

# WINES & VINES

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## WINES THAT CHANGED THE INDUSTRY

Technical breakthroughs and stylistic leaps in North American wines over nine decades

by Jim Gordon with Linda Jones McKee and Hudson Cattell



As *Wines & Vines* marks its 90th anniversary, it seems appropriate to publish a historically oriented piece on the many achievements of our audience during those nine decades. Rather than retelling the history of winemaking, as many authors have already done so well in book form, we conducted the thought-provoking exercise of picking out individual wines from the last 90 years that embodied important advancements in premium grapegrowing and quality winemaking. The wines described below reflect innovations that stuck with the wine industry for an extended time, and in many cases still represent the industry standards. The innovations in some cases were actually returns to traditional methods. We ruled out wines famous mostly for winning competitions or high scores, as well as wines known largely for their marketing accomplishments. We did not consider sales success alone a deciding factor...

### ...1950s

#### First eastern *vinifera*

1955 Brights Wines Pinot Champagne and 1956 Chardonnay

In 1933, when Henry C. Hatch bought T.G. Bright and Co. in Niagara Falls, Ontario, at that time the largest winery in the British empire, he realized that Brights had to develop a dry table wine industry to remain competitive in the markets of the empire. When his winemaker, Adhemer de Chaunac, attended a wine tasting in September 1945 in Fredonia, N.Y., where Philip Wagner had included some of his then-unknown French hybrid wines, de Chaunac immediately ordered 20 French hybrid varieties from France.

But three *vinifera* varieties arrived at Brights along with the French hybrid vines in 1946, and George W.B. Hostetter was given the job of supervising the plantings. Hostetter had a theory that trying different spray schedules, including the use of a dormant spray, would allow *vinifera* grapes to be grown east of the Rockies. It worked, and in 1951, Brights planted the first successful *vinifera* vineyard in the East. This led to the first commercial *vinifera* wines in the East, a Brights

### **Innovation incubator**

1956 Hanzell Pinot Noir Sonoma Valley

Hanzell founder James Zellerbach and his winemaker, Brad Webb, created an innovation incubator at their little hilltop winery above Sonoma Valley. With Zellerbach's fortune and enthusiasm behind him, Webb introduced a slew of new cellar equipment and techniques in the winery's early vintages of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The quality of hillside vineyards like Hanzell's was already well known, but never before had a winery applied so much gentle but technical care to its wine. Webb commissioned what are believed to be the first small temperature-controlled stainless steel fermenters, an early nitrogen-sparged bottling machine and other rarities such as a custom stainless steel crusher-destemmer that still looks contemporary today, a small stainless steel basket press and an electrode to measure dissolved oxygen.

Oh yes, he also was possibly the first enologist to identify, isolate and use a specific malolactic strain, which was named ML 34. While the winery recognizes 1957 as the first commercial vintage, it has a bottle in perfect condition of 1956 Hanzell Pinot Noir from Brad Webb's personal cellar. One of today's leading Sonoma Valley winemakers, Joel Peterson of Ravenswood, particularly remembers the quality of the 1959 Hanzell Pinot Noir. "It is definitely the wine that set the stage for the modern California wine business." ...

...2000s

### **Too early to tell?**

Only looking back later will we be able to pinpoint which wines changed the industry in the current decade. California viticulturist Philip Freese noted the difficulty of seeing the inflection points of history from too close-up. "It's a mathematical term for when a line changes direction," he said. "They are usually best recognized in the rearview mirror. In a political sense, right now we're at an inflection point, and we know it, but it will be even more clear from several miles down the road. In a technical field like ours, however, changes in those techniques are not so clear while you're experiencing them."

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