

A Vineyard in Napa

Prologue

What you have here is pretty simple: one person's story covering forty years in the life of a Napa Valley winery. Within these pages you won't find an attempt to offer the definitive scientific and socioeconomic overview of the phylloxera epidemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Nor is there an ambitious endeavor to, say, map out the entire history of technology in winemaking or recount the biographies of all the Valley's major players. Those books have been written by others. What you will find here is more personal: a narrative of what it was like for us at Shafer and our neighbors, sweating through setbacks in the cellar, learning how to grow the best quality grapes, coping with economic recessions, understanding changes in public tastes, reacting to various insect infestations, and rolling with our own evolution as a wine region.

My hope is that the story in these pages will give a unique behind-the-scenes look at what it has been like to live through the four decades in Napa Valley during which this region was transformed from a rural backwater to one of the finest winemaking regions in the world.

Without a doubt there are other vintners, grape growers, and local characters who could write their own books about these decades, and I hope they do. But for the moment very few of those who could tell you what it's been like on the inside—buying the grapes, trying out the new

techniques, abandoning old ones, selling the wines, making the mistakes, enjoying the occasional successes—have taken the time to do this. And with each passing year, those who played important roles here in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s move out of the picture. Wineries have changed hands and changed names. Those that were prominent in one era have faded into the background in others. Sadly a lot of great names have been taken from our midst: Mondavi, Martini, Tchelistcheff, Davies, Fay, to name just a few you may recognize. I would love it if this book could help shed further light on why those names earned such respect and admiration from fellow vintners.

Beyond the loss of dear friends and colleagues, though, I don't regret the changes that have come with the passing decades, since many have been necessary and even exciting. For a thing to survive it must evolve, and that's a dynamic at the heart of both the Napa Valley story and our own story. Shafer Vineyards started in the late 1970s as a glorified hobby (or so I thought) of my dad's. Then it transformed into an actual family business, which for a time involved the combined efforts of my dad, mom, sister, two or three employees, and myself. Even with that concerted push it seemed as if the winery had the strong potential to flounder, even to fail—as others around us were failing—and as a young, inexperienced winemaker it was going to be squarely my fault. After all, what is a winery that makes lousy wine?

Fortunately, through a lot of scrambling, long hours, and some luck, the winery kept not failing through the 1980s, and by the early 1990s it looked as if this thing was actually going to fly.

In 2003, I was at the winery early one morning reveling in the romance of vintner life—reviewing columns of sales numbers, going over the terrifying amount of money Elias Fernandez, our longtime winemaker, was proposing we spend on barrels and bottles, looking at résumés for a new front-office position, and trying to play catch-up with too many emails.

At some point I turned to the latest stack of wine-related publications on my desk and, while paging through *The Wine Advocate*, came

across a piece by influential wine critic Robert Parker in which he was praising a Napa Valley wine producer as being “one of the world’s greatest wineries.”

It took a moment for it to sink in that he was writing about us. The first thing I thought of was the time in the mid-1980s when Parker had warned his readers in pretty strong terms that our 1982 Reserve Cabernet, a wine I had a hand in producing, was so underwhelming it should be “avoided.” Fortunately though, with a lot of hard work the wines had gained richness and complexity. Parker’s opinion, along with that of others, of what we produced had changed over time and the reviews had improved. But “one of the world’s greatest?”

I realize that this might not sound like a big deal—one sentence from one writer. But it stuck with me. Was there something I was missing?

The write-up in *The Wine Advocate* came around the time *Wine & Spirits* magazine had named our hillside vineyard as one of the top twenty in the world and Elias had been named Winemaker of the Year by *Food & Wine* magazine (not to mention being honored at the White House for being a Hispanic role model).

Everyone at the winery was grateful for these accolades, but they were hard for me to absorb, because they seemed so entirely disconnected from daily life. When I’m in Napa Valley, I’m not on vacation, luxuriating in a multi-day love-fest of eating, wine tasting, and spa treatments. This is where I live and work. Likely as not, when I’m here I’m reviewing our property taxes or buying a new irrigation pump for one of the ponds, wrestling with day-to-day struggles.

Beyond that, praise of this kind makes me uneasy. It can lull a vintner into a dangerous sense of grandiosity. I’ve seen wineries settle in comfortably on these kinds of laurels and essentially go on autopilot. They soon realize that their finest days are behind them.

Looking at Parker’s words that morning, though, I realized I was sensing something that hadn’t occurred to me before: I was too close to see our winery the way others did. The Shafer Vineyards that I still carried around in my head—the uncertain family enterprise that might

or might not make it, the Little Engine That Could—was out of date. And I *was* missing something important. Being so caught up in the minutiae of running a business, I was missing out on the fact that somewhere along the line I'd become very fortunate—fortunate that in spite of all the odds and the tremendous obstacles, the winery had become successful; fortunate that my drive to work in the morning takes me up the Silverado Trail past some of the most inspiring vineyards to be found; fortunate that I enjoy a life surrounded by a great family and by smart, funny, good people who love vineyards and wine as much as I do. More than anything, I'm very lucky to have spent the past decades working alongside my dad, John Shafer, who took a big gamble on this vineyard in the early 1970s, knowing next to nothing about a) growing grapes, b) making wine, or c) running a family business.

A quick word about family businesses: imagine taking all of the ups and downs of familial life and mashing them together with the white-water wallops and splashes of running a small company. I've seen places where it has turned ugly and unpleasant, bringing out the worst in everyone involved. Fortunately, our story is not one of a family business spinning out of control. From day one Dad maintained that family and business were separate. He set a tone that valued hard work, authenticity, creativity, forgiveness for mistakes, collaboration, and high standards. If the story of Shafer Vineyards is one of success, it's owed in large part to my dad and the core values he championed.

It wasn't until I sat down to work on this book that it struck me how deeply intertwined our story is with the history of Napa Valley. Again, being so focused on keeping all the plates spinning here, I've only recently been struck by the realization that forty years have flown by, and we've woven our way into this tapestry. From our arrival here in January of 1973 through the next four decades we were in the middle of the mix—doing business and forging friendships with some people you know of, others who have not yet claimed a spot in the history books. We've lived through the Valley's highs and lows (and there have been a lot of both). We've seen the changes, been a part of them, and in one or

two cases have even sparked them. Sometimes the story has been a drama, sometimes more like a comedy. However you label them, these have been some of the four most tumultuous decades ever seen here. It's been a wild, thrilling, and sometimes heartbreaking ride.

For some here in the Valley, their stories started back in Mexico, Germany, Italy, France, Argentina, or other exotic places. Ours began in Chicago.