

Hanzell

BOB SESSIONS BIOGRAPHY

Bob Sessions was the winemaker and general manager of Hanzell Vineyards from harvest 1973 until his retirement December 31, 2001. After 28 years at the helm, prudently guiding this private wine estate, he reflected. "Hanzell means the world to me. We're sort of intertwined. I don't know where Hanzell begins and I end."

Bob became a winemaker quite incidentally. Born in Burbank, California, he lived in the Los Angeles area until he graduated from high school and joined the Marine Corps. Following three years of service, he enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature, 1957.

His dedication to wine began slowly while in Europe. When he graduated from college, his parents celebrated by giving him a trip to Europe. Bob and his friend Dick Van Bolt spent six months traveling the continent by motor scooter. They visited the home of a college classmate in Brussels and enjoyed the generous hospitality of a family that collected and enjoyed fine wine. "Those gold and deep red liquids were extraordinary," remembers Bob. "It is probable that without that European exposure to wine, brief as it might have been, Dick and I would not have taken advantage of a couple of moments of opportunity later on in the U.S."

Returning from Europe, the young men chose San Francisco as home. Bob worked as a file clerk at an insurance company, the rear chainman on a surveying crew, an ambulance steward and a cook at a North Beach restaurant. In the city he met Molly, his wife of 40 years.

Bob's travel companion Dick, disenchanted with his job in the city, answered a newspaper ad recruiting an office person for Mayacamas Vineyards. Dick was offered the job, accepted the position and moved to the vineyard property at the top of Mt. Veeder. Bob and Molly became regular weekend guests, and quickly developed an attachment to the vineyards and winery. In 1964 Bob began making wine at Mayacamas, under the guidance of Brad Webb, Hanzell Vineyards' highly regarded winemaker. From 1969 - 1971 Bob was Mayacamas' resident winemaker and manager.

Early in 1972 Bob left Mayacamas to become the production manager for Souverain Cellars, now Rutherford Hill. "It was a great experience on so many levels," says Bob, "one of them being the realization that I quite preferred working at small family operations."

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After a year and a half at Souverain, Bob joined his friend Warren Winiarski to help start a winery: Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. While the project was still in its early stages, mentor Brad Webb contacted Bob, requesting that he interview for the winemaker/general manager position at Hanzell. Bob remembers thinking "It was a great winery, with all of the innovation and experimentation I knew Brad had been doing there. The opportunity was a once in a lifetime one, and one as good probably wouldn't come my way again."

Hanzell Vineyards hired Bob in 1973, and he and Hanzell Vineyards began to intertwine. A refined man with the intellect and sensibility to recognize that Ambassador Zellerbach's pure vision should persevere, Bob focused on upholding the Burgundian character of the estate, protecting the Hanzell way. Sessions was the right man for this heritage property. Curiosity balanced his practicality; creativity weighed his respect for tradition. Over his tenure he took great pleasure in the old vineyards, the stainless steel fermenters from the 1950s, the continuity provided by the coopers at Sirugue. Under Bob's direction, vineyard acreage increased from 17 to 42.

When asked to describe his achievements at Hanzell Vineyards, Bob replied "Winemakers don't achieve. They make." For three decades Bob Sessions made wines esteemed for elegance, intensity and longevity . . . and the unmistakable taste of Hanzell's hillside fruit.