

As a preface to this latest book excerpt (California Dreaming), I wanted to provide some context. When I first entered the wine business at a leading wine retail merchant in Washington, DC, I was young and naive about how the wine industry worked. It was my good fortune to start my career in D.C., one of the two genuinely free markets in the United States for the sale of Alcoholic beverages...the second being the State of California.

Let me explain briefly. Since the repeal of prohibition in December of 1933 with the ratification of the 21st amendment, a maze of regulations at the state level determined who could and who could not buy and sell alcoholic beverages, including wine. But because the District of Columbia was not and never has been a state, none of the archaic beverage laws that governed most of the states in the country existed. The law was straightforward in DC; it read: if you were a licensee, i.e., retail, restaurateur, and you could not purchase the alcoholic beverage of your choice from a local distributor, you had the legal right to go to the primary source, (producer) and buy it directly. All you needed to do to comply with DC law was to obtain a permit and pay the excise tax required, depending on whether it was wine, beer, or liquor, and import it into the market yourself. It was that simple.

After being promoted within the first five months on the job as the manager of the American Wine Department, (it was called American Wine Department in those days as the explosion in California wineries was just beginning). Our wine selection had the standard California wineries like Robert Mondavi, Krug, BV, Inglenook, Almaden, and others, along with wines from NY State, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and other eastern states. But I was interested in expanding our California offerings with some of the new hot brands at the time, like Ch. St. Jean, Stonegate, Raymond, Chalone, Stags Leap Wine Cellars, Ridge, and many other wineries that do not have the same cache today. However, when I tried to buy them locally, I was told by the wholesale distributors that these wines were already allocated to several other DC merchants, and A & A Liquors was not one of them. Not to be deterred in Q4 of 1979, I asked Harry Cook, the store manager and part of the family that owned the store to give me the first two weeks of January off. I told him I would go to California on my dime and put us in the California wine business. We were already active importers of wine from France and Italy, so he agreed with me. Besides, I was paying for it anyway. What did he have to lose? Eventually, through the connections I made in the next several years after multiple trips to California, we introduced a host of now well-known wines to our clientele. To name a few, Saintsbury, William Hill Winery, Pine Ridge, Ravenswood, Donna Maria (now Chalk Hill), Matanzas Creek, La Crema Vinera, (today now known as La Crema), Ventana Vineyards, and many more too numerous to mention.

The following excerpt has been condensed and edited from a more extensive chapter about my wine-buying trips to California from January 1980 through 1983. In 1984 I left A & A Liquors and took a newly created position as Eastern Regional VP of Sales for William Hill Winery.

Enjoy the read. I believe you will find it entertaining.

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Knee deep into Q4 of 1980 and working through the busy holiday season, I was getting excited planning my second trip to California Wine Country. I had traveled

to Napa and the other prominent winegrowing regions of California for the first time in January of 1980. I was now prepared to make this next trip more meaningful by looking for wines I could buy directly. At A & A Liquor, we were a significant importer of wine from France and Italy, but this next step was a big move for a young wine buyer from a retail merchant in the nation's capital.

It was also the first time my best friend, the now legendary Jim Arseneault, and I traveled together. Jim was the California wine manager and buyer for MacArthur Beverages. MacArthur Beverages was a well-recognized leading wine merchant who under Jim's vision and leadership would later revolutionize the purchase and sale of California wines in 1985 by establishing a program for selling California Cabernets on futures.

Without a doubt, Jim carved out his niche as one of the most innovative, sharpest wine buyers in the Industry. Jim knew more about wine than almost anyone I have ever met, both then and now, and was able to communicate it in a way that was both educational and fun. Besides, if you could handle the time with Jim, it was a hell of a lot of fun. We were quite the duo when we hit the road or were just out for the evening. Many a night would drag into the morning if I wasn't careful. But that is a long story. So, back to January of 1981.

The first winery on our schedule of a week-long slog through Napa & Sonoma was the Iconic Mayacamas Vineyards. This historic winery was purchased by Bob Travers in 1968, and he proceeded to produce some of the most sought-after wines from Napa Valley, including a 1968 Late Harvest Zinfandel that I once tasted blind against 1966 Ch. Haut Brion--it won the tasting. In today's vernacular, he had developed an early cult following amongst California wine aficionados. We were forewarned that even though Jim's brother had made the appointment (he was the wholesale representative for Mayacamas in Washington, D.C.) Bob was not the most personable fellow. There was no guarantee that he would greet us warmly. Indeed, he did not!

