

Sherrill Cellars

The Sherrills are one of the family teams of wine professionals in the Santa Cruz Mountains who have built up a small and successful winery operation from a sizable amateur passion for good wine. *Nathaniel D. Sherrill (Nat) (NS)* and

Jan W. Sherrill were married in 1961. He was born in New Jersey (1937), was raised in Massachusetts and attended Steven's Institute and Northeastern University, before he went into the Air Force where he specialized in electronics and earth science. Later he went to work for the U. S. Geological Service and has been at the U. S. Geological Survey facility in Menlo Park since 1963. She was born in Southern California (1938) and received her degree in psychology from Mills College. She later did graduate work at San Francisco State University and worked for many years as an administrator at Stanford University.

Sherrill Cellars was bonded (4632) in 1973 in the basement of the Woodside Post Office. The premises were moved in 1978 to the Sherrills' home on Skyline Boulevard in Palo Alto in 1978.

My interviews were only with Nat, which makes them somewhat incomplete when one considers the role that Jan has played in the development of the operation. But the situation was, sorry to say, unavoidable. I interviewed Nat at his office in Menlo Park at the U. S. Geological Survey Western Region facility.

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January 13, 1994

CS: Tell me about the things in your life that led you eventually in 1973 to have a winery.

NS: Jan really started it all, and her father, Joseph Power. He had grown up in the Napa Valley and had been interested in wine most of his life. And the family vacationed up there where they had a piece of property with a cabin on it. They would go up there in the summers and camp out. He had grown up with many of the movers and shakers up there in the industry. He had known Lee Stewart of the original Soverain Cellars for a long time. And he knew George Deuer, the great winemaker at Inglenook. He bought the property right after World War II, so they were going up there certainly by the early fifties.

CS: How do you get into this?

NS: She took it for granted that we had wine with dinner. I grew up on the East Coast where wine was not very commonly used. And I got interested in it also listening to Jan and her dad talk about what was going on in the wine country up there.

As I got more interested in it one thing led to another. And Jan's interest was also growing in those years. At first we would buy really good jug wines and bottle it in fifths, and we discovered that after as little as six months they really improved. Our interest grew and in, I think, 1969 Jan's family gave us as a present the Napa Valley Wine Library course. We went up there for several weekends to this great course with instructors like M.F.K. Fisher, Louis Martini, and Bill Fuller. That whole thing really got us interested. So we began buying good California wines to put away, particularly the Martini Cabernets and those Inglenook Cask Cabs, and some BV wines also.

CS: Where were you living then?

NS: In Woodside.

CS: Did you make any connections around here with some of these people starting up wine operations.

PHEW!

NS: In 1969 or 1970 we noticed a notice in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the American Wine Society was going to have an organizational meeting to start a chapter for Northern California. It was at Paul Masson's. We went to it and we were greeted enthusiastically by people we later came to know very well. People like Gordon Gould at Stanford, who was an avid home winemaker, and Jack Chown, a crony of Charlie Rosen of Ridge fame.

The upshot of it was that Jan, with her usual enthusiasm, found herself elected secretary of this group. It met on a kind of sporadic basis, and had food and wine events and such. In the process we heard of an association of winemakers on the Peninsula, actually before this, but we never had made contact with them. But we found that Gould and Chown were among the members.

CS: Was that PHEW! ?

NS: Right. The Peninsula Home Enology Workshop. The Staigers¹, and the Replogle², and Leon Sobon³, and Ben Zeitman⁴, and Tom Kruse⁵ and many others now in the wine business came out of that organization. In 1970 Lanny Replogle arranged to get the grapes from the old Pourroy vineyard above Congress Springs Road behind Saratoga. That year he arranged to get all their grapes. Then they were parceled out to all of us home winemakers. Mostly they were Zinfandel, although I think it was more a field blend of red varieties.

CS: Did you hear anything about Cabernet franc? I know there were some old vines up there.

NS: No. At that time we wouldn't know what it was. You never heard about it at that early date. George Burtness was on the scene by then.⁶ He also got some of the grapes for his little commercial winery.

CS: Replogle and I went to high school together at Hayward High, and we just figured it out a couple of years ago. Had he started teaching his class in the chemistry of wine at San Jose State yet?

NS: Not yet. He was teaching in the Chemistry Department there but he hadn't started teaching that until about 1975.

Those wines that we made in 1970 were not notable. The grapes had been just too low in sugar. Acids were high and they were good to practice on; a lot of us learned at lot that year. We all broke up the grapes and made them at home. Other than getting the grapes at the same time we didn't have anything in common in the winemaking. I recall it was foggy and rainy that day and we decided that we had better get them while we still could.

CS: How did that experience move you on?

NS: We enjoyed it. We didn't have a crusher at the time and I crushed the grapes with my feet. We had about 450 pounds. I was in good shape but I quickly learned that that was damn hard work. We

¹ P & M Staiger winery (BW 4649).

² Lanny and Fran, Fenestra Winery near Livermore (BW 4956). See Sunrise interviews.

³ Sobon Estate Winery (BW 2459) near Plymouth in the Sierra Foothills.

⁴ Amador Foothill Winery (BW 4963) near Plymouth.

⁵ Thomas Kruse Winery (BW 4566) in the Hecker Pass area near Gilroy.

⁶ Nepenthe Cellars (BW 4517), 1967-1977, in Portola Valley.

did the pressing with cheese cloth bags. We still have a little of the wine. It wasn't really a bad wine. Then we got a bit more serious.

CS: Did you read anything?

NS: I read anything I could get my hands on. I read Philip Wagner's book.⁷ That was about the best one available.

CS: Right. I bought it in 1968 and I couldn't find anything better then. Whom did you talk to?

NS: Everybody in the organization. And in the meantime I renewed an acquaintanceship I had with Peter Becker. He had been the winemaker down at the Cienega winery of Almaden, near Hollister. I had met Peter when I was working at the UC Seismographic Station; we had some measurement instruments in his building, which he used to tend for us.

CS: Right, that's the place where the San Andreas fault goes right through the winery building there. That used to be very famous.

Wasn't this about the time when Becker went up to work at Oakville Vineyards?

NS: That was later.⁸ Jan and I went down to see him and he gave us some hints on what we should and shouldn't do. We also had a common interest in airplanes and sail planes. And he gave us a wonderful bottle of experimental wine he was working on; it was Gewürztraminer.

About the same time I found out that a co-worker here at the Survey was the grandson of Ernest Ferrario, the owner of Ruby Hill Vineyards near Livermore. The father of this friend, Telly Simone, was a banker in the East Bay and was managing the financial affairs of the place. I just stumbled on this wine connection by accident.

CS: Is that how Repogle gets a connection later with Ruby Hill, through you?

NS: No, it was later when Stony Ridge was there.⁹

So in 1971 we got several different varieties of grapes from Ruby Hill. Chardonnay, Zinfandel, and Barbera. That was our introduction to fairly serious home winemaking. In the meantime we had built an old crusher at a garage sale and I had rebuilt it. And we arranged to borrow a press. So we made the three wines, all of which turned out very well. So then we were really hooked.

