

Elmano Homem

He was born in the Azores on the island of Tercera in 1931 and came to the United States in 1955. His family had vineyards in the old country and he had some knowledge of viticulture before he went to work for the Schwabacher family in 1966. *Elmano Homem (EH)* was hired at first primarily as a caretaker for the *Jimsomare* estate on Montebello Road, but there was some orchard and old vineyard there and he has been in charge of their management ever since, although the vineyard acreage has expanded greatly since 1975. He now owns property within the estate and built his home there overlooking the Santa Clara Valley in 1983. This is where the following interview took place on July 12, 1993.

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CS: What kind of a job was this up here that you were hired to do back in 1966?

EH: When I came up there was nothing much here but lawns and flowers and a few fruit trees and a very little piece of a vineyard. The vineyard was planted, I think, in 1900. It was in Zinfandel. But there weren't any grapes because the deer harvested them every year.

CS: I guess that would have been part of the Pierre Klein vineyard, but I didn't know he had planted Zinfandel.

EH: Old Mrs. Picchetti told me that a man named Petri was the first one here. That he built that old Victorian white house across there.

CS: Klein did buy 160 acres up here in 1888 that became part of the Schwabacher property. When his health failed he sold the place in 1913.¹ When do you think that house was built?

EH: I don't really know but Mrs. Picchetti said that it was over 100 years old.

CS: Maybe it's part of some other piece of property. I've seen an aerial photograph of this place taken years ago and you can see what was once of very large vineyard planted here, terraced. But the vines were all gone.

EH: That makes sense, because when I started clearing land up on top I realized that there had been vineyard everywhere up there. It was dead, of course.

CS: I'll talk to the Picchettis later this week, and I'll try to see where this Petri name comes from. I know a whole lot about Klein. He had a great reputation for his Cabernet.

EH: I think that there was Cabernet here before. In fact, Mrs. Schwabacher told me that some wine made here about 1900 won a prize in France.

CS: Good. That's it. Because Klein's Mira Valle Cabernet won a gold medal at the Paris Exposition in 1900. That's interesting. The Schwabachers knew about it. Back then it was a very famous event. But I didn't think anyone remembered it. So this would be James Schwabacher's mother, Sophie.

¹ Sullivan. *Like Modern Edens* (Cupertino 1982): 54-55.

EH: But what if Mrs. Picchetti was correct? Petri must have gone way back. The Schwabachers know that the Crocker family owned this place at one time. Also the Hathaway family. The Schwabachers bought this place from the Hathaways in 1936.

CS: Klein became sick and sold the property. Moved to Mountain View. And he killed himself. People forgot him. But his daughter became very famous in the Mountain View area as a teacher there. There is a school named for her. I once read a history paper about her, but her father is forgotten.

EH: They must have owned that place before 1900, before the Crockers.

CS: They definitely owned the place in the 1890s, whatever it was they owned. Maybe there were two pieces of property up here.

EH: What the property was that the Schwabachers bought was much less than they have today. I know they bought land from the Picchettis. That land across from Elio Picchetti's place the Schwabachers bought from him and I planted the vineyard there.

CS: I thought the Picchettis owned that vineyard, since their house is right there.

EH: No. That's a Jimsomare vineyard. I planted it.

It is possible that there are different parcels that the Schwabachers own now that were owned by others that the Picchettis. Down the hill there, where the barn is today, that used to belong to the Picchettis.

CS: So that is a Picchetti barn. It looks pretty old.

EH: I don't think it's so old. I think Elio Picchetti built it.

But getting back to that old white house there, the one I heard Petri built. Two people I have talked to who have lived there insisted to me that there was a ghost there who told them "I live here."

CS: A male voice?

EH: A male voice.

CS: Klein killed himself.

EH: I didn't know that, but it all makes sense, what these people told me. When a person died before he is supposed to his spirit is supposed to be restless.

CS: I don't want to hear this. I can't deal with ghosts here. It's the same thing with Martin Alhoff, the Amador wine man, who killed himself. He's supposed to haunt that big old house up in Coloma. I was warned before I stayed there.

But, you had heard this, and you didn't know that Klein killed himself, before I told you.

