchise on that area. And something occurred to me as an amateur, that I guess I got from marketing tires or marketing anything, which was that when we went to a distributor or looked at a wine list or whatever, they may have twenty Napa and Sonoma wines, but they wouldn't have any Santa Barbara County wines. There was a great deal of marketing cachet to being the first and unique from that area. That appealed to me. So there was a chance, we rolled the dice, but at the same time, we knew that we would have an advantage.

And, we could be the best wine in the world. We didn't have a neighbor who had demonstrated that you made the second-best wine in the world, or the third-best, or the fourth-best. Nobody had demonstrated anything. So we were taking a shot at the moon. That appealed to my father and myself also.

Hicke: So your father agreed with your outlook?

Firestone: Yes. And that's why that first harvest was, I mean, incredibly exciting. We just kept peering at those grapes and at that developing wine, and wondering, what would it be? What would turn out from it? That just was enormously exciting.

Hicke: Let me get back again to asking you what grapes you planted, and how you decided.

Firestone: Decided really because the configuration was for the noble grapes. The obvious was Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, which were the two leading grapes. We put in--no, I don't think we put in any Merlot at first; let's see, we put in Riesling, quite a bit of Riesling, and Pinot Noir. It was very interesting. There was some evidence that maybe Pinot Noir would flourish there, and I love Pinot Noir--Burgundy--myself. The 1975 harvest was--actually one of the startlingly good ones was the Pinot Noir. Seventy-seven was great.

But we found that year in and year out, our Pinot Noir was just not up to par. There were some beautiful Pinot Noirs coming out of the Santa Maria [Valley] twenty miles away area, and Santa Rosa Road ten miles away, but we just became dissatisfied year in and year out with our Pinot Noir, so we finally took it all out. We were wrong on that.

Riesling--I still think we make almost the best Riesling in the world. For some reason, we just clicked with Riesling. The next year, we planted some Gewürtztraminer. Our Gewürtztraminer is spectacular. Doesn't sell well; Gewürtztraminer is a hard sell. People can't pronounce it, they don't know how to use it. It's just not a popular wine. But our particular configuration just happens to make some really spectacular Gewürtz.

Hicke: Does your ancestor's background in Alsace have anything to do with that, with those choices?

Firestone: [laughs] Maybe, maybe. All those vibrations, and the fact that Alison Green, our winemaker, had done her apprenticeship in Alsace.

Hicke: So when you picked out these grapes to plant, was that with the advice of the university or farm advisors?

Firestone: Yes, it was partly that, partly marketing, and frankly, the fact--nobody could say in the first instance, Chardonnay is going to do better than Cabernet Sauvignon, or vice versa. The state of the art just isn't that. The overall configuration

for the noble grapes is that they all kind of would do well there, but we had to just do it to find out.

Hicke: You just tried--

Firestone: Yes. The only--and this was a mistake I made--we bought our own home farm, which was about four miles away from the winery property, and we had fifty acres that we were planting there. I kind of like Zinfandel. I like the theory of Zinfandel, because--oh, it's an indigenous California wine, and I thought that would sort of complete the mix.

André Tchelistcheff came down, he looked at my soil, which was richer than the winery soil, and all the information, and he said, "Vell, Zinfandel will not do well here. It just won't make good wine." So we sent back 26,000 Zinfandel plants and replaced them with Cabernet and Merlot, and I'm very glad I did that. We had to bite the bullet there. That's right, that was the first Merlot we planted. Then we got Sauvignon Blanc.

Building the Winery

Hicke: Tell me about designing and building the winery.

Firestone: The winery: I went to a fellow called Richard Keith, who had an engineering firm with architects, and gave him the contract to develop the whole thing. He designed the winery, and laid out the machinery areas and the flow. I had quite a bit of input, and here my practical experience on tire shop floors helped a great deal. Because I insisted that the winery be workable. As I tour a number of the wineries around California, I see that they're beautiful architectural buildings, and they're lovely to be in, but they're simply not functional. Little things like having everything on one level. Architecturally it's wonderful to have a number of levels, but functionally it's a nightmare.

I had the winemaker's office and the laboratory at the hub of the winery, where the winemaker could practically see everything that went on, and still can. It's amazing to me how in many wineries, they take the winemaker and stick them off in some side office, or bring them up to the front office where the sales department is, which is functionally just not right to do. So I had quite a bit of input on the flow and the concept of the winery.

Hicke: Had they designed wineries before?

Firestone: Yes, they had, particularly the Chapallet Winery, they did the whole thing, and obviously I was comfortable with that. And they had done the expansion of the Mondavi Winery, and they worked on Souverain and some other ones, I forget which, at the time.

Hicke: How about equipment?

Firestone: Equipment: here I was at a total loss, because this was not my expertise. I hired a winemaker during the construction phase, a fellow called Tony Austin, and of course, André Tchelistcheff was hired on as our permanent consultant. So with Richard Keith's expertise and Tony Austin's input and André Tchelistcheff's, we made the decisions on the equipment, and they would bring me the various options.

Frankly, this was a weakness I had, as the general partner and the manager of the project. If I had it to do again, I'd do some things differently, but I just didn't have the basis for a decision there. That was a weakness.

But we built it, and we built it economically. I was a bear on numbers. We built an architectural winery, but we did it quite economically. We brought the whole project in--it was really quite amazing; in terms of our twenty-year plan, and there were--

[tape interruption]

Hicke: You were just talking about bringing in the winery at a--

Firestone: The whole project came in amazingly close to our long-term projection. The expenses being the winery itself, the building, all of our losses--we had to pay wages up until the time we had wine to sell, and then inventory, and of course, everybody underestimates inventory. It's just fierce, because you've got all that wine aging.

Hicke: You mean how much it costs you to maintain inventory?

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: How much you have to invest--

Firestone: Yes, how much you invest in inventory. You have to buy those grapes, you have to make that wine, you have to pay for the bottles and the capsules and corks and everything, and it all

sits there, and it's not ready to sell. That Cabernet has got to sit there for a couple of years before it's ready. But you've bought it. And everybody who goes into the business underestimates that aspect of it, because that is fierce.

Hicke: Did you get your equipment in Europe--Germany or France, Italy?

Firestone: A little bit of everything. We bought some American. We had a French press. Most of our labeling equipment was German. American tanks, American--

Hicke: Stainless steel?

Firestone: Stainless steel, yes. French and Yugoslavian oak, and some American oak. Our crusher-stemmer was American. All over the lot. Pumps: some Europe, some American.

Hicke: Do you still get all your oak from these same sources?

Firestone: No, we're getting more and more American oak. There are some coopers who are duplicating the European process identically, and the strains of oak that they're using I find are very close, and we're quite optimistic that we can use, for Cabernet particularly, I think we're using as much as a third of our barrels now are American.

Hicke: Are they toasted to your specifications?

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: Can you tell me which coopers?

Firestone: No, I forget their names.

Hicke: But I think that's a very interesting development, that we now have American coopers that can do that.

Firestone: Yes.

First Harvest, 1975

Hicke: Okay, so we've got the winery built, and you have some vineyards.

Firestone: Yes, and we had our first harvest. Of course, promotion is very much part of it. We had some good publicity along the way.

Hicke: Before you ever had any wine?

Firestone: Yes. What was happening, and when we had our first harvest, the first grapes that were brought in, we had a great celebration for that, and invited a lot of people, and that was fun. We always had a lot of fun doing this thing.

Hicke: What did you do? You had people stamping grapes? [laughs]

Firestone: No, we had--let me see if I can remember. We had shears and buckets for everybody. Everybody picked grapes. The first harvest was quite late, September 25. It was Pinot Noir, in 1975. We had a couple hundred people show up, some press, some L.A. types, my father was there, and a lot of local friends. Everybody took their shears and picked the grapes, so they had the experience of actually getting their hands dirty and sticky doing that.

Then we brought the grapes into the crusher, and we had a great friend, an Episcopal priest, there, who blessed the grapes and the harvest, and we all threw our buckets into the crusher and turned it on. Then that was it for the first time. I mean, that was it!

We had a lunch set up, catered, and we took some of the juice, and everybody drank grape juice, as well as some other wine that we brought in--I think we had Chapallet wine. [laughter] From my buddy. And we were underway.

Selling the Wine

Firestone: By six months later, we had some rosé and some Riesling that we could sell.

Hicke: This is rosé of Cabernet?

Firestone: Yes, rosé of Cabernet. All of a sudden, we were in business. I had to go out and hit the streets and sell this. Had terrible luck locally.

Hicke: Oh, really? Nobody believed in you?

Firestone: Precisely. We were just cowboys and farmers over on the Santa Ynez Valley. Santa Barbara knew better; wine came from Napa or Bordeaux.

Hicke: How did you manage?

Firestone: Well, like anything else. And this was my ultimate responsibility. Well, I had two crucial responsibilities. First was to bring in the project on budget with as intelligent as possible decisions about making the winery and the equipment and the people that we had to hire, and that went on for two and a half years before we had the first wine to sell. Then kicked in my formidable responsibility, which was selling the wine, the marketing--the decision on the labels, and the promotion, and walking the streets. That's what I did for twenty years.

Hicke: How did you decide on the label?

Firestone: The first tough decision was whether to call it Firestone. The Suntory people were skeptical about that. They hired a P.R. firm and an advertising firm to study it. They said, "Don't call it Firestone, because it sounds like a big corporation. It sounds like rubber, and anything to do with rubber is very bad with wine." I mean, they talked about a burnt rubber taste--it's just bad. I had to make that decision.

But the tradition of California wineries is that one does put one's name on it. In addition, I had been accustomed to selling Firestone tires, I knew the benefits of selling something that had your own name on it.

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Firestone: And if we had sold something that was the Santa Ynez Winery or the Figaro Mountain Winery or something like that, people wouldn't believe in it as much as selling Firestone. And it played, because wherever I went, if I ever got any publicity, the name of the wine, the name of the family, myself, everything was the same name. And it's a small business. People forget these wineries are very small businesses. We only had so many shots at getting any publicity, and it's very handy to have just one name, one label, one everything.

So it wasn't Brooks Firestone selling Figaro Mountain Wine; it was Firestone selling Firestone wine from the Firestone family from the Firestone Vineyard. So that was one of my early calls, and I said, "Well, the buck stops with me, and I think it ought to be Firestone," so we did.