The following year we spent several hundred dollars on grapes. We bought more of the same in 1972 from Ruby Hill as we had the year before. And actually those 1972s were quite good, despite all the rain we had during the harvest. We had a small cellar adjacent to our garage and we had really become serious. It was soon bursting at the seams. Jan said that it was silly to be spending so much money on a hobby. "We should go into business and make some money." And we were ready for it. We had finished building our house and we were still young. In the meantime I had begun talking to people in the wine business about getting into it. George Burtness was one. He was very helpful. But the real resource was Tom Kruse who was still running the Wine Art home winemaking store in San Jose on Stevens Creek Road. He was really into it technically, and being the gregarious type of guy he is he was plenty willing to share information and ideas. Sources of grapes and equipment. Where to borrow things. That cast the die.

⁷ *A Wine-Grower's Guide* (New York 1965).

⁸ 1972.

⁹ Beginning in 1978.

Woodside Days

The next thing was finding a place where we could do it legally in Woodside. So in 1973 we found a space in the basement of the post office, which used to be a dog grooming parlor, run by the woman who owned the building. One thing that really appealed to us was that it had a floor drain. So we leased the space on the proviso that we would be able to get a use permit from the city. And we did, surprisingly painlessly.

CS: It wouldn't happen today. You can't have a winery in that town now unless your name in Mullen, Anderson, or Cronin.

NS: There was a public hearing, but no one objected. And the ATF approved the bond. The woman in the office up in San Francisco was really very helpful. Elizabeth Rice. Our paperwork went right through. An agent came down in August of 1973, looked it over and signed off on it. In September we started making wine.

CS: Did you have to finance this, take any partners, or such?

NS: No. We decided at the outset that this was going to be our business and that we were not going to get into debt. Even at that early date we were seeing that new wineries could get themselves into financial trouble very easily.

We had the old crusher and we found a small half-ton press, which I rebuilt. We made barrel racks, and we bought scraped whiskey barrels from Sal De Bella in San Francisco. They were really excellent quality with no whiskey flavor.

CS: You and Jan did all this?

NS: Yes, the two of us, but we had lots of friends who were interested in this and gave us a hand. The building was 650 square feet and we thought we'd start off making just a few hundred cases a year. But we had no feel for whether this would succeed or not. We weren't sure how good our quality would be.

CS: Did you have a goal model in you mind. Get so big and get out of this geology business?

NS: No. We never thought seriously that the winery was going to support us.

CS: Didn't you think MAYBE?

NS: Well, I think everyone who was starting a small winery thought maybe.

CS: What I'm trying to get straight is to compare you to a guy like Paul Staiger. He has never thought MAYBE. Other people start as a hobby and they'll go with it if it goes. So I'd say you were a definite MAYBE.

NS: It was a hobby business. But we had no plans or hopes that eventually it would support us.

CS: But it would have been an acceptable outcome.

NS: Exactly. This was a big experiment to see what would happen.

So in 1973, the first year, we made some Chenin blanc from the Brett Smart vineyard in the Napa Valley, near Calistoga. And we made a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon which we bought from another home winemaker, who had bought the grapes from a grower outside of Modesto. And we made Chardonnay and Zinfandel from Ruby Hill. And we made some nouveau wine, carbonic-maceration, with the Zinfandel. We were about the fourth in California to do that. Tom Kruse and Cary Gott at Montevina in Amador County were also doing it. And we also made a little Petite Sirah and some Petite Sirah rosé. The grapes from John Roffinella on Hecker Pass Road. And who knows where those grapes came from? He'd say local vineyards, but they might have come from Lodi. We made total about 650 gallons.

CS: You have two wines you can sell the next spring. How did you do it?

NS: We sold the Chenin blanc and the Zin nouveau in June of 1974. We sent out a mailer to our friends. I'd say we made about 75 cases of Chenin.

CS: Was this a dry Chenin?

NS: You bet. Bottle stability was a real problem back then. One of the barrels was barrel fermented and aged in a French oak barrel.

CS: That was very early for such a thing. Where did you get the barrel?

NS: From De Bella. We always fermented the Chenin blanc in the barrel because that was what was available for us.

CS: Well, they do that in Vouvray, too. But are you following some kind of pattern you've picked up from reading about the wines of the Loire?

NS: No, we were just being very pragmatic. But we weren't aging on the lees or anything like that. In fact, we did have a sulfur problem in 1973; it wasn't serious but it was there. We just splashed the wine; that's all we knew to do then.

So, we had a weekend when we were open in June of 1974 for people to come in and we sold wine. Also, Roberts of Woodside took some of our wines. The Chenin blanc sold very well. They reordered almost immediately. We were very pleased.

1974 was a pivotal year for us. It was a great year for the grapes; if you didn't make good wine that year you couldn't make good wine. We got grapes from the same sources, and with the Chenin blanc we had terrible hydrogen sulfide problems. It was from the sulfur in the vineyard. There was so much on the vines it was getting into the pickers' eyes. We had all volunteer pickers. Lots of friends. We'd go back to the winery and crush and press them and have a party. It was a very good time. I think we made about 1,000 gallons that year. The crush went beautifully. It was a very orderly crush. But we didn't make Chardonnay that year. Southern Pacific has taken over Ruby Hill and it would have been very complicated, and the price was too high.

We had some more wine to sell in the fall of 1974. WE sold some of the Cabernet, but I think it might have been Merlot. That's what we got from around Modesto.

1974 was the first year that we got grapes from Wayne Wiedeman; he is on the Watsonville Road right next door to Kirigin; then it was Bonesio. We bought grapes from him until 1992. He had just Cabernet and Zinfandel. Tom Kruse and his wife were separated at that time, and Sue was living

at the Bonesio place. She had noticed this young vineyard next door. He had started planting it in 1970. At that time he had about eight or nine acres. It was all on its own roots. It was a very dangerous thing to have done, but he didn't know anything about the wine business. He had planted grapes because one of his neighbors had suggested it was a good thing to do.

So we got Cabernet from him and also a small amount from the Sanchez vineyard, Dennis Sanchez, on Woodside Road. Bob Mullen gets grapes from him. Dennis had Colombard and Cabernet.

CS: That must be where Bob got his Colombard back in those early days.

NS: It was planted on the Richard De Lucci property. He was Sanchez's wife's father.

CS: Tell me more about the Wiedeman relationship.

