

Ahlgren Vineyard

Twenty years ago *Dexter (DA)* and *Valerie (VA) Ahlgren* moved to the Boulder Creek area with their family and built a home and a small winery operation a few miles north of that little Santa Cruz Mountain town. They acquired their bond in 1976. They are both native Northern Californians. He was born in Berkeley and she in Santa Cruz; they met as students at the University of California (Berkeley).

Dexter was trained as a civil engineer and practiced his profession in Sunnyvale until the family moved to the mountains. Valerie was an English major with graduate work in Rhetoric. She taught Speech and English for several years at De Anza College in Cupertino.

Their little winery is part of their home. It was not originally planned that way, but today a 1,200 square foot cellar houses scores of French and American oak barrels and winemaking equipment below the living and business quarters of the house. After the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake the cellar was expanded some in the process of increasing the stability of the structure. Around their winery/home are all the signs of a winegrowing operation, new and old equipment, a small vineyard, and 26 acres of land, much of it fairly steep and wooded.

I interviewed the Ahlgrens in the front room of their home. The first session was on a blustery, rainy day, before a toasty-hot wood burning stove and surrounded by their collection of dogs, including a rescued racing greyhound named Willie, and two strange looking cats.

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December 8, 1993

CS: What brought you to this part of the world after so many years in Silicon Valley.?

DA: In the late sixties Val was teaching and I was vice-president and chief engineer of my own engineering company. She was fairly burned out teaching and in the summer of 1976 we went up to Vancouver, BC for a sailing championship. On the way up she announced that she was going to resign her teaching position, and that got me thinking about our situation. And by the end of that year I had decided that I was going to divest myself of my engineering company. I proceeded to sell my interest in it to my partner. That left me on my own, and for the first time in my adult life I was unemployed. Eventually I decided that what I wanted to be was an individual consultant.

So I started doing that in Sunnyvale. I set up a drafting table in the living room and went to work. But we had been talking for some time about wanting to get out of Sunnyvale. We moved there when it was sort of an agricultural community, but it had really changed. It was no longer a quiet little town.

CS: It's well over 100,000 now.

DA: Our subdivision had been an apricot orchard and the former owners lived right across the street from us.

VA: That's a story, too. That was the Trentadue family. They took the money they got from that sale and bought land up north.¹

¹ Leo Trentadue and his family founded their Geyserville winery (BW 4538) in 1969. It was at this time that they sold their interest in the land on Montebello Ridge on which today stands the upper Ridge winery, and a large part of the nearby vineyard area. See Ridge interviews.

DA: Anyway, we decided we wanted to find a more rural setting. Val was very interested in gardening. So we started looking, and one of the criteria was that it had to be someplace close enough for me to maintain my consulting practice.

We decided that Santa Cruz County was the logical place. We spent a year or more looking for property. And I should also say that we were involved in wine at that point.

We were partners with another family in a home winemaking operation. Between us we decided that we wanted to plant a vineyard and build a winery.

VA: We were already making wine together.

CS: When did this begin?

DA: I think the interest started in about 1968. We were both sailing people. We had met at the Palo Alto Yacht Club. I remember one New Years Day we were talking and we decided we we'd buy some land and plant a vineyard.

VA: I think that was 1970.

DA: We had started making home wine in the sixties, with little jugs under the kitchen table.

CS: You haven't explained the wine thing to me. Why not dry prunes or produce jam?

DA: Val was interested in fermentation.

CS: Would you be having a bottle of wine on the table in those days?

VA: Yes. We used to go down to Bertero's in the Hecker Pass area and buy gallon jugs and pour them off into fifths.

My interest peaked based on my literary background, as absurd as that sounds. When we were up in the Northwest on that sailing trip to Vancouver, BC, and at that time there was this great home winemaking hobby up there. They didn't have many grapes but they made wine from other things. I got interested in mead from honey.

They had these little shops, Wine Art, and we were driving by one of these shops one time and I saw this beautiful demijon, hand-blown, green glass, real raffia. I decided to buy one of those. In fact, it's down in the winery right now. So we went into the shop and looked at all this nifty looking stuff they were selling. They had a rack on the wall with little pamphlets on winemaking. So I bought this little pamphlet in making mead.

CS: You didn't know then that at that time Wine Art had a store on Stevens Creek in San Jose.

DA: No. But Tom Kruse was later the manager of that store.² Later our daughter was the manager of the Los Altos store. Her supervisor was Mike Daggett, home winemaker, long-time Ridge employee, and partner in the Fellom Ranch winery.³

VA: We occasionally had good wine at the table in my family when I was young. And when I was a child my father took me up to Beringer in the Napa Valley and he showed me the caves, before it became sort of Disneyland. So I had a little introduction to the world of wine. And when I was teaching at De Anza my department chairman was Italian and they used to buy grapes and make their own wine. That really caught my imagination in a very powerful way.

² He founded his Thomas Kruse Winery in 1971 (BW 4566) in the Hecker Pass area, next door to the Bertrero Winery (see above).

³ Fellom Ranch Vineyards on Montebello Road (BW 5381), founded in 1987.

So I brought down my little three-gallon demijon, and my pamphlet. And I was going to make mead.

CS: That's the literary connection. Beowulf, Grendel, the Anglo-Saxon poetry.

VA: Right. I knew all about the mead halls and the giver of rings and such. So I wanted to know what they were drinking.

I decided to make sparkling mead. It was absolutely fabulous. I did it with a crown cap on used champagne bottles. I poured some for our future partners, the Watts. (Darryl was a photographer for *Sunset* magazine.) Everyone agreed it was delicious.

Then I became a little more curious. I started fermenting all kinds of stuff. And I was experimenting with beers, as well. I was using all these funny little English books that tell how to make wine out of anything. At one point a neighbor called me after she had come home with a big load of elderberries from a ranch in the Sierra foothills. She wanted me to teach her to make wine. So, Viking that I am, I agree if we split the fruit. What I made at home was absolutely wonderful. We took a sample down to taste it with Tom Kruse at his new winery, and he couldn't tell what grape it was from. It tasted like a wine from grapes. (He bought that place when he was working at Wine Art.)

At that point Dexter was getting pretty curious. And so were Darryl and Rosemary Watt. So suddenly Dexter has been to the dump or something and he is building a room within a room in our two-and-a-half-car garage, in Sunnyvale. By now the Watts are partners with us and we bought some French barrels. And we found an old crusher, an old redwood fermenter, and we ordered two tons of Zinfandel grapes from John Roffinella in the Hecker Pass area.

DA: So in 1972 we crushed two tons of Zinfandel in our driveway. And it turned out that these grapes came from the Sierra Foothills.

CS: I bought Petite Sirah from John in 1972.

VA: He was always close-mouthed about where he got his grapes. We used to call him our favorite "used grape dealer." But it was really great to have him pull out an old jug of wine and pour us some in those little water glasses. It was a time warp. Scenes like that have been reenacted for generations in California.

And he'd talk to us about technical things, like tying vines with willow sprouts. It was remarkable, some of the skills these oldtimers had.

CS: So you must have had about 300 gallons of Zinfandel that year.

Into The Mountains

DA: We had seven barrels in our little winery in the garage. But I should say, that by the time we had made that Zinfandel we had already purchased this property. We bought this place in February of 1972.

At about this time only our youngest daughter was still in school at home. In 1973 she completed her sophomore year in high school and she started talking to us about moving up here, since this would be a good time for her to move and get to know people here.

And we decided she was right and that we should move quickly, that summer.

VA: We had originally wanted to wait until she had graduated, but she made a very wise observation. If we waited until she graduated she'd never know anyone up here. We thought that was very correct.

We put our house in Sunnyvale on the market, and it was sold by June. We had friends whose

parents owned a little house in Boulder Creek and we were able to rent it. So we just made the move, and we had all that wine. It was our last load. We'd put a barrel in the truck and pump the wine into it. And when we got up here we had to reverse that. That was quite an adventure. And we had all our other stuff, sixteen years worth of camping equipment, shop equipment, and family life.

CS: Did you make wine that year, 1973?

DA: That year the Watts made the wine at their home. And 1974.

