

A life in vines - and insects

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"I loved Bergeron" - viticulturist Bob Steinhilber 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 missed him 3 three years ago, three years after Foster's look a over. I'd already decided I wanted to change my lifestyle and reduce the stress."

He is now a viticulturist consultant to the likes of Joseph Phelps, Rodney Strong, Quilley, the new Beaulieu Vineyard, Swanson, the Silverado Winegrowers (they're still in 70 or 80 vines) and many more. A past president of the American Society of Enologists, chair of the California Grower Foundation, organizer of 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 employees - a total of three since 1982.

He was brought up on a ranch farm in Fresno in the hot San Joaquin Valley and studied viticulture at the undistinguished university there before moving to the coastal Napa Valley in 1971. Eight years later he joined Bergeron 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 Bergeron's glory days in the 1980s, with a lovely team of high achievers based in a stately Victorian mansion (classified a historical monument, he and head winemaker Ed Strang were a dream team).

"It was very fortunate because in my early career I got to work for wine legends such as André Tchelistcheff and Dick Ponson. But Ed and I... could tell whether he had a wine just by looking at the back.

"I worked for five presidents over 20 yrs and we all remain good friends. It was a wonderful place to work because it was owned by Nestlé. 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. Bergeron'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 shrewd 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 (I guess it is to its previous Australian wine acquisition Wolf Blass to create Bergeron Blass. Foster's now also own such brands such as Penfolds, Lindemans and Rosemount.

Steinhilber 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 Aussies. 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 which had had very unique 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 anything 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 \$200 bottle of wine."

But Steinhilber'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 leaf-rolling phylloxera bug. The most popular wine varietal used then, AXBT, proved to offer little defence, as the French had warned: "In choosing AXBT we were just dumb, and I count myself in that," says Steinhilber now, while pointing out that the replanting provided a spur to much improved matching of variety, clone and terroir to individual wineries.

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 grapes. It is as 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 aphid, a leaf-hopping insect that thrives on the buds of vines and stems, with the noisy-sounding glassy-winged sharpshooter being the most effective.

In the late 1990s the sharpshooters arrived in southern California. Steinhilber remembers it well: "The first time I saw it was at Calway in Temecula in vintage '98. 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 oaks and vegetation that appeal to the glassy-winged sharpshooter. Steinhilber 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 vicious 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 alcohol levels, 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 Robson at lower alcohol is a huge issue."

I asked him whether he thought it would be advised. He gave me an enigmatic smile and said, "You know what? I don't."

"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."