

## Gemello Winery

The Gemello Winery was an important part of the history of winegrowing in the Santa Cruz Mountains, particularly for the grapes from this district that went into Gemello wines over the years. Founded by John Gemello in 1934, at the end of Prohibition, the winery was located just west of El Camino Real in Mountain View. Gemello was born in Italy in 1882, in a small town in the Piedmont region, north of Torino, where he had experience in winegrowing before he came to the United States in 1913. He went to San Jose and soon was on the west side of the Valley near where his winery was to be located. For a while he was the caretaker of the former Klein estate on Monte Bello Ridge, the estate that was later to become the Jimsomare property, famous for its grapes that today go into Ridge wines. In 1916 Mario Gemello was born there. Twenty-eight years later he took over the operation of the winery from his father. John Gemello lived until 1981.

John Gemello bought the land on El Camino in 1925 and built the winery there in 1933-34 at the end of Prohibition. In 1944 Mario took over the operation of the winery, although John stayed active for many years. In 1956 Mario sold the wine shop and liquor store on the property to Louis and Boise Sarto and in 1969 Mario and Louis incorporated the entire operation. During these years and on into the 1970s the Gemello Winery became important for the production of premium varietals, many made from grapes grown in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Mario Gemello's last crush was in 1978 and he bottled his last wine on June 23, 1982, a 1978 Templeton Merlot. In 1989 the winery was demolished.

I interviewed *Mario Gemello (MG)* at his home in Mountain View several times, beginning July 27, 1992. His little wine cellar there contains bottles from many of his famous vintages as well as mementos from the winery's history.

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August 7, 1992

CS: I am talking to Mario Gemello at his home in Los Altos, in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Would you begin by talking about your father's early years here before World War I?

### Early Years

MG: When he came from Italy in 1913 he settled in San Jose working for Paul Masson. In a few years he sent for my mother and their oldest daughter who were still in Italy. He had made enough money at that time so that he could afford to pay their way over. Then they moved into a home up on Monte Bello in Cupertino. He was up on the Ridge above Picchetti Brothers, almost where Ridge Winery is now. It would be just about where the school is now. He lived in a little house there that was owned by the Picchetti brothers and in a few months he got a job working for a Mrs. Carmoney, who was a retired school teacher. She taught him how to speak English and he worked there as a caretaker. Later with two others he went into a little orchard and vineyard there, almost up on the Ridge. They had a little winery, also. It was across from the old Perrone mansion.<sup>1</sup> It was above Charles Rousten's place.<sup>2</sup> He knew Charlie and his father at that time. That was his first taste of raising grapes in this country.

CS: They actually had a little winery up there?

MG: Yes, a little place where they made wine and sold it out in bulk. This was all before Prohibition. In 1919 after the war they had made enough money, prices were way up for fruit then, they had about \$9,000 apiece, so he moved to Mountain View in 1920 and went into the vegetable business. This was at the corner of San Antonio and Alma, which is where the Mayfield Mall used to be. Now I think it's

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Osea Perrone built a large winery on the Monte Bello Ridge in the 1880s. It is the home today of Ridge Vineyards.

<sup>2</sup> The little Rousten Winery operated off and on here, above the Monte Bello School, until 1952. Charles Rousten's father had been Dr. Perrone's vineyard manager.

Hewlett-Packard. Actually it was in Los Altos. Now it's in Mountain View. That's where he started. He had 25 acres, and there were three partners. They actually didn't buy the farm; they were renting it. There were three partners again here. Each partner had a truck with a vegetable route. Mountain View, Cupertino and Los Altos. My dad peddled vegetables from house to house. In the early mornings, before the housewives were ready to go to the store, he would go around to the stores also and supply them with vegetables.

CS: He didn't raise grapes down there?

MG: No. That lasted until 1925. He made good money there and made enough to put a down payment on 31 acres that he bought on El Camino Real. That's where the winery was started.

CS: So you were almost ten years old. You can remember all this then.

MG: Oh, yes. When we moved onto that property we had 31 acres, in apricots and prunes. There was some bare land, and of course that bare land was planted to grapes. My dad always had in mind that he wanted a winery, even though it was still Prohibition, he felt that before the vines were bearing in a few years maybe things would change. And he needed grapes for making homemade wine anyway, for his own use.

CS: So those vines would be coming into bearing about 1928-29?

MG: Yes. That's about right. So he had grapes he could sell to his friends and some for himself. He had about eight acres of Zinfandel.

CS: Do you know why he chose Zinfandel?

MG: I'm not sure. It wasn't a grape he knew in Italy, of course, but it was very popular in California. I think he got acquainted with the Zinfandel up on Monte Bello.

CS: That figures. The Picchettis had Zinfandel.

MG: Well, my dad planted a vineyard for Picchetti, right near where the Steven's Creek Reservoir is now. My dad worked for Picchetti for one winter. That was when they first moved up to Monte Bello, probably about 1915. It was below the Picchetti Winery as you approach the reservoir. If you looked across it, there was the vineyard. It was to the east.

CS: Ah, so there were vineyards over there.

MG: Well, eventually when the reservoir was full the vineyard was flooded.