NS: We bought his grapes in 1974. They were good grapes, but in 1975 the vineyard had been greatly overcropped. We knew that the grapes would never get ripe and we told him we wouldn't buy them unless they could get to 22.5 Brix. We told him that he needed to strip off half the crop to make it. But he didn't believe us. Came mid-October 1975 and the sugar was only 18-19%. So he ended up selling them to Mirassou for \$50 per ton. That was a real reality lesson for him. So then he asked us to come down and show him how to prune the vines. Jan, by that time, had gotten very good at this, and she went down and showed him how to do it. So in 1976 the crop was back to a respectable level. It was really a little short. And from then on we got all his grapes and we generally had a pretty good relationship with him. We were paying top dollar for those grapes. And they were good. The wines matured quickly and they had nice fruit. But over the years the question of pickers got to be a matter of contention as the crop level got up around 10-14 tons. You couldn't do that with half a dozen people you picked up on the street. By that time we were of a size where we had to have everything down to a schedule. Wayne was still trying to do it by picking up a few casual laborers at the unemployment office, or some people standing on the street corner. We told him that that simply was not acceptable; we expected to have an army of pickers in the field when we arrived and that they would pick all day and at the end of the day the vineyard would be picked. For several years he did that with a labor contractor. And then he started complaining about expenses and for a couple of years we hired the labor contractor. And then we charged him. That worked fine.

Then he decided to take care of the pickers himself. In 1990 it went OK. In 1991 it was marginal, but he got the vineyard picked on time. But in 1992 phylloxera had become major problem for him, with his vines on their own roots. He was in denial up to that point. So that year he said he was going to get the pickers from the Kirigin Winery next door. I said that there were only about four guys there. So he said we could come back the next day and get the rest. I told him that we didn't do business that way. So I went down a few days in advance and dropped off the bins and I then came down on the day that the Cabernet was supposed to be picked and it was about half picked. So I put all the bins back on the truck and said, "That's it." He was stuck with it and was pretty mad. But I had warned him. But because the crop size was dropping from the phylloxera he wanted to cut back. He was down to about five acres by then. In the 1980s he was up to about 14 tons and that was more than we could handle. Dan Gehrs took some of it for Congress Springs. Obester got some for a few years, also. But as phylloxera got worse we were again able to take all his tonnage.

CS: Was that vineyard inside the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation?

NS: It was outside by a tick. We were tempted to try and get it in but we wanted to maintain the integrity of the appellation and didn't want it gerrymandered. Jan had done a lot to get it in the first place. But it didn't matter. The wines sold very well. I don't think appellations make all that difference.

CS: Well they do when they say "Napa Valley."

NS: But if you had really good wines you could say, "Emeryville Mud Flats" and it wouldn't make a big difference.

CS: Let's go back to the vintages.

NS: 1974 was a significant year for us. It was last year for the Chenin blanc. The H₂S problem was horrendous. We ended up treating it with silver, instead of copper. We had access to a large number of thin silver discs, and silver will pull out hydrogen just like that. It's much better than copper.

CS: Sure. It's the oxidation reduction factor; I remember that.

NS: We made a necklace out of these silver discs with nylon string. We lowered them into the barrel and stirred it around and they'd come out black and we'd clean them with acid. It cleaned up the wines just like that, but we said we aren't going to deal with that anymore. But ATF let us do it. They'd never heard of silver, so the guy said, "You didn't call us."

CS: Well, if copper is safe, silver is safer.

NS: The wines from vintages 1974 and 1975 turned out very well. The 1974 Petite Sirah, Zinfandel and Cabernet all had tremendous promise. We won two gold medals at the Los Angeles County Fair for the Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. The first we knew that anything like that had happened was when Darrell Corti called and wanted to buy all our production. He was a judge and had had the wines. These were the 1974 wines in 1976.

By then we knew Dave Bennion pretty well. As small wineries popped up he would always be on the scene. We had made a late harvest Zinfandel from some Lodi grapes that Ridge just couldn't handle. There was no place to put them. So they crushed them and sold them mostly to home winemakers, and to us. It came in on October 29 and it ended up with an alcohol of 18.3%. Sugar was 1.5%. We knew we had a monster coming, so we got a fish tank bubbler and we put it in the fermenter to bubble in some oxygen to keep the yeast going.

CS: That's remarkable. Over 17% things usually start closing down. You're up in the level of port. They'll think it's a fortified wine.

NS: That's right, and we had no end of trouble dealing with the BATF. They wanted to know what we'd put in it. Fortunately gas chromatography was just getting started as a reliable analytic tool. We got some analysis done by a friend, Bob Story, who was a home winemaker. He ran a test for us and there were none of the higher alcohols you'd expect from a fortified wine. After much back and forth they let us sell it, but they wouldn't let us put the October 29 on the label. We'd already printed the labels so we took some Magic Marker pens and blocked it out. We put it on sale in 1976 at \$10, which was in the high-end of the market at that time.

CS: That's about \$25 in 1993 constant dollars.

Selling Wine

NS: We sent out samples for people to try. So the word had gotten out and on the Saturday when we were going to start to sell it we had people waiting in line outside the winery.

CS: That was a hot time for that kind of item.

Let's talk about the label. Yours was anything but typical at that time.

NS: It was done by a friend of a friend of ours. Mike Canyon. He was a very talented designer. We took a bunch of labels up to his studio that we liked. He called us a couple of weeks later and we went up and saw this diagonal thing. We had never seen anything like it before.

CS: There are lots of diagonals now. Dunn, Hanna, etc. But yours is the first I remember ever seeing.

NS: The more we thought about it the better we liked it. There isn't a really a fantastic story. It just happened and we still use basically the same label, with a few changes.

CS: Any other marketing things you're doing now.

NS: We had wine in several stores on the Peninsula. Weimax, Beltramo's, Roberts of Woodside, and a few others. And we are still selling out of the Woodside place on weekends, but that was on specific dates, not every weekend. We did open on weekends in the summer there in 1976, but it was not a great success in terms of the amount we sold for the time we put in. Sometimes we'd be open the first weekend, or the last weekend. But we never had enough business in Woodside to make it worthwhile to do it on a regular basis.

CS: Let's talk about the 1975 vintage.

NS: It went OK, but it started to rain a little too early. One of our very best friends became the vineyard manager for the Hacienda Winery in Sonoma. That gave us access to some really first class Chardonnay and Cabernet.

CS: How did you know this person?

NS: He was a fellow that Jan worked with at Stanford. He was interested in agriculture and wine in particular. He had worked with us on small vineyard that a group of us had started in Portola Valley in 1974-75. It was owned by a woman named Lisa Barrett, a physician at Kaiser. It was about 1.75 acres of Riesling and Merlot. A group of us planted it and took care of it, the idea being that we would buy the grapes. There were a few friends involved.

CS: This is basically a Sherrill thing. There's no other winery involved?

NS: No. But the manager of the operation was this fellow we were talking about, Don Jones, who ended up on Hacienda.

CS: Let's follow through on the Portola venture. That's Santa Cruz Mountains.