And then coming up with the label itself, and we had this kind of bizarre idea at the time, which was to have a different drawing on each label that came out. In actual fact, the first label we had was this rosé. We had a drawing of the unfinished winery on the label, nothing like what you see now.

Hicke: I'm just looking at some of your '91 labels. Who did the drawings?

Firestone: Sebastian Titus was the artist. For the first two years, every label we had was different. We had a series of labels. Then we finally came up with our classic label, and stuck with it.

Hicke: This one is your permanent label now?

Firestone: Yes, this is the new departure. My son [Adam Firestone] finally had the courage to do this. We had no colored stripe on it.

Hicke: Oh, I see, that's the new part. Otherwise, it's a picture of the winery.

Firestone: Yes, but we had a very large drawing on the earlier label. I'm sorry, I haven't got any examples of it--it was a larger drawing. The drawing dominated the label. I had one of me harvesting Chardonnay grapes with my shepherd dog watching me; he made that drawing. We had one showing the reservoir, and at the time we had sheep that would be inside the reservoir, because their pointed feet did a great job of packing the sides of the reservoir when they went down to drink, so we put that on the label.

Hicke: You had a different label for each wine?

Firestone: Yes. And that was a nice little gimmick that served us well; we got some good publicity on that one.

Hicke: Why did you depart from that, then?

Firestone: Well, it was very expensive, and we ran out of scenes. We thought after a couple of years: we've come of age. Now it's time to have a classic label, because we are now playing with the big boys, and it was time to stop the gimmicks and do something for real. But the gimmick helped us get over those first couple of years, because we were just so new that we were not a classic winery. I didn't want to pretend to be more than we were.

We always had the philosophy that we were not going to be the greatest winery in the world. If we happened to be, in our spare time, that would be wonderful, but we were not producing the contents of the Holy Grail. We were doing something that was natural and fun and quality, and something that we liked and approved of, but so many of these wineries take on an atmosphere of being the best in the world. They want to make the greatest, esoteric, artistic wine. I think it's much more healthy and normal than that.

In my pricing, in the atmosphere of the wine--and each winery takes on a character of its own--we just wanted to be a very good standard. And if occasionally we were great, well, of course we were striving to do that. But we just took on a little bit different atmosphere than some of the wineries in our league.

Hicke: This affected your pricing decisions and what you did about promotions?

Firestone: Yes. We were at the lower end of the premium scale, and occasionally we hit with a very good write-up and scarcity. A number of wineries--there's a classic pattern for new wineries, and it is a death trap. They will do their homework, and bring in some very good grapes, and make a very limited quantity of great wine for the first two or three harvests. They will be fashionable. The wine writers will find them. They will have very little wine, because they're just starting up. And everybody will think, This is the winery.

It will go to their heads, and they price themselves too high. They surround themselves with an atmosphere of being the great, fashionable winery. And they get away with it, because they are--for a year, or two years. Then they have been so successful that they now make a great deal more wine, so they suddenly have five times the wine that they had when they were fashionable. And the wine writers find another great, fashionable winery.

So if I've seen it once, I've seen it dozens of times. These wineries suddenly have more wine than they should have. They have lost that great prestige edge. They never knew how to sell their wines, because people just lined up to take it from them at too high a price, so they have to cut their price, they have to go out and sell it, and they don't know how. And they lose their reputation, and quite often they go bankrupt. It's just kind of a pattern.

I saw that, and I guess my good old tire company instincts tell me I don't want to fall into that trap. So we never postured ourselves or purported to be the fashionable winery. We just did it day by day, step by step, and developed a good relationship with distributors across the country, avoided the super-fashionable distributors. Never was that crazy about selling wine in New York or San Francisco, because everybody was trying to sell their wines in those special restaurants. Secondary markets just were fine with me, and we just step by step, day by day, did it for twenty years.

Terroir of the Santa Ynez Valley

Hicke: Let me go back a little bit and ask you to describe the special qualities of the Santa Ynez Valley, and how you explain it to people that good wines can be made there.

Firestone: Well, the special qualities of the Santa Ynez Valley--it's going to take a couple of generations to know what they are. And here again, nobody can tell how great a wine is going to be for the first few years. You can't. And I never claimed to, because you start out, and you don't know--well, first you have new grapes from new vines, and it takes five, seven years to get a really mature crop. The characteristics of the grapes in those first couple of years change dramatically as the vines age.

And of course, vintages differ. Our '75 harvest was a beautiful harvest, but they were the first grapes off the vines. They were all different, and they made some beautiful, delicate wines. The wines did not age, did not have the staying power that subsequent vintages had. Seventy-six was a rainy year; it was a disaster year for us. Seventy-seven, god, it was a great year, and we still have some '77 wines, and the Cabernet is still holding, and it's just beautiful.

Seventy-seven was our breakthrough year, and particularly because I think it was in '78, we won the Vintner's Club tasting of Riesling wines in San Francisco. It was all blind tasting, nobody saw what they were, and by god, we came out as the best Riesling. That was probably the startling, startling moment when we thought that maybe we really had something. That was the first stamp of approval, and it was kind of shocking. I mean, we'd run with it--of course we did.

Then the second, and this one really put us into orbit, we had a '78 Chardonnay, and I still maintain it's perhaps the best Chardonnay we ever made. It's just--the wine had a quality, it was just brilliant. I mean, not at first. We didn't spot it in the bottle, and we had pretty well sold out of the vintage, and we were happy to do that. But our distributor, I guess it was about 1981, because it was about a two-year cycle before we released it then, and--yes, it was '81. Maybe '80--our English distributor had submitted it to International Wine and Spirits competition, and we got Best Chardonnay of Show. These were maybe the two high points in my life in this whole twenty years; both have been in England. That was the first one.

Kate and I went to Bristol for the prize-giving, and we got the gold medal and the trophy for being Best of Show. This kind of--well, Kate's family always thought I was nuts, still do. But leaving the tire to go into the wine business, well, you know. But getting this award in England was very, very, very special. We had local publicity on that, and that was the time that Santa Barbara began to attract a little notice. Because we would never on our own make it in Santa Barbara. We had to prove ourselves in London before Santa Barbara, and that's true. That's just the way it is. And Los Angeles--we got really good publicity in Los Angeles on this and other things about that time.

Fortunately, that was '81, when we had for the first time the full harvest mature, because from '75, '76, '77, it was about '78 until we got a full harvest from the vines, and it was about '81 when we had that mature and ready to sell. That's why the projects take so long. We hit with that great publicity from London about our Chardonnay, and then people began to take us seriously.

Hicke: I read somewhere that was the first year you made a profit.

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: Not a coincidence, probably.

Firestone: Yes. It all went together.

Hicke: You told me a little bit about the soil. What about the climate, the other aspects of the *terroir*?

Firestone: Well, it's right there, it's in the niche. The degree days and the cool nights. We have a lot of fog up there. This year,

we're desperately looking for heat. We're in the slot of the great regions of the world, so we've proven that.

Hicke: It's surprising that you had to come along and recognize this before anybody else did.

Firestone: Well, I've got to give Dean Brown the credit. He was a year ahead of us planting grapes. He was the one that did the ten-year weather study. He was the one that established this. I guess you're doing histories: what did we recognize? Why did we do what we did? Well, it's a combination of things, and part of it is not knowing any better. [laughter]

Hicke: I think that's a historical factor, definitely.

A Practical Approach to Winegrowing

Firestone: I mean, it had to be somebody like myself who was very motivated, who had a general business sense, who weighed up all the equations, but basically, I wasn't fully aware of why it couldn't succeed. In fact, my son now--after twenty years, I know a little bit too much--he's taking over, he's expanding the winery, he's expanding the grapes, and he's doing a great job. He doesn't know any better. [laughter]

Hicke: It's interesting, because you approached the winery business from sort of the financial end, let's say, more or less as a business investment, as opposed to somebody who loved wine and came into it from that--

Firestone: Well, that's not quite accurate, because after twelve years in manufacturing, living in London, Kate and I just loved the idea of moving to the country. I wanted a farm. The farming part was very appealing. The qualitative aspect of it, the fact that unlike a tire business, which is just numbers and a round and black product, this was a quality product. This was something that bordered on the artistic. That appealed to us very much.

I like wine, I enjoy it. But I had an advantage here, because some of the people that go into the wine business lose sight of the practical aspects, because they are so much in love with wine. They are totally involved with it. I was never that much in love with the product itself. I mean, opening a different bottle of wine, tasting our vintages, I love it, but there's a distinction between, it's--I think I

have a far more healthy appreciation and not the esoteric appreciation that sometimes gets people in trouble.

Hicke: Down to earth, literally.

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: You also did have a farm, right? You had the sheep, you mentioned, and--

Firestone: Oh, yes, we had a cattle ranch and for about ten years, I just slugged it out in the cattle business. [laughs] It was terrible. I never made a go of it.

Hicke: So you don't have that now?

Firestone: No.

Hicke: Okay. Tell me a little bit about the vineyard management. I don't know how much you actually got into it, but such things as water and trellising, and I don't know if you have any problem with frost or any of those things.

Firestone: Oh, yes, and here again, we had three levels of expertise. We had the Professor Petrucci, who was the master consultant, and we had a farming consultant called Dale Hampton, who oversaw at that time about 3,000 acres of grapes. And then we had the vineyard foreman, Larry Alexander, who has been with us all along. My job was to manage them, see that everybody got paid, see that everybody was talking to everybody, see that everything was on schedule and that. I would participate when I could. The idea of going out and running a tractor is enormously appealing to me, but that's really not what I was supposed to be doing. I was always at the harvest, I did a lot of work at the harvest, because I just liked it, but that wasn't my job.

The winery does not want me to farm, it doesn't want me to make wine, it doesn't want me to shuffle papers. It wants me to manage the economics secondly, but firstly, it wants me to go out and sell. Every day I was sitting on a tractor, I was denying my responsibility. My responsibility was going out and, frankly, that was where my battle was fought.