CS: When you got your bond were you able to bring any of this home wine into it?

VA: No, it was pretty much consumed by then. And we shared a lot of it.

DA: We didn't make wine in 1975.

CS: When did you start building this place?

DA: We started building the house in 1974.

CS: Was the winery underneath part of the original idea?

DA: No. When we purchased the property we wanted to plant a vineyard and build a winery. That was the plan that the two families had. As a part of that plan, one of the first things I did was survey the property and sub-divide it into three parcels. Each of the families owned a 2.5 acre parcel outright with the third 5 acre parcel held in common ownership. That was for the winery, but the winery didn't happen.

Along the way we discovered that we had a water problem. Before we bought the property we made an offer contingent on our finding water. So we dug an exploratory well. The well driller came back with this glowing report, that we had all kinds of water and that the quality was suitable. But it took a year and a half to get PG&E power to the well pump. And when we turned it on we realized there was something amiss. It was very high in dissolved salts.

By that time we had planted some grape vines, in 1974. And we started watering the vines, and very soon the leaves were turning brown. For the Watts that presented an insurmountable problem. And at that point they began to lose interest in the property.

VA: And by that time our house was about 60% completed. We had sunk every dollar we had in this place. We couldn't walk away from it. Except for the joint purchase of the property they were still in a relatively safe position financially. So, ultimately we bought them out. It was clear that we now had a much different project on our hands than we had envisioned in the beginning. We now had half as much capital and half as much labor.

DA: They had three strapping sons, and we had three daughters.

VA: Working together the two families had been very productive, as when we put up the fencing, and the water system.

CS: But how did the water problem get resolved?

DA: We went back to the well driller and complained. He drilled three more wells for us. None of them was any better. So he finally just threw up his hands and walked away. And at this point we came to terms with the reality that there was no water in the ground that we were going to be able to use. So we started a suit against the driller. That was in 1980 and we won the suit and we got

enough money to build a 125,000 gallon steel water tank.

CS: But what were you using for water all this time.

DA: We were hauling it, in a truck. Later we developed a cistern system, based on the idea that we would capture rain water off the roof. We live in an area that averages about 55 inches of rain per year. One inch of rain will produce about 1,400 gallons off the roof. So we are very careful about our water usage, but we make it. We use high pressure hoses in the winery. We have low-flow things on every outlet.

CS: Let's go back to the vineyard, where we left it with leaves blackening.

DA: We started planting them in 1974, Chardonnay.

VA: We also had some Cabernet Sauvignon out, there, which was what Darryl wanted to grow. But we had a thermograph, and I became doubtful whether we could ripen Cabernet on this property, and after we bought them out we decided that it was too cool. Those vines had all died, anyway. Originally there were 700 vines. They were all on St. George rootstock. They were field budded later. We had the same fellow do it who did Congress Springs. The most westerly part was grafted to the Mt. Eden clone, and the rest to the UC Davis clone that Doug Meador has at Ventana.

So we hauled water in those cherry barrels. It was about that time that I went to the first viticultural short course at Davis. And there Professor Kassimatis was telling everyone that we should go to AxR-1, because that was the only way we could get enough production. But our farm advisor down here, Rudy Neja, was telling us that we needed the St. George if our vines were going to live. So it sounded as if we had a choice between no grapes or dead vines. I told Dexter that I knew I was going to grow old, but I wasn't going to do it siphoning water out of barrels that I had to haul fifteen miles round trip. At that point we put the vineyard on hold. And they have been gradually dying. Anything that you see there now has just survived. One year we netted a part of them and got a few grapes, but we never have really had any production off of it. We practice our pruning on them, but we don't get anything off them.

Subsequently we have done a lot of homework on rootstocks. We became friends with Lucie Morton.⁴ We've studied what they've done in France and South Africa. And we discovered the reason that 99R and 110R had been dismissed by Davis. And I went to the little seminar Lucie held down at Marilyn Otteman's place on Hecker Pass.⁵ I was there when Pierre Galet was there, and had a chance to see him and Lucie Morton arguing in French.⁶ It was a wonderful experience.

We have learned that vines are quite vigorous in these mountains. So we now have our own little rootstock vineyard or 110R and 1103. It's our mother vineyard.

Lucie also suggested that we plant Semillon. All there is in the Santa Cruz mountains now is that vineyard from which we get ours today, the old St. Charles Vineyard of the Novitiate. So we've been collecting Semillon clones. We have some from the old Almaden place, next door to Ruby Hill, in the Livermore Valley, the Wente clone, the UC Davis clone, and the St. Charles.

DA: We had bought Semillon from the old Almaden vineyard in 1981 when I wasn't able to get any Santa Cruz Mountain Semillon. Several years later we went back and the vineyard had been let go. We took Galet's book with us and we had to get down on our hands and knees to identify cuttings there. We eventually had two tiny cuttings survive. We also got the Wente clone. But they have been heat treated. And we have some from Davis and from the St. Charles Vineyard. So we're coming along very slowly on this.

One thing about what's left of the Chardonnay. We've only had one vine on which we've had

⁴ A scholar in the field of rootstock, and a former associate of Pierre Galet.

⁵ Sarah's Vineyard (BW 4868), founded in 1978.

⁶ Morton translated Galet's *Practical Ampelography* and it was published by Cornell University in 1979.

any mildew.

CS: Tell me about what you learned about this property from the old records and your survey.

History

DA: I researched the old government survey records and retraced the 1868 survey of our boundary lines. On one of our property corners the record mentions a two inch square stake at the foot of an eight foot diameter redwood tree. Subsequent to the survey this forest was clear cut. But that stake was still there. Now the tree is just a stump. They came up the line to the ridge and saw Lawrence's vineyard. That was "Buckskin" Lawrence, one of the old property owners here. His house was further down what is now the highway. For a few years in the 1860s there was a post office located on our property down near the San Lorenzo River, on the old Saratoga toll road. There was an old logging mill farther up, just down from our house. Our eastern boundary is the old Saratoga Toll Road. In 1980 we bought an additional 16 acres, to add to the original 10 acres.

CS: How did you make the decision to get your bond?

DA: With the water problem and its influence on our partners, it was pretty obvious that we would never build a winery the way we had hoped. But we were really interested in getting bonded. My experience with government is that things don't get any easier as time passes, so we decided to get the bond sooner rather than later. And we did have the space under the house. We decided to sacrifice this space, it was to be for storage, and bond that area as the winery.

CS: Were there any wine people in the area who helped you in this process.

DA: Tom Kruse was one of our mentors. We visited him frequently and talked wine. Also, in the early seventies, there was the movement to form the Santa Cruz Mountain Vintners. We went to several meetings. Jan Sherrill was involved in the early work; so was Merry Edwards, and Dave Bennion, too. There was a lot of bonding between us all at that time. And lots of good wine and parties. So we had a tremendous resource of information available to us. So bonding the winery wasn't difficult with all the advice we had from our colleagues. But we did it ourselves.

CS: Tell me about your first commercial vintage, the 1976.

Vintage 1976

DA: Our goal was to make wine that year. The chore was to find sources of grapes. And we looked for the varieties that we liked. Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Zinfandel were our top three. And we asked all of our winemaking friends about grapes sources. From Roudon-Smith we were directed to the Chauvet Vineyard in Sonoma.⁷ There's a story there. I was to pick up grapes at the vineyard. I drove up there in my 3/4 ton army truck. He had picked the grapes into his boxes, and then I was to arrive and transfer them into my boxes. They were just inside the gate along the fence. When I arrived there the boxes of grapes looked like bee hives. And I had always been afraid of bees, but I decided that if I was going to make wine I'd have to go through with this. I didn't have a choice. So I transferred all those grapes without a bee sting. That was Zinfandel, and we made about 150 cases of it.

VA: Those weren't the first grapes we crushed. The first were from Shandon (Paso Robles), the Shell Creek Vineyard.

⁷ See Roudon-Smith interviews.

DA: We were turned onto them by the Sherrills. They were Cabernet Sauvignon. And we got Monterey Chardonnay grapes from Doug Meador at Ventana. That arrangement was made through Merry Edwards. They rented (Mt. Eden) a refrigerated van and picked up the grapes, and they came by here and dropped them off for us.

