

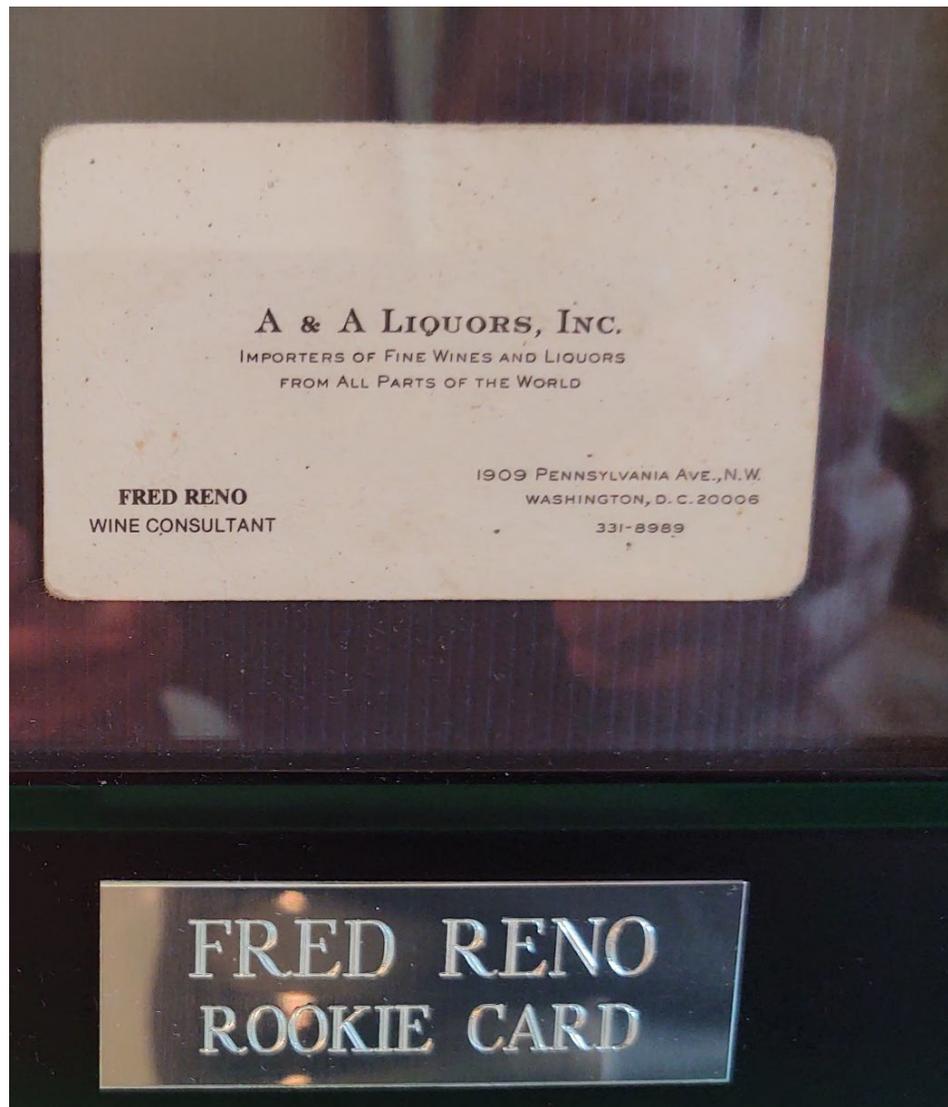
PREFACE TO RETAIL WINE BEGINNING

I would like to share some context about this excerpt from my chapter titled “The Beginning—Don’t be Afraid of the Dark.” Let me start by stating how difficult it was initially for me to get a position, any position in the wine industry, back in 1978/1979 after relocating to Washinton, D. C. I interviewed with Importers, Distributors and finally was hired by what turned out to be one of the top Retail Wine Merchants during that time in the city—A & A Wine & Spirits. I had never worked in any retail position up to that point, so it made A & A even more of a challenging beginning to my wine career. The store was established one year after the repeal of Prohibition back in December of 1933. At the time I started Harry Cook was the manager and co-owner. Harry married the daughter of the Founder and was without a doubt the finest gentleman I ever had the privilege of working with/for in my 40+ years in the wine business.

If it wasn’t for Harry giving me that first opportunity I may never have broken into the industry. I owe him more than I can ever repay. (more on this in the full chapter of the book.

This excerpt details my first wine trip in my new position after being promoted to American Wine Manager and Buyer in late August of 1979. I had only been working for four months at A & A. I had never been to a winery in my life, and I was very excited because I had secured a visit to Martin Ray Winery in Santa Cruz. Martin Ray was an iconoclastic wine personality in the early days of California wine going back to 1943 after he sold Paul Masson winery which he had purchased from the Paul Masson himself. I was enamored with the wines of Martin Ray as I began to taste and look into wines from California back in 1977. Although I never had the opportunity to meet him prior to his death in 1976, he became the standard by which I judged every other California wine I tasted at that time.

So, with that background let me take you into the world of retail wine back in the late 1970's. A world and business I knew nothing about before I got my break.



THE BEGINNING/DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

I had begun to get a bit bored with retail wine and had been surprisingly offered several different sales positions with the same distributors I had interviewed with before getting the position at A & A. These were the same companies who told me I didn't have enough experience to work for them. Mr. Cook sensed that and decided he wanted to keep me, so he promoted me to the position of American Wine Buyer in August of 1979. In those days, although we had some California wine from Mondavi, Charles Krug, Martini, and early producers like that, the producers of California wine were not very prominent on the East Coast and there really wasn't an established market for premium California wine in the minds of the consumer at that time.

