

EPISODE #17 TIME TO FOLD THEM/WILLIAM HILL WINERY

Fred Reno

In the aftermath of the 21 Club event in May of 1987, I knew it was time to move on from William Hill Winery. I spent the remainder of that year and in early 1988 planning the timing and what my future wine career would look like. In the early part of 1988, I was looking for an idea to fulfill a promise I had made to Doug Shaw, now the president of M. S. Walker in Massachusetts, that we would do something in Boston similar to the 21 Club event, as he had sat next to me.

I went to Boston and worked with my good friend Chip Cohen at M. S. Walker to brainstorm about what we could do that be compelling and noteworthy as the 21 Club event. We went to my favorite venue, to dine in Boston that evening, restaurant Jasper. Jasper White was an accomplished, well-known chef in Boston, if not the country, and had worked with Lydia Shire at the Bostonian Hotel earlier in their career when it first opened. The Bostonian was known for, among other things, featuring a strong California wine list at a time when that was unheard of on the East Coast, both Lydia and Jasper went on to be successful after they departed the Bostonian. Lydia moved to Los Angeles as the first executive chef at the new Four Seasons Hotel Beverly Hills, and Jasper, of course, had his restaurant in Boston. As we were sitting there during dinner, Chip mentioned to me that he was aware that Lydia had been flying back and forth between Los Angeles and Boston on more than one occasion, working on a deal to open her own restaurant. When I heard that, I looked at Chip and said, "Well, if we buy out Jasper's restaurant for one night, bring him and Lydia together to collaborate in a reunion dinner. What do you think? The dinner theme will be featured with a retrospective tasting of William Hill Gold Label Cabernet Sauvignon, including the pre-release tasting of

the yet to be released 1985 Gold Label Cabernet Sauvignon. Additionally, we will dress the evening up by requesting black tie, just as we did at the 21 Club event. Chip just grinned and said, "Great idea. At that point, I asked our wait person to have Jasper come out when he had a moment. I let him know I wanted to speak to the chef about an event William Hill Winery would like to do and have hosted at his restaurant.

When Jasper sat down with us, I reiterated to him how much I had admired his cuisine and how I had always enjoyed my dinners at Jasper's. Then explained that I wanted to buy his restaurant for the evening and stage a dinner, at which he and Lydia Shire would join once again, working together to create and execute a menu designed to complement William Hill Cabernets. He thought it was a terrific idea and said, "If Lydia will do it, I will do it." I told him I would contact her and let him know the following week. We chose a date in early April, specifically the evening of Tuesday, April 12. When I returned home to D.C. the next day, I reached out to Lydia. I had never met her, and she had no idea who I was. But I had a great relationship with the Four Seasons Hotels, and could arrange an introduction, knowing full well that she was already flying back and forth to Boston to cement her new deal. I felt that my timing was right. When I got her on the phone, I explained who I was and what I had in mind. The fact that we would fly her back at our expense, and she could once again work side by side with Jasper, led her not to hesitate to commit, she repeated what Jasper had said to me the week before. Her comment was, "If Jasper will do it, I will do it as well". I replied, "Jasper has already said he would do it If you would, so I'm delighted that you have accepted my offer. I closed the deal right there on the phone and let her know I would inform Jasper and get back to her with details and dates.

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Once I confirmed with Jasper that we could buy his restaurant on the evening of Tuesday, April 12th, the marketing team back at the winery got busy creating the invitations, and I worked with Chip to pull

together the list of invitees. All the details came together very quickly in February, as April 12th was approaching rapidly, however, I was increasingly restless as I was committed to leaving William Hill Winery. While I did not, at that point, still have another job opportunity, I never lacked confidence, and I believed that if the word got out that I was available, something would develop leading to the next step in my career path.

The week of the event in April, Bill and I were scheduled to fly to Washington D.C. the day after the Jasper dinner to participate in the annual MacArthur Beverage California Cabernet Sauvignon Futures event. I figured that week gave me the right moment to let Bill know that I was planning to move on. As it turned out, once Bill and I met in Boston on the day of the event and checked into the Four Seasons Hotel, I decided to make the most of this situation and meet with him that afternoon, just before the Jasper event.

The aforementioned Doug Shaw and Chip Cohn from M. S. Walker joined us for a quick lunch that afternoon before the evening dinner. Once lunch was over, I let Bill know I needed to discuss something with him. He told me to come up to his room at 3:30, as he had several phone calls to make.

When I entered his room, he looked at me and said, "Fred, what's going on? I responded, "Bill, I am resigning as Vice president of Sales at William Hill Winery effective immediately. He turned a different shade of white, as if he didn't understand what I just said. He looks at me in disbelief and says, "Fred, what does this mean? I said, "Bill, this means I'm out of here. You have the ball. Don't fumble it. Now let's show them tonight what two professionals can do. I then walked out of his room, and he was stunned.

That evening, I got up, introduced Bill Hill, who shared his incredible insights into the vineyard development, setting the stage for him and our guests to enjoy a retrospective of five vintages of William Hill

Cabernet Sauvignon. Bill gave a command performance that evening. Unlike the 21 Club event, and the dinner was a huge success. No one in the room that night had any inclination that I had just resigned several hours prior. I had to restrain myself from letting onto Chip or anyone else know what I had done. Anne Rosenzweig was my guest for the evening. She had come up from New York to attend the dinner and was a beautiful gesture on her part. Just a year after the 21 Club event in New York.

In 1989, when Jasper White authored his book, *Cooking from New England*, he was kind enough to send me a signed copy, noting that he had written about the event and included several recipes featuring dishes they had served that evening. His last statement in the chapter of the dinner was, and I quote, "It was truly memorable".

The next day, when Bill and I flew to Washington D.C. we worked on the outlines of an exit agreement, which would have me transition out of the company by June. The agreement allowed me to continue earning an income based on sales in the Mid-Atlantic region until the end of the year. While this was a positive development, it wasn't going to be very lucrative. The reality was beginning to hit home that I was going through a divorce in my personal life, and I was going to need to get started networking very quickly before my decision began to put me in debt. As fate would have it, I was correct in my judgment of knowing when to hold them and when to fold them. In late May, Sonoma-Cutrer came calling. That would be the next opportunity I was looking for and would eventually lead to my greatest opportunity as President and CEO of Henry Wine Group.