

As a preface to this excerpt about the drama surrounding Bill Hill's response to one of Frank Prials Wine Talk columns in the New York Times let me explain the concept behind the First Growth Bordeaux vs. William Hill Gold Label Cabernet Sauvignon blind tastings.

Bill Hill believed that the wines he was producing from his Veeder Peak vineyard were comparable in quality and had the necessary balance and concentration to become even more enjoyable with the proper bottle age. At the time in the early 1980s, it was an article of faith among the Francophiles that the top wines from Bordeaux were well above what California could produce. With time, a position relegated to the dust bin of the early myths about California wines vs. French.

It was a brilliant and grand idea to invite the public, via a lottery, to participate and taste at the wineries' expense these wines in a blind tasting. The first two events in the series were November of 1983 in San Francisco and January of 1984 in Los Angeles. I was not working for William Hill at that time. However, when I started in February of 1984 as the VP Sales Eastern Division, I took charge and decided that we would do the next three events in Four Seasons Hotels. First, in Washington, DC, March of 1985, next November of 1985 in Dallas, the final was in March of 1986 hosted in Chicago.

These were huge events that required a significant amount of coordination as we partnered with a local fine wine merchant and sent their customers a solicitation to be entered into a random drawing lottery. We would then pick 100 winners who would be invited, at no cost, to participate in the blind tasting and score the wines. We would then fill out the audience with prominent trade and press from each of those markets. To ensure that the results were legitimate and not rigged, we hired Arthur Anderson, one of the most respected big five accounting firms in the country. They would collect and certify the results that evening on the spot—a brilliant touch and one that lent credibility to the tasting.

The following excerpt from my book is in the chapter titled, “The William Hill Days: Learning Lessons in Brand Building.” It will give you a glimpse into the past California wine industry some 35 years ago.

THE NEW YORK TIMES FRANK PRIAL SAGA

I was given a substantial bonus and salary increase at years end in 1985. It wiped out the bad taste in my mouth from the inadequate financial compensation I had received at the end of 1984. Busting my ass traveling for William Hill Winery most weeks in pursuit of building the Brand now felt worth it. I was energized and ready to go as 1986 began.

Then along came one of those moments that can either be monumental or can slip by unnoticed. This Moment did not! My instincts kicked in, and I thought of what my Father had said many times in the past, "son, there is a lot of opportunity in this world, and very few people who see it. I quickly realized this was one of those opportunity events.

I remember that day in February like it was yesterday. It was Wednesday, February 5th. There I am in the Boston Four Seasons Hotel lobby that morning, waiting for my friend, the on-premises superstar for M.S. Walker, Chip Coen. We had a full day ahead of us, calling on the top restaurants in Boston. I pick up the Wednesday NY Times to read Frank Prials' Wine Talk Column during my wait. His column appeared in the Food Section of the Wednesday Times weekly, and he was widely read and considered one of the foremost authorities on wine at that time, especially French wines. Quoting Thomas Matthews of the Wine Spectator upon Frank Prial's death in 2012, he said, "If there was one wine writer every other wine writer always read, it was Frank Prial."

As I read the column, I realized he had received the press release we sent in November of 1985. It announced that William Hill's wines had overwhelming won a blind tasting against several of the First Growth Bordeaux of identical vintages. In this tasting, the vintages were 1978, 1979, 1980, & 1981. The First Growth Bordeaux's were none other than Ch Latour, Ch Margaux & Ch Mouton Rothschild. The event was in Dallas, Texas, at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Prial's article started reasonably complimentary about William Hill wines but then took a quick turn downward. He argued that it was a classic mismatch as Bordeaux wines last longer, prove to be more complex and *on...and...on*. Here was the opening to his argument, and I quote, "Very impressive. But why am I thinking of the Harlem Globetrotters and how they roll into town, take over the American Legion Hall and wipe out the set-up opposition to the tune of "Sweet Georgia Brown?" He finished his column with numerous other comparisons, suggesting they would be more valid to taste and compare William Hill Cabernets against. He concluded with this comment. I quote: "it's like those automobile commercials that say, More trunk space than the legendary BMW! Even if the car in question is powered by squirrels on a treadmill, the association has been made."

I assume he thought he needed to be funny at this point in his column. However, I understood that he had stumbled into a fight having no idea who he just took on. I found this amusing because I had attempted on several occasions when Bill Hill was in New York, to arrange a meeting or lunch with Mr. Prial, and he had declined each offer. I thought to myself. We need to get this guy!

It was just past 9:00amEST/6:00 am PST; I go to the payphone (no cell phones in those days) and call Bill Hill at his residence, hoping not to wake him. I hear Bill on the other end of the line asking me why in the world was I calling him at this hour? "Bill, you will not believe what Frank Prial wrote in the Wine Talk column this morning. I gave Bill the flavor of the article, and he tells me to Fed Ex him a copy of the paper. (these were the days before the internet and even FAX machines were not that common, folks). I hung up and went to the Concierge desk at the hotel to do it immediately.

As I am getting off the phone, I spot Chip. I indicate to him I will be out in a few minutes. When I get in the car, he says, Fred, what was the delay about we are going to be late for our first appointment. I explained to him what I had just read, and as a result, I had called Bill Hill. I further commented to Chip that Frank Prial has no idea what he is in for once Bill gets a look at his column.

I was confident that Bill would find a way to turn this into Gold. Sure enough, on Monday, February 17th, Bill fires off to Prial a rebuttal letter. Bill was great in person when he spoke to folks, but he was equally a match for anyone when he put pen to paper to counter what they might say about his wines. His letter also contained a six-page rebuttal referencing all the points that Prial had made in his column. My favorite sentence in Bill's letter was and I quote, "Since you are a long-standing and highly respected student of wine, I would like to gain some insight from your knowledge and experience." BOOM!!!

Bill did cc at the bottom of his letter, "several interested parties." What he did not tell Prial was this. A copy of his letter, along with his rebuttal memo, went to dozens of other wine writers. Bill wanted to bring to their attention what Prial had argued and suggested there might be a debate in all of this. He closed by saying, "please feel free to quote any of the enclosed materials."

For the next several months, wine writers throughout the country took up the challenge. The debate started on the age-ability of California Cabernet Sauvignon and California wines vs. their European counterparts. Many of the writers either sided with Bill or slammed Prial for his one-sided, slanted viewpoint. What happened next was the proverbial "Tipping Point" for the evolution of the William Hill Brand in the marketplace. We couldn't have paid for the press coverage we received. On Wednesday, April 16th, Prial, in his Wednesday Wine Talk column, devoted the entire space to the controversy and his prior statement by quoting extensively from Bill's letter and memo. He deftly apologized without directly apologizing to Bill. (It was quite clever of him, in retrospect).

I quote here from his last two paragraphs.

"Then, too, the idea of a good California Cabernet outlasting some Bordeaux 1982's, well, it's not particularly shocking. After all, the 1982 Bordeaux were more like California wines than many California wines. Last, I regret having referred to first-growth Bordeaux--or anything else--as "immortals. If there is one thing the wine-writing trade doesn't need more of, it's hyperbole."

WOW! We had won. It was like putting jet fuel into our Brand and, like a slingshot, created an awareness that we could never have bought in a million years.

Just for the record, we never tasted our 1982 Cabernet Sauvignon in any of these blind tastings. I am not sure why Prial felt it necessary, even to mention the 1982 Bordeaux vintage.