

Why Cloverdale and how did this town come into being?

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I always had a soft spot in my heart and palate for Souverain because my old wine guru and mentor Leon Adams took me there early in our friendship. Lee Stewart launched the winery by harvesting his grapes from an estate on nearby Howell Mountain. His daughter suggested the name, deriving it from the French word, sovereign. But I suddenly awoke from my reverie once I looked closely at the sign at the entrance. A titan of the movie world bought the property in 2006 and after a short period under the name of Rosso & Bianco, it is being revived and expanded to become the flagship location for the Francis Ford Coppola Winery, complete with many other ways to amuse you in style.

Nearly 35 years ago Coppola bought the heart of the historic Gustav Niebaum property, and his 1880 winery that would become known as Inglenook, in Rutherford in the Napa Valley. Several of Coppola's high-end red wines are still made there on the Rubicon Estate. But this new Sonoma winery will be aimed at the people seeking both leisure and beauty of foliage and vines, the ones who come out ahead in the new U.S. economy of the coming teen years. Greg and I ate lunch here in the '70s along with other members of his family, but we could not do so that day because the restaurant is being extensively remodeled. For the moment, a temporary tasting room is housed in a former passageway while the new tasting complex is built in the remodel of Davis's East Wing. Will Coppola prove to be the Godfather, in the best sense, that provides Sonoma County more visibility? Or will it just be a baby-boomers road try-out of Fame? Everyone is waiting to see and you get almost the same number of opinions, mostly along the line of: "don't ever underestimate Coppola." Indeed, and also remember that his Robert Duvall character in Apocalypse Now loves the smell of napalm in the morning.

Although relatively inexpensive at less than \$20, the 2006 Diamond Label Claret is an impressive wine from Sonoma vineyards. The 2006 version is full of deep, dark berries and includes all the five noble varietals that the British demanded from the Bordeaux city exporters a couple of centuries ago; this 2006 version is more than 80 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, with a touch more Petite Verdot than Merlot. Will it age? Certainly not as long as the current versions of the wines from the progenitor French vineyards — that is Graves, after all, a terroir of gravelly soil where vines must struggle and when they do, they become Haut Brion, if they are very good and very strong.

Alas, I finally realized that my 25 years away from living in Sonoma County and writing about wine there were a time of riotous explosion of wineries, and times had rapidly changed. Back in the days when we launched the

Napa/Sonoma Wine Review in the spring of 1981, I logged barely a dozen wineries north of Santa Rosa. Now there are nearly a hundred. The goal that day, however, was not to visit the new properties but to see how the original family and co-op wineries had evolved in a totally different market. Unlike those early days, winebibbers no longer have to be coaxed to drink "domestic" wine; now they clamor for both the reserve bottlings and the new case and barrel-lots of wine that are auctioned off annually.

Century-old Zinfandel vines in Alexander Valley

As we drove through the wavy hills of Alexander Valley, I remembered the first time I ventured up there, in about 1976 while living in San Francisco. A columnist for the Bay Guardian surprised his readers back then by insisting that the best zinfandel released that year was not from the hills east of Sacramento. No, he taunted us; it came from the Alexander Valley. In May, as we passed by this spring, familiar names from three decades ago — Jordan, Robert Young, Alexander Valley Vineyards and Field Stone, I remembered how I loved the topography of the area, much as the Italian families did who came here in the early years of the 20th Century. The hills are feminine in form and dressed in fall colors, they will be splendid.

We turned up the winding lane to the winery launched by the Demostene family in 1973 and which I had not visited for 33 years. The patriarch, Leo Demostene, and his wife, Rose, bought the property in 1956 and ripped out most of the old fruit orchards in favor of wine grapes, which he eventually sold to bulk wineries for more than a decade while he planned his own winery. The family's roots were already deep. Leo's father, Manuele Demostene, first farmed in the valley around 1900.