EH: That's right. I never knew that. Now, I don't believe that kind of stuff, but it makes sense. This idea of a restless spirit.

CS: Let me throw the name of Klein's place to you and see if it rings a bell. Mira Valle. Looking at the valley, just as we are doing now.

EH: Nope. I never heard that.

CS: OK, that's enough of that. Let's talk about the estate. How big was the Schwabacher property when you came here?

EH: 530 acres. It was built by parcel purchases.

CS: I wonder if it was originally a full section of 640 acres.

EH: No. Mr. Schwabacher bought 160 acres here in 1936.

CS: That is the size of the piece Klein bought in 1888, a quarter-section.

EH: Then he bought that piece of land from Picchetti. He also bought property way down below, but I don't know who from. I think that there were two parcels of 80 acres each. And there was another parcel of 150 acres. Today it is different some, since we traded some land with the Open Space District. We sold 160 acres and we gave this land to the District and got 25 acres in return. I think it adds up to 355 acres today. The County bought the 160 acres for the park. The Open Space District needed a piece of land for a trail that had to cross our land. We traded them a very steep piece of land for 25 much better acres.

CS: That was a good trade. 40 acres that's no good is no good.

Tell me about the original vineyard you found here.

EH: It had not been pruned and the deer pruned it every year. There were no grapes at all. It was about six acres in all, of mostly live vines. Some were dead.

CS: Earlier you said that you could see dead vines other places on terraced land. I think that that was the Klein vineyard, and not the Zinfandel.

Who told you that Zinfandel was planted in 1900?

EH: I saw papers, in fact from the county.

CS: Did you ever talk to anyone up here that made you think that maybe that Zinfandel was part of a working vineyard during Prohibition?

EH: They sold grapes. I even think they sold some grapes to Martin Ray, way back.

CS: Did the Gemellos ever come up here?

EH: I heard that one time they came up here too.

CS: John Gemello used to work up here, for Perrone. But that was 70 years ago.

EH: I talked to a man up here, Mr. Lopez, an old-timer here. He also worked up there too. And he worked for Hathaway before Schwabacher. There were some other vineyards, but he said it wasn't much.

CS: Did you talk to the Ridge people before you thought about bringing back those old Zinfandel vines?

EH: I had met Dave Bennion up here in 1966 and we talked about this Zinfandel.

CS: This is about the same time they were looking at the Picchetti Zinfandel, also.

EH: Dave came down to look at these vines and I told him I was putting a fence around them. So in 1967 I was able to sell a few grapes.

CS: So you fenced it in 1966 and pruned those old vines. Did the Schwabachers put up the money?

EH: Yes. We got a ton at least, maybe a little more.

CS: So Jimsomare grapes went into a 1967 Ridge Zinfandel. That's historic.

EH: They paid the Schwabachers for them. It was about \$300, which seemed like a lot of money to me then.

CS: That would be close to \$1300 today.

EH: I remember that Mrs. Schwabacher was tickled to get that money. See, the problem before was that they couldn't deduct any of their expenses, since it was producing any income. Now they were taking in some money from the land.

CS: What was the next step?

EH: After Mrs. Schwabacher died. . . .

CS: What was her first name?

EH: Sophie.

CS: That's rare. They named one of their children after her mother.

EH: No. She was the Sophie, the SO, in the name Jimsomare. The daughter's name was Mary Louise. The father was Jim, two Jims, then, with the son, Jim, one Sophie, and the Mare, for Mary Louise.

CS: It was named for all four of them. Everybody thinks that the name came from three children. Everybody has it wrong. I'll straighten that out for history. So that's where Jimsomare comes from. I did that too from Almaden Valley grapes, Zinfandel, my first wine, in 1968. We called it Rapsulpar, for Raphael, Sullivan and Parker. "Toast the Czar with Rapsulpar" was on the label.

EH: And I made wine for years with Dave Bennion and Bill Peterson, he was a very close friend of Dave's, and we had a label we called it El Dabe.

CS: I've seen it. In fact Dave once gave me a bottle.

EH: Later we changed it to Hotarion, or something like that.

CS: So, when do you start planting down here?

EH: Yes, that would be in 1975 or 1976.