CS: Were there many vineyards around there in the twenties, where the reservoir is today?

MG: Yes, there were a lot of vineyards there. The Villa Maria, of the Jesuits at Santa Clara University, they had grapes in there. They were there when I was a kid. And I can remember seeing vineyards there on the corner of McClellan Road and the road that goes to the dam.

CS: There's a row of old palms there that used to lead to the John Doyle Winery there.

MG: Right, there were grapes in there. And there were grapes at the corner of Monte Vista and Foothill. Where that old bar, the Who-Who House was.

CS: I can remember those there in the late fifties when I rode my bike out there. I recall they left

pieces of the vineyards around when they built the homes.

MG: There was a little piece of vineyard that we bought and made wine for years from on the other side of Steven's Creek, toward the Heney winery.<sup>3</sup> It was a little two or three acres that we bought.

CS: What did you call the Heney Winery in those days, say when you were in high school? Heney was dead then.

MG: There was a sign on the roof, Heney Winery. It said "Champagnes, Wines and Vermouth."

CS: I remember for a while there was a pet cemetery there. Before that Paul Masson had used it to bottle their red wines.

MG: Right. I think Armond Bussone remembers working there. And they were up at the Monte Vista Winery also, the D'Amico place.

CS: We got off the subject, but that's OK.

MG: Well, from the time that my dad moved from the Mountain View property in 1925 until 1933 he was strictly in the fruit and vegetable business. He also had a chance to rent 25 acres next door, and that was bare land. He had a Spanish family and three Japanese families living on that place. They raised strawberries, raspberries, blackberries.

CS: Did you all live right there?

MG: Yes, we had a little home. The property next door belonged to the Martel family. He used to be a big restaurant caterer in San Francisco.

CS: What do you remember about getting the winery started?

## A New Winery

MG: All of a sudden he tells me to get the tractor and the Fresno scraper ready. We're going to dig a hole. I thought he was digging a cellar for home use. We did have a small cellar under the house, but it was awfully small. So he decides to dig a cellar in the big fruit barn. We knocked out part of the floor in the fruit barn in 1933 and we got a cement man to put in foundations and forms and the first thing you know we had a nice little concrete cellar. It had a dirt floor. Later it was enlarged, but in the beginning it was just a small place, maybe forty by forty.

CS: What did you put in it?

MG: A couple of tanks from the Golden State Winery in San Francisco. It had operated throughout Prohibition. And he bought a couple of new wine tanks; I remember helping him put them together. We filled them with water so that they wouldn't leak. In late 1933 we crushed our first grapes.

CS: That figures. Prohibition ended in December 1933.

MG: We had this good friend all through Prohibition, at the Golden State Winery in San Francisco, and somehow they knew when Prohibition was going to end. I recall that once this man bought some

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Heney had his Chateau Ricardo there near Foothill Boulevard in the years before Prohibition. He was the brother of the famed California politician, Francis Heney.

wine from Picchetti during Prohibition and my dad hauled it into San Francisco by wagon, with four horses. I guess they were making sacramental wine or medicinal wine, or something. I know that he got stopped right there at the city limits by the police, and when they found out who he was working for they just waved him in. The arrangements had been made that the wine was coming. The Beltramo family in Menlo Park was also making wine at that time and taking it into San Francisco.

CS: So, we've got a winery now. What did it look like?

MG: We had a regular fruit barn, like you'd see anyplace, of wood. But inside he had the hole. It was at least seven or eight feet deep. We did the crushing up above and the wine was then run down into the cellar by gravity.

### Grape Sources

CS: Where did he get his grapes now?

MG: From his home vineyard there, and also we had a place in Campbell mostly prunes, but it had some grapes. We owned it with another partner. It was near the Rinconada Golf Course there.

CS: I'd call that Los Gatos.

MG: It was really Campbell, but close to Los Gatos. It was close to the Pucchinelli Winery there. He was up on a hill, and we were down on the flat.

CS: I'll ask you about them later.

MG: We had about eight or ten acres there, but there were lots of vines missing. It was an old vineyard. He also bought some grapes up in Los Altos Hills. These were from little home vineyards up there. And we bought from Cupertino, also, from that area we were talking about.

CS: Let's go back to Los Altos Hills. Nobody seems to know anything about those little vineyards up in the hills above Mountain View.

MG: I don't remember names, but there were lots of them here and there. Beltramo used to buy a lot of his grapes from them. They were small, one or two acres. There were maybe twenty or thirty of them up there scattered around. I couldn't say for sure. They were mostly Italian folks, French or Italian. I think most of them were planted during Prohibition.

CS: I'm really interested in these little places around in the hills here, well really the foothills. It would be like where we're sitting, right here.

MG: Sure. By the forties we were buying some grapes in Los Gatos and Saratoga.

CS: Was this mostly Zinfandel?

### Gemello Wines

MG: Mostly. We only made two kinds of wine then, burgundy and claret. Burgundy was heavier and the claret was lighter. Zinfandel mostly went into the burgundy. The Mataro (Mourvèdre) and Carignane went mostly to the claret. These made a lighter wine. If you got it good and ripe, Zinfandel made a

pretty heavy wine.

CS: There was no white wine yet.

