

PASSION & AMBITION

When I began writing what has come to be known by many of my friends and colleagues as "The Book," I have often been met with the comment: WHY? What people have said at times goes something like this: what is it that you know that is important and necessary to share? How will it benefit anyone? Why so much emotion about business, albeit the wine business? Who do you think will care about what you have to say? Aren't you scared of the reaction you might face if this book is published? After all, it is a "tell-all," isn't it?

Well, the answer to those questions is complicated but simple. Yes, I have a significant amount of Passion when it comes to the wine business. I do not know how you can be successful in any business if you lack Passion--so that is not unique to me. What is unique to me is I am the only person I know who has been in all three tiers of the wine business and not only have been successful but contributed significantly to making a positive change within each of those tiers.

I have a perspective that most of the folks in the wine business have not been lucky enough to experience. Starting in retail wine in Washington, DC at the time when Robert M. Parker came into prominence with what he initially called The Baltimore-Washington Wine Advocate showed me just how gullible the wine buying public was and still is.

I witnessed first-hand how a brand can live on and become something entirely different from the original vision of its founder. This experience occurred after I had left William Hill Winery and then watched as larger liquor and wine companies purchased the winery

from Bill Hill. (First, Allied Domecq in 1992 and then Gallo in 2007).

The years I spent as Vice-President of Sales & Marketing at Sonoma-Cutrer taught me the meaning and power of focus in the wine business coupled with honest pricing of your wine. In retrospect, it should surprise no one that the market does not care if they get a deal on your wine, they only care if their competitor is getting a better price. If you have quality and stand by that commitment, the market will respect and support your brand. Sonoma-Cutrer to this day is a classic case study on how you build a premium brand that stands the test of time in the wine business.

The Distribution business made me realize that it was possible to build a brand even if the product you have is sales and service. However, it is by far the most painful and gut-wrenching segment of the wine industry. In distribution, you are continually being squeezed by both sides of the equation. (However, the balance between the needs of the producer and retail buyer has shifted in recent years to favor the side of the Distributor due to the unhealthy consolidation we have witnessed). At the end of the day, both the supplier and the buyer will throw you under the bus at the drop of a dime.

With this quick overview of the three-tier system and relative merits and lessons that can be learned, I do admit I would not change a thing in my career. I have been fortunate to see all sides of this industry and the people involved. This book is just about that-- the proverbial good, bad, and the ugly. Unlike other industries I have often cautioned folks who have never been in the wine business it is unlike any other that exist. Just because you may have achieved success in another business does not at all qualify you to be successful in the wine business. When I explain that

to otherwise successful business executives, they always look at me like I do not know what I am talking about. I share with them my experience and explain it this way; if it makes perfect business sense, the owner of the winery or related wine entity will nine times out of 10 do the exact opposite. I realize that sounds crazy, but that is the way they roll! There is this thing called Alcohol that appears to rule the day. Lots of emotion and personal choices go into making decisions that otherwise would be made based on logic and basic sound business judgment. Not in the wine business, though.

Speaking of emotion, let me share some of mine with you. I was captivated the first time I had a bottle of wine with dinner. I still recall the wine distinctly, although it was not wine from an excellent vintage or for that matter a distinguished producer. However, it was my first experience with the art of enjoying food and wine.

The next thing I know I am at a local wine store exploring their wine selection and purchasing a book which in my early days of learning about wine I referred to as "the Bible". I still have that book today; it is Frank Schoonmaker's Encyclopedia of Wine. (See exhibit attached at the bottom) I remember looking up Medoc and then somehow landing on Saint-Julien and next reading that one of the most famous wine producers in that Township located in the Haut-Medoc was Chateau Ducru-Beaucaillou. Well, I will be damned but the wine store in Kalamazoo, Michigan where I was living at the time had a bottle of 1970 Ducru-Beaucaillou on its shelf for the princely sum as I recall of \$10.99. So, I bought a bottle, and took it home for dinner. Now that was like going from driving a Ford Custom to being behind the wheel of a Cadillac. It blew my mind on how different and amazing the flavors were in comparison to the bottle of Regional

Medoc from Sichel, the first bottle of wine I experienced. Well, the next bottle was Ch Lafite, followed by Latour, Margaux and, finally Haut-Brion all from the 1970 vintage. Talk about getting a fast-track education!

However, what I was to experience next changed my life. I was out to dinner with some friends and was looked upon as the resident wine expert. They deferred to me, so I decided to move past Bordeaux and ordered a bottle of Burgundy. It was a 1969 Clos Vougeot produced by Domaine Rene Engel. Now that was like moving from a Cadillac to a Rolls Royce. In fact, we drank all three bottles they had in the restaurant wine cellar that evening. I am not quite sure how we made it home, but it put me on a quest to find this wine and buy a case. After some exhaustive searching, (keep in mind in 1977 there were no internet searches or Google) I managed to purchase six bottles from a gourmet kitchen shop. Quite surprising when I think back on it now.

Well, that did change my life as I began to wonder, and dream was there a way for me to make a living in the wine business. The thought even entered my mind that maybe someday I would write about food and wine. That is how obsessed I was with my new-found hobby and passion. Finally, my dream took over, and the decision was made to relocate in my quest to begin a career in the Wine Business. I was young, ambitious, and fearless. So, yes there was a burning Passion inside of me that wine had ignited. I was determined not to be afraid of the dark and pushed forward eventually landing my first position working retail wine in Washington, DC.

Wine was the catalyst that changed my life and career path. To this day, that remains true. (Living proof to me is I would have never met my wife of thirty

years if I had not been in this business). I remain extremely Passionate about wine, the people behind it and the vineyards that produce it. Most especially those from Burgundy and specifically White Burgundy, i.e., the greatest Chardonnay in the world. During my days at Sonoma-Cutrer, where we only produced Chardonnay, I would have countless debates with trade wine buyers about Chardonnay's relevance during the beginning of the ABC movement; (Anything But Chardonnay). At the end of many arguments and discussions, I would always tell them they can have their Riesling or other esoteric white wine, and I will have my Montrachet. (Preferably a bottle from *Marquis de Laguiche*). Folks it is no contest. I rest my case.

Yes, wine is a tremendously alluring and seductive friend. One that is everything we say it is, it makes food taste better, it is socially more acceptable and creates an atmosphere to stimulate lively times without the drastic turn of events that often happens when people drink too much alcohol. I would like to add, if wine is enjoyed in moderation which means something different depending on the individual.

Burgundy though is the King and Queen of wines, and while we have come a long way with Pinot Noir in this country to mirror those great Pinot Noirs from Burgundy, we have only begun to discover the true Grand Cru Climats for Chardonnay and how to let the vineyard speak directly to us. I can count on one hand the number of genuinely exceptional wines produced from Chardonnay that originated in California and have several fingers left over. I look forward to the day when what I have just stated becomes untrue. One can always dream!

In my days of distribution, I would gleefully exclaim to my wine suppliers that I had a deep Passion for

wine and a deep Passion for business. The combination is combustible under the right leadership and commitment. The truth is that wine adds an intrinsic value to everyone who touches it. If those in the Wine Business know how to harness that energy and not let ego get in the way of making money, they have the opportunity to be successful and enjoy life at the same time. Yes, I know a tall order for most of us but one that is attainable. I know---I have!