VA: Before that we had taken our boxes up to Mt. Eden on that terrible road in the dark, and part way up the mountain we started dropping the boxes off. What a mess! Then they had the grapes picked into them down in Monterey and dropped them off here. These were used boxes we bought from Roffinella.

DA: Total that year we made about 300 cases from the three varieties. We also made a little Cabernet from the Bates Ranch, above Hecker Pass Road. I think it was the first commercial crop from that vineyard. Tom Kruse put us onto that. We made two different Cabernets that year. They were vineyard designated.

We had decided that we really wanted to have some wine in the bottle as soon as we could. The best way to do that was to make a rosé. So we took about 40 gallons of juice from the Bates Ranch Cab and squeezed it and made what I labeled as Cabernet Rosé. But I waited so long to press it that it was as dark as any claret you've ever seen.

VA: I think you left it over night.

DA: But we didn't ferment it on the skins. So early the next year we were able to have 15 cases of this "rosé" for sale.

But the remaining skins and juice produced a very tannic, heavy, full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon which is just now starting to taste good.

VA: Every year we'd have an open house and we'd pull a bottle and "disgorge" it, upside down, to blow away some of the sediment. We'd take the bottle out of the case, upside down, and pull the cork with this old French cork-puller we have. So year after year we'd do this, and we developed this whole crew of aficionados, and it was years before it was ever drinkable.

DA: Over the years we've tried to keep samples of every wine we had made. But one of them that we had no samples of was the 1976 Shell Creek Cabernet. A friend of ours recently, from his own private cellar, dropped off two bottles of it. So Val and I pulled the cork on one that night. It was delicious, and I thanked our friend profusely, but he was shocked that we done it. "That was for your collection!" he said. But we still have one bottle left.

Selling Wine

CS: How did you sell these first wines?

DA: At first, just to a few friends.

VA: The first wine I can remember selling was that 1977 Zin Blanc.

CS: As the vintages progressed you did start really selling it. How?

DA: I started doing the selling myself. It was a matter of contacting retailers and restaurants. In the early days I could sell almost all our wines by telephone, which was great. And I would deliver it myself.

CS: How did total production progress?

DA: We increased about every year, but not very much.

VA: Our 1978 Napa Cabernet was the biggest Cab lot we'd ever made, 250 cases. Dexter thought he'd never sell that wine. But he did.

CS: When did you hit 1,000 cases, total?

DA: I'd say in the early eighties.

CS: You mentioned a jump in 1986 earlier.

DA: Yes. And by 1989 we had hit 2,500 cases. Before 1986 we were in the 1,500 case range. It was about that time that I made a conscious decision to raise our Chardonnay production, and we did. And our Cabernet production was way down in 1987 and 1988. We had some really poor grape sets.

Last year I cut back on Chardonnay. There is so much of it around. I cut it by two-thirds, from 1,500 cases to 500. I we started making Zinfandel again. We had stopped making it in 1982. We had been buying our Zin grapes from the old Ruby Hill Vineyard in the Livermore Valley, near Pleasanton. But Computerland bought the property in 1982, and they pushed out the vineyard right away.⁸ And this was the time that red Zinfandel was going out of style. And it made no sense for a winery like ours to go into white Zinfandel.

CS: How much wine did you make this year?

DA: About 1,800 cases.

CS: That's quite a drop from the previous 2,500 cases. That's almost 30% less.

DA: That amount feels more comfortable now. Of course, from vineyards where we buy the total production, we're limited by what they produce. The St. Charles Vineyard⁹ this year produced less than two tons of grapes. That's perhaps 120 cases. But a couple of years ago we got enough for 250 cases. But a large part of the total decline comes from the cutting back of the Chardonnay production.

CS: A decline of 1,000 cases more than accounts for the total decline. In fact other varieties are up some.

Good, that gives me a historical dimension. Now back to the details. Let's go back to the 1976 vintage.

DA: We had 2.3 tons of Shell Creek Cabernet. We got about 1.5 tons from Bates Ranch. We also bought Zinfandel from Templeton through Paul Staiger.¹⁰ He had been focusing on Templeton and Zinfandel and he agreed to get some grapes for us. Several other winemakers were in on it. These grapes arrived near his place quite late in the afternoon. It was night time when we got there. There were trucks all over the place, headlights lighting the whole area. Fruit flies all over.

VA: Volatile acidity filled the air! It was awful.

⁸ For a more complete picture of this controversy see: *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2/8/82; *Hayward Review*, 2/1/82; *Wine Spectator*, 5/16/82.

⁹ Novitiate vineyard, near Bear Creek Road.

¹⁰ P and M Staiger Winery (BW 4649) on Hopkins Gulch Road near Boulder Creek, founded in 1973.

DA: This was Friday or Saturday, and we later found out they had started picking the grapes on Monday and stacking them on the truck. So the people who got there first got the last grapes picked, on top. We were one of the last. This wine never saw the commercial light of day.

VA: You can't imagine the scene up there, in the dark, with all these scrambling people dumping boxes.

DA: We got 1,500 pounds of that Templeton Zin. We also crushed 1690 pounds of the Chauvet Zin. We also got Monterey Chardonnay on November 6 from Doug Meador, 3159 pounds.

VA: That was his first year of commercial production, too. Later there was some question whether those grapes really came from Ventana, or from the McFarland property nearby.

CS: What were you aiming at, in terms of style then?

Making Wine---Style

DA: We had the background experience of home winemakers. And nothing more. But we had never made a Chardonnay before. We had made an Emerald Riesling with the Watts, but it was a bomb.

VA: We never really respond fully to questions about style. We didn't come to winemaking with a sense of self-sophistication. We discovered early on that Dexter was the gifted winemaker. He has always had some kind of intuitive sense about when things need to be done. He has a good nose, and I have a strong sensitivity for H₂S.

DA: She's the winery canary. My decisions are made on the basis of experience.

VA: We aren't trying to imitate anyone.

DA: In the early days I was sort of serving an apprenticeship. I was learning. We did things in a very straight-forward, traditional way.

VA: Essentially, you're just taking care of things.

DA: We always want stable wine, so we always inoculated the Chardonnay for malo-lactic. Same for the reds. Even in 1976.

VA: We have used wild yeast. And we don't put the Semillon through ML.

But we were consulting with Merry Edwards in the early years. We were her first consulting clients. One of the first things we did with her was get a list of the lab equipment we'd need. I have a tape of those sessions with her.

DA: We didn't have a pH meter then. But we could do sugar and total acid.

CS: Straight titration?

VA: Yes. We still do that.

CS: Glass jar paper chromatography for malo-lactic?

DA: Yes, we had a kit for that.

VA: In 1976 we were still destemming red grapes by rubbing them through a sheet of something with holes in it.

DA: It took your finger prints off. We got that from Nat Sherrill. And we had an old Italian crusher.

CS: Let's go to 1977.

DA: We again got the Shell Creek Cabernet (5,000 pounds). That came as juice. They were machine picked and field-crushed. They did it in the middle of the night.

VA: We weren't comfortable at first about getting grapes that way.

DA: It came in a big tank truck, and we had to split it with Nat Sherrill. It took us two or three hours to pump that must out of the tank.

VA: And we brought it home in the plastic Maraschino cherry barrels. Those barrels were really important to small, young wineries like ours back in the seventies.

DA: I brought home 600 gallons of must in those barrels in a rented trailer. I remember driving along at about ten miles per hour bringing them here.

VA: We were terribly worried about it. It was really aerated and it had started to ferment when it got here. But it turned out to be a very fine wine, our first gold medal at the Los Angeles County Fair. But at that time we were worrying about absolutely everything. We hadn't developed that kind of confidence you ultimately gain over the years.

DA: We also made Zinfandel from the Chauvet Vineyard (1877 pounds). And we started getting grapes from Wayne Weidaman on Watsonville Road in the Hecker Pass area. Nat Sherrill told us about this vineyard. We got 102 boxes of Zinfandel grapes that year (2.05 tons). He delivered them to us in his pickup truck.

We got 2.5 tons of Chardonnay from Ventana.