MG: No, we didn't start making white wine until the forties. We enlarged the winery in 1939 and when we needed more grapes. We went to about a 50,000 gallon capacity. Before then it had been about 20,000. Eventually we got it up to about 80,000. Production would be about one third of capacity.

CS: How did you sell your wine?

MG: In the early days it was sold right there on the spot at the little retail store we had. Five gallon demijons, or ten gallon barrels, maybe twenty gallon. Even fifty gallon. But most of the sales were five gallon demijons.

CS: No cork finished wine yet?

MG: Not yet.

CS: So by 1939 you're twenty-three years old and that's where you're working, at the winery.

MG: By now I'd decided that that's where I was going to work. There was nothing else doing then. I didn't really catch on to the winery right away. Mostly I was working at the farm. Especially in those days when we had a sign on the highway, and I was going to school. They'd kid whether you were a bootlegger or what. I didn't get enthused in the wine business until I'd been married four or five years and I knew that I had to make a living. Our first child was born and we needed money. That wasn't until about 1944 or 1945.

CS: But you were always pretty much attached to the place. You never took off to work someplace else.

MG: No. I only worked one week for someone for wages in my whole life. I drove a tractor for one week for a fellow who needed a tractor driver for one week because one of his men was sick.

CS: Where did you get the extra grapes you needed during the war years?

MG: We started to go down to Morgan Hill. We had two big places down there. Charlie Prusso had a big vineyard, and another fellow. And we went to Los Gatos, there were a couple of big vineyards there. And we bought grapes on Monte Bello Ridge from Charlie Rousten. He had some nice white grapes up there. Semillon, Sylvaner, Riesling.

CS: Any Grey Riesling?

MG: We did make some, but that came from Morgan Hill, from the Pedrizzetti vineyard. And we bought some of their Barbera as well. But we weren't too much on white wine then, until we got the refrigeration system.

CS: How do your sales evolve? You started out as a sort of grocery operation. Where is the change?

MG: The big change doesn't really come until the late fifties. You can't come and get a bottle of Gemello wine with a label on it in the forties.

CS: Were you selling wine in bulk then in the forties, to other wineries?

MG: No. It was all retail to consumers.

CS: So, you're selling about 20,000 gallons a year retail.

MG: Yes. I'd say so. In the late forties we started to bottle in gallons. We got one of these small Ogden filter and bottling machines. This is when you start getting a Gemello label. I'd say that was about 1948 or 1950. Before that it was all demijons and small barrels. And the only other people in the area that were doing that were Mrs. Andriano and Pucchinelli. And we were very good friends with both of them. Her trade was a little different than ours; it was mostly Stanford students and professors.

CS: We'll get to her later. How did the war years affect your dad's operation?

## Rixford Cabernet Sauvignon

MG: Grapes became very scarce. Some of the vineyards weren't being taken care of as carefully as before. There was a lack of help. But when somebody offered you some grapes and they wanted to pick them now, you either took them or you lost them. My father made quite a bit of wine during the war years that was a little sub-standard for his trade. It was light and low alcohol. But people didn't accept that then. They wanted a heavy wine. When the war was over we had a few thousand gallons of wine, and we were looking for some grapes or some wine that we could blend to make it heavier. Someone then introduced us to the Rixford brothers, who had a lot of heavy Cabernet Sauvignon, but in those days very few people knew about Cabernet as a varietal.

CS: You are talking about the old Rixford La Questa Winery up in Woodside.

MG: Right. They owned the old property.<sup>4</sup> They wanted to get out of the wine business. I think that this was about 1945. When we were introduced to them, and my dad and I went over and talked to them they had some wine in tanks, a 1944, 1943, 1942, 1941, and even some 1940. And they had their 1939 wine bottled, and the 1938 in half bottles. They had the Rixford La Questa label on it. They wanted to sell all the wine and all the equipment and the tanks.

CS: Would you describe the Rixford place back then in the forties?

MG: The vineyards were in pretty good condition. They'd been taken care of. But they were getting ready for subdivision. The winery was an old building on the side of a hill. You went around the driveway and the winery to the lower level and you would drive right into the lower part of the winery. It was a gravity flow winery. The grapes came in on top and they were fermented up high and then the wine went down to the lower level, and by the time the wine was ready to sell it would be on the bottom level.

CS: How many acres of vines would you guess were up there?

MG: Maybe fifteen or twenty acres.

CS: Did you ever hear anyone talk about there being other red Bordeaux varieties than Cabernet Sauvignon up there?

MG: Right there they always referred to it as Cabernet. Now later we were in contact with the old

<sup>4</sup> Emmett H. Rixford had founded his La Questa Vineyard near Woodside in the 1880s. His vineyard was planted to the five varieties of red Bordeaux: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet franc, Malbec and Verdot. It was replanted between 1900 and 1905 after the onslaught of the phylloxera. Rixford's wine in the Médoc style was one of the great wines of the pre-Prohibition period in northern California, at least according to many contemporary accounts.

vineyard that Martin Ray planted. It became known as the Marie Rose Gaspar vineyard. That one had five different varieties in it.<sup>5</sup> I'm pretty sure there was the Cabernet Sauvignon, the Malbec, Cabernet franc, and Merlot. There was another one.