In the mid-eighties, end of the eighties, there were some real tough days in the winery business. There was just too much wine and not enough business. There were about three years when--I calculated it--I was gone more than half the time. There was one year when Kate and I--well, she was with

me most of the time--we took a three-month road trip. I just got in the Chevy Van and drove across the country. I actually have done that a number of years, but would go back and forth--leave the van somewhere and go back and forth. But one time, we just left from here and were gone on a three-month trip.

Hicke: What parts of the country did you find that were interested in your wines?

Firestone: Well, everywhere. I avoided New York and San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., not so much. Particularly in Texas, in the Southeast, we do well, and North Carolina. We love North Carolina. We go to Charlotte and the Triangle and Raleigh and up and down the country, and we would just go to every event we could. There are wine shows, there are charity events, there is--we would schedule the whole thing, and they'd know that in Texas I was going to be there that week. We went to Austin and Lubbock.

I remember going to Lubbock, Texas, one of the best sales I ever made. It was on the way home, I was just by myself on this trip. Lubbock was the last stop. I was tired, and I thought, well, Lubbock, okay. One more time. I went out to lunch with this character, I can't remember his name. His store is Cross Keys. In Lubbock, all the stores are together in the wet area of a dry county. We just got talking about life and children and politics and everything.

Then finally he said, "What about--let's talk wine." I said, "Okay, we'll talk wine a little bit." And then between us, we got the idea of putting up a display in his store and getting some tires. I had never done that before. So I said, "Okay, look. I'll go by the Firestone store. I know I can get this handled. I'll get some display for you." He said, "Great, then I'll come by and I'll give you an order."

So I went by the Firestone store, I had some samples with me, and I gave the guy a few bottles of wine, talked him into it. So we got some tire stands and some tires and some inserts, and some Firestone stuff. I loaded it into the van, took it to his store, and the guy gave me an order for 100 cases.

I said, "I don't want to overdo this; I think this is wrong." He looked at me and he said, "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing." And he cleared out the front of his store--I saw pictures of it later. He cleared it out, put in a stack of 100 cases of wine with these tires around, all that stuff, and

it took him about three months, but he sold it all. And made a lot of money.

Hicke: In three months?

Firestone: Yes. But that's the way he operated. He had a flair, and people liked his store, and particularly where all of them were sort of in the same area, he always did something that was interesting. And here was this different display, and he sold the wine, and he made a lot of money doing it. But the more of that I can do--if I could do one of those a day, that's what it takes.

And fortunately, I like people. The traveling wasn't all that bad, but here I was away from the winery for three months. I never went back to the winery. But that was me doing the best thing that I could possibly do to maintain a successful winery.

Buying J. Carey Cellars, 1987

Hicke: What was happening at the winery? Was Kate managing it?

Firestone: Well, she was going back and forth. We bought the second winery, the Carey Winery, she was there by then.

Hicke: J. Carey Cellars?

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: When did you buy that?

Firestone: I think it was '86 when we started looking at it. Alison was making wine, Patrick Well was managing the whole thing, Joyce was taking the orders, and everybody was doing their job. Larry was running the thing, and I'd get all the reports and talk to people every day, but I didn't have to be there, and the fact that I didn't have to be there meant that I was doing what I should be doing.

Hicke: Tell me about why you bought J. Carey.

Firestone: Well, I always knew it, because a fellow called Bob McGowan, who was general counsel for McDonnell-Douglas, had planted it--twenty-four acres. We knew that one of the vineyards was magic and one of them was all right. Some doctors had bought it

called Carey--father surgeon and two son surgeons--and they bought it for their father's retirement, and the father died. They had built a winery there. Typical doctors, it was poorly run but made some good wines. They were losing a bundle on it, and they just got bored with it.

Came to me and said, "We've got to sell this, are you interested?" Because we'd helped them farm from time to time, so we knew it. I said, "Don't talk to me, I know too much. Go find somebody that doesn't know any better." I'll never forget, when they first came, they came up to the winery before they even bought the place. They wanted to make the greatest Cabernet Sauvignon in the world. I said, "Don't say that! Don't even think it! If you start out that way--by the way, you're not going to do it anyway. Just do it in a way that fits. What you ought to do is you ought to call it Dr. Carey's Table Red, and make a name for it, but don't try and make the best wine in the world! You're going to kill yourselves."

But they did, and they made a pretty good wine. Anyway, they had sold it, and crazy thing, I was down--it was during the harvest, during October, November, something like that--with our then-general manager, who was Allen Russell. We were having breakfast at six o'clock after being early, early in the morning at the winery. I ran into a real estate guy and said, "Hey, what's going on in town?" He said that the Carey winery had just fallen out of escrow.

I said, "No kidding?" He said, "Yes, damn it. The people who had bought it backed out." So we went there and looked at it one more time, and I put in an offer, and it was not very much money at the time, but the Careys wanted to sell it. So we bought it, and then started to put a fortune into the place. Kate said she wanted to run it. [laughs]

Hicke: Did she want to make the best Cabernet?

Firestone: Yes, yes! Argh! [laughs] But it's worked for us. And they've made some pretty good wine, but [laughing]--that was one I couldn't control.

Hicke: So she manages that one?

Firestone: Yes.

Hicke: And also Firestone when you're not there.

Firestone: And we got this wonderful thing going for us, which is sort of the his-and-hers wineries. And the publicity of it

demonstrated to people that we were very serious about the wine business, this is what we do, and the fact that it's sort of a his-and-her kind of thing and rivalry kind of appeals to some people. And it's all worked.

Hicke: What do they make besides Cabernet?

Firestone: Merlot and some Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. They steal our best grapes and make small batches of Chardonnay.

Hicke: That's what you get for being away so much. [laughs]

Firestone: Exactly.

Wine Business in the mid-1980s

Hicke: Well, we've gotten up to the eighties, at least the mid-eighties. How did things go on from there?

Firestone: Well, you know, around the mid-eighties is really interesting. That's when the real hard work set in, because the first initial bloom of the early days was off. We had lots of wine to sell. The wine business had its ups and downs. We had some distributors who went out of business. That's when the whole wine business came of age across the state. There were wineries failing, and--

Hicke: The tax laws changed.

Firestone: Yes, the tax laws changed. And that's when it just turned into a--fortunately, we still liked it, even with ups and downs. But I just did it day in and day out. And always enjoyed it. It was never that hard. You know, talking to you now, it's absolutely amazing. I look back over twenty years, and you say, "How were the mid-eighties?" Well, the mid-eighties were pretty bad, but it didn't seem so at the time. [laughter]

Hicke: You didn't know they could be any better?

Firestone: I was just working like hell, and the family had grown up, and we had a lot of fun and did a lot of things. We'd have different ideas of success and failures, 100 cases in Lubbock, the distributor would go out of business in Minnesota, and we just kept putting it together one day at a time. They were wonderful years.

Winemaker Alison Green

Hicke: When did you bring on Alison Green?

Firestone: She joined us in '77. She came to us from the Hoffman Mountain Ranch Winery. Her father was Russ Green, who had owned the Simi Winery, and she's just a classic winemaker. She grew up in a vineyard, around a winery, went to Davis, did well, did her apprenticeship in Alsace, had come back, and I guess did some work at Hoffman Mountain Ranch under Tchelistcheff. And then she came to us and was the assistant winemaker. When Tony Austin left to start his own winery, she took over.

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Hicke: Does she have a specific winemaking philosophy?

Firestone: Yes, it's just like mine. She just loves wine, but again, she does not feel it is the contents of the Holy Grail. And she's very good at what she does; she has extraordinary talent. She has a very practical, down-to-earth outlook. She has come to realize, as indeed I have, that the real breakthroughs and the quality improvements will be made in the vineyard, not the winery, because we've pretty much hit a standard of winemaking. So she spends a lot of time in the vineyard, and she is just one of these rare and wonderful people. We just have a great partnership.

Hicke: Speaking of the vineyard, do you have any problems with your diseases and pests?

Firestone: Oh, yes, we found phylloxera down there just three weeks ago. Oddly enough, it came in the little vineyard next door to Carey's that one of the doctors kept. It was sort of a freak. My daughter and son-in-law bought it, and as part of due diligence, they were examining everything and saw this area of the vineyard was just not doing well. They were a little suspicious, and they got a couple of tractors and experts and a backhoe and dug down to the roots, and found the first case of phylloxera.

Family Members in the Winery

Hicke: I understand that other members of your family are involved in the winery now.

Firestone: My son Adam is now the joint general partner, and he's running the whole operation and doing just a wonderful job of it. He is very good at what he does. After he'd taken the California bar exam, he had about a six-month hiatus before he got the results. He was totally sick and tired of waiting, so he helped out with the harvest. So he was always part of it.

Our oldest daughter, Hayley, is in the retail operation. My younger daughter, Polly, is at school. She is interested in the vineyard more than in wine. So everybody is involved. So I'm rapidly becoming superfluous to the operation. [laughter]

Hicke: Well, with your present job as state legislator, it's probably a good thing that you raised your own successors.

General Trends

Hicke: I have just a few questions here on the general wine industry. What do you think about the Neo-Prohibitionism?

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Firestone: Yes, Neo-Prohibition: I don't see that as being as big an aspect of the thing, and I think we'll survive them. I think the medical attributes of wine are becoming well known.

Hicke: Well, what changes do you see as important for the future, the changes that you have seen and the things that are coming?

Firestone: I think that people are drinking less but drinking more quality, and that helps wine. Politically, I see people putting taxes on alcoholic beverages--right now they're talking about this tipplers' tax in Los Angeles, which would be absolutely crazy, putting a 10-percent tax on all the drinks that are served retail. That's going to just kill their convention business and their hospitality, tourist industry.

I see interest in wine spreading throughout the country. A gallon each per person is still so much less than in Europe. I think we've got people in Omaha and Dallas and Akron, Ohio,

who are drinking more wine, and that's good; they're paying attention. I think we've got a very strong future.

IV MEMBER OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY

Hicke: Now let me just ask you to tell me a little bit about your run for the legislature, and why you decided to do that.

Firestone: When Jack Davies was the president of the Wine Institute [board of directors]--this goes back about twelve years, something like that--I was on the board at the time--he asked me to chair a committee to look into the future: what would make wineries successful or failures? I got some of the brightest people that would volunteer their time, and we went on a retreat and went down to Palm Springs with a futurist from Stanford, and sat around and brainstormed for two days on what would be the reasons for success or failure of the wine and wineries generally. Was it farming, winemaking, Neo-Prohibitionists? Was it international trade? What would promotion do? What would make us as an industry a success or failure?

