

THE NAPA VALLEY ONLY REPRESENTS A SMALL PERCENTAGE (4%) OF THE TOTAL PRODUCTION OF THE CALIFORNIAN WINE INDUSTRY, BUT IT IS BY FAR THE MOST FAMOUS WINE REGION IN THE US. IT HAS A RELATIVELY YOUNG, BUT NEVERTHELESS RICH HISTORY IN TERMS OF WINE AND HAS ESTABLISHED ITSELF AS ONE OF THE LEADING WINE AREAS IN THE WORLD.

The Napa Valley

BY GERARD BASSET OBE

The first time I went to the Napa Valley was in 1990 on a wine tour organised for Nina, my future wife, and me. Before we started the wine tour, we spent three full days in San Francisco and were of course blown away by this amazing city. However, just a few days into our wine tour and we completely fell in love with the Napa Valley and, having returned several times since, the affection for this magical place has never diminished.

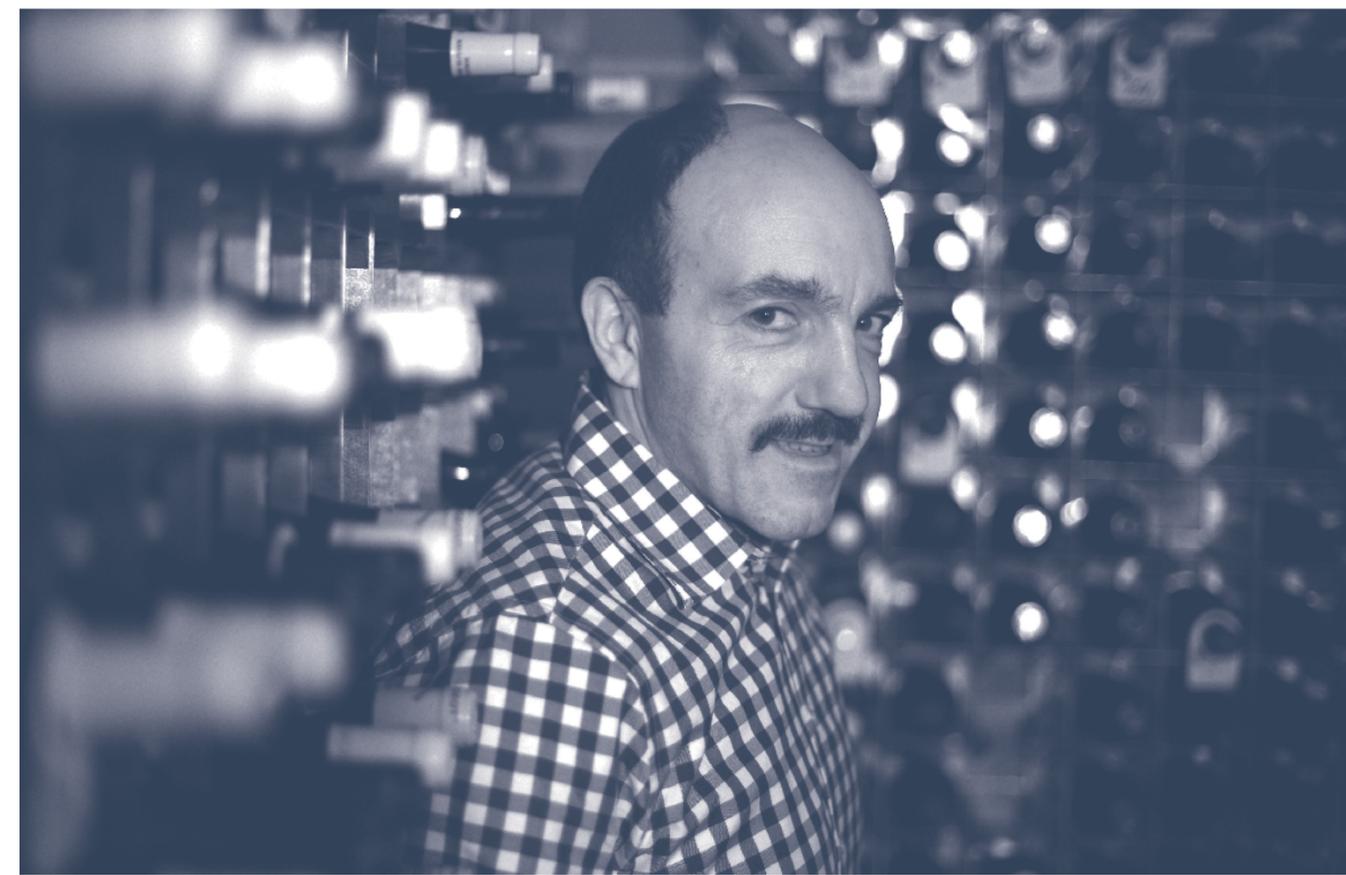
The Napa Valley is situated north of San Francisco and the Valley is formed between the Mayacamas Mountains to the West, which protect it from the Pacific Ocean, and the Vaca Range to the East. It is roughly thirty miles long (50 Km) and five miles (8 Km) at its widest and the soil composition is extremely varied. The Napa Valley (Meaning Valley of Plenty in native American, if we believe some sources), is an official AVA (American Viticultural Area) and at the time of writing, it is composed of sixteen sub-appellations (also AVAs).