CS: Probably Petite Verdot.

MG: I know when we went up to pick them, you could tell, the vines were different. So were the leaves and berries.

CS: So probably on that Rixford property there were these other vines, and Martin Ray just figured out which was which and planted them at the Gaspar place. The story goes that when Rixford planted them in the eighties and replanted them after the phylloxera between 1900 and 1905, that he used the five varieties in the exact proportion as there were on one of the great First Growth Chateaux, maybe Margaux or Latour.

MG: Well, they were separated at the Gaspar place. There wasn't a block of Cabernet and a block of Merlot. He had them all in a row so that when you started a row at the Gaspar place you just picked the row and when you got to the bottom of the hill they were all in the same box but in the proper proportion. At Woodside I didn't have a clear picture of the vineyard situation.

CS: So you bought those early vintages in bulk and bottled and took them down to the winery.

MG: Right. We bought the whole thing. They said if we bought the bulk we had to take the bottled wine as well. We also bought the tanks and equipment, and an old press.

CS: This was a very historic purchase of wine, La Questa vintages 1940-44 in bulk and 1938 and 1939 in the bottle. I somehow got a bottle of the 1938. I mounted the label in my dining room next to a Gemello label and a Martin Ray 1948 Cabernet.

MG: We didn't know it at the time. And we had to pay for each load of wine we hauled out of there cash, right then.

CS: How much wine are we talking about here?

MG: I think the 1944 was the biggest amount, in a 1,222 oval cask. It was one of the best casks we had in the winery. We bought the cooperage too. 1940 about 1,000 gallons in two smaller casks. 1942 was also about 1,000 gallons. I would say that it came to about 8,000 gallons total, including the bottled wine.

CS: Wow, about 40,000 bottles of great post-Repeal Cabernet Sauvignon. What happened to it?

MG: Half of it we used to blend with the lighter wines we'd been making during the war. Then, talking to different people we found out that we had a real Cabernet Sauvignon, vintage wine, that was a very good wine, but almost nobody knew anything about it. Then Martin Ray started to come into the picture. He heard about it and came down several times.

CS: Let's get to Martin in a minute. What about the bottled wine? You couldn't blend that off.

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<sup>5</sup> This Gaspar vineyard was planted right across the road from the entrance to the old Paul Masson estate and winery off Pierce Road above Saratoga. When Martin Ray bought the estate from Paul Masson in 1936 Masson retained title to this piece of property and built a pretty chateau-like home on it. Later Martin Ray planted this vineyard, which produced grapes into the eighties. In recent years it was allowed to decline and the property was subdivided. Recently another vineyard has been planted there.

MG: We simply treated it as wine purchased in bond and we took it out of bond and sold it retail. We sold it from our winery to our retail store there on the property.

CS: When did you start the retail store?

MG: Right away. Sometimes we'd sell wine out of the winery in bond, to the consumer, but we'd have to put the tax stamps on it.

CS: Were you carrying anybody else's wine then. Another label?

MG: We were carrying some sweet wines, port, sherries and muscatel. We bought them from the Golden State Winery in San Francisco.

CS: Did you have your own Gemello label on those wines?

MG: No, there was a sticker on them that said "drawn from a tax-paid container." And there was a little blank there where we'd write in what kind of wine it was.

CS: Really appealing, but if you had one of those bottles now it would probably be worth some money, as a collector's item. Empty, of course. So, how did the Rixford wine go? I've heard stories about how the word got out.

MG: Yes, the word got out. And Martin Ray was coming over and buying it. Later he says to us, "Do you realize what you have here?" Finally, he purchased most of the 1,222 gallons of the 1944 wine. We bottled it for him in about 1946. Then we started selling what we had left as Cabernet Sauvignon. We got maybe a dollar, dollar-and-a-half per bottle.

CS: But that's not bad. That would be about \$10 in 1992 dollars.

MG: Later we discovered the Gaspar vineyard up behind Saratoga had good Cabernet grapes and we made that wine into a varietal. That would be in the early fifties. Later when my partner Louis Sarto came into the picture, then we started to get going on the varietal wines. This started about 1956. The Rixford wine was all gone, but we had already started making Cabernet from the Gaspar vineyard. And also from the Scott Knight Smith vineyard, down below on Pierce Road.<sup>6</sup>

CS: What about the grapes up at Woodside. What happened to them in later years?

MG: I'm not sure, before Mullen brought it back later.<sup>7</sup>

CS: Did Martin Ray ever bring down Woodside grapes to your winery to crush and make wine?

MG: No. But he may very well have bought some and made wine.

CS: I understood that in the late forties he did just that, specifically the 1948 and 1949 vintages that came out under his label. But that didn't happen. My God, I think I put that story in *Modern Edens*.<sup>8</sup> It did make sense, at the time. He had already sold the Masson place to Seagram in 1943 and I knew he got some Rixford wine from you.

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<sup>6</sup> See the Scott Knight Smith interview on the development of that property and its vineyard.

<sup>7</sup> Robert and Pauline Mullen began bringing back the Rixford vines in the early sixties to provide grapes for the revived La Questa label.

