

On Custom Crush

Andrew Hoxsey, Managing Partner

Napa Wine Company
7830-40 St. Helena Highway, Oakville

Napa Wine Company, established in 1993 in Oakville, carefully produces one million cases of wine each year. Twelve thousand of these cases are filled with Napa Wine Company's own wine, under three different labels; the remaining nine hundred and eighty-eight thousand cases are made for 60 other clients of Napa Wine by 12 to 20 consulting winemakers. Andy Hoxsey is managing partner of the enterprise. Wine wasn't central to family life while Andy and his brother Jerry were growing up in Napa and Modoc Counties. Wine was always part of a meal, but it wasn't the be-all and end-all. So, it's no surprise that when Andy thought he and his family should start a wine business it wasn't out of a deep passionate need. It simply made sense.

Andy's father was a cattleman who ran the family's S-X Ranch in Modoc County. Andy's grandfather was a grape grower who managed the family's 635 acres of Yount Mill Vineyards in Napa County. Andy

grew up in both counties. He went off to college at UC Davis to study the business of viticulture and then flew airplanes for ten years as a company pilot for various outfits. In 1985 Grandfather Andy told young Andy it was time to come home and lend a hand (his brother Jerry was already helping with the cattle).

Young Andy joined the board of the Napa Valley Cooperative as his grandfather and his uncle Ren Harris had before him. At the time there were 200 members in the Coop with about one third of their grape crops going to Gallo and the rest to just six local buyers: Beaulieu, Beringer, Krug, Inglenook, Martini, and Mondavi. Andy

realized growers needed more businesses to sell to for a better marketplace. He tried to persuade both the growers and the Coop to incubate new businesses for the production of cash flow wines like Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc, but he had no luck.

At this same time, Heublein was divesting itself of various holdings in Napa Valley. A production facility in Oakville came on the market in 1989 for which the Hoxsey family was low-bidder. Curiously, the facility didn't sell. In 1992, Heublein came back to Andy, a deal was struck and the Pelissa family, of which the Hoxseys are a part, bought the property. Heublein also sold its South St. Helena facility for Christian

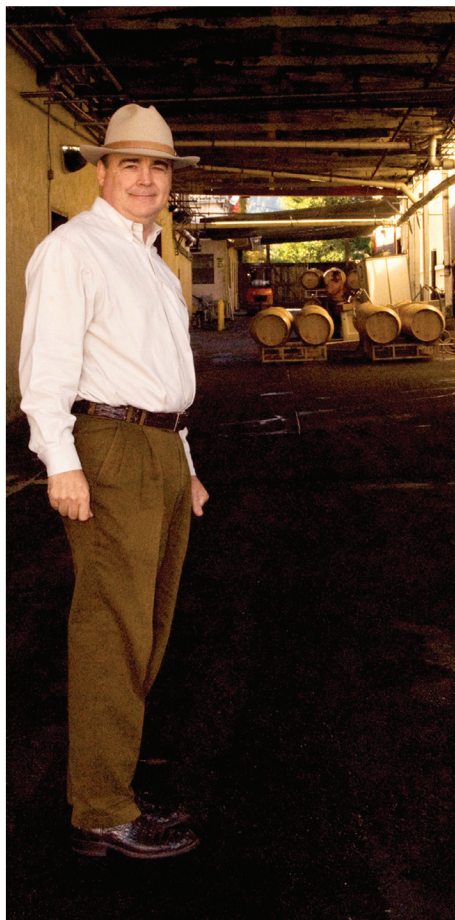


PHOTOGRAPHY: PRISCILLA UPTON

Brothers to Sutter Home Winery and its Rutherford facility to Niebaum-Coppola, now Rubicon Estates. Without a home for Heublein's Inglenook brand, it contracted with Napa Wine for three-quarters of its former facility in Oakville, which now boasted a total infrastructure of three barrels of an abandoned dessert wine and a bare bulb dangling over the thermos on a card table of a night watchman dozing in his chair.