Leo's maternal grandfather, Abele Ferrari, moved to Healdsburg in 1905 to work for the neighbor Italian Swiss Colony (Asti) but soon began a manufacturing career, earning seven patents for the wine pumps, crushers and presses in the days before Prohibition. He bought the nearby Soda Rock Winery in 1925 and struggled through Prohibition times until he rebuilt it completely after 1933. Leo and Rose took over Soda Rock in 1943. Unfortunately Leo died almost exactly 30 years later, just as his family was creating an estate that implemented his vision.

His four children took on the added responsibilities after his death: Ed, Peachie, Cindy and Dave Demostene, who had learned to make wine at Soda Rock. My guide for the day had the good grace to marry Cindy several years ago and she was a most gracious educational host as we walked around the property. We walked past the original building that is still standing and then rode out to the mother lode,

The region took an aristocratic air when Charles Crocker made Cloverdale the last northern stop on the Central Pacific Line, possibly he wanted a hunting lodge nearby and wanted to return home in style in his own rail car.



Mary Stuart in her front yard at Vintage Towers

Vines at Sausal Vineyards



which I had missed so much for these last three decades. Driving over the folds and hills of Alexander Valley, which resemble the soft, enchanting paintings of Georgia O'Keefe after she moved to Taos, we passed a beautiful azure-blue pond.

Zinfandel vines so gnarly that they resemble tree trunks soon came into our view at the top of a gentle slope. These are vines that were planted in the 1870s, the early 1900s and just before nationwide Prohibition, the event that signaled the end of the winemaking for many of the early families in California. Those vines and their 90-year-old sisters, dry-farmed, often yield less than a ton per acre and they are so fragile that workers treat them gingerly and they are groomed like rare treasures. Because they are.

I cannot recommend enough the bottling of old-vine zinfandels from the property; I am especially fond of the 90-year-old selections. Ask for their Private Reserve, which is aged nearly a year and a half in French Limousin barrels, which helps explode the berries onto your palate, distracting you to dream of pairing this wine with Italian pastas whipped up by your girlfriend's grandma. The wine is +/- \$22; buy lots of it and wait ten years if you like. Meanwhile, until it ripens like a cherry or boysenberry you can buy the Sausal Cellar Cats Red for half the price. It's a little lighter, non-vintage blend of several zinfandel lots and honors Sophie and Gypsy, the rescue cats who I imagine actually run the place when the lights are turned off at night, sort of like an old Archie and Mehitabel cartoon.

And then there was Shirley
Greg saved a sentimental favorite for last, still knowing after nearly 25 years how he can tickle my funny bone. We both learned about wine in the days of the early '70s when some wineries in California were still serving tastes of their wines in Dixie cups over the counter of a hose and barrel room, often served by the owner and children thereof. Some wines turned out to be spectacular. And all for free.

Near Trentadue, and its lovely "32" wines, is a place that is the product of a second generation of vinifera-grape growers whose families have been farming in the area for three generations of local farmers. We're no longer young pups; we are of Medicare and Geritol age. But John and Jim

Pedroncelli can tell you in 15 minutes the history of California wine — the crop that became an industry, quite awhile after they took over the Dry Creek Valley vineyard on a hillside west of the Mayacamas mountains from their father, John Pedroncelli Sr. John the elder bragged to me and Leon 30-some years ago that he had done two things right in his life, besides his family, and he was right. He had the vision to buy 90 acres on several slopes back in 1927, two years before the Stock Market Crash of 1929, which was also the year that Leon Adams invented the term wine writer in America with his columns in the San Francisco Call about the Prohibition raids that he viewed from the stern of Bay police ships.

His second wise move was to retain and protect the "mother clone" of Zinfandel vines that are now a century or more old. I remembered the research that I did in Frank Schoonmaker and Alexis Bespaloff's Encyclopedia of Wine, 1964, with revisions until Frank's death in our bicentennial year. Those with a historical bent may be amazed to learn that 45 years ago, Sonoma winegrowers focused on varietals such as Carignane, Petite Sirah (not Syrah) and Alicante Bouschet, 10,000 acres worth, versus way less than 400 acres of today's stars, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

Schoonmaker foresaw eventual brilliance in Sonoma back then, however, noting both the soil of the terroir in vineyards all over the coastal county, growing in a surprisingly large number of very diverse microclimates. If you've ever lived there in deep summer, while Stockton is frying, most Sonoma locations are near or over 100 degrees, but then a cool westerly wind blows in from the ocean in the mid-afternoon, leading to large, 40-degree temperature differentials overnight, the kind of climate that makes noble wine varieties very happy.