<sup>8</sup> I did, on page 152. See Bibliography for reference.



MG: No, we never made any wine for Martin Ray. We stored some Champagne for him at one time. No. that wasn't for him, for his son.

CS: Peter Martin Ray.

MG: Well, maybe the story got mixed up from the fact that we had bottled that 1944 Rixford Cabernet for him. He may have told people that, but we didn't.

## The Gemello Label

CS: No, he wasn't the kind of person who'd be saying someone else made a great wine like that. Let's talk about that Rixford label. We have that one, the Martin Ray label and the Gemello label, and they are all sort of variations on a theme. When did Gemello go for that label?

MG: When we bought all that wine from Rixford, it had the old Rixford label on it and we kind of liked it, especially Louis Sarto when he saw it in 1956. He loved that script, the scroll on it.

CS: You know where that script comes from? Only French Champagne drinkers would know, if then.

MG: No. I never heard.

CS: Rixford took that right off the old Louis Roederer Champagne bottle. Just the script. I've laid them side by side. It's perfect.

MG: We liked it very much. In fact Louis's brother, Boise Sarto, made a lot of display and advertising for Pepsi-Cola. He was quite an artist and he loved that script.

CS: That's pretty strange, because the Pepsi-Cola script looks very much like that too.

MG: When Louis came together with me within a few months Boise came also. He kept his old job, but he also used to be a display man for Seagram, or National Distillers, I'm not sure which. When we decided to go into labeling our wine, we had to come up with a label. We had one, but it was just a stock label. We took one of those Rixford bottles to Louis Roche, who used to work for the brewery industry. He was one of the big lithographers in San Francisco. We didn't realize he was almost going to duplicate the La Questa label. So he comes up with the same scroll, but instead of La Questa it was Gemello. Instead of a circle he had a triangle. Instead of putting EHR in the circle, like they had, he put a GW in the center. It was really close. I wonder, did Martin Ray come with that label after us?

CS: No, before, but with a different twist. He had the scroll exactly the same. I can see it on that bottle of 1948 Cabernet I have. But he didn't put the center seal on the main label. He made it the same, put MR in it and used it as part of the neck label. Remember, those early wines he put up in Champagne bottles and he had a neck piece on them just like a bottle of French Champagne. But it was the same thing as the Rixford label. Let's go back to that purchase from the Rixfords. Just what did you buy from them.

MG: We didn't buy any real property, or their bond. Just wine and equipment. We bought the containers the wines were in. There were eight or ten casks and maybe fifteen or twenty puncheons. There was one at 1,222 gallons, and one at 1,003. There were three of them at about 600, and two at 500. These were upright ovals, with the cradle and the blocks. These all became part of the Gemello Winery.

CS: Do you know where they got that cooperage?

MG: Some of it was from the Beltramo Winery in Menlo Park before Prohibition. It was over on Middlefield Road, I think. I don't think Beltramo started up after Prohibition. There were also two casks which came from a cooper in San Francisco, Woerhner, a German cooper.

CS: I've seen that name on casks at the old Almaden place on Blossom Hill Road. Big ovals. They were probably destroyed in that fire three years ago.

MG: We also got an old press, a basket press, that didn't amount to anything. We put it out in front of the winery.

CS: Sure, I remember that.

MG: I think Paul and Sandy Obester have it now. There was also an old hand crusher, which they had made into an electric crusher. But they wanted us to buy all that stuff if we wanted the wine.

CS: How much did you pay for the wine?

MG: Oh, I'd say between 40 and 50 cents a gallon.

CS: Well, that's not a bad price at the time. That would be \$3.50-4.00 in today's dollars.

MG: Right, we were buying Monte Bello wine from Rousten at the time for 12 cents per gallon. I remember my father going up there to buy wine from Charlie Rousten's father and offering him ten cents a gallon for wine and he just jumped all over him. He says, Picchetti's selling water out of the spring down there for ten cents. So my dad offers him 12 cents a gallon, and he takes it. Yeh, there was a nice spring there, that's still running, just above Picchetti's there.

CS: Rousten's dad had been the super up at Dr. Perrone's hadn't he?

MG: Yes. And also down at the Monte Vista Winery. And he was running his own winery when he was down at Monte Vista.

CS: Well, this tape's about over. Let's call it a day and we'll start up with the big changes that take place after 1956.

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August 25, 1992

### Vintages 1934 and 1935

CS: But before we jump up to the fifties, let's go back again to the first vintages at the winery, 1934 and 1935, and get a detailed look at these first years. Mr. Gemello has pulled out some of the old documents from these years.

Where did you get the grapes in 1934?



La Questa    Martin Ray    Gemello's



Mario Gemello in his home cellar, 1992

MG: From our first form 702, production and inventory of wine, we started the vintage in September. We produced 3316 gallons of claret, and we had 350 gallons of sauterne, which I think we purchased, because I'm sure we hadn't produced any white wine. The grapes came from our own production, about five tons, and we had ten tons from Napa, from a Mrs. Thompson.

CS: Before then if you sold wine it was purchased from someone else.

MG: That's right. In 1934.

CS: What were those Napa grapes from Mrs. Thompson?