VA: We've made Ventana Chardonnay every year since 1976. But we do buy from other sources as well.

DA: And we got 3 tons of Cabernet from Bates Ranch. We didn't buy there in 1978 or 1979, but started again in 1980 and have ever since.

We bought 2 tons of Zinfandel from Paso Robles. We got them from a recommendation by Bob Roudon. Those grapes arrived unripe, 19.2° Brix. We were due to buy four tons, and we rejected two tons.

VA: We unloaded them from a bin and crushed them and got the sugar.

DA: So we made a Zinfandel rosé from that.

VA: We fermented it in glass carboys, seven gallon acid bottles. We called it Zinfandel Blanc.

DA: At the time I noted in my diary that we pressed the must "for rosé for Champagne."

VA: We pumped it with nitrogen to preserve as much of the fruity character as possible. We bottled

it in a flint Bordeaux bottle. It was just beautiful. And it was effervescent when you poured it. The fruit was beautiful. I recall this one family came by and wanted to taste our wine and that was the only wine we had to taste at that point. The grandmother asked, "Now, how is this different from Gallo?" And she put it to her lips and she said, "It's delicious."

DA: That wine made a lot of friends.

In 1977 we produced 1,983 gallons of wine, about 800 cases.

CS: So, you have a wine to sell. What about the early Ahlgren label?

The Label

VA: I went to talk to some artist friends. I was an artist jeweler, and was a member of Gallery House in Palo Alto. I decided that knowing all these graphic artists would mean we could have a really wonderful label. But as I talked to them it became clear to me that this was a more workman-like piece than art work. One of them sent me to a friend who had a shop where she sold printing equipment. She had a bunch of books and I bought a couple. One was called *Printed Ephemera*. It had pictures of old railroad tickets, bank bonds, chewing tobacco labels, and such. So our original label was drawn from an 1860s railroad ticket, the format. It was a blank filled out and perforated, with two halves. And we used the lines to fill in the information about the wine.

I was told early that it would cost about \$1,000 to go to press with a professionally designed label. So I came home and told Dexter that and he said, "Hell, I can buy ten barrels for that. No way are we going to spend that on a label." So he said that I should do the label. We went back and forth. So I came up with the railroad ticket thing.

I got the typography, including the scroll from Dan Solo. He's a collector of old type faces. Later I went back and looked at the railroad ticket and it had the same vertical scroll.

CS: We'll start with labels the next session, and move on from the 1977 vintage.

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January 18, 1994

CS: When did you start using the new label?

DA: We started in 1985. We changed the label at the insistence of our brokers. They thought that the old label was funky, great for Boulder Creek and Santa Cruz, but not for broader markets. So we worked with a local design firm and spent over six months in a very interesting process. We took him a lot of labels, and we talked about what we wanted and they made up quick sketches. After that exercise they came back with mockups of five labels, and one of them was the label we finally adopted. We took that on around to brokers, and we did some balloting here at the winery. It was pretty unanimous-- the one we adopted was what people liked. The 1985 Chardonnays had that label.

VA: And the 1983 Bates Cab had the new label. The old label was really loved by some people. But it was also controversial. It didn't pretend to be pretty. Some people hated it. It was very easily identifiable. People would walk into a bottle shop and say that they didn't know the name of a wine,

but it has black hand lettering on it. That was very positive. The negatives were that to some people it looked like a sample label. We were tasting with a buyer in San Francisco. We were in this little tasting bar arrangement that they had and a customer walked in to ask a question. He turned the labels of three of our bottles to her and asked whether she would buy these wines. And she said NO, that they were samples. He was making an important point for us. And we had heard it before. Narsai David tasted out 1982 Cabs on his radio show and his side-kick on the program asked whether they were sample labels. Another negative was that when a bottle was sitting on a restaurant table you could not read the word AHLGREN. The script was not really an advertisement.

So we invested all this money getting a new label and just before it was ready to be released one of our brokers told us that he was ready to put a halt to the whole new label thing. And the vast majority of our consumers loved it. But at that point we told him that we had bought it and that he had to sell it.

CS: You could use it from time to time for a wine here and there.

VA: We plan to do exactly that. If we ever produce an estate Semillon it will surely be under the old label.

DA: And we think we'll use it for the Zinfandel, also.

CS: Let's go back to vintages.

DA: There are a few things about the 1977 vintage we didn't talk about. We bought Zinfandel from the City of San Jose. They had a vineyard that was part of the old Grilli property. It was a typical Italian field blend. We bought a couple of tons and as we were crushing we separated the obviously non-Zin from the Zin. We wound up making two wines. The Zin was very high acid, but the rest we made into what we called RANDOM RED. It had everything else, and the BATF approved the label. I sold the Zinfandel to Stony Ridge (Ruby Hill), and I guess they dumped it into a tank with the rest of their Zin.

I had gotten preliminary approval from the BATF for the Random Red label, but I forgot to get final approval. So the next time the BATF audited us the guy tells us that we never got final approval. By now we had about five cases left in the cellar. So I had to make application for final approval, with five cases of wine. He was a real nitpicker. Also we made a Zin rosé, which we called Zinfandel blanc, from some Paso Robles grapes that were too low in sugar. We also made a Petite Sirah from Ventana. Doug Meador made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I didn't have to pay for the grapes until I sold the wine. It turned out to be a very nice wine.

CS: You never bought any from Shell Creek.

VA: We had a real problem there. We had wonderful grapes in 1976 and 1977, and then in 1980, when we bought them again, the vineyard management had changed. The grapes were the raunchiest stuff we had ever seen. The pH was sky high. We dumped it over the hill. That was the end of our Shell Creek experience.

DA: In 1976 and 1977 we had made Zin from the Sonoma Chauvet vineyard. In 1978 we were unable to get those grapes so we bought Zinfandel from Ruby Hill, and also some from the Wiedeman Vineyard near Hecker Pass. We made two Cabernets: one from Adamson-Tupper in Rutherford and the other from the Besson Vineyard, near Hecker Pass.

CS: I just drank a 1978 Cab of yours from Besson. It was good and still had plenty of life in it.

DA: In 1978 we also made Chardonnay from Ventana. We had a grand total of 777 cases. In 1979 we made Zin from the same two sources as before. Cabernet from Adamson-Tupper,

Winemaker's Comment:

DEEPLY COLORED ROSÉ
MADE IN THE TRADITIONAL
MANNER. FRUITY, DISTINCT
VARIETAL AROMA AND FLAVOR.
UNFINED AND UNFILTERED.
STORE BELOW 70°F, 21°C.

BOTTLED APRIL, 19 77

SERVE CHILLED D.D.A.

PRODUCED & BOTTLED BY

Ahlgren Vineyard

BOULDER CREEK, SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Vintage of 1976

Variety CABERNET SAUVIGNON/ROSÉ

Origin SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Alcohol 12.4 % by volume

Walter D. Ahlgren ~ Thelma Ahlgren

CONTAINS SULFITES
GOVERNMENT WARNING: (1) ACCORDING TO THE SURGEON GENERAL, WOMEN SHOULD NOT DRINK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES DURING PREGNANCY BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF BIRTH DEFECTS TO CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IMPAIRS YOUR ABILITY TO DRIVE A CAR OR OPERATE MACHINERY AND MAY CAUSE HEALTH PROBLEMS



**Winemaker's
Comments:**

100% Cabernet Sauvignon.
Rich, ripe, aromatic, intense
bouquet. Spicy, black
cherry, pepper character.
Good fruit/acid/tannin
balance. Firm structure,
long finish. Unfined and
unfiltered.
260 cases produced.
Bottled July 27, 1987.

Walter D. Ahlgren Thelma Ahlgren

AHLGREN

1987 CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Santa Cruz Mountains, Bates' Ranch

Alcohol 13.6% by volume

and from Tepusquet in the Santa Maria Valley. That was a disaster. The wine was very vegetative. The wine was awful. We ended up blending it. We bought some Merlot and some Petite Sirah and blended it in. 1979 was the first year we made Semillon. We got the grapes from the Alma Vineyard of Novitiate.