CS: So for all the years up to that point the Jimsomare wine was just the Zinfandel from those old six acres.

EH: I think that the first Cabernet we produced was in 1978.

CS: What was the most you ever got off those six acres of Zinfandel?

EH: Once I got eleven tons. Some I got as little as four or five. Last year I got eight tons.

CS: But those aren't the same vines.

EH: Oh yes, lots of them are still from the original vines.

CS: I thought they were all taken out.

EH: No. Maybe at least 10% of those vines are still the original 1900 vines. I've been replanting for years, when a vine would die.

CS: I don't think that anyone knows about that.

EH: Dave knew.

CS: And that six acres is still Zinfandel.

EH: Right.

CS: Where did you get the Zin to replant?

EH: Many different places. Emmolo's Nursery in St. Helena was one place.

CS: Are they still on St. George rootstock?

EH: Yes.

CS: If that vineyard was planted in 1900, that was just about the time that St. George was getting popular around here. They made be on St. George, too.

EH: They are, definitely. And when I replanted I tried to use St. George. There might be a few AxR-1.

CS: You don't have to worry about that. It's only in Napa now that there's a problem with AxR-1. We'll be dead before it's a problem here. The newspapers like to talk up the "devastation."

EH: So, first I planted five acres right by the main gate. All Cabernet. Mrs. Schwabacher died in 1972 and it took three years before I was able to plant. So that was probably in 1975. Then I put in ten acres up above; it was a hay field. Ridge approached me. At first the Schwabachers didn't want to plant. But finally we did it. But we could see that prices were going up. By 1979 I cleared off a big parcel where we figured we could plant 25 acres. We also planted there in 1980 and 1981. All that 25 acres went into Cabernet. There was also six acres of Chardonnay and about seven acres of Merlot.

CS: So that's the source of the Monte Bello Chardonnay. I understand there isn't any more up on top.

EH: That's right. Those old vines up there they pulled out.

So that's where we are now. But let's go back a bit. In 1987 I planted another 4,000 Chardonnay vines. That was on what used to be Picchetti land. Now we are planting another five acres of Chardonnay.

CS: Why Chardonnay?

EH: We get good tonnage per acre, the price is good, and the quality is excellent.

CS: How many acres total at Jimsomare?

EH: We're up to about 65 acres. Six vineyards. At the gate there are five acres of Cabernet. There are six acres of the old Zinfandel. Then there's one with five Chardonnay with two acres of Cab. Then we have ten acres of Cab and six acres of Chardonnay. There are seven acres of Merlot. Twenty acres of Cab. And the five Chardonnay we just planted.

CS: What kind of total yield are you getting now?

EH: Cabernet is sort of disappointing. Cabernet can be as low as two tons per acre. There are a couple of places we get almost three tons. Chardonnay can go almost five tons per acre. And the quality is very high.

CS: How many more plantable acres do you have here?

EH: Perhaps twenty acres.

CS: So this makes a good income for the ranch.

EH: It pays for itself. That includes everything. For me and all the workers, and taxes. And it pays the expenses of the Schwabachers here; it's rent free.

CS: Well, that's what a farm is supposed to do. It's supposed to take care of you.

EH: But it took a long time.

CS: Who did you work with up at Ridge in the early years? Was it just Dave Bennion?

EH: Mostly. In 1966 I had met the other owners, but I hardly saw anyone but Dave.

CS: How did you deal with the grapes. Was there a contract or a handshake?

EH: It was a handshake for a long time, until about 1985.

CS: That's when Bill Curtiss became president.

EH: I think that was a mistake, to get him.

CS: What changes could you see from your end when he took Bennion's place?

EH: From my end, it was just cleaning up the "bone yard," all those old cars and machinery. Other than that I couldn't see anything from this end.

When they sold to the Japanese I think they could have done better.

CS: They got almost \$10 million.

EH: But there were so many shareholders. I think the partners only went away with about \$500,000 each.

CS: It's not a great fortune, that's for sure.

When Paul Draper came did you see any important changes at your end.

EH: Not really.

CS: How did you and Ridge decide how to handle the crop down here? Did you get together and work it out? Did they tell you?

EH: They didn't have much say in what I did down here. I think the other partners thought Dave was coming down and giving me detailed instructions. But actually it was more the other way. A lot of things happened up there that he got from me.