MG: Probably Zinfandel and Mataro.<sup>9</sup> These went into our claret. That's really all we made in the first years.

CS: Do you remember getting those grapes?

MG: I remember going up to Napa and picking the grapes with a crew. My dad bought them on the vine. I was still in high school. I had a man who came up with me from here and then we hired some people up there. We were in charge of running the crew. When we had them all picked into lugs the truck came up and got them and hauled them home. We picked for about two days and then at the end of the second day, that night really, we loaded them and drove home all night. We got home the next morning early. Then we crushed them the same morning.

CS: They'd be cool going into the fermenters then. You must have been pretty sleepy.

MG: I was sleepy. I didn't sleep all night and my dad put me to work the next day racking wine and I fell asleep and the wine started running all over the floor of the winery. But that wasn't my fault.

CS: So how much wine did you have at the end of the year?

MG: In December of 1934 our inventory was 3891 gallons of claret and 350 gallons of sauterne.

CS: So then you sell it. How did that work?

MG: We have the retail store out in front. If he would take the wine out of the winery direct and sell to someone in a five gallon demijon or a ten gallon barrel he would have to put government stamps on the container, so much per gallon. They had to be pasted right on the container. But if we sold it in the retail store he would sell it to himself, with the stamps, and then the retail store would sell it and put a little tag on the container that said it had been removed from another tax-paid container.

CS: Would you have any barrels in the retail store?

MG: Yes. There was a whole line of barrels. It is what we used to call a barrel shop. There would be a little spigot on each barrel and you could give a person a taste of the wine when he came in. If he liked it we'd fill his jug up. And we had other wines in there, all kinds of sweet wines that we bought from the Golden State Winery in San Francisco.

CS: Did any other retailers buy from you there?

MG: Yes, but we kind of discouraged that. Once in a while we would do that, but we sold it to them as a consumer, same price as if they were buying it for home consumption. In those days there wasn't

<sup>9</sup> Today more commonly termed Mourvèdre in California. But the Spanish term Mataro was standard here in the years after repeal.

any sales tax, so we didn't have to make a certificate that it was for re-sale. There were a couple of persons who would sell it retail themselves.

CS: How did you keep track of this?

MG: My mother kept most of the records. She had a little book and she'd mark down how many gallons and the price. That's one there, that little green book is for 1934-1935. Some days she'd have one or two gallons, some days lots more.

CS: That's a rare piece of history there. People simply did not keep such things from the old days. They are almost non-existent.

MG: In those days we had no cash register, just a little drawer.

CS: How about next year?

MG: We had 3891 gallons in December 1934 and in 1935 we produced 5680 gallons.

CS: That's quite a bit more. I guess you were doing all right selling it.

MG: We didn't age it much those days. We moved it right out. In 1935 we had a new source a grapes, a vineyard owned by D. W. Borrow in Campbell. And we still had Mrs. Thompson up in Napa. And then we had a little of our own grapes too. We had about four tons here and fifteen tons from Mrs. Thompson. And this year we got 14 tons from Borrow. So that was about 33 tons and we made 5682 gallons. That comes to 172 gallons per ton which is pretty good production for a small winery making dry wine.

CS: Your were getting 4-5 tons of Zinfandel from your home vineyard. How long did that last?

MG: Until 1939, when we sold the back portion of the orchard, and that's where the grapes were. Behind the winery. From that point on we don't own any vineyards.

## Changes in the 1950s

CS: Let's move to the 1950s.

MG: After the war in the late forties I purchased a liquor license and operated with it along with the retail wine operation and the winery. It turned out that I was about the only one in California that had all three licenses, a bonded winery, the retail store and the liquor license. So in the early fifties it wasn't easy to run both the operations. In 1956 I was talking to a young fellow not too long out of college and he was interested in the liquor business and a retail store. So I took him in and sold him the retail operation. I produced the wine and he and his brother sold it, Louis Sarto, and then his brother Boise.

CS: What had been his interest in such a thing.

MG: He had worked a couple of years for a bottler in Los Altos and was interested in varietal wines. He was very interested. It turned out that when he came, that was the turning point of the Gemello Winery. We started bottling wine with cork finish and our labels. One of our first outstanding wines was a 1960 Cabernet Sauvignon.

CS: So between 1956 and 1960 there weren't really any Gemello wines, as we came to know them.

MG: Not with vintage dating. We did have some wines with the new label, but not vintage dated. We started producing varietals right away when Louis came, even before I was bottling Zinfandels and Cabernets, Sauvignon blanc. But not vintage wines.

CS: Where did you get the grapes for that Cabernet?

MG: Our main vineyard for that was the Marie Rose Gaspar vineyard in Saratoga. Later on we used the Knight Smith vineyard up the road. They were out two main Cabernet vineyards.

CS: Did you buy from anyone else up there?

MG: We bought some Cabernet Sauvignon from Dave Bennion, from the Ridge Winery. That was before they really established their own winery.

CS: When did that start?

MG: The records I have show that we bought from them in 1959 and 1960, which was about when they started. I think they bought the place in 1958. Also on the Ridge there we bought grapes from Charlie Rousten and earlier from William Short.

CS: Do you have a record of that.