NS: Riesling was the wrong variety for that location. It was much hotter than we had thought. And we had to be very sparing with the amount of water we had. Deer were worse than we had imagined, even though the fencing was pretty high, and we made it higher. But they still got in and just ravished the vines. But once it got established there was still a problem of ripening. The Riesling was sunburning. I'd say that particular location in Portola Valley is about a region 2+ so far as heat accumulation is concerned. It's a west facing bowl. And we had a lot of trouble with gophers. The Merlot was one of the defective clones we had here in California in the seventies. It was enormously vigorous; the vines were just rank. In a couple of years you had trunks the size of your arm. And there was no crop worth mentioning. The woman who owned the vineyard decided that the stuff was an invasive pest. That vineyard consumed an appalling amount of energy, and produced very little in the way of grapes.

CS: Now let's go back to Hacienda.

NS: We got Chardonnay and Cabernet. And we got a substantial amount of Zinfandel from Ruby Hill. By now we were out of the Chenin blanc business. And we got Petite Sirah again from Roffinella. But the nouveau market was changing by this year. Some of the big operations were finding this was a good way to turn you money around fast. You could have your wine on the market before you had paid for the grapes. And a lot of these were not made in the classic and some were dreadful wines. These began to poison the market for all nouveau. So we were able to sell our 1975 the next year, but we could see things changing.

CS: By 1975-76 your first reds are out and you now have, and from now on, a full range of wine to sell. Any changes in selling?

NS: In 1977 we started selling in the Los Angeles area. Jan went down there and went around with samples. We had gotten several names from Dave Bennion. And our production was creeping up. We were selling all we could make. We still weren't making any money because we were plowing back every cent we had into the business. We were buying more cooperage, and by this time we had bought a good must pump, and at that time one of those cost as much as an automobile. And we got a bigger press then from George Burtness, who was going out of business, and that really helped a lot.

More Grape Sources

Our sources for grapes remained about the same. By then Ruby Hill was being run by the Stony Ridge people and the grape quality was still good. And in 1976 we took over the management of the vineyard across the street from Ruby Hill. That's where our Zinfandel had been coming from and the Stony Ridge guys didn't want to deal with it, so we dealt directly with the Simone family, who still owned it or controlled it with some kind of an arrangement with Lone Star Cement Company.

CS: That's right. There's a gravel plant right behind that vineyard.

NS: That had not been a part of the Southern Pacific transaction when they bought the Ruby Hill property. So we farmed the vineyard, along with a couple of friends. It was about four acres. We were going to take the whole crop, except some for a few home winemakers we knew. But this arrangement didn't last very long because in the fall, just before harvest, there was a fire at the gravel quarry, and the fire got up into the vineyard, and the aerial tankers swooped over the vineyard and dropped fire retardant all over everything. I asked the Food and Drug people about making wine from that and they said don't even think about it. And I called UC Davis and they said that that stuff would kill any yeast we tried to use. We had put all kinds of work into that thing and got nothing out of it. So we got out of the vineyard business for good after that.

Also in 1976 we got hooked up with Tom Sinton. He was the fellow who originally planted the Shell Creek Vineyards down east of Paso Robles. That's south of the little town of Shandon.

The Sinton family owned an enormous valley down there. It's just a beautiful place, and they ran cattle all over it, and raised alfalfa. Tom got in on the grape growing thing early on and he realized that that area was prime grape growing country. So he went to Davis and got a masters degree in viticulture, or at least got all the course work done. He planted some land that he and his father owned jointly, and land that his uncle owned. He ended up planting something like 500 acres. It's east of Creston.

CS: I don't think I've ever been there.

NS: It's out in the middle of nowhere. But the water table is very high, and there is good soil.

CS: So that's what Shell Creek is. Before now it was just a name you heard and saw on labels.

NS: Dave Bennion put us in touch with Tom Sinton, who had some grapes for sale. Dave said that was a good part of the world for Cabernet. So we liked what we saw and we bought five tons of Cabernet from him in 1976. The wine was terrific. It was very approachable at a young age. He also had Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. We liked him from the outset and we really got along well. We still buy our grapes there, but there have been a lot of changes. We'll get to those later.

It's remarkable that the wine turned out as well as it did because in late August an enormous tropical storm came up from the south and dropped six inches there.

CS: I recall it very well. It was so strange that the Central Coast should be battered that early and the North Coast went unscathed.

NS: But the vines bounced back and the chemistry was excellent for the grapes. By then we realized that we had to have a bigger place to make and store our wine. We were bursting at the seams in Woodside. We had barrels stacked to the ceiling.

CS: Did you keep case goods there as well?

NS: Everything. It was orderly, but if you wanted something that wasn't in front you had to do an awful lot of moving. Actually we were thinking about another place in 1975. And in 1976 we started looking very seriously. One of the first places we looked at was the place we now have up on Skyline. We had some conditions we had laid out. It had to be on a main road so customers could find it. Dirt roads may be romantic but they don't promote customers. It had to be reasonably close to where we worked. Jan was at Stanford by then, the financial aid officer in the school of education. And the place had to be licensable for a winery. And we wanted to grow some grapes. So we liked the Skyline place, but the woman wanted a fortune for it, and it was completely out of the question. It was 23.5 acres, with a house, and of that area about 10-12 acres could be planted. And there was a perfect winery site.

So we looked all over the Santa Cruz Mountains, and a little bit in the East Bay. The more we looked the more we liked Skyline. In early 1977 we talked to a real estate person we knew and she said that the place had been on the market for 18 months and the woman hadn't even gotten an offer. So we talked to her and said we had to take some measurements and take some soil samples, and she said that was fine. So we looked at everything pretty darned carefully and the more we looked the better we liked it. By then she had moved out. The house was a fright. It was all painted brown and black inside. Olive drab trim, with little tiny lights. But with some paint it could be OK. So we made her an offer and said this was all we could afford. It was our best and final offer. And she said she liked us and that that was the bottom price she'd consider. So she took it. And we bought it at just the right time.

The day the escrow closed I got a call from the land acquisition officer of the Mid-Peninsula Open Space District. He said they had decided they wanted to buy the Skyline place. So I told him we'd just bought it that morning, "And it ain't for sale." So in 1977 we made wine in the Woodside place the last time. We had fermenters in the parking lot. It was awful. We were using large plastic tanks.

So in 1978 the winery was still in Woodside but we crushed and fermented at Page Mill Winery. We rented space from them. We simply had no place to work at Woodside. After it was pressed we trucked it back to Woodside and stored it in the winery.

This was one of the few times that two bonded wineries had shared the same premise for fermentation, and BATF was very uneasy about it. Finally, they just turned their back on it. They told Dick Stark to make sure that his bond coverage was large enough to cover both of us, otherwise they didn't want to know what was going on. We did all the work there in our segregated area.

CS: At this point is it still you, Jan and friends?

NS: Yes. There's no hired help. We worked together very well, but the 1978 vintage was a harvest from hell, since everything came in at the same time. The weather got very hot in late September. It was chaotic with trucks coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Somehow we and the Starks were able to come out of that still close friends. When we got the wine back to Woodside we were out to the doors with barrels and case storage. We had a lot of wine that should have been in cases, but there was no place to put the cases.