Which brings us to this year and the tasting room. The room of old is long gone, replaced by a beautiful tasting area, with long wooden counters that would make even Wild Bill Hickock want to put away his guns and cards and quaff a Zinfandel. Where we used to taste from pipettes and any glass was handy, while John Sr. and Jr. grinned, now you taste in a room that a fancy-dancy San Francisco lawyer would feel comfortable in. And just as the custom was 35 years ago, the Pedroncelli tasting room is without charge. But I dare anyone with a sense of country aesthetics to get out of there without buying something, if Shirley Buchignani is calling the shots behind the counter, wearing her signature cowboy hat.

As Julie Pedroncelli noted,

Shirley has been introducing guests to affordable Sonoma delights there on Canyon Road for eight years. Julie also noted that the room opened in 1987, but it appears brand new and a masterful blend of wood hues and colors. Shirley works the bar like the very best bartenders must have done in Virginia City when the silver strike hit back in the late nineteenth century. Planning just to have a couple of sips, my day got turned around when Shirley pried out of me in less than five minutes what I really wanted to taste.

When I mentioned the visit more than 40 years ago, she poured the 2006 Dry Creek Valley Zin, the result of the mother clone. I lifted a toast to John Sr. When she heard Washington as my home state, she poured a Merlot from the Bench Vineyards in 2006, darker than most Washington prize merlots, with several spices and black cherries at their ripest. The 2005 Sangiovese was also tasty, lots of plums and all those berries that also highlight the zinfandels, but it also had a background aftertaste of cloves. That made me think Thanksgiving, but this wine is only for those of you who dive first for the drumstick and the dark meat.

But she saved the coup de grace for last, something I never suspected because 35 years ago the varietal on the label was still a question mark for the Pedroncellis. What a lovely surprise it was to drink the 2007 Estate Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Having experienced and wrote about Oregon pinots back when they exploded in the '80s, there is a standard by which the American version of Burgundian wine should taste. But in this case, I put that standard aside. This is a slightly denser brand of pinot, much more like the legendary Mirassou California pinots that the breakthrough generation — aka baby-boomers, cut their teeth on in the '60s and '70s. Not only were there in the taste my favorite raspberries from Puget Sound but cherries, more berries of every stripe, and a similar hint of cloves back there someplace. So, this is the wine I suggest for you to serve by the twos and threes with that gargantuan Thanksgiving dinner. And for those of your family with prejudices for whites only with turkey, serve them a lovely Washington or Alsatian Gewurztraminer. And ask them later to pronounce it.

Jim, the younger Pedroncelli brother, told us a long time ago that he was literally born in his father's winery office and he started marketing the family's grapes and wines since 1957, so he has seen the fancy dancers of the industry come and go but his family winery still stays a venerable favorite, most recently of the grandchildren of their original patrons. The upshot of our visit there was that I bought all those wines from Shirley and threw in a lovely 2006 Zinfandel from the Pedroni-Bushnell vineyard, on the eastern rim of hills of the Dry Creek Valley. John Pedroncelli Sr. bought that vineyard back at the end of World War II, and sold it to his son-in-law, thus the names on the vineyard. Tell Shirley hi for me.

Why Cloverdale

I learned "why Cloverdale" the next morning while strolling through the town, which is bisected by old Highway 101. First of all, I smelled the jasmine, a memory that drew me back over the years. Sonoma and northern California jasmine is delightful. After the new route bypassed the town several years ago, business owners eventually decided to install bollards and planters and reroute traffic to slow folks down considerably as they drove through. It worked. Now living back in my home town in the Northwest, I miss the lovely range of Mexican food that I tasted in my 12 years in California. The La Hacienda restaurant across the street from the Cloverdale Reveille newspaper rewarded us all with a meal to remember when Fred and Keeli Gernandt flew in from Bandon, Oregon, in their own plane, to join us.