VA: Dan Gehrs at Congress Springs was managing the vineyard and offered us the grapes.

DA: In 1980 everything was extremely ripe. The alcohols were very high.¹¹ The Bates Cabernet that year had a tutti-fruitti/roast beef taste. It didn't taste like Cabernet Sauvignon. Keith Holdfeldt at Sunrise, then located in the Locatelli winery on Empire Grade, had some Cab from the Arata Vineyard¹² which was very tannic, without a trace of fruit. So we went through some blending trials and bought some of that to go with the Bates.

VA: Our first technical consultant was Merry Edwards. Then she left Mt. Eden and Keith became our consultant, and he was really wonderful. He also worked at Veedercrest before it went under.¹³ He's in Oregon now. He still consults for us. We ship samples up to him.

DA: Both our Zinfandels in 1980 were skewed. One tasted like roast beef and the other was tutti-fruitti, so we blended the two together and made a wonderful wine-- big, rich. A couple of times we traded this Zin with some woodcutters up here for fire wood. They loved that big wine.

VA: We thought the Zinfandel from the Wiedemen vineyard was difficult to work with. The grapes had a very low pH, very stable. You could hardly get them to ferment. Then, as you punched the cap the mass kind of collapsed, and you had this big fermenter full of jam, which made it hard to press. I only think one vintage did those grapes go through a malo-lactic.

But we do get calls now about that wine. We got a fax from New York thanking us for their Thanksgiving dinner, last year, they had five bottles of our Santa Clara Zinfandel and they said it was absolutely fabulous.

Wine Writers

Before we go on I want to go back to the 1978 Adamson Cabernet. We ended up not entering it into any competitions. We thought it was too sophisticated. Our experience is that you needed really up-front fruit, and such. But it ended up in a very serious tasting in New York by a group called The Grand Crew. They tasted 64 top California Cabernets, eight at a time for eight weeks. Our wine won that tasting. And they had another tasting where they took California Cabernets, the top eight from this other series and they took ten red Bordeaux in the \$10-20 range-- that was back in 1982 when the dollar was very strong against the French franc. It included Lynch-Bages, and our wine won that one. Terry Robards was at that tasting, so we got a big splash in the *New York Times*; he was still writing for them then.

About three years ago somebody called us and said they were going back to taste 1978 Cabs with Robert Parker, and could they take a bottle of ours. He tasted it and wrote that he was stunned by the quality of the wine.¹⁴ So we sent him a vertical of our Bates Ranch Cabernet and he said that if you were looking for quality Cabernets at a reasonable price to check out Ahlgren. Some place in there

¹¹ See the table at the end of this interview for more specific data on these vintages.

¹² In Saratoga below Villa Montalvo.

¹³ In Emeryville, BW 4711, 1972-1982.

¹⁴ *Wine Advocate* (December 15, 1989):2. Parker scored the wine 88 and wrote, "its stunning showing in this recent tasting was a total surprise."

I think he said we were among the most underrated Cabernet producers in the country.¹⁶ On the other hand the *Wine Spectator* trashed us for the same wine.¹⁶

DA: Back to the 1980 vintage, that was when we dumped the Shell Creek Cabernet down the hill. Even after I had adjusted the acid it was unstable.

In 1981 we made Semillon from the Livermore Valley, from the Almaden vineyard next to Ruby Hill, now a gold course. That year there were no grapes from Alma; they had problems with cutworms.

VA: Over the years that Semillon has been superb. We had a magnum up at a tasting in San Francisco and people loved it, all the way to the bottom.

CS: One of the untold secrets about California wine is how well Semillon and Sauvignon blanc age, and how long. With the right chemistry and good fruit, fifteen years is nothing.

VA: Keith Holfeldt took our Semillon to France and snuck it into tastings as a ringer; it always did well.

That's one of the sources for our Semillon clones, that old Almaden place.

CS: It is a very good chance that those vines can be traced back to Château D'Yquem. That old vineyard was controlled by Theodore Gier years ago, and his Sauternes variety vines came from the old Louis Mel importation to his El Mocho Vineyard in Livermore by way of the Wentes.¹⁷

Grape Sources

DA: We made Cabernet from three vineyards in 1981. We were not able to get Adamson grapes. Bob Adamson called me in January 1981 and said that it would be best for him if he sold all his grapes to Joe Heitz. I guess Joe told him that he wanted all Bob's grapes or none.

VA: It's interesting the Heitz never gave a vineyard designation from the Adamson grapes. But we did.

CS: Actually, Darrell Corti made a Cabernet from those vines in 1970, I think at the Sutter Home place. He also gave a full vineyard designation and complete description of the place. I drank a bottle of it last Saturday up at a tasting on Howell Mountain.

VA: After he told us he wouldn't sell us his grapes anymore I told him, "You psychiatrists, this is the kind of thing that drives people crazy."¹⁸

DA: So in 1981 we made Cabernet from a vineyard then called Cristina Vineyard in Oakville. I agreed to buy eight tons, but the first batch was underripe. So I refused the second batch. We also made a small quantity of Cab from the Veedercrest vineyard on Mt. Veeder. We got them through Keith. We made a red table wine from those grapes. Val designed the label for it. There was a red table with a candle.

In 1982 we only produced Zinfandel from Ruby Hill. I had arranged to pick up the grapes on a Sunday and drove up with my truck. They had had one of their grape stomps the day before. I got

¹⁶ *Wine Advocate* (February 28, 1992):22. Here Parker was discussing various California Cabernet producers. He wrote that Ahlgren was, "a perennial overachiever making burly, rich, concentrated, ageworthy Cabernets. . . ." "Price/Quality Ratio: excellent."

¹⁶ *Wine Spectator* (November 19, 1992) rated the 1978 an 80 and termed it "austere."

¹⁷ For Mel's personal telling of that story see: *Livermore Herald*, February 24, 1933, and *Wines & Vines* (October 1, 1935).

¹⁸ Adamson has retired and sold the vineyard a few years ago.

there at about 7:00 in the morning. There were people lying around all over the place. It looked as if there had been a battle. The pickers were there and they didn't know what to do. So I walked down to the main house and knocked on the door where Harry Rosengana was sleeping. He called that he'd be right out. So I waited fifteen minutes, and he finally dragged himself out.

Also in 1982 we started getting some grapes from the York Creek Vineyard on Spring Mountain in Napa Valley. Cabernet. Fritz Maytag was a little sensitive to anyone but Ridge putting YORK CREEK on the front label, so we put it on the side label. On the front label it was Napa Valley. We got Semillon from the Alma Vineyard and we also got Cab from the Beauregard Vineyard in Bonny Doon. We blended that with the 1983 Bonny Doon and labeled it Santa Cruz Mountains.

In 1983 we got Chardonnay from the Beauregard Vineyard. And that was the first year we had St. Charles Vineyard grapes, Semillon. By then the Alma Vineyard had become very unproductive. By then Dan Gehrs had given up on it. We made Cabernet again from York Creek and from Bates Ranch. And from the Beauregard Vineyard which we blended with the 1982.

CS: Are you profitable by now?

DA: We had been in the black almost from day one.

CS: How were the 1983 Cabs?

DA: Napa had a reputation for 1983 Cabs that was down some. Ours were pretty tight.

In 1984 the Chardonnay from Beauregard was blended with the 1985 Beauregard. Jim Beauregard is not a very good farmer.

VA: In 1984 we had a warm tropical storm come through just before harvest.

DA: We went up to check the vineyard and it was ready to be picked. Jim was away on a vacation with his family at Tahoe.

VA: His solution was to just sulfur the hell out of the vineyard.

DA: The Beauregard Cabernet was so highly sulfured that it stank during the fermentation. We went to great lengths to get rid of it. But I finally dumped it. Some months later we had a tasting here and Keith had saved some and put it in without telling us. Nobody could tell it was Cabernet.

VA: We had even put it through a filter Keith brought down from David Bruce's. It was the only red wine we have ever filtered. We had to work far too much in the cellar on the wines from Beauregard grapes.

DA: In 1984 we got Semillon from both Alma and St. Charles. We were buying again through Dan Gehrs. We ended up with a blend of the two vineyards.