CS: So you were pretty free. Nobody ever told you how many buds to leave.

EH: No.

CS: But you didn't have a great deal of experience before you came up here. How did you learn?

EH: I read some. And I took some classes at UC Davis. I learned a lot from talking to other people. There are always changes. Just in the last few years. Everyone has different ideas on how to do things. Now we are cane pruning; we get more grapes. We do that for all the varieties now.

CS: Now sulfur could be a problem with Bennion couldn't it? Did you decide how much?

EH: We decided. Yes, really. I remember one year he called me and told me not to sulfur and what happened, I got mildew. Things started changing before Curtiss took over.

CS: But, I think that David Noyes would have been pretty upset if they were bringing in grapes with mildew from not sulfuring enough.

EH: I sulfur by the shoots, six inches, twelve, eighteen, not by how many days go by. Then after that you just watch things. But I remember one time they thought there was too much sulfur after they were picked, and that year I hadn't sulfured after June. I can remember Paul Draper saying once that he would prefer having a little bit of mildew than having too much sulfur.

CS: How about the Ridge vineyard manager today?

EH: David Gates. Sometimes I'll ask him things if I don't know the answer; he's very qualified.

CS: But you don't have a conference with him at the beginning of the year.

EH: No.

CS: Do they have a worse problem than you do down here with fog getting the vines wet?

EH: Actually it doesn't work that way. We get just as much as they do. In the spring our vineyard is farther ahead in growth, but at the end they catch up since it's hotter up there. I have a friend who drives down in the morning and he tells me when he drives down, it's amazing, the fog starts right here.

Now we're taking leaves off in the summer to let the air in and keep things more dry. We got this from other people.

CS: Sure. Summer hedging. It's all the new thing now.

EH: I remember the first time we did it Dave came down and said we gave the vineyard a haircut. Now everybody is doing it, but I've been doing it for a long time. In Europe they give them a hell of a haircut. They have machines that do it.

I think the wine business is a very crazy thing. There are so many things always changing. Years ago up at Ridge they made some great Cabernets up there. Now you have to do all this stuff to make good Cabernet. We never took off leaves in the old days. How did they get that great Cabernet?

CS: Right. How did they get that 1964 and 1968?

EH: A person could go nuts going around and asking everyone all these questions. Everyone has a different way of doing things.

CS: What about water up here?

EH: We have one but we don't use it much. We never had water on the old Zinfandel. When we replant there we water the young vines by hand. After two years the new vines are pretty much on their own. We have a rig that we take through the vineyard to deliver water. We pull it with a tractor. If you don't do it when they're young they'll die. By the third year, then they're OK. We have drip on most of the other vineyard, but we don't use it. Even with the drought last year we didn't water. We still got five tons per acre on the Chardonnay. Our soil is similar to Ridge's, but there is a lot of clay that holds the moisture. You dig down and you see a lot of moisture.

Part of the reason we get such good grapes is that we don't water. And we could get more grapes if we watered.

CS: What about your relations with Ridge today. Who do you talk to?

EH: Wilma Sturrock is the president and we talk a lot. I very seldom talk to Paul.

CS: Is there a written contract now.

EH: Oh, yes.

CS: How do you determine price?

EH: We go by Napa prices. What they get there, we get here. That's for all the grapes.

CS: How about labor? Are your guys your guys, or do you mix them up?

EH: Our guys are my guys. But we do trade at picking time. We pick Chardonnay earlier before they pick, so what happens, they have four guys in the vineyard and their four guys come down. But they're on the Ridge payroll. But then my guys go up later and pick up there when their Cabernet is

coming in. We just try to keep the hours straight and even. We have a good relationship, I have to admit. It works very well.

Last year we harvested at least 115, maybe 120 tons.

CS: How do you work with the Schwabachers here?

EH: It works very well. They are really nice people. I talk to them on the weekends. But I don't talk to them about what I am going to do. I am pretty much on my own.

This is a fantastic location. Even when we go to the opera in San Francisco, it's not a bad drive.

CS: What day do you go?

EH: Last year we went on Sunday afternoons.

CS: That's when we go.

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