And we kept getting back to politics. It's not what we would do ourselves, it's what would be done to us, in terms of labeling, taxation, all the permitting process, and the international trade, interstate trade--all of that. We just kept coming back to it: hey, it's not us, it's what we deal with technically.

I reported that back to the Wine Institute. I said, "The best thing we could do is be active in politics if we really want to be a success or failure, because the laws and taxes will do it to us." In my business, I did a pro forma of a \$5 million winery. That winery, if one looks at all the taxes that winery will pay before making a profit, it's 10 percent of sales. It's a half a million dollars. That's excise tax, it's property tax, it's sales tax, it's employment tax, it's gasoline tax--all the taxes that this entity will pay, it's 10 percent.

Now, 10 percent gets close to sales expense and overhead expense. That's formidable. There's a lot of idiots in this house here [State Assembly] that don't have any idea about that. Here, if I think back on the enormous risk--I was putting everything I had in the world at risk here: my resources, my family, my life, my career, everything. And like I said, there are compensating errors. If I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn't do it. It was too much of a chance.

The governmental restrictions and taxes were not as bad then as they are now, but thinking of doing all that, and knowing that before profit, 10 percent would go to taxes, well, you know, you probably wouldn't do it. It's getting to be a killer.

So what better thing--since I was always interested in politics anyway, and had followed it and helped other people, I just thought I'd take my turn and do this.

Hicke: Can you tell me a little bit about running, the campaign?

Firestone: Oh, it's like selling tires or selling wine, only worse. You have to raise a lot of money, and you have to be out there in front of people every day on the streets, walking precincts, throwing debates, the whole thing. I ran twelve years ago; this is not the first time I did this. But this time, the district was ready for me.

Hicke: You got gerrymandered out last time, I read.

Firestone: Yes. It's a rough game. It's a despicable game. They took me out of the race last time; I had to move, and put myself back in it. That was tough to do.

Hicke: When were you elected to the legislature?

Firestone: November '94.

Hicke: And have you had any impact on the wine industry, or have you been able to get anything done?

Firestone: Well, indirectly. There really aren't that many bills that affect it one way or the other. Specifically, no. Excuse me, there was one bill, a Jack O'Connell bill to do with putting signs on highways. You know, other states and countries in tourist areas will have little generic signs, those bunches of grapes saying, "That way," in other words, indicating where the

wineries are. California doesn't do that. They were crazy not to.

His bill required CalTrans to engage in this program. Good bill. Good for California. I was happy to help. My little part of this was explaining to people, because I've been all over the world and have seen how it works in Germany and Italy and in France, for goodness' sakes, and in Oregon and Washington, Virginia, North Carolina, everybody has directional signs. But somehow, California hasn't gotten there yet.

Hicke: What bill was that, do you recall?

Firestone: Do you want to find out?

Hicke: Yes. [tape interruption] Are they checking?

Firestone: Yes, they're going to pull the bill out for you. It's actually--it was a bill that he sponsored last year, but then his bill didn't get the job done, because CalTrans resisted this program, and defined rural counties in such a way that no county that produces wine could have these signs. [laughs] This bill changed the definition and pretty much put CalTrans on the gun for this. [SB 768, 1995-1996 Reg. Sess.]

Hicke: There is one thing that I forgot to ask you about, which is your "Prosperity Red."

Firestone: That's one of those bizarre things. We always had a red table wine and a white table wine, which were our leftovers. This came--I'm not quite sure what the sequence was. I was talking about the economy, and saying that if every little business did something that was--this was during the recession a few years ago--if every business did something that was a little bizarre and was a good value and promoted it, well, this country wouldn't have a recession, it would have prosperity.

And something just clicked in my mind, and I talked to this wonderful designer we have, Mark Oliver, who does all our labels. I had an idea of doing this label, and he came up with this concept. It was just startling. We got more publicity on it. The label got in the Library of Congress as a depiction of '93, I think it was, art, commercial art.

Hicke: It's a wonderful label. We'll put that into it. And how did it sell?

Firestone: Oh, I was startled--so much so that I had to phone up my friends--I talked to Bob Mondavi, and I said, "Hey, I've got

this little problem. I think I might have fallen into something that's bigger than I can handle." I was just beginning to talk about it, and then it kind of leveled off. I almost sold the label.

Hicke: You know, you're very good at following up on your own suggestions. [laughter] I think that's an admirable quality. Politics is important, so you run.

Firestone: Well, it really is. California is in a pickle. I'll give you a letter that I send everybody. I went to Columbia [University] in New York. Now, New York is dysfunctional. It's broke. It is in so much trouble, and as a result, City College [of New York], which was always this--it was a great place. When I was at Columbia in my time, City College turned out people to equal any Ivy League.

Now it's a mess. They cut \$200,000 out of \$1 billion, so a big budget cut this year, and fees are going up to \$750 or \$1,000, because they have no choice. They're broke.

Hicke: I guess we're getting to those same choices in California.

Firestone: Yes. And we've just managed to get away without any fee increases, and we've managed to put about a 3 percent increase in the budget, and we're holding our own. But, there's some pretty good evidence that California is heading in the direction, and if that's the case, it's going to be brutal.

Hicke: Is there anything that you think we've passed by, or any other comment you have?

Firestone: The wine business has been great. Our family has not gotten wealthy on it. But it's been a wonderful life for Kate and me.

Hicke: Good note to end on. Thank you very much.

[end of interview]

TAPE GUIDE--Brooks Firestone

Date of Interview: July 25, 1995

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| tape 1, side A | 1 |
| tape 1, side B | 14 |
| tape 2, side A | 25 |
| tape 2, side B | 36 |
| tape 3, side A [side B not recorded] | 37 |

APPENDICES--A. Brooks Firestone

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| A | Colen, Bruce David and Mark Kauffman, "Profiles: Brooks and Kate Firestone," <i>Architectural Digest</i> , November, 1986 | 45 |
| B | Firestone Vineyard brochure | 53 |
| C | Firestone Label samples | 55 |
| D | Bill SB 768 Text | 56 |
| E | <i>Wine Institute News Brief</i> Vol. 3, No. 4, August 17, 1995 | 58 |
| F | Wallace, Nora K., "A Tipple of the Hat to the Economy," <i>Santa Barbara News-Press</i> , No. 166, December 1, 1992 | 60 |
| G | Berger, Dan, "Firestone's Family Values," <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , January 20, 1994 | 61 |
| H | Firestone Vineyard News Release re. presidency of Adam Firestone | 63 |

Profiles: Brooks and Kate Firestone

TEXT BY BRUCE DAVID COLEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK KAUFFMAN

IT IS BOTH STRANGE and wonderful to think that about a hundred miles from the nation's second-largest city, people still pioneer the land much as their forefathers did. The city is Los Angeles; the place is the Santa Ynez Valley, just northwest of Santa Barbara; and the couple who broke new ground are Brooks and Kate Fire-

stone, owners of the successful vineyard bearing the family name. What makes their achievement all the more surprising is that neither was born to the rural way of life.

Kate Firestone, the former Catherine Boulton, was a soloist with Sadler's Wells Ballet. As for Brooks, he had been groomed to follow in his



"Our first harvest was in 1975; in 1977 the Johannisberg Riesling won our first award," says Brooks Firestone, who with his wife, Kate, has spent the last decade bringing Firestone Vineyard's name to national recognition. LEFT: "We love talking about the wine," says Firestone, who chats in the Santa Ynez Valley winery's tasting room with Julia Child, a neighbor and frequent visitor. On the wall is a mural painted in the 1930s by California artist John Cunningham.

OPPOSITE: Kate, a former ballerina, and Brooks Firestone join with guests at a barn dance held on their ranch, an event they organized to raise funds for their church.



Thoroughbreds graze in front of the Firestones' house, located a few miles from the winery and surrounded by 2,300 acres of ranchland



father's and grandfather's footsteps. After dutifully climbing the corporate ladder, he found himself, at thirty-five, stationed in London as head of Firestone Tire and Rubber's European operations. However, he found the prospect of spending the second half of his life guiding an industrial giant very disheartening. He decided to drop out.

Other men faced with a similar midcareer crisis have been known to throw themselves into the arms of Bacchus. Brooks Firestone was no exception, but he may be the first to



ABOVE: Brooks Firestone and vineyard foreman Larry Alexander survey rows of newly pruned Cabernet Sauvignon vines. "The 1985 harvest was very sound," says Firestone, "but the late-harvest Riesling is truly exceptional." In the distance rises the winery, which was completed in 1978. BELOW: Watched by his quarter-horse mare Mustard, Brooks Firestone mends a stretch gate on the ranch.



have been encouraged to embrace the grape by his family. Leonard Firestone, his father and former ambassador to Belgium, owned five hundred acres of vineyards and a ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley, a region that had been producing wine for years but had never received national recognition. The senior Firestone suggested, "As long as you've got nothing else to do at the moment, why not take a look at the property? Maybe it's something that would interest you."

Brooks Firestone is the first to admit that his interest in wine began and ended with being able to select the right vintages when dining in New York or London. But when he and Kate drove over the San Marcos Pass for the first time and saw the rolling verdant pastures below—quilted with patches of ancient California live oak, interspersed with

terra-cotta mesas—they knew they had found their enchanted valley. Others who have had the same reaction include Ronald and Nancy Reagan, whose ranch is on the valley's southwestern rim.

The more Brooks Firestone familiarized himself with the winemaking process, the more fascinated he be-

came by the ancient art. The best-made tire will soon go flat, but the life (and taster's memory) of a great wine can last half a century. Firestone had found his *métier* without sacrificing his entrepreneurial skills. "I was, and still am, enough of a businessman to feel that satisfaction in your work depends a lot on making a profit," he

says. "It took ten years of twelve-hour days—we started building the winery in 1975—to reach that point. Now we're just about the right size—80,000 cases a year—and instead of growing any bigger I want to concentrate on making better wines.