That pretty much wrapped up the Woodside phase of our operation. We didn't get grapes from Dennis Sanchez's vineyard after 1975. The Chardonnay connection in Sonoma had only lasted for 1975 and 1976. We still were getting Zinfandel from Ruby Hill. We had started Shell Creek in 1977 for Cabernet and Petite Sirah. We were now getting Cabernet also from the Wiedeman vineyard in Hecker Pass. And in 1978 we made a Gamay for Robert's of Woodside Store.

* * * * *

February 3, 1994

The New Winery

CS: Let's go up to the new place. What was the physical setup?

NS: There was basically just the house there. Almost as soon as we moved in we started work on the various processes necessary to get a bonded winery up and going. The biggest hurdle we saw was with the City of Palo Alto.

CS: You're inside the Palo Alto City limits.

NS: It's complicated. The San Mateo County line goes through the property some couple of hundred feet east of Skyline Boulevard. So the property is divided between two counties. The Santa Clara County part, which is a large majority of it, is all inside the Palo Alto City limits. So there are three jurisdictions involved. Palo Alto annexed the properties up in the hillside areas some years back, when they thought that there would be development up there, luxury houses, that would yield lots of property taxes. So we were included in that. But it developed that those houses weren't built. It's a long and complicated story.

CS: Where was your house?

NS: In Palo Alto. But the original location planned for the winery building had the county line running through the middle of it. So this would lead to a pushing and shoving match between Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties over which would get the sales tax revenue. So we decided to move the planned location so it would be in one county. It was the smartest thing we ever did.

A big hurdle for us was getting through all the bureaucratic hoops the City of Palo Alto had for us. Because of the location the building had to go through architectural review, because it was within the Skyline-City Corridor. That was established by the state legislature back, I think, in the sixties. It's just a scenic highway easement. So anything built in this corridor has to go through this kind of review. Actually the City was pretty helpful and cooperative. They assigned a specific planner to the project to help guide the thing through the labyrinth they had set up. In our case it was Betsy Crowder; she was a very sympathetic and helpful resource. The review people looked at the sketches we had provided for the winery building. It was about 3,000 square feet, and it was a pretty uninspired, boxlike structure. They said there was no reason we couldn't build it, but it was not very attractive.

One of the members of this committee was a woman named Sigrid Rupp, who was an architect and she offered to help us rework the design. She knew the folks at the Schug Winery in the Napa Valley.¹⁰ She took our plans up and talked to them to see if they made sense for a workable layout. They said it was a fine arrangement, so she made some sketches to sort of repackage the place and make the building more attractive. We also got quite a bit of help from a young man who was sort of an intern with the City Planning Department, Tony Carrasco. So we got approval from all the levels of bureaucracy in Palo Alto and we started construction in the summer of 1979. We had got the concrete slab and retaining wall done in late 1978. We did the concrete work on Veterans Day and by the time we were through it was snowing, it was so cold.

CS: Was it your idea to be able to do the 1979 vintage on the spot?

NS: Yes. The Woodside situation was just hopeless and Page Mill couldn't deal with us a second time. The construction of the building itself took place on a weekend in August of 1979. We had a sort of barn-raising. For me, coming from New England, that was the way barns we put up.

CS: Was it a tilt-up structure?

NS: Not much. It was wood frame, but on stick at a time. Over the years we had built up a small group of friends who had built their own houses; a group of us had worked together helping each other. They formed the nucleus of about 100 people who came and helped us. We had about 50 people on each of two days. We really "raised the barn" in two days. The building wasn't finished, but we got all the walls up and most of the siding on. And there was enough of the roof done to make it structurally sound enough for the small earthquake we had the next day. The amount of work and energy put out was almost unbelievable. We had a dedication of the building at the end of the second day. Roger Smith came up and blessed the building.¹¹ Then we had a giant party, with a barbecued sheep.

CS: Yes, he would be the perfect clergyman for the purpose. That wasn't the party we went to.

NS: That one was in the fall of 1979. On Saturday, the first day of the building operation, an inspector from the City of Palo Alto came up to see what was going on. And he had such a good time he came back on Sunday.

CS: What did you bring up from Woodside and what was new?

NS: We didn't have any equipment up there yet because it wasn't a bonded facility, but we got the BATF up there to sign off on it as soon as we could. They were a little hesitant because there was no real roof on the place, but they finally did accept it as a bonded premise. Then we had to transfer our equipment, but we didn't end up bringing up all the wine stored in Woodside until a year later.

We were really running two wineries under one bond. I still don't understand how that was OK, but BATF didn't have a problem with it.

CS: That is very unusual. That's just not the way it's done. The normal thing is for the person when they are moving the premises to take out a permit for a bonded wine cellar (BWC) to act as a storage facility, but where no wine is actually going to be produced.

NS: We were careful to make sure that wines were kept separate as to what would be "produced and bottled" and what was "cellared and bottled." The 1978 wines had to say "cellared" since they had been produced at Page Mill Winery. The record keeping was very complicated but we did keep it straight. We had several subsequent inspections and everything went right through.

¹⁰ BW 5309, since 1991 in the Carneros area of Sonoma County.

¹¹ Margaret Smith, his wife, is the executive director of ZAP, Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, an industry/consumer organization.

We got some new barrels, but that was all the new equipment we had.

CS: One of the things I forgot about the 1978 vintage. You said you made some Gamay for Roberts Store in Woodside. Tell me about that before we go on to the 1979 vintage.

NS: It was a nouveau wine. It was made to be drunk young, and it was just for them. We made five tons worth. We had also done it in 1977-- I forgot to say that. It had all come about because the folks at Shell Creek had some extra Gamay.

CS: What kind of Gamay was it?

NS: Napa Gamay. We were busy when the grapes were ready to be picked so George Thaler, who ran the wine department at Roberts, went down there and drove the small tank truck they owned back with the crushed grapes in it. They had a field crusher. Because of the timing that year we had no place to ferment the stuff, so we just added yeast to it and let it ferment in the truck. We vented the tank so it wouldn't explode. It worked remarkably well. The wine was very good and only just now is it beginning to fade. We bottled it the next spring.

CS: Were you using these portable bottling lines then?

NS: No, and we never have. They're a good idea, but the way they work out in practice is that you end up bottling on their schedule and not on your own. That would always be a problem with us.

CS: Let's go to the 1979 vintage.

NS: We made pretty much the same wine we made in 1977 and 1978. Cabernet from Wiedeman and Shell Creek, Petite Sirah from Shell Creek, Zinfandel from the Quist vineyard in Woodside and from Ruby Hill, Chardonnay from Ventana, and Gamay for Roberts again. We also made a Gamay blanc for ourselves, a dry blush wine.

CS: Did production go up at the new winery?

NS: We were up around 5,000-5,500 gallons.

CS: So you're up over 2,000 cases now. Had you ever been there before?

NS: No. We'd been up to about 1,500 before that. So this is a significant jump up. It was pretty hectic that year. We were trying to get the building finished and we had to get the parking area done. And then we had a lot of rain during the vintage. But we got through it. By 1980 things really settled down. Then we began to run pretty much the same kind of grapes from year to year from then through the mid-1980s.

