A life in vines - and insects

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"I loved Beringer," viticulturist Bob Steinhauer told me, as we sat talking in the Napa Valley sun's dying rays last month. "It wasn't even a job – it was a love. But I retired from it three years ago, three years after Foster's took it over. I'd already decided I wanted to change my lifestyle and reduce the stress."

He is now a vineyard consultant to the likes of Joseph Phelps, Rodney Strong, Quintessa, the new Beam Wine Estates, Swanson, the Silverado Winegrowers ("huge – they sell to 70 or 80 wineries) and many more. A past president of the American Society of Enologists, chair of the California Grower Foundation, reorganizer ot the American Vineyard Foundation, current board member of the Wine Institute (so important that it doesn't bother to call itself the California Wine Institute), he can boast a list of awards and industry appointments far longer than his list of employers - a total of three since 1965.

He was brought up on a raisin farm in Fresno in the hot San Joaquin Valley and studied viticulture at the celebrated university there before moving to the coastal Napa Valley in 1971. Eight years later he joined Beringer where he ended up in charge of their own 10,000 acres, and of their grape purchases from about 400 growers, all over the state. In Beringer's glory days in the 1990s, with a lively team of high achievers based in a stately Victorian mansion classified a historical monument, he and head winemaker Ed Sbragia were a dream team.

"I was very fortunate because in my early career I got to work for wine legends such as André Tchelistcheff and Dick Peterson. But Ed and I…..I could tell whether he liked a wine just by looking at his face.

"I worked for five presidents over 26 yrs and we all remain good friends. It was a wonderful place to work because it was owned by Nestle. At first I had reservations about a foreign company but as it turned out they were just wonderful people to work for – very cosmopolitan. They taught me a lot about other parts of the world. Beringer's success owed a lot to everyone working very hard together with the same goals."

I couldn't help pointing out at this point that he was using the past tense. With a sheepish grin he tried to substitute the present, but I think I am not alone in judging that the company is run with considerably less aplomb since it was taken over by the Australian brewer, who in 2001 glued it on to its previous Australian wine acquisition Wolf Blass to create Beringer Blass. Foster's now also own such brands such as Penfolds, Lindemans and Rosemount.

Steinhauer has nothing but praise for the previous owners, venture capitalists Texas Pacific who took it public. "As far as I'm concerned, they were the best. They treated everyone really well. We grew and it was just a lot of fun. They were really nice people to work for.

"I learnt a lot from the Australians though. They've got very good technology and brought a lot of it with them. I'm at a loss to say what we gave to the Aussies. But you come away with ideas. For example, we had a Cabernet vineyard in the Central Coast whose fruit had a very veggie character and the Aussies helped us get rid of it by different trellising techniques. They also farm for the final product. They don't make everything as though it's going to be a Reserve, which is good business practice." He looked around the manicured acres that surrounded us. "I don't know if you'd get general agreement here in the Napa Valley, but not everything is going to go into a $100 bottle of wine."

But Steinhauer's biggest industry-wide concern is an insect, and not the one that caused such problems from the late 1980s when the great majority of coastal vineyards had to be replanted because of the predations of the fatal phylloxera louse. The most popular vine rootstock used then, AXR1, proved to offer little defence, as the French had warned. "In choosing AXR we were just dumb, and I count myself in that," says Steinhauer now, while pointing out that the replanting provided a spur to much improved matching of variety, clone and rootstock to individual terrains.

In 2001 he was appointed by Bill Lyons, California Food and Agriculture Secretary to look into the greatest current threat to the state's chief agricultural product, grapes. The problem is Pierce's Disease, for which there is no known cure for grapevines. It is so familiar to California's vignerons that it is known simply as PD. It has been in the state for more than a century. According to the extent of winter rainfall it can reach epidemic proportions and then goes away. Some varieties are more vulnerable than others but most die within two years of being infected.

The disease is spread by various sorts of sharpshooter, a leaf-hopping insect that thrives on the banks of rivers and streams, with the scary-sounding glassy-winged sharpshooter being the most effective.

In the late 1990s the sharpshooters arrived in southern California. Steinhauer remembers it well. "The first time I saw it was at Callaway in Temecula in vintage '99. I was in shock. There were so many you couldn't even count them."

Napa and Sonoma, California's most prestigious wine producing counties in northern California, have no shortage of creeks and vegetation that appeal to the glassy-winger sharpshooter. Steinhauer nodded around the floor of the Napa Valley. "Pierce's is a very big problem for many of us in the industry, especially in coastal districts. There are places you cannot grow vines here because of PD. Some people have had to put in other crops.

"The sharpshooter hasn't arrived here yet because of all the efforts to stop it. One of things the state did was quarantine ornamental vines from nurseries. Plants are inspected and again when they get to Napa County they're re-inspected. If the glassy winged sharpshooter is found, the plants are either destroyed or shipped back. So it's more or less contained, so far. Thanks to a tremendous amount of federal and state funding, the glassy winged sharpshooter has not spread, which gives us a period when we might find a cure for PD. But I don't know whether we're going to find a solution to be honest.

"And we still have plenty of other pest problems – the vine mealy bug, for instance, which is the most virulent of all the mealy bugs."

Another current preoccupation for California wine producers is the propensity of grapes to build up sugars long before developing real flavour, resulting in extended 'hang time'. "Many of the very good wines are made at high alcohols now, which is a concern to a lot of people. Are they going to last? Are they really better wines? This is being studied now – which is a good thing. We're experimenting with picking grapes and making wine at different maturity levels in a J Lohr vineyard in Paso Robles. Getting mature flavours at lower alcohols is a huge issue."

I asked him whether he thought it would be solved. He gave me an avuncular smile and said, "You know what? I dunno.

"But what I do know is that everyone here has been concentrating on trying to improve the wines of California and it's been a lot of fun."