"The winery is a marvelous way of life in itself, not the means toward some other goal," Brooks Firestone continues. "Kate and I have found pride and daily satisfaction in what we're doing. That's a hard combination to beat. I hope one of our children will feel the same way and there will be a winemaking branch of the family to go along with the generations of industrialists, just as the Rothschilds are split between vintners and bankers. Maybe, as Kate says, one day when people hear the name 'Firestone,' they'll think of our Pinot Noir or Johannisberg Riesling instead of you-know-what."

The most likely candidate of the Firestones' four children is their youngest son, Andrew, although the



Seated between Kate and Brooks Firestone is winemaker Alison Green, together with other winery personnel who meet at least twice a month to taste new bottlings. "My favorite is the Pinot Noir," admits Brooks. "It's the most difficult wine to make, but it's the one that fascinates the most, particularly our 1977 Pinot Noir Reserve."



ABOVE LEFT: An avid polo player who started playing while vacationing in Hawaii, Brooks (center) captained the Firestone Vineyard Polo Team at a celebrity match held the day after the barn dance. ABOVE RIGHT: Actress Bo Derek, who with her husband, John, owns a ranch in the valley, was invited by Brooks Firestone to throw in the ball to start the game.



Kate and Brooks Firestone share a quiet moment over Sunday breakfast on the enclosed porch of their house.

eleven-year-old is more interested at the moment in breaking horses than crushing grapes. Which is quite understandable since he has grown up in the heart of the most beautiful horse country west of the Rockies.

The area is dappled with Thoroughbred and Arabian stud farms, quarter-horse ranches, paddocks, training tracks, show rings and polo fields. A few miles from the winery, the Firestones live in a wood-frame, two-story farmhouse that sits atop a knoll on the 2,300-acre ranch, which they share with a herd of cows, a string of polo ponies and thirty or so foxhounds, kenneled on the property by the Santa Ynez Valley Hunt, of which Brooks serves as master of the foxhounds. Providing room and board for the dogs is not purely altruistic, he confesses. "While ostensibly we're a drag hunt—the hounds fol-

low a precharted course using the scent of a pet fox—the dogs are not up to those niceties and they tear off after the coyotes and wild boar too."

He is equally concerned with fighting still another predator, sagebrush, which inexorably takes over green grazing slopes with its grey thickets. Whenever Brooks Firestone has nothing else to do—which is never—he throws a shovel and machete into the back of his four-wheel-drive and lurches into the pathless hills to do battle with *Artemisia*.

A healthy portion of their social life involves the traditional workaday chores of cowboys, especially at roundup time, when the ranchers help each other out with the corralling and cutting of the cattle. Then, to celebrate the centuries-old ritual, there is a no-cholesterol-barred western barbecue followed by barn danc-

ing and case after case of local wine.

Kate Firestone, who happily traded her tutu for jeans and boots, participates in these roundup contests. She is one of the winery's weighmasters at harvest time, and over the years has done every chore from picking the grapes to running the corking and labeling machines. During the summer crush of visitors to the vineyards and tasting rooms, she can often be found leading tours.

Any lingering impression that grape-growing is a gentlemanly pursuit is dispelled by the Firestones, who work long hours and have little time to dwell on the division of labor between the sexes. The ranch foreman is a forewoman, and the wine-maker at the vineyard is the highly respected Alison Green. And as captain of the Firestone Vineyard Polo Team, Brooks finds himself playing



The Firestones discuss with Rev. Charles H. Stacy plans for adding a parish hall to St. Marks in the Valley Episcopal Church, where Brooks has served as lay reader and Kate sings in the choir.



Kate Firestone, who can often be found leading tours at the winery, oversees her younger son Andrew's piano lessons.

A recent family gathering united three of the Firestones' four children: Polly, who is studying to be an actress; Adam, a Pepperdine Law School graduate; and Andrew, who may continue the winemaking branch of the Firestone family.





“Maybe one day when people hear the name ‘Firestone,’ they’ll think of our Pinot Noir or Riesling instead of you-know-what.”

—Brooks Firestone

with and against women who have a higher goal rating than his own.

The mention of polo brings a smile and a flash of excitement to Firestone’s eyes. “Kate and I took our last honest-to-goodness vacation ten years ago. We both travel all over the country holding wine tastings, and Kate goes back to England once a year to visit her family. But that trip to Hawaii in 1976 was really the last time we were completely free of business and family concerns. And it was on the islands, of all places, that I got

continued on page 234



ABOVE: The official start of the Santa Ynez Valley Hunt Club season draws a large group of riders to the Firestone ranch, where the club kennels its hounds. As master of the foxhounds, Brooks Firestone organizes the drag hunt, in which the hounds follow a pre-laid scent, not foxes. LEFT: Father Michael, from a nearby Capuchin Franciscan friary, presides over the blessing of the hounds.

 PROFILES

Brooks and Kate Firestone
continued from page 216

hooked on polo. It's become such a big sport up here that we're almost outgrowing the Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club fields. I guess Palm Beach is still considered the polo capital of the country, but they may not hold that title for long."

The Firestones seem to have a quiet way of seeing to it that their personal pleasures and good fortune benefit others. They recently organized a celebrity polo match to help raise money for St. Marks in the Valley Episcopal Church in nearby Los Olivos, where Brooks frequently serves as a lay reader. The couple had been the guiding force in building the church, and it was now in need of an adjoining wing for meetings and social functions. As the daughter of an English clergyman, Kate Firestone is familiar with ecclesiastical shortfalls.

The charity match was to be preceded the night before by a dinner and dance for 130 in the barn and stable quadrangle on the ranch. The day of the festivities, the Firestones sorted out some of the tasks that lay before them. In a few minutes he would be heading for the polo field to be sure it was in good shape and to chalk the field stripes. On the way back he had to stop at the church to pick up the buntings the decoration committee was making for the barn. She would see to cutting and arranging the flowers and setting up the tables.

The polo fete was catered, but normally Kate Firestone does all her own cooking, and her post-hunt breakfasts more than make up for any disappointments of the chase. Following up on her culinary skills, she is an active member of the American Institute of Wine and Food, founded by the Firestones' good friend and Santa Barbara neighbor Julia Child. Kate is still involved in her first love, ballet, and has choreographed musicals for the local high school.

Enologists and critics are always complimenting the couple on how honest and well balanced their wines are. The same can be said for Brooks and Kate Firestone's way of life. □

Pioneers Go West

he switch from tires to wine was a welcome change for winery owner Brooks Firestone, grandson of Harvey Firestone, founder of the rubber empire.

Brooks and his wife, Kate, were among the first to pioneer coastal California's Santa Ynez Valley as a premium wine region and bring it into prominence. Brooks continues to oversee the direction and management of the winery and Kate is vintner for companion winery Carey Cellars.

For years the Firestones have taken pride in producing a selection of excellent wines at reasonable prices. To accomplish this, most of the grapes are estate grown and the winery is designed to accommodate the vineyard exactly. A dedicated winemaking staff ensures quality and consistency year after year.



FIRESTONE

VINEYARD



Wines from California's Santa Ynez Valley

Pursuit of Excellence

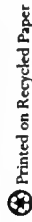
Good winemaking requires an excellent palate, sound judgment, an open mind and technical skill. As winemaker for Firestone Vineyard, Alison Green contributes all these qualities plus an extensive background in wine. A conscientious nature and a delightful sense of humor puts it all into perspective.

Alison continues to refine Firestone's winemaking style of elegance and character. "Balance and integrity of fruit are foremost," she noted. "I manage to juggle the elements of the wine so that each component complements the other."

Traditional practices are supplemented with new techniques and ideas when they are found to enhance and accelerate the pursuit of excellence.

FIRESTONE VINEYARD

PO Box 244 • 5017 Zaca Station Road • Los Olivos CA 93441 • (805) 688-3940.

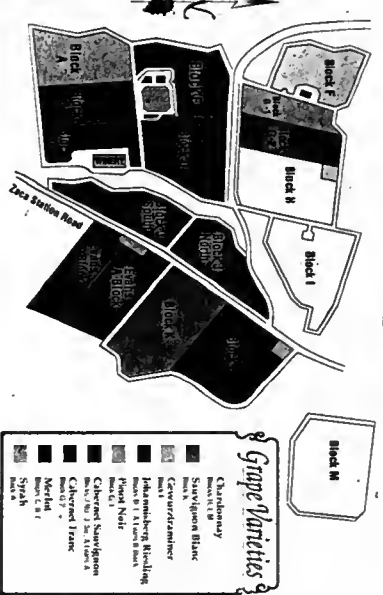


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"Firestone has always pursued a very fair pricing policy... excellent value for money." - Oz Clarke

The Vineyards



The Vineyards and Winery

located in the center of Santa Barbara County, the Santa Ynez Valley is a quiet, pastoral area of gentle rolling hills punctuated by gnarled oaks. The climate is exceptionally cool (Region I to II), owing to the influence of the Western maritime winds which funnel into the valley between the San Raphael and Santa Ynez Mountain ranges. The East-West orientation of the valley gives it a unique viticultural advantage.

The region also offers a wide diversity of soil types excellent for vineyards. These well-drained soils, combined with the extended growing season, allow a slow and even maturation of fruit, resulting in wines of intensity and distinction.

In 1972 the Firestones planted seven classic grape varieties on their 260 acre vineyard site. In the ensuing years, the vineyard has been refined to match grape varieties, rootstocks, and growing techniques to the appropriate soil and microclimate. Each vineyard block is designed to express fully the personality of the vines.

Historically overlooking the vineyard is the winery, an impressive structure that is modern in concept yet classic in design. Cathedral-like rooms house row upon row of oak barrels and casks. Since the first harvest in 1975, the winery has added to its success; its reputation for producing exceptional and unique wines continues to grow.

Guided tours and tastings hosted by a knowledgeable staff are available daily from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Groups of ten or more are requested to make an appointment in advance.



Chardonnay - The exquisite flavors of our Santa Ynez Valley grapes are enhanced by the time-honored techniques of barrel-fermentation and extended lees-aging. These labor-intensive, traditional methods produce wines of great finesse, complexity, and depth.

Johannisberg Riesling - Apricot and orange blossom are the hallmarks of this classically-styled, off-dry wine. A perfect example of the variety, combining old-world varietal intensity with the richness California's climate provides.