In 1980 and 1981 the economy was down and the wine business went with it.

CS: Those are the years of heavy price inflation and then the Reagan depression. They called it stagflation.

NS: Those of us who had expanded production in 1979 and 1980 found ourselves with wine we couldn't sell.

CS: You had financed the operation yourself-- you hadn't taken on partners?

NS: Right. We never have.

Marketing

CS: So how did you deal with the marketing problem?

NS: We started to push marketing in Southern California. Jan was down there doing it and got very good at it. She had left Stanford about 1981 and was working full time for the winery. She took samples around and then we shipped them the wine. We didn't have a warehouse down there, which turned out to be a blessing. Some people who did get hit by the BATF for not having the proper license. But a lot of wineries got hit on that. You have to have a storage permit, for a tax paid bonded warehouse. Several wineries got caught and fined, like \$1,000.

CS: How about price inflation at this time. It was double digit for a couple of years.

NS: You could not raise prices as fast as the automobile manufacturers were. Ours did creep up some, but not much. But we still hurt.

CS: But you did get it sold. Did you play any tricks? Sell through Trader Joe's?

NS: At that time Trader Joe's was the market of last resort. That meant you were one step away from Chapter 11 then. We never got into that, but we did cut back production, as it became obvious that we had too much. And we started something that worked in the early eighties. Bottle your own wine at the winery. People could bring their own bottles and bottle what was a generic red, a generic white, and a generic pink.

CS: Did you pick that up from Gemello-Obester?

NS: No, they got it from us. We got to thinking, that this was the way people used to buy a lot of their ordinary table wine in California. You take your jugs and demijons to the winery and they fill them up for you. It seemed like a good way to move some wine, and also to get people to come up to the winery. We were always trying to encourage people to come up for sales at the winery.

CS: Was there always someone there?

NS: No. We weren't open very much. It was weekends and special events. The bottle-your-own started out pretty small, but it improved. The wines were called "Skyline Red," "Skyline White," and "Skyline Sunset."

The reds were blends of Petite Sirah and Zinfandel, sometimes some Gamay, and occasionally Cabernet. The white we bought right from the start. We realized we could never make good quality and inexpensive white wine from the grape sources and technology we had. We bought Sauvignon blanc for several years and then switched to Chardonnay when the bulk market there got good pricewise. The first Sauvignon blancs we bought were from Congress Springs.

CS: Are there any other changes in the early eighties?

NS: We had planted some Chardonnay on the front part of the property in 1980 and 1981. The conventional wisdom of the farmers in the area was that deer would not jump a six foot fence. That's what we had. But that wisdom was more conventional than wise. The deer teased us for about three months. At first nothing happened. And in a short space of time, when their other browse began to dry up, the deer just decimated the vineyard. It was in a short piece of time and there was nothing we could do. In three weeks the vineyard was gone. We tried every kind of deer repellent and noisemaker and nothing worked. It was a real heartbreaker. But it may have been a blessing in disguise. We just

didn't have the time to take care of a vineyard and run the winery. We had been concerned about having a good source for Chardonnay. But as it developed good sources became available.

The other change that took place in the early eighties concerned Zinfandel. The situation out at Stony Ridge-Ruby Hill was deteriorating and the operation began to unravel; they were very short on money and were stretched a mile wide and an inch deep. The quality of the Zinfandel was really suffering. The 1981 harvest was our last one there. It just wasn't very good. I think Stony Ridge only lasted a couple of more years there at Ruby Hill¹² At the same time we were still buying Zinfandel from the Quist vineyard in Woodside. We could still get two plus tons up there. That was in 1981 and 1982. These were old vines. Trish Hooper, whose family planted the Quist vineyard, thinks the first vines went in there in 1865.

CS: There were a lot of old vineyards planted back there in the early years. I think the Hooper vineyard was planted in the 1880s.¹³

Two tons isn't much Zinfandel. In this the early 1980s the Zinfandel craze was softening some. Were you feeling that too?

NS: Oh, yes. We felt it very much. The problem from our standpoint was that Zinfandel was so undependable in style that consumers didn't know what they were going to get in the bottle. And Cabernet was coming along pretty strong so that is what carried us. 1982 was the last time we got Zinfandel from the Woodside area. We decided that for the quantity involved it was too much trouble.

Meanwhile we had got a connection with Benito Dusi near Paso Robles, from Dave Bennion. WE had already made Zinfandel from another vineyard outside of Paso Robles called Cripple Creek, toward Creston. That was in 1980 and 1981. But the owners didn't keep it up, and we thought that there was too much Alicante Bouschet in there anyway. But we developed a very comfortable relationship with Dusi. We still get grapes from him.

CS: I thought they all went to Ridge now.

NS: No. That has been a thorny issue on both sides. Benito really doesn't need the money and he will not be pushed around by anyone. He will sell grapes to whomever he damn well pleases. He's fair and treats Ridge very well, but he isn't in their pocket.

CS: Dave Bennion was the Dusi connection up here from the beginning. I remember his telling me how he'd go down and sleep there, and party, of course.

NS: We're really good friends now. Jan and Benito are particularly good friends. We see him several times a year. In fact we just saw him a couple of weeks ago.

But we didn't make 1993 Zin from that vineyard. He had some very strange things going on in that vineyard. Grapes came in drastically over ripe in August. He provided Ridge with two truckloads of "essence" in the third week of August. Sugar was in the 30s. He is not sure why it happened.

CS: August was terribly hot, but then it cooled off some, too much in some places.

NS: But the heat really didn't go away from there. I don't understand it. But he called us and told us that these grapes were not something that we should fool around with.

CS: How old is that vineyard? I can remember it along the highway there in the 1950s.

¹² The Stony Ridge operation moved off the Ruby Hill property in 1983 and went bankrupt in 1985. See: *Wine Spectator*, 5/16/82, 9/16/83; *Wines & Vines* (January 1985).

¹³ For more on the John A. Hooper vineyard (Rosedale Farm) and other early producers in the Woodside-Portola Valley area see *La Peninsula* (San Mateo County Historical Museum): 19:2 (1977 and Summer 1980). For a viticulture and wine history of many oldtimers here see: Gilbert Richards. *Crossroads* (Woodside 1973): 105-108.

NS: His father planted it when Benito was a young boy, and he's in his late sixties now.

CS: Probably right after Repeal. Did you know that Dusi once had a bond?

NS: Right. It was a bonded winery. But they really got crosswise with the federal people on a number of issues. They decided it was too much bother.¹⁴

CS: How much Zinfandel do you usually get from him?

NS: Typically, five tons. That's a truck load. He charges top of the line for those grapes.

CS: Sonoma prices?

NS: More. He gets top dollar. He knows he's got some of the best Zin in the state.