The climatic conditions change dramatically between the South of the Valley and the Northern part. Due to the cooling effect of the Pacific Ocean, felt more in the South of the Valley, through the San Pablo Bay, the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grape varieties are at home in this cooler area of the Valley. Then as we move in a northward direction and the Valley becomes progressively warmer, Red Bordeaux grapes, especially Cabernet Sauvignon, become

very important both quantitatively and qualitatively. Of course, there are other grapes planted such as Zinfandel or Syrah for instance, but it is really with wines made with the Cabernet Sauvignon and its Bordeaux companions that Napa Valley made its name and is famous for.

Back in the 19th Century, in the early days of wine production in the Valley, wineries such as Charles Krug, Beringer and Inglenook were founded and would be quickly and already getting recognition for the quality of their wines. After Prohibition which lasted from 1920 to 1933, in the 1940's and 1950's the red wines of Inglenook were still receiving high praise for their stunning quality. However, two events were going to play a crucial role that would firmly install the Napa Valley within the top league of the best wine regions of the world: The creation of the Robert Mondavi Winery and the Paris Tasting.

Following a bitter dispute with his elder brother, Robert Mondavi, at the age of fifty three, left the family business and opened his eponymous winery in 1966 and went on to quickly produce world class wines that this legendary man promoted incessantly around the world with an incredible energy. Further more in the late 1970's Robert Mondavi teamed up with the Baron Philippe de Rothschild of 1st Growth Bordeaux, Château Mouton-Rothschild and together they started a joint venture and launched the now iconic Napa Valley red wine; Opus One!



In 1976, in Paris, the genius Steven Spurrier, an English man based in the French capital, set up a blind tasting to celebrate the bicentenary of US revolution. Surprisingly, both in the white wine section and the red wine section, each time a wine from the Napa Valley came top in front of some of the greatest French wines and to top it all, the judges in the tasting were French wine luminaries! The tasting, now dubbed 'The Judgement of Paris', is still talked about today as one of the most famous wine events in history.

By the 1990's the Napa Valley was then in full speed and more wineries kept being created (from less than thirty wineries in the 1960's, there are more than four hundred now in the 2010's in the Valley). The 1990's is also when the phenomenon of the cult wines such as Screaming Eagle, Harlan or Colgin took off. Powerful and concentrated wines, mostly red wines based on Cabernet Sauvignon, produced in small quantity and loved by the US wine critics, they are sold principally on mailing lists and can quickly reach astronomic prices on the secondary market where they are bought by collectors.

To accompany this frenzy for wine, which brings a huge amount of visitors all year round, The Napa Valley has developed a structure of high class hotels (The Meadowood resort or l'Auberge du Soleil are two luxury hotels of very high standing), as well as fine dining restaurants such as The French Laundry in Yountville (once rated Best Restaurant in the World) and the restaurant at Meadowood Hotel in Saint-Helena; both establishments being three Michelin Star eateries. Aside from these deluxe places, the Valley is full of trendy restaurants where you can eat well at reasonable prices.

Because of the flamboyance and extravagance displayed by many of the wineries, hotels, restaurants and some of its people, the Napa Valley is sometimes referred to as a sort of "Disney Land" for wine lovers. That's not totally wrong but that does not stop me thinking that it is a magical place where it must be wonderful to live and that produces some world class wines. I really love going there for many reasons and I greatly enjoy its delicious wines. I just can't wait to return again, again and again. ■

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