Gewurztraminer - This unique, barrel-fermented wine has exotic aromas of tropical flowers, pears, and spice. Alsatian in style, the wine is dry and crisp, with subtle overtones of oak.

Sauvignon Blanc - Fermented partially in stainless steel and partially in small barrels to preserve the distinct regional character of this estate vineyard. Smokey, intense, and a touch wild.

Rosé of Cabernet Sauvignon - A provençal-style Rosé offering fresh strawberry flavors with notes of sage and plum. Crisp and dry; one of the very few traditional rosé wines made in California.

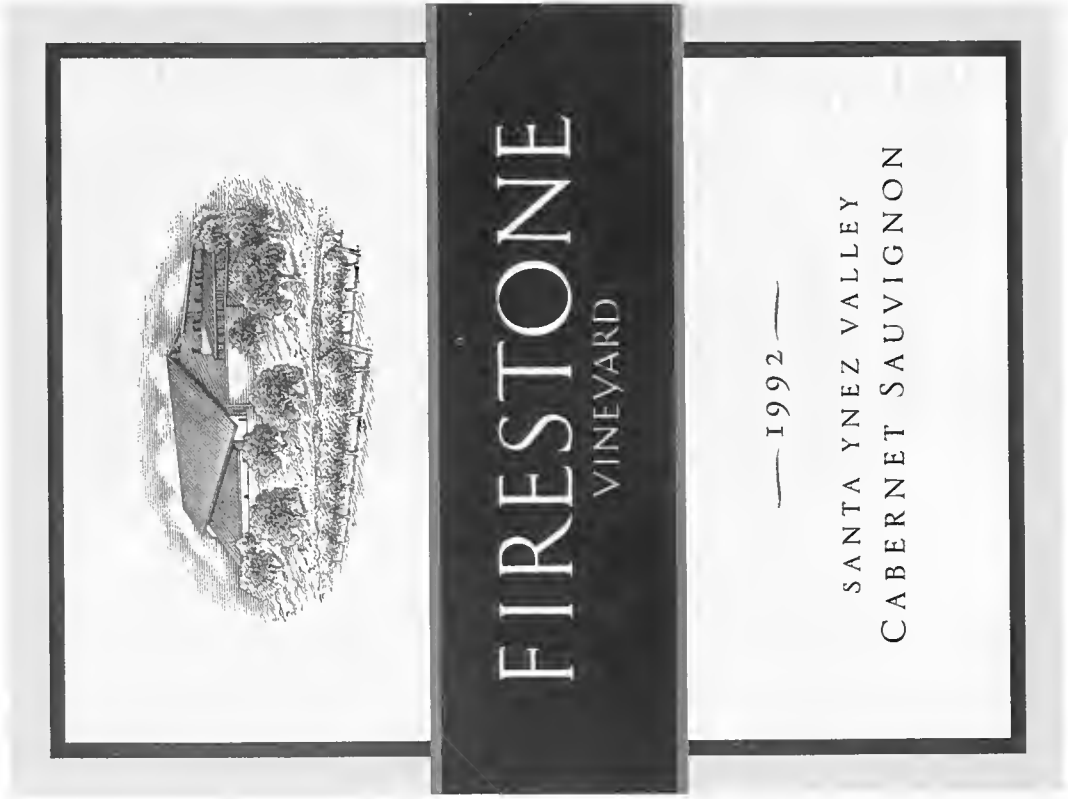
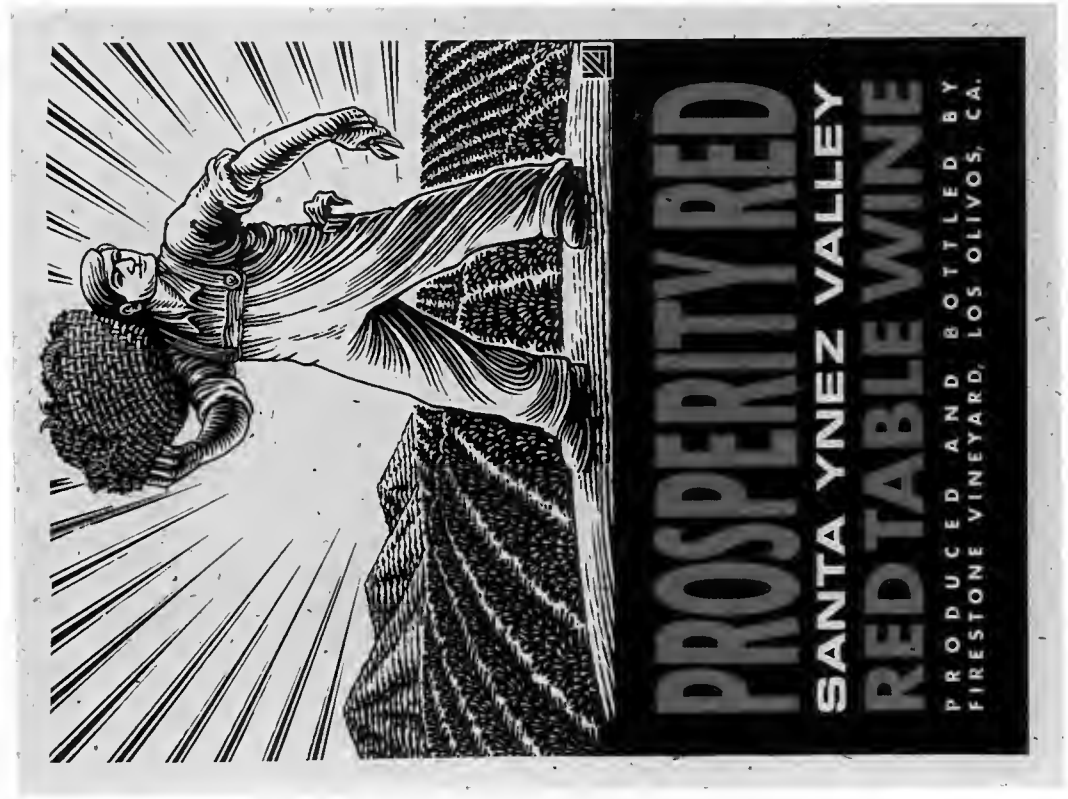
Merlot - A deep, garnet-colored wine with luxurious blackberry, cherry and spice flavors caressed by toasty oak. Full, rich, and soft, with mildly tannic finish.

Cabernet Sauvignon - Rich and round in style, with regionally typical notes of sagebrush, boysenberry and earth, with a subtle kiss of vanilla. Individual and distinctive.

Syrah - First Harvest 1994.

"Vintage Reserve" - This term designates the finest wine we can produce in any given vintage. These outstanding wines are chosen from intense, old-vine lots which are blended and aged for extra months in small barrels. Unique, rare, and always individual, they represent the finest our vineyards and winemaker can produce.

Johannisberg Riesling "Selected Harvests" - We are usually blessed with botrytis (Noble Rot) each year, giving our classic Johannisberg Riesling a rich texture and luxurious apricot-honey flavor. In exceptional years, we produce a rich, sweet dessert wine from fully botrytised fruit. The result is sheer nectar.



Appendix C. Firestone Label samples.

Display 1995-1996 Bill Text - INFORMATION
 BILL NUMBER: SB 768

BILL TEXT

| | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| PASSED THE SENATE | JULY 20, 1995 |
| PASSED THE ASSEMBLY | JULY 17, 1995 |
| AMENDED IN ASSEMBLY | JUNE 27, 1995 |
| AMENDED IN SENATE | APRIL 18, 1995 |
| AMENDED IN SENATE | MARCH 27, 1995 |

INTRODUCED BY Senators O'Connell, Ayala, Johannessen, Kelley, Leslie,
 Monteith, Polanco, and Thompson
 (Coauthors: Assembly Members Cortese, Firestone, and Hauser)

FEBRUARY 23, 1995

An act to amend Sections 229.19, 229.281, and 229.29 of, and to add
 Section 229.282 to, the Streets and Highways Code, relating to highways.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SB 768, O'Connell. Highways: signs: services available.

Existing law requires the Department of Transportation to administer a program for the placement of generic tourist oriented directional signs along highways in rural areas to guide motorists to facilities and attractions, as specified. Under existing law, the department may not approve the placement of a sign within the boundaries of a city, or if the sign promotes gambling activities.

This bill would prohibit the department from approving the placement of a sign under additional specified circumstances.

The bill would authorize individualized farm trail symbols, in any county having an active farm trails program, as specified, to serve as the symbol on tourist oriented directional signs if the farm trail signs otherwise comply with specified requirements.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. Section 229.19 of the Streets and Highways Code is amended to read:

229.19. (a) The design and installation of signs pursuant to this chapter shall conform to any federal standards applicable to the highway. In addition, the signs shall meet the standards and criteria prescribed by this chapter, and shall be posted only in rural areas on noncongested conventional highways where a sign would not pose any traffic dangers or disrupt the free-flowing movement of vehicles.

(b) The department shall not approve the placement of a sign under any of

Display 1995-1996 Bill Text - INFORMATION
BILL NUMBER: SB 768

BILL TEXT

the following circumstances:

- (1) Within the boundaries of any city.
- (2) If the sign promotes gambling activities.
- (3) Within any urbanized area having a population of more than 50,000 persons, as designated by the most recent census of the United States Bureau of the Census.
- (4) If approval of the sign would violate any federal law, rule, or regulation and that violation would result in the loss of federal funds.

SEC. 2. Section 229.281 of the Streets and Highways Code is amended to read:

229.281. (a) The department shall also take into consideration whether a business, attraction, or facility has existing on-premise or off-premise advertising structures located on a nearby state highway when determining its eligibility for a generic tourist oriented directional sign.

(b) The decision to place generic tourist oriented directional signs is at the sole discretion of the department.

SEC. 3. Section 229.282 is added to the Streets and Highways Code, to read:

229.282. (a) In any county having an active farm trails program that is recognized by the board of supervisors of that county, the individualized farm trail symbol may serve as the symbol on generic tourist oriented directional signs, if the farm trail signs comply with the requirements of this chapter.

(b) As used in this section, an active farm trails program means an organization of farmers and other rural enterprises that are in direct contact with the traveling public.