Another interesting thing was the Chardonnay we started getting from Spring Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains. It's outside of Portola Valley. The Varner brothers manage it and Greg Melchor owns it. It is on the east facing slope just east of Skyline Boulevard. It overlooks Portola Valley. There is a lot of Chardonnay. Back then it was about 12 acres. We got Chardonnay there in the eighties. It will be in the records (see below). It was exquisite. Tom Fogarty also got some. Later he got it all.¹⁵ Then we got Chardonnay from another vineyard the Varners managed in Portola Valley. Technically it's inside the Woodside city limits. It was owned by Louis Buehlman. About 2.5 acres of Chardonnay. It is on Hidden Valley Lane. It's behind the Portola Valley town center; I don't know why that's in Woodside. We got grapes from him until 1989. Then the Varners decided to go into the wine business and to make wine up at the Cinnabar Winery. They use Spring Ridge and Buehlman grapes, but they didn't tell us they were going to use them until June 1989, which is very late. And they also blew the whistle on Fogarty. He was getting Chardonnay and Gewürztraminer from Spring Ridge.

Going back to 1985, one time Jan and I had been out to dinner and when we got home there was a message on our home phone saying that it was George Lucchessi and that he had several acres of Santa Cruz Cabernet Sauvignon-- were we interested?

CS: I never heard of it.

NS: He's in Cupertino, on Regnart Canyon Road. I called him back the next morning, and this was no joke. We couldn't imagine who would be shopping around the Santa Cruz Mountains like this. It turns out he called Mt. Eden and Ridge and a few others and they weren't interested. We went up there and he had four acres of head pruned, dry farmed, mountain grown Cabernet in its first bearing year. So we bought the grapes, the whole thing. There were only about 1,500 pounds this time. I guess the vineyard was planted in 1981. He and his wife live on a knoll and the vineyard is on the southeast side, on very steep terrain.

CS: What did it come to eventually, maybe twelve tons?

NS: Less. But that began a relationship that continues to this day. He is a school teacher and a horse fancier. They're wonderful grapes. Since we stopped getting grapes from Wiedeman, that's our Cabernet source.

At the 1989 Syntex tasting for the Children's Health Council I was at a table and a fellow came up and introduced himself. It was Leo Ware, and he owns Vanumanutagi Vineyard up at the end of Redwood Retreat Road. He said he liked our wines and if we were interested in buying some Chardonnay he'd like to talk to us. Little did we know that our arrangement in Woodside would fall apart in two weeks. So I called him and told him that maybe we were interested. He had some

¹⁴ Benito A. and Sylvester Dusi bonded their winery (BW 4436) in 1950 and dropped the bond in 1970.

¹⁵ Thomas Fogarty Winery (BW 5041) on Skyline Boulevard, bonded in 1982.

Chardonnay available. Jan and I went down to look at the vineyard to see how things were done and we found that things were done remarkably well. You can't really see Leo's place from the road. The long one you see there is the Bates Ranch vineyard. The one father down toward the main road is the Mary Carter vineyard.

CS: That's where they are going to build those "estate" that Tom Kruse is so upset about. David Bruce bought her grapes years ago.

NS: Ware's vineyard manager, Cliff Haller, is the most fanatical I have ever met. He is a reasonable man, but so careful and thorough. He is an extraordinarily talented person. He isn't formally trained, but he reads and listens a lot. Ware lives in Palo Alto where his law practice is.

I was looking around the vineyard and spotted something that looked like Petite Sirah. And it was. They had been selling it to Guglielmo Winery in Morgan Hill, and they were blending it. We said we would keep it a separate varietal and it became available. That was in 1990. So we added two wines to our repertoire, and we have been very pleased with both of them. We think that our is the first Santa Cruz Mountain appellation Petite Sirah that has ever been made. We still get our Chardonnay there.

CS: I can't think of any others, or any other vineyard. I understand there were some Beclan vines up around Corralitos until a few years ago. That's a variety directly related to our Petite Sirah, at least our Duriff/Petite Sirah. Years ago George Guglielmo bottled a Petite Sirah under the Mt. Madonna label. I wonder if he got it there. He had a Santa Clara County appellation on it, but I think it was before there was a Santa Cruz Mountain Appellation.

Those aren't old vines are they?

NS: No, there were planted in the seventies.

CS: Do you keep the two Petite Sirahs separate?

NS: Always. We do it with all our wine.

CS: Did you keep getting grape sources from Shell Creek?

NS: We stopped in 1983. By then the Wiedeman vineyard was really coming on strong, and then when we got Luchessi. . . .

CS: What was your level of production going into the 1990s?

NS: It has cycled up and down a lot, but in the 5,000-6,000 gallon range, usually.

CS: So you've really kept between 2,000 and 3,000 cases.

NS: That's right. That's comfortable.

CS: Any employees. That's usually the sign of a lack of comfort, at least from growing volume.

NS: We have had a lot of part time people, but no full time. Just Jan and I. In 1980 we did take an intern out of the UC Davis program. We let him go after about one month. Then we did share some people with Congress Springs for a couple of years. Then in 1989 we took on a French exchange student from Foothill College. He had been a student in winemaking technology in France. So he had to work for a quarter at a working winery.

CS: I don't get it. What was he doing at Foothill? Was he enrolled there?

NS: No. They have a program for exchange students. And they send American students to France. It was just a work/living experience.

He was a real delight. His English was as good as my French. So we ended up conversing in Franglais. He was from the Jura region of France. We learned a lot from each other.

It was about that time that we were settling down on winemaking style. We were moving away from oaky wines. We had done some experimenting with larger cooperage, trying to let the fruit stand on its own. At about that time the Novitiate Winery in Los Gatos went out of business and there was an auction. Jan ended up buying about eight larger ovals, in the 600-1,200 gallon range. The people running the auction thought they had her in a corner. They said she had to take all or nothing. And we also had to get them out of there ourselves. A couple of them were bricked in. She said it was quite all right, that her husband and friends did stuff like that all the time. So I took a group of friends, we're kind of amateur riggers, and we had those things out of there in half a day.

Those were the turning point in our wine operations. They were in great shape, tight and clean. They had been used to age dessert wines. We cleaned them very carefully and there was never a hint that they had ever been used for sweet wines. They have become an integrated part of our operation. Sometimes we buy grapes in amounts based on the size of those containers. Our wines come from vineyards that don't give us huge amounts of tannin. And we use very extended maceration; that was from the start. The cap sinks and sits on the bottom. And does it make them softer and more approachable.

CS: What put you in that direction?

NS: Dave Bennion encouraged us in that direction.

CS: Do you use small oak barrels at all now?

NS: Small French oak cooperage for Chardonnay. We buy new barrels occasionally but not often.

CS: Does the Zinfandel go from the fermenter to a large oak oval, and then to the bottle?

