



## HISTORY OF HANZELL VINEYARDS

Industrialist James D. Zellerbach acquired the 200 acre Hanzell estate on the Mayacamas slopes above the town of Sonoma in 1948, just as he was sent by President Truman to implement the Marshall Plan in Italy following WWII. It was upon his return to California that Zellerbach planted 2 acres of Pinot Noir and 4 acres of Chardonnay on the site in 1953. At that time there were only a hundred or so acres of Chardonnay planted in California.

In 1956 Zellerbach built a beautiful little gravity-fed winery, the design of which owed an architectural debt to the 12<sup>th</sup> century press house at Clos de Vougeot; the building's façade is a 2/3 mirror replica of this venerable winery in Burgundy. But while the reference was intended as a respectful nod to history, the Hanzell facility was a gleaming modern wonder of high-tech stainless steel tanks and sophisticated laboratory equipment. To Zellerbach, tradition was best left to the old world. Grand Cru winemaking in the New World would be accomplished through strict adherence to empiricism and by embracing science and technology. After all, it was America in the Fifties.

Zellerbach hired Ralph Bradford Webb in 1956 to be his winemaker and Webb would be integral to the winemaking for the first two decades of Hanzell. Mr. Webb's disciplined scientific approach contributed to the immediate high quality of Hanzell's early vintages, the first of which was 1957.

Zellerbach and Webb introduced four significant advances in enology that would subsequently be adopted by many other wineries, predicating consistency and quality for the entire industry.

- **Temperature-controlled Stainless Steel Fermenters**

Hanzell's custom designed stainless steel fermenters, each with the capacity of one ton, marked the first time a winery could completely control the temperature of fermentation. In the late nineteen fifties, winery vats were constructed from concrete or redwood and the heat of fermentation dispelled passively and slowly. Stainless steel offered an inert, sanitary material that could be manufactured in thin sheets from which double-walls were constructed. Within the double walls coolant circulated, efficiently dissipating the heat of fermentation to maintain a specific temperature. Consistency of wine quality was given a big boost by this technological advance and now one can find jacketed stainless steel tanks in just about every winery in the world.

- **French Oak Barrels**

In pursuing the Burgundian ideal, Zellerbach and Webb quite intuitively thought that small French oak barrels should be used to simulate the flavors of great Burgundy. At that time California wineries aged wines in larger vessels, usually constructed of redwood. Or, if small barrels were part of the program, they were typically acquired from the bourbon industry and built of American oak which contributes an altogether different set of flavors. Hanzell was the first California winery to exclusively use imported French oak barrels in the wine's *élevage*. This made a huge difference to wine quality and the industry would soon recognize the merits of French oak, adopting the same practices wherever highest quality wines were being made.

- **Inert Gas**

The practice of ‘blanketing’ young wines in tank with inert gas, particularly Nitrogen, was relatively unknown when Zellerbach and Webb built Hanzell. Webb’s scientific education provided him with an intimate chemical understanding of the process of oxidation by which wines mature and eventually degrade. To ensure the longevity of the Hanzell wines, Webb outfitted the tanks with specialized fittings through which the atmospheres were maintained with minimal oxygen prior to being filled and during aging. At bottling, each and every bottle was treated with Nitrogen immediately before it was filled with wine – a practice that is a cornerstone of quality winemaking now. Although this advancement in winemaking technology was not particularly glamorous, it had profound consequences for the many wineries that would adopt these practices. Today, the use of inert gas is ubiquitous in the industry.

- **Induced Malolactic Fermentation**

Malolactic fermentation was incompletely understood in the 1950s. In fact, it was generally considered to be a spontaneous chemical reaction that transformed natural malic acid in the grapes to lactic acid in the wine. With the 1959 vintage at Hanzell Vineyards Webb succeeded in isolating the bacterium that facilitates this reaction and culturing it in Tank 21, one of the 6 glass-lined stainless steel tanks that exist to this day at Hanzell. Once propagated, Webb used the bacterial culture to re-inoculate young wines and thereby to achieve stability of the wine in barrel. At that time it was not uncommon for entire vintages to undergo malolactic fermentation in the bottle, ruining the wine with fizziness and rancid flavors produced by the microbial activity under cork.

When Zellerbach died in 1963, Mrs. Hana Zellerbach sold off the bottled and barreled wine inventories, much of it to Heitz Cellars; the 1963 and 1964 vintages of Heitz Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are indeed Hanzell-grown and produced. In 1965 Mrs. Zellerbach sold the estate to Douglas and Mary Day, who would expand Hanzell Vineyards modestly under their 10-year proprietorship until 1975 when they sold the winery to Barbara and Jacques de Brie. Primarily Mrs. de Brie’s project, Hanzell Vineyards would grow further to roughly 30 acres in 1976.

Mr. Webb continued to oversee production as the winery changed hands, eventually departing Hanzell Vineyards to spread his knowledge among a number of winery clients, including Freemark Abbey, and Sonoma Cutrer. In 1973, Mr. Webb placed Bob Sessions as his successor and his winemaking influence lived on through Mr. Sessions’ career of 3 decades at Hanzell. Enough cannot be said of Mr. Sessions’ loyalty to the vision of Zellerbach and his dedication to one winemaking ideal over all else. His wines, although now diminished in quantity, live on in the Hanzell library as a marvel of tradition and rigor. Very few winemakers in the world have achieved such singular vision and left as astonishing a legacy of quality and longevity.

In 1991, Mrs. de Brie’s then adolescent son Alexander inherited Hanzell Vineyards. Under Mr. de Brie’s ownership, Hanzell Vineyards has grown to 42 acres. Mr. de Brie has also invested in a cave and a new winemaking facility constructed in 2004 to accommodate the increase in wine production. From the original 700 case production in the late 1950s, Hanzell Vineyards has grown to 6,000 cases annually, retaining its identity as a very small winery dedicated to making the Burgundian varietals at the Grand Cru level.

Today Hanzell Vineyards is securely poised to continue carrying out Zellerbach’s vision. Five decades of tradition in winemaking in California is worth centuries in the Old World. The first 50 years of Hanzell Vineyards will be followed by many more years dedicated to honoring the legacy of this historical wine estate through respect for tradition and by continuing to advance the viticulture and winemaking practices on which Hanzell Vineyards originally succeeded.