VA: The 1984 Bates Cabernet was not typical. The vineyard had been overcropped. We were very disappointed in it when it was young, but as it aged it turned out to be one of our favorites, even though it was a lighter wine. But it had perfect balance.

CS: 1984 was an early year. I can see here you picked it September 16. That's three weeks earlier than any of your previous harvests.

DA: 1985 was the last year we got Beauregard grapes. We blended the Chardonnay this year with the 1984. But we did make a 1985 Beauregard Cabernet that was not bad. We didn't get York Creek grapes anymore. We started getting them at first because there was a surplus, but by 1985 this wasn't the case.

VA: That is despite the fact that we were reputed to have made some of the best wine ever to have come off that vineyard. But Maytag had his old buddies from Ridge and Belvedere.

DA: We also made Chardonnay in 1985 from the Sierra Madre Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley. I was interested in getting another Chardonnay that would be different from Ventana. But we made Ventana also.

CS: Bates Cab and Ventana Chardonnay are the two most solid elements of continuity for you over the years.

VA: And the Semillon from the Novitiate vineyards. We've made it right through 1993.

DA: We couldn't get Sierra Madre grapes in 1986, but we did get some from Tepusquet. But we couldn't use the word TEPUSQUET on the label. Jess Jackson had bought it by then and wanted to expunge the word from the language.¹⁹ The word had developed a bad connotation.

That wine was tasty for a while, but it fell apart very quickly. Of all the wines we made over the years the Tepusquet wines, from 1986 and 1987, were the only ones that fell apart that way.

CS: I'm seeing you raising production some almost every year. What's happening?

DA: That's just the way things we going. It wasn't a plan. Some of the variation comes from the vintage.

1987 was an interesting year for me. The St. Charles Semillon developed a spontaneous malolactic fermentation and it developed a weird popcorn flavor. We decided that there didn't seem to be any way of getting rid of it, so we approached it on the basis of blending. So we bought several hundred gallons of Semillon from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars; our assistant winemaker then, Jennifer Reid, had worked there earlier. We blended it with the St. Charles. We gave it a California appellation.

VA: It turned out a very nice wine.

DA: We had some St. Charles Semillon left over, so I blended that with some Tepusquet Chardonnay which became WHITE TABLE WINE.

VA: In 1987 and 1988 there was very low production from Bates Cabernet.

DA: We had more than twice as much in 1986 as these other two years.

CS: Tell me about Jennifer Reid.

DA: She was a graduate of UC Davis in fermentation science. She came here in 1987 and left just before the 1989 vintage. She had worked for Stag's Leap for about a year after she had graduated. Then she went to work for David Bruce. We got to know her through Keith. We got to utilize her about two or three days per week. She spent the rest of the time at David's.

CS: Did anybody take her place?

VA: Not really. She kind of took the place of our daughter.

DA: She worked for us for about five years. She had worked at the Los Altos Wine Art store. She

¹⁹Kendall-Jackson bought Tepusquet in 1987. See *Wine Spectator* (August 31, 1987); *Wines & Vines* (June 1987): 18; (August 1987): 15.

just picked it up.

VA: She started out right after high school. She started working here about 1981. Until 1985.

CS: Is there anyone in that position now?

VA: No, just us.

DA: Let's go on to the 1988 vintage. Our total dropped some this year, to 1568 cases.

CS: Had you changed anything about your marketing?

DA: We were working for more out-of-state marketing.

VA: And in 1987 we exported some wine to Germany.

CS: Is this foreign connection in cahoots with other wineries?

VA: No. It a connection we found.

DA: It's the same with our out-of-state contacts.

VA: In 1985 that the UC Alumni had a wine information program. They invited lots of the wineries to submit samples for tasting. Our 1985 Bates Ranch Cabernet came out number one. I didn't think it could win anything because it was so sophisticated.

CS: These were all University of California people.

DA: There were about 70 or 80 wineries involved.

VA: There was a tasting in New York for UC alumni, of those wines. Our wine was number one. Ours was a Cabernet, Merry Edwards had the best Chardonnay, and Rosenblum had the best Zinfandel.

The tasting was set up by Acker Merrall & Condit in New York City. They loved our Cabernet and they asked us if they could sell our wines. That has turned out to be an extremely fine account for us. They don't carry many California wines. They treat Ahlgren as if it were a small, exclusive French chateau. They had an article on us in a recent catalogue. They take up about 20% of our production and buy all the wines that we make. Dexter goes back once a year and they take him around to winemaker dinners and that sort of thing.

DA: In 1988 our production was down some. We made Semillon from St. Charles and we bought some in bulk from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and sold it as California. That year we had two Semillons.

CS: I didn't know Winiarski made a Semillon.

DA: They make it to blend in their Sauvignon blanc.

Also in 1988 we started making a Santa Cruz Mountain Chardonnay from a vineyard owned by the Buerges.

In 1989 we really had production kick up-- to 2390 cases. This was the earthquake year. We made St. Charles Semillon and also got a little Sauvignon blanc from there. Dan Gehrs had gone through and interplanted in the Semillon with Sauvignon blanc where a Semillon vine had died. So in

1989 we got about 200 pounds from these vines and blended into the Semillon. We also bottled more Semillon from Stag's Leap as California.

In 1989 we bought Chardonnay from another Santa Cruz Mountain vineyard for the first time. This was a two acre vineyard above Soquel owned by the Mayers.

CS: It appears that the jump in production is Chardonnay bubble.

DA: That's right. In 1988 we had 10 tons from Ventana. In 1989 we had almost 15 tons. We were using Ventana as the vehicle for increasing our production.

CS: What's pushing this?

DA: We had intended to increase production over time during the mid-eighties, but the 1987 and 1988 grape production was down. I was using the Chardonnay to make up for that drop in Cabernet production from Bates in the previous years. So in 1989 we had three different Chardonnays.

Earthquake

The Chardonnays were fermenting when the earthquake hit. All the barrels came down in the cellar. Nothing really broke. But the barrels rolled and a lot of the fermenting Chardonnay just spilled out when the fermenting locks were knocked off. We lost the equivalent of a couple of hundred cases in juice. And we lost Semillon also, in the same way. The Cabernet was in the fermenter for a couple of weeks after completion of fermentation.

VA: We lost some that sloshed out, from a little tsunami.

DA: So you had extended maceration, whether you wanted it or not.

VA: The way things were we had no place to put the fermented wine. The cellar was in chaos. All our library wines came down, all the barrels. We had to pump out every barrel and restack them and put the wine back in the barrels. Dexter and I worked for weeks on this. We really lost weight. We were exhausted by the time Christmas came around. So the 1989 reds are a little different.

CS: Is that 2390 cases what you ended up with?

DA: Yes.

CS: So 1989 would have been your all-time production record had it not been for the earthquake. It would have been around 2600 cases.

VA: We had an exposed earth bank in the cellar. We had earthquake insurance and we got a structural engineer up here and hired a contractor and ended up propping the whole house up underneath and excavating all that sandstone bank, little by little. You saw the wall there now. But having that wall and cutting out the bank gave us about 30% more cellar space.

DA: The footprint of the house is 1200 square feet. So when the bank was there we actually had about 60-70% of that.

VA: The year prior to that things were going so well that we had decided to build a real winery building. We had done a lot of the preliminary work planning it. We were poised to build an 8,000 case winery. So when the earthquake hit, and the recession after that, we just put all that on hold.

But with the more space in the winery now we can delay it. We spent an awful lot of time and money retrofitting this building, and only after it was all over did we realize how much of a distraction it was. Especially for marketing. We sort of let the brokers take care of things. I think that hurt us. It took us about two years to get the whole job done, but we did do it in spurts. We'd work for three months and then take a break for a couple of months. We actually had to have the replacement wood milled on site. It was all very time-consuming.

DA: We have proven to ourselves that we can produce 2400 cases very easily. It is an exercise in agility down there, but it really works.

CS: But when you get beyond 3000 cases you'll want someone to help you.

DA: Absolutely. It's interesting that our assistant, Jennifer Reid, left just a month before the earthquake.