SEC. 4. Section 229.29 of the Streets and Highways Code is amended to read:

229.29. In order to be eligible for a generic tourist oriented directional sign, an individual business or, if more than one business is to be included, then a majority of the businesses and attractions within 10 driving miles of the sign, shall conform to all of the following:

(a) Open to the public at least 40 hours per week and six days per week, for a minimum of three continuous months per year, and maintain regular hours and schedules.

(b) Seasonal businesses and attractions closed more than one week at a time shall have the sign covered or removed by the department during the period of closure.

(c) Possess any appropriate business license approved by the state and local agency regulating the particular business.

(d) Each business or attraction identified on a tourist oriented directional sign shall provide assurance of its conformity with all applicable laws concerning the public accommodation without regard to race, color, sex, culture, social origin or condition, or political or religious ideas.



Consumer "Tippler" Tax Defeated

Continued Member Action Urged

A coalition of the licensed beverage and hospitality industries was successful in rejecting proposed consumer "tippler" tax amendments to a budget trailer bill (SB 1130) on a 50 to 15 vote (with 14 not voting) in the Assembly late last month, a few days before the final 1995-96 budget bill was sent to California Governor Pete Wilson. These defeated amendments would have authorized Los Angeles County to impose its own on-premise tax on the consumption of wine, beer and spirits.

Although this was a crushing defeat for tax proponents, the issue is far from dead. SB 1130 rests on the Assembly floor, and efforts to amend it could come at any time while the Assembly is in session. Since Los Angeles County officials are more intent on seeking new revenue sources to solve their billion-dollar budget deficit than on cutting services, it is highly probable that legislative representatives will pursue the tax road again. In addition to amendments to budget bills, AB 485 (Villaraigosa), which is a free-standing bill, is another possible vehicle for "tippler" tax authority, though this measure is still in its first policy committee, the Assembly Revenue and Taxation Committee. No hearing has been scheduled.

Removal of state preemption to grant local excise tax authority remains a constant threat, as many local governments are strapped for funds, and the public's tolerance for other revenues, such as increased sales taxes, appears to have been maximized. Consequently, some local officials are opting for what they consider to be politically less offensive taxes on wine, beer and spirits. Legislation which would grant authority for a "tippler" tax subject to voter approval, will remain a constant threat for the foreseeable future. It is important, therefore, that WI's ongoing legislative advocacy be reinforced by individual member contact with legislators. Such action was critical to the coalition's recent success. Members are encouraged to assist in this effort by contacting John De Luca (415/512-0151), or Mike Falasco in Sacramento (916/441-6974).

continued on next page

Onerous ALRB Regulations Tabled

On August 2, the California Agriculture Labor Relations Board voted down its own proposed rules which included the so-called "peak employment" and "forever certification" regulations. The "peak employment" rule would have authorized labor elections when less than 50 percent of the eligible work force is involved. The "forever certification" regulation would have permanently tied farmland to a prior successful union election, and ignored the numerous situations where the certified union had abandoned its contract with the farmer. The proposals were defeated as a result of strong advocacy by WI and other agricultural organizations.

International Wine Competitions Announced

Two international wine competitions have recently been announced:

Selections Mondiales, Montreal, Canada

The ninth annual Selections Mondiales competition is scheduled for March 1-9, 1996 in Montreal. Organized by the Quebec Liquor Board, the Societe des alcools du Quebec (SAQ), this competition offers opportunities in many categories as well as price classifications. A brochure describing the competition's general rules and an entry form are available either from the SAQ at 905 de Lorimier Avenue, Montreal, Quebec CANADA H2K 3V9, or through Rick Slomka, WI's trade representative in Ontario, at 905/336-8932.

Istanbul, Turkey

Also in its ninth year, the international wine competition in Urgug, Turkey, is scheduled for October 11-15. Turkey has applied for membership in the European Union which means it will have to open its market to imported wines. Entry forms and rules can be obtained by contacting Jennifer Sangiuliano in the International Department at 415/356-7551.

Santa Barbara
News-Press

138th Year—No. 166 Oldest daily newspaper in Southern California

Santa Barbara, California, Tuesday, December 1, 1992

RED, WHITE AND NEW

A tippale of the hat to the economy

By Nora K. Wallace
 News-Press Staff Writer

Make way for prosperity. Prosperity Red and Prosperity White table wine, that is.

Firestone Vineyard in Los Olivos has released a new low-priced novelty wine heralding the economic upswing of the country.

"People are getting a big boom out of it; it's amazing," said winery owner Brooks Firestone. "Wine is a conversation piece — this gives it a meaning beyond the wine in the bottle."

The vineyard, typically more concerned with producing such high-quality wines as cabernet and chardonnay, is hoping to put a dent in the market with the \$5 Prosperity bottles. The red is a blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, while the white is a Riesling. Both are created by winemaker Alison Green.

"It's designed to be a bargain," Firestone said. "That's part of coming out of hard times; everyone's tightening their belts."

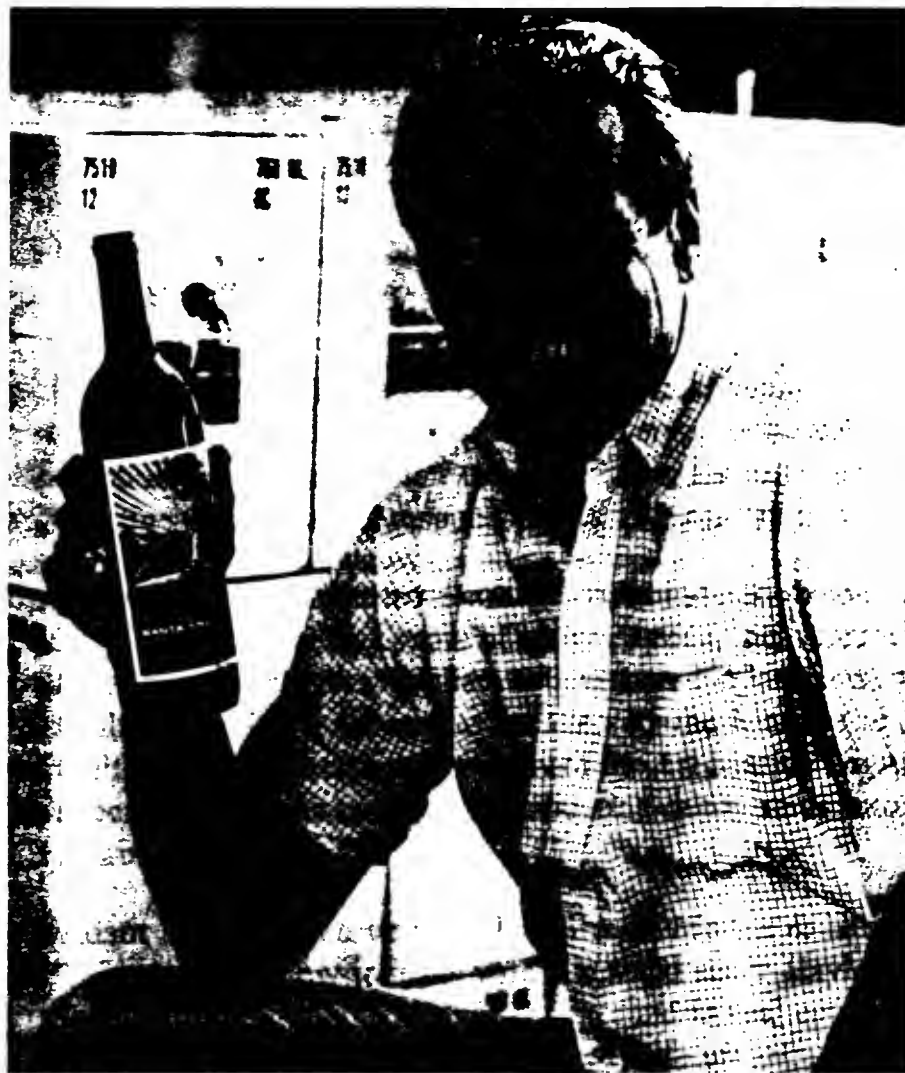
The idea is not a new one. Several months ago, the Gainey Vineyard of Santa Ynez made a splash in wine circles by producing Rece\$\$ion red and white wines at \$5 a bottle.

Since Santa Barbara County winemakers don't harbor rivalries, Firestone called Dan Gainey, owner of the winery that produced Rece\$\$ion Red.

"Dan Gainey is a good pal," Firestone explained. "I called and said 'I'm coming out on a different side of this thing.' Now it's kind of a joke between us."

Firestone reasons that consumers may well make tandem purchases of bottles extolling both sides of the economic spectrum. The wines say "This was 1992. We came into it with a recession and come out in prosperity."

If everyone in the county did



Santa Ynez Valley vintner Brooks Firestone holds his winery's answer to Rece\$\$ion wine — Prosperity.

something to "engender an optimism and create products like this, the recession would truly be over," Firestone added.

The label, a combined creation of Santa Barbara artist V. Courtland Johnson and Mark Oliver Inc., features a worker in overalls hefting an overflowing basket of grapes on his shoulder, with a vineyard in the background and the sun's rays lighting up the sky.

The image, Firestone said, was inspired by the poster art of the 1930s and the Works Project Ad-

ministration, which "came to symbolize the resilience of the American spirit during tough economic times."

Firestone takes stock in the power of wine to reflect a period of time. With the presidential election finished, and President-elect Bill Clinton out mingling with the public, "you can feel the whole country coming up," Firestone observed. The mood reminds him, he added, of an old Southern expression: "We're just done doing down."

"Wine expresses the historical

moment of a country," Firestone continued. "This Prosperity Red is capturing the historical moment of America in December 1992."

"It's a good idea," agreed Moreno Valley resident Mike Flanagan, who stood with his wife Amelia in the vineyard's tasting room on Monday. "It's much better than your average \$4 bottle of wine."

The label, agreed Amelia Flanagan, "is distinctive when you go into a grocery store. The emblem says a lot."

WINE

Firestone's Family Values

By DAN BERGER
TIMES WINE WRITER

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY — Scrub brush, grass and weeds ran up the scruffy, sand-colored hillsides. At the peak, cracks in the thin topsoil showed the erosion by rain and wind and the effects of summer heat.