As we headed up the steep climb of Mt. Veeder Mountain to Mayacamas, I noticed that the fuel gauge indicated we were running close to empty. Jim had spaced (as he sometimes could) and had forgotten to fuel up our rental car. We decided we had no choice but to continue and keep our fingers crossed that we would make it. Our thought was once we were at Mayacamas, we could coast downhill to the nearest gas station in Napa. Or at least that was our plan.

Ten minutes late for our appointment (Jim was always late), we knocked on the office door and we were informed that Bob would not meet with us because we arrived past our appointed time. He conveniently used that as an excuse.

Jim and I looked at each other, and I said, "well, what the hell we came all this way, why don't we look around for ourselves." We peeked inside what we believed was the winery building, and out came a fellow introducing himself as Lore Olds. He looked somewhat surprised and asked could he help us? We explained who we were and the fact that we had arrived late for our appointment. I chimed in, "yea, we came from the East Coast, and now Bob won't see us." Lore shrugged his shoulders and said, "well, that is the way he is. I will show you around." We smiled and said that would be great. Once inside the winery, Lore began to barrel sample us on everything in the cellar. During this tasting we discovered (before anyone in the market or press knew) that Bob had decided to discontinue producing Zinfandel and replaced it with a quest to make Pinot Noir. I found it interesting considering my experience tasting the '68 LH Zin against '66 Ch. Haut Brion.

When we asked why he stopped producing Zin, Lore just replied, "well, the boss doesn't like it really, and he wanted a new challenge." I thought Pinot Noir would provide that. Lore went on to say he had started a new project up above Mayacamas at the top of the Mountain several years ago. He was now getting those Zinfandel grapes and calling his new brand SKY Vineyards to produce only Zinfandel. A perfectly named wine brand given its proximity to the top of the Mountain. SKY became a very well-known producer of top-flight Zinfandel, which Lore still produces, although he has recently added Syrah to the portfolio.

We thanked Lore for the time he spent with us, and as we started to pull out of the winery parking lot, Jim slowed down as he drove by the office. Just at that moment, the window shade was pulled back ever so slightly to view our exit; it was Bob Travers. Jim flipped him the Bird, stepped on the gas, and roared out of the winery. As we reached the road, I reminded Jim we had next to no gas, advising him to slow down. Besides, we were headed down the Mountain to another iconic Mt. Veeder property, and a producer aptly named Mt. Veeder Vineyards to meet Mike Bernstein, the owner.

Mt. Veeder Vineyards and Mike Bernstein was the first vintner in California to plant all five Bordeaux varietals in his vineyard, his inaugural vintage was 1973. Mike was a gracious fellow and had developed a strong following for his wines by those in the know. The visit to Mt. Veeder was far and away, more cordial, and warmer. As we left, I noticed a large gas tank behind the winery, which stored fuel

for the tractors and other equipment. I explained to Mike our situation, and he offered us several gallons from his storage tank, which would get us to Napa with no problem. I was both grateful and relieved as I had no idea how much farther we would be able to get with the fuel we had. Jim, of course, thought all of this was funny as he was apt to do when he screwed up and just said, "Oh Fred, why are you worried. I told you we would make it." Sure Jim, Sure!

While we saw many more wineries and vintners during this trip, there were two other amusing, what you might call revealing, encounters with vintner personalities on this trip that I would like to highlight. I would be remiss if I did not share them with you, the reader. The first of these was our visit to Kistler Vineyards. At the time, Jim had the exclusive rights to sell their wines in Washington, D.C. Somehow, through one of his customers, he was able to make an initial connection to Steve Kistler's father, which led to him securing these brand rights for MacArthur's. The first commercial vintage Kistler produced was the 1979 vintage. There was a Chardonnay each from Winery Lake, Dutton Ranch, and Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards. These wines were an instant success and some of the most sought-after chardonnays in America at the time, and surprisingly even today.

I was intrigued that we were going to visit this property. I had learned Kistler planted their vineyard with bud wood from Mt. Eden Vineyards, established by Martin Ray in the 1940s. Kistler also chose to emulate Martin using the California appellation on his label in contrast to a more precise geographic location for the wines, just as Martin Ray had done.