MG: I have a record of all the grapes we bought in 1959 and 1960. That's the only record we kept.

CS: Those are important years. You saved a couple of good ones. Let's just copy that record down right here in the transcript.

## Grapes Purchased by Gemello Winery

### 1959

Date	Variety	Supplier	Place	Tons	\$/ton
9/8	Chardonnay	Dr. Dave Bennion	Monte Bello	1.6	\$120.00
9/21	French Colombard	Pat Mastro	Campbell	2.2	55.00
9/26	Grenache	Sam Jasper	Manteca	21.3	52.00
9/28	Pinot blanc	Marie Gaspar	Saratoga	2.5	110.00
9/28	Zinfandel	Pat Mastro	Campbell	2.8	50.00
9/29	Zinfandel	Pat Mastro	Campbell	1.4	50.00
9/30	Zinfandel	Ralph Bogner	Campbell	4.2	60.00
9/30	Zinfandel	Ralph Bogner	Campbell	1.6	60.00
10/1	Sauvignon blanc	G. Guglielmo	Morgan Hill	4.9	65.00
10/3	Sauvignon blanc	G. Guglielmo	Morgan Hill	4.6	65.00
10/5	Ruby Cabernet	Dr. Dave Bennion	Monte Bello	1.6	90.00
10/6	Cabernet Sauv.	Dr. Dave Bennion	Monte Bello	2.0	90.00
10/8	Semillon	Charles Rousten	Monte Bello	2.0	60.00
10/9	Zinfandel	Sal Falcone	Los Gatos	.7	55.00
10/9	Zinfandel	A. Bellecitti	Saratoga	2.4	60.00

10/12	Cabernet Sauv.	Marie Gaspar	Saratoga	1.8	90.00
10/12	Zinfandel	A. Bellecitti	Saratoga	3.4	60.00
10/13	Cabernet Sauv.	Marie Gaspar	Saratoga	1.2	90.00
10/13	Carignane	A. S. Nino	Los Gatos	6.2	60.00
10/16	Napa Gamay	G. Guglielmo	Morgan Hill	3.7	77.50
10/17	Cabernet Sauv.	Marie Gaspar	Saratoga	<u>1.0</u>	90.00
			Total=	74.3	

### 1960

9/19	Zinfandel	Pete Venosta	Morgan Hill	5.1	85.00
9/20	Zinfandel	Pete Venosta	Morgan Hill	4.9	85.00
9/21	Sauvignon blanc	A. Bellecetti	Saratoga	2.7	75.00
9/22	Zinfandel	A. Bellecetti	Saratoga	2.1	75.00
9/26	Grenache	Charles Prusso	Madrone	4.9	60.00
9/28	Pinot blanc	Marie Gaspar	Saratoga	2.0	135.00
9/29	Grenache	Charles Prusso	Madrone	5.7	60.00
9/30	Sauvignon blanc	Ralph Bogner	Campbell	1.1	75.00
9/30	Carignane	Charles Prusso	Madrone	5.4	60.00
9/30	Petite Sirah	Charles Prusso	Madrone	2.8	60.00
10/1	Petite Sirah	Charles Prusso	Madrone	1.8	60.00
10/3	Zinfandel	Pat Mastro	Campbell	4.9	70.00
10/4	Zinfandel	Pat Mastro	Campbell	2.9	70.00
10/4	Carignane	Pete Venosta	Madrone	4.9	85.00
10/4	Grenache	Pete Venosta	Madrone	5.1	85.00
10/5	Grenache	Pete Venosta	Madrone	4.9	85.00
10/10	Cabernet Sauv.	Dr. Dave Bennion	Monte Bello	4.4	130.00
10/10	Carignane	Pete Venosta	Madrone	5.0	80.00
10/11	Carignane	Pete Venosta	Morgan Hill	4.9	80.00
10/12	Carignane	Pete Venosta	Morgan Hill	4.9	80.00
10/12	Cabernet Sauv.	Marie Gaspar	Saratoga	3.3	135.00
10/12	Mixed red	Charles Rousten	Monte Bello	5.2	80.00
10/13	Carignane	Pete Venosta	Morgan Hill	3.9	80.00
10/17	Carignane	Charles Rousten	Monte Bello	5.9	75.00
10/19	Napa Gamay	G. Guglielmo	Morgan Hill	3.3	110.00
10/19	Napa Gamay	G. Guglielmo	Morgan Hill	3.0	110.00
10/21	Carignane	A. S. Nino	Los Gatos	<u>5.4</u>	75.00
			Total=	115.7	

\* \* \* \* \*

### Ridge Vineyards

CS: Tell me about your relations with Dave Bennion and the folks from Ridge Vineyards.

MG: Dr. Bennion came to see me at the winery one day and he wanted to bring fellow workers from Stanford Research to talk to me about going into the wine business. So one day they all four came over and sat down and told me what they had in mind, and I told them DON'T. "Don't go into the wine business." But that shows you how wrong I was. They went right on into it and made a success of it.

CS: What did they tell you they wanted to do?

Gemello Winery

2003 EL CAMINO REAL  
MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIF.  
Whiteliff 8-7723

Weight # 17141

07513

Date Oct. 8, 59

Name

Charles Rousten  
Cupertino, Calif.