This stark view faced Brooks and Kate Firestone as they drove up rutted, deserted Zaca Station Road in 1972, trying to determine if it was a likely location for a vineyard. The view gave no hint. This was a barren mesa apparently devoid of water, and the rocky slopes clearly posed a hazard for even large earth-moving equipment.

There were no wineries nearby, only one in all of Santa Barbara County, and that one had a history of making not table wine but dessert wines. The entire county had a mere 100 acres of grapes.

Despite the forbidding appearance of the land, the Firestones spoke with experts who believed in the area, so they cast their future here, built a winery and

began to make wine. That opened the door to dozens of other entrepreneurs. Santa Barbara County now has more than three dozen wineries, almost all of them family-owned.

To the list of family-owned wineries, you can now add Firestone Vineyard, which until recently was a joint venture between the Firestones and Suntory Ltd. of Japan, the huge wine and spirits company. Last week, Firestone announced he had acquired the 31% share of the winery the family didn't own. "Three years after we started the winery I knew I wanted full control," admits Firestone, 57. "Kate and I now have six grandchildren and we wanted to keep the winery in family hands.

"We've put our careers, our lives—and our line of credit—into this decision because we believe in the future of the wine industry," says Firestone. "We visited Burgundy recently and we saw families that had been making wine on the same soil for 18 generations. We feel families are the soul and essence of this

'I was like Bre'r Rabbit and the briar patch. The California golden pasture and live oak are where I want my ashes scattered. It was summer when we came through here and the fields were golden, and I loved the smell of the dry grass and the atmosphere. I was totally at home with it.'

BROOKS FIRESTONE

business, and we'd like our children to keep this fire alive."

Pioneering this area as he did, Firestone awakened a sleeping giant. It's true that other people suspected there was potential for fine wine here. "But Brooks," says Rick Longoria, winemaker at nearby Gainey Vineyards, "proved it in a very convincing way. The Firestone project was very important to this area, particularly with grape planting. They plunked down 250 acres of vineyards just like that, which was a great commitment to the area.

"Someone looking at doing 20 or 30 acres had to feel better," adds Longoria, who grew up in the area. "Brooks fueled so much optimism because he was doing it just as Napa and Sonoma would have done it. It was big-name, big-time. This had been a remote agricultural area, and he was really a famous name."

The Santa Barbara area certainly wasn't without wealth. Some of the nation's top thoroughbred horse breeders had huge ranches between the Danish tourist community of Solvang and pea-soup stopover Buellton.

But Firestone, who was reared in Los Angeles and worked in London (where he met his wife, Kate), didn't feel out of his element in this wild country when he moved here 20 years ago. —continued



Winemaker Alison Green and Brooks Firestone in the barrel room.

"Some people might have felt this was desolate," says Firestone, "but I was like Bre'r Rabbit and the briar patch. The California golden pasture and live oak are where I want my ashes scattered. It was summer when we came through here and the fields were golden, and I loved the smell of the dry grass and the atmosphere. I was totally at home with it."

Firestone's original plans called for growing grapes, not building a winery. "My father had bought land here in 1971 and decided to plant wine grapes," says Firestone. "I had just left the [tire] company, and I went out to see how sound an investment grapes were."

He said he did an in-depth report for his father. The good news was water: There are subterranean springs all over the property; wells could be dug to feed the young plants. More good news: A neighbor, Dean Brown, has done a 10-year weather study that showed perfect growing conditions for fine wine grapes. "This was the cornerstone of the whole project," says Firestone.

But there was one huge economic drawback, he says: "I told my father there were no wineries here, so he'd be sending his grapes north (to Napa or Sonoma), where they may not pay the prevailing price for grapes." He suggested the family should consider starting a winery.

But the elder Firestone was not convinced and called on his close friend and golfing companion, Keizo Saji, then president of Suntory, to see if the winery was a good idea. Saji, whose firm also owned a winery in Japan, sought assistance from company experts, who did a careful analysis of the area. Finally, Saji said he liked the idea and formed a partnership with the Firestones to found the winery.

The move was a gamble. Firestone was the first winery built in the Santa Ynez Valley which had no reputation for fine wine. But Brooks was sure the experts from UC Davis and Fresno State, the two leading viticultural institutions in California, were right in saying that this was a good area for fine wine.

Not all the experts were encouraging. Firestone called Andre Tchelistcheff, the state's top winemaker, and asked him to be the consultant on the project. "I told him I wanted to make wine in the Santa Ynez Valley, and Andre said: 'Good. How much money have you got to lose?'"



Brooks Firestone

But Tchelistcheff visited and then came on board. He assisted Tony Austin, the first winemaker and now owner of nearby Austin Vineyards, in making the first wines, from the 1975 harvest.

"I realized soon after we opened the winery that this wasn't a hobby, it was a serious and very competitive business," says Firestone.

What did intrigue him those first years was how the wine would taste, and he admits that a few of the early wines were not mainstream. One or two probably shouldn't have been released, he admits now.

Did he ever doubt his decision to open the winery?

"I guess it was like going through a dark forest," he says. "You don't peer behind every rock and tree, you just keep on moving. So, yes, I can't deny there were times when I was profoundly frightened, just realizing that I had gotten myself into something pretty scary. I was swimming in water over my head, and I suppose the answer then is to just keep on swimming and don't think about it."

By 1977 Firestone was producing superior wines from its own young vineyards, yet sales were never easy: "I remember in 1976 driving to L.A. to deliver five cases of Rosé of Cabernet and being damned happy," he says.

Firestone's first real break came that year in Akron, home of the family tire company. "It was a dull news day there,

so the Akron Beacon-Journal put out a front-page story on the winery owned by the tire people, and we sold out 300 cases of wine in a day. It was our first truck-load order of Rosé of Cabernet. That was just incredible."

The company made a profit in 1981. "We've made a profit every year since," Firestone says. Gross sales topped \$5 million in 1993.

Soon after the original purchase, Firestone began thinking of bringing the winery under family control. The 20-year deal was to be renegotiated before the end of 1993, and more than two years ago, Firestone approached Saji and asked if he could take complete control of the winery.

Firestone declined to say how much he paid for the 31% stake in the winery, but wine industry sources estimated he paid nearly \$2 million to gain full control.

With the closing of the deal last Dec. 31, 45% of the winery is now owned by Brooks' father, Leonard K. Firestone, former ambassador to Belgium and former chairman of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. of Akron, Ohio. Brooks and Kate Firestone own 43% and each of their four children, Adam, Hayley, Polly and Andrew, own 3%.

By putting the winery under full family control, Firestone admits, he'll face even greater demands to market the wine. And Brooks is splitting his time these days — part time as a wine salesman, part time as a politician.

Firestone, who lost a race for the 35th Assembly District seat in 1982 by 1,190 votes out of 102,550 cast, announced last November that he would seek that post again. The man who won the 1982 race, Jack O'Connell, is vacating the seat.

Firestone's vision proved that fine wine was possible in the Santa Barbara area. Today there are 9,200 acres of vines in this county, and Firestone is one of 34 wineries that market wine with a Santa Barbara appellation.

"Really, I'm amazed at what we've accomplished here in just 20 years," says Firestone.

FIRESTONE

VINEYARD

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FIRESTONE VINEYARD SEES GENERATIONAL CHANGES

Los Olivos, California, January 9, 1995

FIRESTONE VINEYARD announces that Adam Firestone will become the third generation to be involved in the winery. Following Brooks Firestone's recent election to the California State Assembly, his elder son, Adam, will leave his law practice to take on the responsibilities as President of the Los Olivos-based facility.

Following graduation from college, Adam joined the Marine Corps while attending law school. After five years of active service, he returned to California to continue his legal career as a civilian and assumed operations of the vineyards at Carey Cellars. In 1990 Adam was recalled by the Marines and deployed to the Persian Gulf. Captain Firestone served with the 1st Marine Division and was assigned to a special operations task force conducting decoy raids into Kuwait as part of Desert Storm.

Adam has practiced with the law firm of Mullen & Henzell in Santa Barbara since 1991. He will now join his wife Kate and sister Hayley on a full time basis at the family-run operation. Adam's background in real estate and business law will be a valuable addition to the growing winery's future.

INDEX--A. Brooks Firestone

- Alexander, Larry, 31
 Arthur D. Little Co., 14
 Austin, Tony, 22
- Broun, Dean, 12, 18, 30
- California State Assembly, 39-42
 Chappellet, Donn, 13, 15
 cooperage, 23
- Davies, Jack, 39
- equipment, 22
- financial planning, 14-16, 22-23
 Firestone, Adam, 26, 30, 37
 Firestone, Catherine Boulton
 [Kate], 5-6, 8, 11, 15, 29, 35
 Firestone, family, 1-4
 Firestone, Hayley, 37
 Firestone, Leonard, 2, 11-13, 16-17, 19
 Firestone, Polly, 37
 Firestone Tire & Rubber Co., 1, 8-10; in Liberia, 2
- grapes, planting of, 19-21
 Green, Alison, 20, 33, 36
 Green, Russell, 13, 36
- Hampton, Dale, 31
- J. Carey Cellars, 33-35
- Keith, Richard, 21-22
- label, 25-26
- marketing, 26-28, 32-33
 McGowan, Bob, 33
 Meyer, Justin, 13-14
- Noblé, André, 5-6
- Oliver, Mark, 41
- Petrucci, Vincent, 31
- Saji, Keizo, 16
 Santa Ynez Valley, 14, 18, 28-30
 soil, 12-13
 Suntory [Ltd.] Co., 16-17
- Tchelistcheff, André, 13, 21, 22, 36
 Titus, Sebastian, 26
- Van Loben Sels, Bud, 13
 vineyard location and evaluation, 11
 vineyard management, 31
- Well, Patrick, 33
 Wine Institute, 39
 winery building, 21-23
- WINES
- Cabernet Sauvignon, 13, 35
 Chardonnay, 29, 35
- Domaine La Tache, 5-6
- Merlot, 35
- Prosperity Red, 41-42
- Riesling, 24, 28
 Rosé of Cabernet, 24
- Sauvignon Blanc, 35
- GRAPES
- Cabernet Sauvignon, 20, 21
 Chardonnay, 20
- Merlot, 21
- Pinot Noir, 20, 24
- Riesling, 20

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