Kistler was in Sonoma Valley high up on the Mayacamas Mountains overlooking Kenwood just off Nuns Canyon Road. It was quite a trek as we split off Nuns Canyon Road and up a very rough and ragged private road. When we finally arrived, we looked around but could see no one. Just as we started to walk around the back of the building, out came a fellow who had long unkempt hair; he was wearing a whitish tee shirt with holes in it and boots and jeans. He quietly introduced himself as Steve Kistler and expressed his surprise to see us, asking who we were and what were we doing there? Jim explained who he was and that we were to meet Mark Bixler. Steve told us that Mark had gone into town and was late coming back. After a few somewhat awkward moments, Steve offered to show us the winery. Jim and I followed him as he walked toward a nondescript entrance to the winery building. As we went through several smaller rooms, I noticed wine barrels with electric blankets covering them. I wasn't sure what to make of it, but Steve did mumble something about stuck fermentations. (It would turn out later that the bottling of the 1980 vintage chardonnays from Kistler would develop

Hydrogen Sulfide (H₂S), and they would end up performing an unusual procedure in the market a year later. More on that later in the book).

When we reached the main barrel cellar, it was so small and cramped that we had to duck our heads to get around. Steve started to tell us what was in specific barrels and the conditions he experienced during the 1980 harvest. Never once did he offer to taste us on wine. I found that very odd as industry protocol was to taste wine with your trade clients when they visited, especially from the East Coast. Additionally, Jim was one of his largest customers outside of the state of California. Once this brief, boring, and unenlightening tour ended, we left the cellar, once outside, Steve turned around and left us standing in the driveway as he walked away.

I didn't know what to make of all of this, but I thought, oh well, it is Jim's brand, and if this is the way they treat their customers, good luck to them. At that moment, through the gate, a pickup truck appeared, scattering rocks and dust all the way. Out of the truck popped Mark Bixler. He came over and immediately apologized for being late. Jim let him know that we had met Steve, and he had given us a brief tour of the winery. It appeared that was going to be the extent of the visit. I then spoke up and said to Mark, "it is my custom when I travel to California to bring several bottles of wine to share with vintners whose wines I admire." I continued, "I have a bottle of *1978 Marquis de Laguiche Montrachet* in the car and we would like to share it with you and Steve if you have the time." Suddenly out of nowhere, Steve Kistler appears, inviting us into the house. Mark and Steve both had huge smiles on their faces and corkscrews gleaming in the sun. We sat on an oversized couch in the living room, and once we had enjoyed a bit of this Burgundian nectar, we were carrying on like we were best of friends. Steve then offered to open any of their wines we would like to try as Mark tried to pull together some bread and cheese. It was a stunning turn of events at the end of what started out to be another less than satisfying visit. I couldn't help but be amused by this and always enjoy sharing this story. Many years later, when I was CEO of The Henry Wine Group, and we were the largest distributor in the country for their wines, the treatment I experienced was no different and was consistent with the indifferent way Steve Kistler treated me that day--and I am sure anyone else from the trade. Pretty amazing that they became as successful as they did.

One more notable visit scheduled for the following day was with Matanzas Creek Winery. Jim and I had learned of this new winery and somehow obtained a bottle of their Chardonnay back in Washington, D.C., and were impressed. Their winemaker was none other than Merry Edwards, who had recently left Mt. Eden Vineyards to take the position as winemaker at Matanzas Creek. Yet another

connection to the Martin Ray legacy for me to pursue. When we arrived at the winery, we found ourselves knocking on the trailer door that served as the office and lab for the production facility. A woman, who turned out to be Merry Edwards, answered the door and asked who we were. I let her know we were from Washington, D.C., and we were there to introduce ourselves as we had been impressed with their wine.

Then the rudest thing happened, she just closed the door in our face. After that treatment, we were about to leave, and just as in the Kistler visit, a fellow came out and introduced himself as the General Manager. I believe his name was Jim Katon. I told him I had made this appointment and restated that we were retail wine merchants from Washington, D.C., interested in buying their wine. He gave us a brief tour of the then small winery building. Then he ushered us away with no offer to taste any wine or explanation. We left, letting him know that we were interested in selling Matanzas Creek in the Washington, D.C. market and would welcome the opportunity to represent the brand if they were interested. Katon said he would give it some thought, and then we were on our way. As we left, I said to Jim, "boy, some of these producers here in California sure think their sh.. doesn't stink." (An attitude that has only gotten worse in my years of dealing with California winery owners). Let me also note that all four of these wineries were ultimately sold later to new owners. So much for generational winegrowing in California.



Dan Haas, Fred Reno, & Jim Arseneault moving Fred's cellar circa summer of 1980.