However, during the next several months leading up to the holiday season in 1979, I attempted to purchase and expand our California wines through local distributors. I tried to purchase wines that were scarce and in demand. Only to repeatedly be told that A & A Wine & Spirits was not a leading retail store for California wines and the limited amounts of these wines that came in went first to several other wine merchants. This astounded me. You would be surprised to learn who these brands were. Most of which are not in business today or have been bought and sold so many times that their identity is entirely different. Finally, after being turned down to buy; of all things Chateau St Jean Chardonnay, I went to Mr. Cook and requested that once the year had finished, he let me go to California on my nickel for two weeks. I told him I would put us in the California wine business. He had nothing to lose, as the first two weeks of January were notoriously slow, especially in retail, and I was willing to pay for this trip out of my pocket. He said sure you have my authority to represent us and good luck.

Once I was given the okay to go to California, which was for me my first trip to California wine country, I immediately arranged to visit Martin Ray Winery and David Bruce Winery both located in the Santa Cruz

Mountain region. They were two of the most iconic producers at the time with much history and recognized as pioneers in the business. After many calls to the local wholesaler about the Martin Ray visit, they let me know that no one goes up there; they are not open to the public. The winery had been reopened in 1976 by Peter Martin Ray, Martin's adopted son after Martin's death.

Besides Peter Martin Ray there was Ken Brooks, a local CPA from Palo Alto; that for some reason had the rights to the Martin Ray label. As well as the winemaker at the time Doug Fletcher. I persisted and said the fact that no one goes up there is why I am going to make it the first winery I visit. I got a call back several weeks later letting me know there were no guarantees, but I did secure an appointment. However, be prepared for what might not be a warm greeting. You may not even get in. David Bruce, on the other hand, was easier to arrange because they were represented by a smaller wine distributor in Washington D. C., and they were happy to set it up.

With those two appointments in the books and a lot of optimism, I got on a plane the first week of January of 1980 and flew to San Francisco. I set up shop at the Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill and figured I could go to Santa Cruz the first two days and then find my way to Napa Valley on my own during the remainder of the trip. The visit to Martin Ray proved to be not anything like I envisioned.

As I got close to Saratoga, I began to get confused about my directions. With the address in hand, I found the entrance to a gate at the bottom of the foothills to the mountains. Fortunately, it was not locked. So, I got out of my car, swung the gate wide open and began the drive up a very steep and winding road. After what seemed like close to five minutes, I pulled up to a small parking area which was atop a vineyard in the sky literally. I got out of the car and walked around and was greeted by a dog. Then out of the cellar came Doug Fletcher with a wry smile that

said, welcome you made it. I introduced myself, and we proceeded to talk for a few minutes when he ushered me into a cellar with barrels that looked like a small garage operation. We tasted some wines and talked with him, giving me the history and background on how he had been contacted by Ken Brooks when Ken and Peter Martin Ray were discussing reopening the winery.

Martin had, of course, lost most of his vineyards, (that vineyard is now known as Mount Eden Vineyards) and the house further up the hill in the early 70's in the battle with his investors but had retained a small five-acre plot in front of the house that was below on the hill that had originally been for guests. He eventually moved into it and converted the underside into the cellar and winery. Recently, they had been purchasing fruit from both Winery Lake in Napa (this is before Carneros achieved its official AVA) and Dutton Ranch in Sonoma to augment the meager amount of wine they were able to make from their vineyard. Meanwhile, Peter Martin Ray had begun to plant an additional twenty or so acres on the surrounding land he inherited upon his father's death. I found the whole experience very exciting as I had just visited the winery of my folk hero in the California wine business. Also, I had made what I believe to be a good impression on Doug Fletcher. (In fact, the next trip to Martin Ray the following year I was fortunate enough to meet and have lunch with Eleanor Ray, or Madame Pinot as Martin called his wife. It was a great treat as she told me many stories about Martin and the dinners, they had for the many guests who would visit). As I was leaving, Doug said, let's stay in touch as he would be traveling back east in the spring and was looking forward to seeing me if he got to Washington D. C.

The visit the next day to David Bruce Winery was equally exciting because of the sure eccentric nature of Dr. Bruce and his winemaking style. In those days, David Bruce had a reputation that if he hit it right, he made incredible wines, and when he missed it; he missed it by a

mile. As I left his winery that Saturday afternoon my thoughts were, I was in California, had just visited two of the most private and fantastic wine producers and to think that just a little over nine months ago I couldn't even get a job in this business. As you can imagine, I was feeling pretty good about myself at that moment.

I took Sunday off to enjoy San Francisco and then on Monday headed up to Napa Valley for an appointment to visit Schramsberg Vineyards the leading Sparkling Wine producer in California. An appointment that had been set up by the Kronheim Company, the top wine distributor in D.C.

I arrived at the scheduled time and introduced myself. The hospitality person who greeted me seemed confused and excused herself. When she returned, I was told that my name was not on anyone's calendar, and they would not be able to give me a tour or spend any time with me. I felt both foolish and disappointed at that moment, and after several minutes of empty talk, I walked out vowing never to sell or recommend another bottle of their wine. I was completely and utterly pissed at the Kronheim Company for dropping the ball on my appointment. I then spent the next several days going up and down Napa Valley walking into the wineries and introducing myself and just generally becoming familiar with some of the brands that I had already been selling. Overall, an education but not exactly what I had intended as my first experience in Napa Valley. As I drove out of the valley on the last day of my trip, I vowed to myself that the next time I returned it would be different. (and it was)

Once back in Washington, D. C., armed with a firsthand knowledge of California wine country, I felt much more confident and energized in my new position. I was determined and more committed to putting A & A Wine & Spirits on the map as a leading wine merchant representing the best from California. (I DID!)