For a historian or traveler interested in such, the first draws are the center for the Pomo Indian tribe and especially the story behind Ishi, the last of the Yahi tribe to survive, born near here in 1860s and died in the Bay Area in 1916, five years after wandering into a slaughterhouse in Oroville and discovering he was the last man standing from his clan. Two years before Ishi's birth, James A. Kleiser rode down the Russian River while scouting a road between the coast, the geysers

and Clear Lake. He chose this northernmost tip of Sonoma County for a new town along the old trail between Lake County and the Pacific coast and between San Francisco and Ukiah on the north-south axis. Visitors saw many more sheep grazing on the slopes north and south of town than they saw grapevines. And the region took an aristocratic air when Charles Crocker made Cloverdale the last northern stop on the Central Pacific Line, possibly he wanted a hunting lodge nearby and wanted to return home in style in his own private rail car. Rail connections to Larkspur and a ferry to downtown San Francisco will return to Cloverdale within a few years.

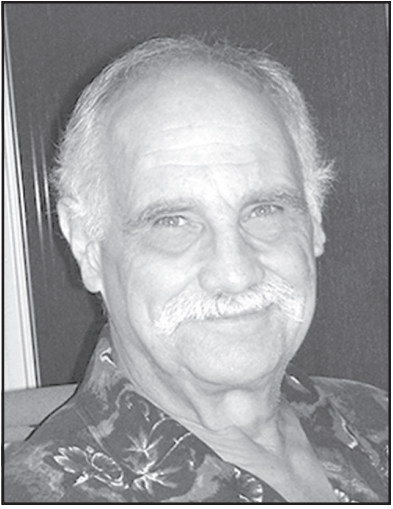
Lest you wonder if Cloverdale is too sleepy, that question was answered on a very hot day in late May this year. I was in town to consult with the managers of the Cloverdale Reveille, Val and Neena Hanchett. Almost exactly 28 years earlier, Val was the partner in a new wine tabloid called the Napa-Sonoma Review. Little did we know that it would be an early journal of the coming-out party for California wine, but specifically for Sonoma County. There are pubs and a brewery for amusement, but those who get up early to tour the county will appreciate how quiet and peaceful the town is in the evening.

Then the last day in town I stepped out of the office into the blinding sun and an explosion of sound and color out in the old main drag, which was cordoned off for entertainment on Heritage/Spring Festival weekend. The community organizers were inspired creatively and they booked one of the hottest bands and ensemble entertainment groups in the country, Portland's March Fourth Marching Band. It is difficult to describe for you the three rings of humor, daredevil stunts and synchronized marching music — blues and jazz standards, that comes with this circus. The brass section, the guitars, the drums, the saxophones, they lay down a sheet of music while stilt walkers prance out to the center of the crowd drawn around and they perform in choreography with the costumed dancing girls and move flawlessly to the beat of the band.

Why Cloverdale? Because it is a real town, like many in Sonoma County that withstood the temptation to be part of a theme or attempt to be something it is not. It was long a farming town and now is becoming a town amongst vineyards and wineries. This is not Sausalito or Bodega Bay. Each night as I walked around town and noted the colors in the beautiful sunsets, I felt like I was home away from home when I checked back in to the Vintage Towers.

The Stuarts have quite a following. During the week that I stayed there, the couple who booked a room on the opening day had returned, with their grandson, for the fifth year. Guests enjoy a marvelous parlor that is full of sofas and easy chairs and a DVD player for guests' use. Upstairs, at the center of a wheel of tower rooms, is another reading nook that was inviting every evening. If you want to see leaves turn in color and taste wines that are ready for market, this is your destination this fall and winter.

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Sausal Vineyard & Winery: <http://www.sausalwinery.com/>
Francis Ford Coppola Winery: <http://www.francisfordscoppolawinery.com/>
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