VA: Another thing that had changed our ability to make wine came with the bladder press. Before that we had two basket presses. Now we have two bladder presses. It's still a lot of work, but it's possible.

CS: Tell me how the 1990 vintage went for you.

DA: Actually we set a record for tonnage, 44.3. Everything we did in 1989 we did in 1990 so far as grape sources are concerned. But we didn't buy any bulk Semillon this year.

CS: Are these the reds you're selling now.

DA: We're selling the 1989s now. We try to hold the Cabs for four years.

In 1991 we didn't have any Sauvignon blanc for the St. Charles Semillon. The deer ate it and the Semillon crop was extremely small. We had a total of about 20 tons of Chardonnay. We took all of the Mayers and Buerge production.

VA: The Mayers wine is extremely slow to develop. It is extremely firm and stable wine.

DA: We still get all the Mayers grapes, but we aren't getting Buerge now.
Also in 1991 I got a ton of Cabernet franc from Bates Ranch and blended that with the Bates Cabernet Sauvignon.

CS: Was that the first year Bates had Cab franc for sale?

VA: I think so. We didn't hear about any before that.

DA: In 1992 I cut our Ventana Chardonnay from 15 tons to 5 tons. And we dropped the Buerge Chardonnay. We're selling our 1991 Chardonnays right now.

CS: So you are coming up on the market now with much less Chardonnay to sell. Does that feel good?

DA: Yes.

CS: I think you timed it pretty well. There is an awful lot of Chardonnay around looking to be sold.

DA: Actually, I was about a year late. I should have cut back on Ventana in 1991.

VA: But we were concentrating on fixing this house.

DA: In 1992 we also got Bates Merlot as well as the Cab and Cab franc.

CS: Are you going to produce a varietal Merlot?

DA: Yes, and a varietal Cabernet franc.

CS: Will you blend any of them with the Cabernet Sauvignon?

DA: We did some blending trials a few months ago.

VA: We had several people with really good palates, and they all had graduated cylinders and pipettes. No one could improve on the straight Cabernet Sauvignon. You could improve Merlot with Cab, but not the other way around.

We have a little wine club here now. Small wineries have to sell more wine themselves, since we're being squeezed out by the big chains. We've lost a lot of places to sell wine. The fine wine shops that used to educate consumers are actually diminishing in number. The chain stores want larger and larger quantities at deeper and deeper discounts.

DA: In 1992 we made two Zinfandels, from Besson and from the Pourroy vineyard up at Congress Springs. The Besson comes from his father's vineyard that was planted in the twenties. It's an old head pruned vineyard that is not visible from the Hecker Pass highway. Going east it's before you get to Fortino's. And we got some in 1993, as well. The Congress Springs Zinfandel was a disaster. The grapes had been over-sulfured. So we're back in the Zinfandel business.

Style

CS: Let's talk about style now. You had an unexpected extended maceration in 1989. Will you do it again? Or are you doing it?

VA: We might some day. We don't like to get doctrinaire about winemaking. If we want to try something we will.

DA: We always have to think about the financial aspect of what we do. For example, with Bates he always wants top dollar. He wants the Napa price plus a bonus. I have a five year contract with him that is automatically renewed unless one of the parties decides not to. So I gave him notice a couple of years ago I was stopping the contract. So in three years I am really going to rethink the situation.

CS: Does your Cabernet Sauvignon have to be Santa Cruz Mountain?

DA: No. But we focus on these Mountains because that's where we are. There just isn't very much Santa Cruz Mountain fruit available.

VA: We have a commitment to the Mountains here but we aren't fools.

CS: Let's finish up by talking about the future and the idea of expansion. Is that a MAYBE still?

VA: It's there. It's a maybe. The market situation is not great.

DA: And I wouldn't undertake it without a partner.

CS: So right now at about 2,000 cases you can keep moving along and it's comfortable.

DA: Very comfortable. It's something we can do ourselves. It's a great life. But 8,000 cases is another world. We have the plans and we have the site for it. If we had the right partner we might do it.

CS: As you get older do you think your daughter, who worked here with you, might want to step in and take over?

VA: No. She has her own career.

DA: We have a couple of choices way down the line. One of them, obviously, is just to shut the winery down.

VA: To take someone else on we'd have to push up production to increase profits to take care of a second family. There are lots of ways to make money in wine without actually producing the wine, but if we push up production much, that would be a big step.

* * * * *

Ahlgren Wines, 1976-1993

<u>Year</u>	<u>Variety</u>	<u>Vineyard</u>	<u>Crush Date</u>	<u>Tons</u>	<u>% Alcohol</u>	<u>Cases</u>	
1976	Cabernet Sauvignon	Shell Creek	10/16/76	2.4	12.0	134	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/20/76	1.3	11.6	44	
	Cab S, for rosé				12.4	22	
	Zinfandel	Chauvet	10/17/76	0.8	17.6	40	
	Zinfandel	Templeton	10/16/76	0.8	16.0	30	
	Chardonnay	Ventana	11/6/76	1.6	13.0	79	
Total				6.9		349	
1977	Cabernet Sauvignon	Shell Creek	10/4/77	2.5	12.3	178	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/20/77	3.1	12.4	183	
	Zinfandel	Wiedeman	10/10/77	1.4	14.4	65	
	Zinfandel	Grilli (San Jose)	10/11/77	2.1	14.4	bulk	
	Random Red	Grilli			11.6	33	
	Zinfandel (rosé)	Paso Robles	10/19/77	1.0	11.4	63	
	Zinfandel	Chauvet	10/8/77	0.9	13.5	51	
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/27/77	2.5	12.4	177	
	Petite Sirah	Ventana	11/17/77	2.0	12.4	146	
	Total				15.5		869
	1978	Zinfandel	Wiedeman	10/1/78	3.7	15.2	163
Zinfandel		Ruby Hill	9/12/78	2.1	14.0	124	
Cabernet Sauvignon		Adamson	9/30/78	5.0	13.6	270	
Cabernet Sauvignon		Besson	10/13/78	2.0	13.4	107	
Chardonnay		Ventana	10/11/78	2.2	13.2	113	
Total					15.0		777
1979	Zinfandel	Wiedeman	9/23/79	4.0	12.8	216	
	Zinfandel	Ruby Hill	9/27/79	2.9	14.4	163	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Adamson	10/6/79	4.3	12.0	245	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Tepusquet	11/16/79	2.5	14.2	204	
	Chardonnay	Ventana	11/2/79	3.6	13.6	162	
	Semillon	Alma	10/17/79	1.6	13.0	83	
	Total				18.9		1073
1980	Zinfandel	Wiedeman	10/5/80	3.0	15.0		
	Zinfandel	Ruby Hill	10/6/80	3.0	15.9 blend	279	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Adamson	10/3/80	4.2	14.7	237	
	Semillon	Alma	10/10/80	1.5	12.4	69	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Shell Creek	10/10/80	2.0	14.7	dumped	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/7/80	4.1	14.7 +17% Arata	257	
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/24/80	3.1	13.5	153	
	Total				20.9		995
1981	Semillon	Almaden (Liv.)	8/28/81	2.3	13.2	121	
	Zinfandel	Ruby Hill	9/6/81	4.0	13.2	224	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Cristina (Oak.)	10/6/81	4.4	11.7	258	
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/8/81	4.4	13.5	237	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Veedercrest	10/14/81	1.9	12.9 red table wine	108	
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/21/81	5.0	13.2	263	
	Total				22.0		1211