It took a quarter of what it had cost to buy to put the facility back in shape. Andy's original Napa Wine team was Tary Salinger, Erin Green and Randy Mason. Tary handled marketing (Tary has since been with McManis Family Vineyard for several years); Erin, the wine (she is now winemaker for Pahlmeyer); and Randy, its plant (Randy's still there with Andy). Andy says it all still demands substantial capital input—square nails continue to fasten some structures—but today the facility includes a tasting room alongside its crush pad for just 25 brands made at Napa Wine, in addition to its Napa Wine Company, Elizabeth Rose and Ghost Block labels. Fermentation and barrel rooms, bottling line, a lab, and a variety of offices round out the site. The original winery (Brun & Chaix) was constructed in 1877 and carries Bond #7.

Although Napa Wine's first permit was for crushing seven or eight thousand tons of fruit, Inglenook brought in only about two thousand tons under their winemaker John Richberg for just a few years before Constellation Brands



bought out Inglenook and took the brand to Potter Valley. This meant Napa Wine had to hustle for more clients. However, Andy observes that if just Big Business clients like Constellation, Kendall Jackson and Mondavi contracted Napa Wine as an overflow facility, it could run with half its employees (there are 100) but, he says, Napa Wine wants to incubate the Pahlmeyers, Staglins and Lewises of the Valley. Staglin Family and Lewis Cellars outgrew Napa Wine, but Pahlmeyer still prefers its freedom to make wine and let Andy worry about the numbers.

For Andy, differences of scale in winemaking come down to an industrial and an art side. He says it has always been a kind of wrestling match between the yin and yang of the two for Napa Wine's senior management, but he proudly notes that a few years ago three of the top ten of its top one hundred wines chosen by Wine Spectator were from Napa Wine Company. Bryant Family and Blankiet Estate have been made at Napa Wine; the Mason Sauvignon Blanc is made from Napa Wine fruit (Randy also makes a Mason Pomelo Sauvignon Blanc with fruit from Lake County).

Napa Wine started out with an all-inclusive price per ton. While this meant plenty of

cash at harvest, Andy sadly points out that there was none later on, yet carrying costs are steady. Now, it's à la carte: topping, pump-over—a client pays for each step to make his or her particular wine. And the steps can change because of technology. Unlike a small winery, Andy says Napa Wine can readily afford the latest and greatest, so there is an advantage for the client, both on the industrial side of things, in being able to keep up with high tech, and on the art side, choosing how the fruit is pressed or must pumped over; punch-down aerated or non-aerated. It is all up to the client.

At one time there were over eighty clients making wine; now it is around 60, which Andy says is a much better number, with 12 to 20 different winemakers. Andy likes the diversity: John McKay of Nova Wines, Michael Pozzan, Volker Eisele. Each is distinctive. Napa Wine encourages the winemaker to be there for every step, but doesn't actually allow Alternating Proprietorship or Custom Crush clients to handle anything. Equipment is constantly sanitized and prepped to specification by Napa Wine, with each consulting winemaker providing an extra layer of quality control. Before taking on any new client Andy first wants to know 1) source of fruit 2) winemaker—who goes directly to the

production office and 3) that the prospective client can provide barrels, racks and a full description of the wine to be made.

Still red and white wines and dessert wines can all be made at Napa Wine. The company began to produce its own label because of its tasting room site, and today makes Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Sauvignon Blanc. Rob Lawson is winemaker and production is at 10,000 cases of three labels. Andy says he would like to double production some time, although he is very happy with the one million case use permit. Future changes most likely would not increase production, which might decrease, but be about quality.

This year the Pelissa family's Yount Mill Vineyards, managed by Jim Del Bondio, celebrates its 105th harvest. Besides Napa Wine Company, Yount Mill sells to Duckhorn, Foley, Franciscan, Hall, and Louis M. Martini. Yount Mill has always farmed organically, at first because it made economic sense: a thrifty way of growing grapes. Now, because it makes healthy and scientific sense: a responsible way of growing grapes. At harvest, all Napa Wine Company pomace is mixed with straw and hay, cow, horse and chicken manure and forked into windrows on the floor of an

empty irrigation pond. The windrows are regularly aerated and wet down before their content is spread back on the vineyards in about a month's time, and the pond readied for run-off from winter rains. Andy is constantly reviewing ways to take better care of the soils of Yount Mill Vineyards and the wines at Napa Wine Company. ■