NS: Yes, that's the way. With the exception of Chardonnay, oak is not a major component in our wines. And we have been making *sur lie* Chardonnay since the late seventies, but we don't stir. That makes it possible for the wine to stay longer in the barrel without getting too oaky. What happens is the bottom half of the barrel gets coated with lees and tartrates and the barrel there is almost insulated from the wine so far as the oak extraction is concerned. If you don't stir it the wine can mature in the barrel longer without getting over oaked. And this also extends the usefulness of the barrels. It works very well for us.

CS: Let's look at about 1990 and I'll make sure I have down what your wines were.

NS: Chardonnay from Vanumanutagi, and a small amount of Petite Sirah from there also. And Petite Sirah from Shell Creek. And we made a small amount of Gamay blanc from there. That was the last year. Cabernet from Wiedeman and Lucchesi. Zinfandel from Dusi.

CS: So with these wines and keeping under 3,000 cases there was no revolution in your marketing after the eighties.

NS: The marketing revolution was evolutionary. We bailed out of the Los Angeles market in the late eighties when it became clear that price was going to be the only thing that anybody down there cared about. Small wineries can't compete well on that basis. We redirected our efforts to selling more at the winery. By 1988 we had moved to about 85-90% sales at the winery. We were open a few more times a year for special occasions. Also by appointment and some weekends. And then there was the

bottle-your-own event.

CS: Are you in the Santa Cruz Mountain "passport program"?

NS: No. There are several times in the year when we had staked out dates when we were always going to be open. It just didn't fit with what we were trying to do.

CS: Does it hurt being outside the program?

NS: No. And I have talked very frankly with the other wineries about how much business it generates and I'm not convinced the program works all that well. But you'll never get them to admit it publicly.

CS: There are some I've talked to who think it is made for them.

NS: WE may have this funky, laid-back image, but we pay very close attention to who buys our wine, how much, when, where they come from. We know what works for us and what doesn't work.

CS: That high a percentage at the winery is remarkable. That means that your 2,500 cases are really worth about 4,000 cases sold from "first hands" to consumer, as they say.

NS: And our prices are lower. And that's because we don't have all this stuff in the middle.

CS: And this helps to keep it at the comfortable level you like.

NS: And we work at that. We recognize all this. At a couple thousand cases per year we can sell at the winery. At 5,000, no way.

CS: But where do we see Sherrill wines in the Northern California market?

NS: Not many places anymore. We are at Beltramo's, and at the Printer's Ink Cafe in Palo Alto, Roberts of Woodside, the the Country Cafe Restaurant in Redwood City. Not many more. And it works. No distribution system, no brokers, no accounts receivable. It's kind of remarkable story and a lot of people don't believe it.

CS: Well, I'm not sure I can fill this tape now. You've knocked out a lot of questions that I had intended to ask. Is there anything more in the nineties worth talking about?

NS: There is a thing going on in the industry that has always been my worst fear. And it's one of the reasons we've changed the way we market. I always felt that if large wineries brought their technical expertise and financial muscle to bear on the part of the market that small premium wineries have traditionally carved for themselves, there there would be hell to pay. And it is happening. Large wineries are setting up boutique wineries inside their own operations. They can produce barrel fermented, *sur lie* Chardonnay of absolutely stunning quality for \$10 per bottle, and they are starting to do it. I'm not saying this is the end of the world as we know it, but it is a big thing.

CS: There are a lot of "little guys" who really don't get their hands very dirty, who have not invested very much of human capital in their operations. They just brought money and have bought a life style. They are not going to fall back on longer hours and more hard work.

NS: And some of them have debt overhead that is very high because the felt they had to build architectural monuments for wineries.

CS: You have a large element who say, "I don't care because this is a life style investment." But they aren't going to live forever. And many of them are going to, and already have, tired of t he lifestyle and have moved on to something else.

Since we have this time, let's go to the life of this wine growing family. How do you live your year? Do you take off from time to time?

NS: No, we don't. And that is one of the things that has started to bear down on us as we've gotten older. We don't get much time off. We have to be here for these weekends and we're open through the year. And there is a huge mailing list that Jan takes care of. The mailers have to be prepared and printed. We were up to 5,000 names, but we've cut it down to 2,500 now.

CS: And your sales are pick-it-up-at-the-winery deals. No wine-of-the-month shipments or anything like that.

NS: No. We've kicked that around, but there is a tremendous amount of work to that. We do ship some from the winery, but it is a very small amount.

Our mailing list is different from most in that we probably know personally half the people on it, well enough to be able to talk to them when they come to the winery about things other than wine.

CS: What do the demographics of the mailing list look like? You probably organize by ZIP codes.

NS: No, we mail first class. Our experience with bulk mailing has been dismal.

CS: You are talking about \$725 per mailing.

NS: We have learned that first class mailing is more than worth the investment.

CS: What's the market?

NS: San Francisco to San Jose and the East Bay.

CS: You are a couple in your fifties and you are going to die someday.

NS: We are grappling with that issue now. We don't have any children to leave the winery to. And we don't know anyone who would buy a winery these days.

CS: But you might be able to sell yours precisely from the fact that you don't have the problems others have.

NS: But we don't want to move now. We like it where we are. One of these days we'll that enough is enough. But not now.

CS: Let's finish by going through the 1993 vintage.

NS: We have generally unwritten agreements with our growers that go back for years. Usually by March we have firmed this with them. Lucchessi, however, we have a written contract with him, and we take everything he grows.

CS: How about equipment?

NS: We do have a different press. We bought one from Congress Springs shortly before Dan Gehrs left. That was one they had bought from Ridge, which Dave Bennion had bought new in the seventies.

We still ferment the same way. We have some stainless steel for holding, blending, and bottling.

We like to go around and look at the vineyards to get a feel for what is happening before the vintage. Part of these are really social. We don't go down to Shell Creek or to Dusi and tell them what they are doing wrong. I would rather cut my tongue out. They take us around and show us what is happening.

CS: You don't go around checking sugars. How do you know the grapes are ready?

NS: It depends. With Luchessi we make the final determination. We decide where we want the sugar, but at Vanumanutagi and the others, they tell us when they are ready. They arrange the picking themselves. We bring down the bins and they have the pickers. Shell Creek harvests mechanically. I come down at six or seven in the evening with the bins on the truck. They take them off and pick in the middle of the night. They have a little guest cottage where I stay. I get up at six or seven the next morning and the grapes are loaded on the truck. I just get in and drive home.

The whole thing is usually spread out over a month or six weeks, and it's usually orderly.

Jan runs what we call "grape central." She's at home and looks after what's going on at the winery. I do the trucking. I bring in the grapes and we crush them.

CS: So you need to do this on a weekend.

NS: No. I take off from here; I take my vacation in the fall.

CS: Pieces of vacation during the vintage.

NS: The fellows who work for me here take over when I'm gone and then I work through Christmas and New Years, so they can take off. So there is always somebody on the engineering staff here.

For all this the greatest invention was the cellular phone. Now I have one in the truck and I can call Jan from the vineyard and keep her posted if I'm going to be late or something.

CS: This is really interesting, the way this fits your life. It's all integrated. It makes good sense.