	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/14/82	4.7	13.4	237
	Cabernet Sauvignon	York Creek	10/19/82	7.9	13.6	486
	Semillon	Alma	10/29/82	2.2	12.0	130
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Beauregard	11/2/82	1.3	12.3	183
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	11/6/82	5.0	12.6	325
Total				24.4		1368
1983	Chardonnay	Beauregard	10/9/83	2.3	12.2	124
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/10/83	3.1	12.6	161
	Semillon	St. Charles	10/18/83	2.8	13.2	159
	Cabernet Sauvignon	York Creek	10/21/83	5.0	13.2	303
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/28/83	3.6	12.0	215
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Beauregard	11/1/83	2.1	12.0	211
Total				18.9		1173
1984	Chardonnay	Beauregard	9/5/84	2.5	13.8	w/'85 Chard
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Beauregard	9/8/84	3.2	12.0	dumped
	Cabernet Sauvignon	York Creek	9/13/84	4.5	12.0	285
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	9/16/84	6.8	12.6	419
	Semillon	Alma	9/28/84	1.1	14.0	
	Semillon	St. Charles	9/18/84	3.2	13.5	blend 252
	Chardonnay	Ventana	9/29/84	5.2	13.2	288
Total				26.5		1244
1985	Chardonnay	Beauregard	9/7/85	3.0	13.6	295
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	9/26/85	5.0		
			10/5/85	5.1	12.3	626
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Beauregard	9/28/85	1.9	11.4	102
	Semillon	St. Charles	10/1/85	3.5	12.9	198
	Chardonnay	Sierra Madre	10/8/85	4.3	13.2	248
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/12/85	4.7	13.4	264
Total				27.5		1733
1986	Chardonnay	Tepusquet	9/20/86	4.2	13.5	230
	Chardonnay	Ventana	9/23/86	5.2		
			9/24/86	4.7	13.8	550
	Semillon	St. Charles	10/11/86	3.3	13.2	186
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/9/86	4.6	12.5	
			10/10/86	5.8		641
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/6/86	3.9	12.5	239
Total				31.7		1846
1987	Semillon	St. Charles	10/1/87	4.5	13.0	306
	Note: Napa Valley Semillon blended with St. Charles, bottled as "California"					
	Semillon	St. Charles	White Table		13.0	86
	Chardonnay	Tepusquet	Wine			
	Chardonnay	Tepusquet	9/25/87	5.8	13.6	279
	Chardonnay	Ventana	9/29/87	10.7	13.4	565
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	9/30/87	4.7	13.0	260
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/4/87	4.6	13.1	261
Total				30.3		1757
1988	Semillon	St. Charles	9/23/88	1.6	13.0	89

1988	Semillon	St. Charles	9/23/88	1.6	13.0	89
	Semillon	Napa Valley	bulk		14.0	265
	Chardonnay	Buerge	9/9/88	3.6		204
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/1/88	10.0		583
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	9/22/88	4.1	12.9	259
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/20/88	4.9		257
	Total			24.2		1568

1989	Semillon	Napa Valley	bulk			234
	Semillon	St. Charles	10/14/89	2.9		
	Sauvignon blanc	St. Charles	9/16/89	0.1	blend	303
	Chardonnay	Mayers	9/28/89	3.2		173
	Chardonnay	Ventana	9/30/89	14.5		754
	Chardonnay	Buerge	9/26/89	2.2		96
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/3/89	8.9		574
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/29/89	4.1		256
Total			35.9		2390	

1990	Sauvignon blanc	St. Charles	9/16/90	0.2		259
	Semillon	St. Charles	10/6/90	4.6	blend	
	Chardonnay	Mayers	9/27/90	5.5		302
	Chardonnay	Ventana	9/29/90	14.9		810
	Chardonnay	Buerge	10/4/90	5.5		316
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	10/2/90	7.8		400
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/14/90	5.8		320
	Total			44.3		2407

1991	Semillon	St. Charles	10/21/91	1.8	14.2	110
	Chardonnay	Buerge	10/18/91	2.6	13.6	186
	Chardonnay	Mayers	10/19/91	5.9	13.8	322
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/23/91	15.1	12.8	782
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	11/4/91	10.0	12.3	774
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	11/14/91	4.3	11.7	
	Cabernet franc	Bates Ranch	10/4/91	1.0	12.8	
Total			40.7			

1992	Semillon	St. Charles	9/15/92	2.7	13.6	170
	Sauvignon blanc	St. Charles	9/11/92	0.2	blend	
	Chardonnay	Mayers	9/10/92	2.9	13.8	173
	Chardonnay	Ventana	9/18/92	5.1	13.5	311
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	9/30/92	10.0	12.5	
	Cabernet franc	Bates Ranch	9/25/92	1.0	12.0	
	Merlot	Bates Ranch	9/17/92	1.0		
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/5/92	3.9	12.7	
	Zinfandel	Besson	9/24/92	5.3	14.7	
	Zinfandel	Cngrss Sprngs	10/1/192	2.0	12.0	
Total			34.1			

1993	Sauvignon blanc	St. Charles	9/21/93	0.3
	Semillon	St. Charles	10/2/93	2.1
	Chardonnay	Mayers	9/29/93	5.9
	Chardonnay	Ventana	10/1/93	3.0
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Bates Ranch	11/2/93	8.2
	Cabernet franc	Bates Ranch	10/4/93	1.6
	Merlot	Bates Ranch	9/22/93	1.2
	Cabernet Sauvignon	Besson	10/21/93	2.0
	Zinfandel	Besson	10/7/93	4.2
Total				28.5

WINE PEOPLE

Ahlgren Vineyard



ZINFANDEL

Zinfandel is finally getting the respect it deserves! With the current run of great vintages, it is time to appreciate Zinfandel for the rich and complex wines it can produce.

SKY VINEYARDS

Sky Vineyards is fourteen acres of Zinfandel grapevines and a tiny winery located on Mt. Veeder at an elevation of 2,100 feet. We cannot contain our enthusiasm for their Zinfandel. This is fantastic stuff! Intense raspberry, violet and peppery flavors. Lively and long in the mouth. Annual production is only 1,000 cases and the wine is bottle-aged for a year prior to release. Extremely limited.

Sky Zinfandel, 1990 \$17.99

Pedroncelli, 1989 \$7.99

Our value selection: Great blackberry fruit.

Heitz, 1988 \$9.99

Ridge Sonoma, 1991 \$10.99

Clos du Val, 1990 \$12.99

Ridge Howell Mountain, 1990

From the leader in Zinfandel. \$12.99

Clos du Val, 1988 \$13.50

Always a favorite

Lamborn Family, 1990 \$14.99

Extremely limited.

Nalle, 1991 \$16.99

A monster

FOUNDED IN 1976 and still located in the cellar beneath the rustic mountain home of Dexter and Valerie Ahlgren, Ahlgren Vineyard is dedicated to limited production of fine premium wines. The Ahlgrens employ traditional hands-on methods, and grapes selected from carefully chosen vineyards to produce 2,500 cases of handcrafted wines.

Just how does a reasonably sane professional suburban couple get into the business of winemaking? Laughing, Dexter Ahlgren responds: "It was all Val's fault."

She became interested in fermentation, and right there under the kitchen table, in the heart of Silicon Valley, interesting products were transformed into ever more interesting beverages—elderberries into elderberry wine, honey into sparkling mead, malt and hops into beer.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining garage, mysteries were dangerously exploding. At times all entry was temporarily forbidden. When Val's wines became provocatively tasty, Dexter was intrigued. He turned out to be the gifted winemaker in the family. Possessing that precious mix of acute senses of both taste and smell, Dexter demonstrated an intuitive awareness of how to handle grapes and wine.

OWNERS
Dexter and Valerie Ahlgren

APPELLATION
Santa Cruz Mountains
California

ACREAGE
Total acreage 20
Approximately eight acres
suitable for planting

STORAGE
150 barrels: French and
American

CASE PRODUCTION
2,500 cases

TYPES OF WINE
Chardonnay, Semillon,
Cabernet Sauvignon

Soon the suburban garage had been emptied of autos and converted into a mini-winery complete with insulation and French barrels ready for the next grape harvest.

We are pleased to offer the wines of Ahlgren, a winery which has established a reputation for wines of consistent high quality and long life.

Cabernet Sauvignon, 1988
Besson Vineyard \$16.99

Berry and herb aromas. Soft, integrated tannins. Only 257 cases produced.

Chardonnay, 1991
Ventana \$16.99
Classic California style. Big and rich.

Cabernet Sauvignon, 1988
Bates Vineyard \$18.99
Deep garnet color. Aromas of blackberry, cedar and leather. Tremendous fruit extract. Only 259 cases produced.

Chardonnay, 1990
Mayers Vineyard \$24.99
Smoky and austere. Long, balanced finish. Only 302 cases produced.