Address

DESCRIPTION

AMOUNT

79 Boxes grapes  
Semillon

Gross - 12120  
Hare 8030  
Net 4090

2.045 tons  
@ 60.00 ton 122.70

Gemello Winery

2003 EL CAMINO REAL  
MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIF.  
Whiteliff 8-7723

Weight # 520

07512

Date Oct. 6 - 59

Name

Dr. Dave. Bennis

Address

Stanford Research Institute  
Palo Alto, Calif.

DESCRIPTION

AMOUNT

108 Boxes grapes  
Cabernet Sauvignon

Gross - 9710  
Hare 5750  
Net 3960

1.98 tons  
@ 90.00 178.20



MG: They had a chance to buy this vineyard and land up on the Monte Bello Ridge. They were interested in planting good varietal grapes, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Chardonnay.

CS: This is the William Short place.

MG: I think it was part of it. I'm not sure if it included the Short vineyard.

CS: You had bought grapes from Short.

MG: Yes I did. That was the Pinot noir that he had planted.

CS: Did it work out?

MG: For a year or two. He was kind of a hard man to do business with.

### Charles Rousten

CS: What did you buy from Charles Rousten up there?

MG: He was the one who introduced me to Bill Short. He said there was this fellow above him that had a nice vineyard that was just coming into production and maybe I'd like to buy his grapes. I bought some white varieties from Rousten, Sauvignon blanc, and some reds, Petite Sirah and Carignane. It was for our regular red wine. Charlie was producing a little wine up there and then later on he quit. And he was selling some grapes to different people. I was doing him a favor buying what grapes he had left over, because he was doing me a favor. He was operating the Gaspar vineyard, and Scott Knight Smith's vineyard also. To get their grapes they wanted me to do all the work on the vineyard. Cultivate, prune, etc. So I got Charlie Rousten to do it for me. He did the picking for me as well. I'd then buy the grapes from him and the owner got half of that. It was a fifty-fifty deal.

CS: Actually, he was sort of a share-cropper, wasn't he?

MG: Yes, he was share-cropping, but he made sure that I got the grapes. In other words, I had control of the vineyard. I had a contract with Mrs. Gaspar and Mrs. Knight Smith. Then a time came when Charlie had a little disagreement with Mrs. Gaspar. So she said she didn't want him on the place any more, and that was it. This was in the seventies. So that's when Herbert Regnart came into the picture.

CS: He's still alive?

MG: Yes, the Regnart family is an old family here. They even have a school named after them in Cupertino. Charlie introduced me to Herb and he was willing to take over the Gaspar place if Mrs. Gaspar would agree to do business with him. So I introduced them.

CS: Did the Regnarts live on Monte Bello?

MG: No. they lived in Cupertino off McClellan Road, where it intersects with Stevens Creek. That relationship with Regnart lasted until my last harvest in 1978. When Rousten pulled out he pulled out of both vineyards, so Regnart took over the Knight Smith and Gaspar vineyards.

CS: How long did you keep buying from Mrs. Gaspar?

MG: I think that the last time was in 1977. And from Scott Knight Smith in 1978. And Regnart was operating the vineyards right until the end.

CS: Did you keep buying grapes from Rousten?

MG: Yes, until he just abandoned the vineyard. He was probably one of the first men that my father met here. My father knew his father very well. I don't know whether he knew him from the old country, but he knew him before Prohibition.

CS: From the old country? Rousten is a French name.

MG: Yes, it's a French name, but he was Italian. He was from the same part of the country as my father. They spoke the same dialect of Italian. He was a foreman for one of the wineries up there before Prohibition.

CS: That's right. Osea Perrone.

MG: We did business with them. We bought some grapes and I got to know Charlie. We also bought some wine from him.

CS: So in the forties and fifties he was making wine and selling grapes.

MG: He sold to home wine makers. He made wine himself and sold it there. And he'd have ten of fifteen thousand gallons extra and we would buy some of that from him. We did that for three or four years until his father passed away. Then Charlie more or less abandoned the winery. That was in the fifties.

CS: So the Rousten Winery isn't a producer after the fifties. But I remember they kept their bond for some time. How about the vineyard?

MG: Yes, through the sixties. It was maybe 15-20 acres. There were a lot of vines missing. Production was very low. He really didn't have much interest in the winery or the vineyard. He was more interested in cattle and raising hay. He had close to a hundred acres up there.

Some of that is in the Open Space District now. Some of it he continued to operate as a pasture for horses right up to the end. He was boarding horses at the end. He had somebody helping him. When he passed away I heard that the land went over to the person who was with him at the end, rather than his relatives. But he didn't have too many. He just died a couple of years ago. He was a fellow who liked to do things his own way. He never married. He just had a brother, who died some years ago. He was a loner. But he was a real nice fellow to do business with and to get along with. That is, if you agreed with him.

CS: Did you buy any other Santa Cruz Mountain grapes?

MG: Well, for a couple of years we had grapes from the Locatelli place over near Big Basin. We got Zinfandel from them. That was in the late forties. My dad was always looking around for grapes in different places.

CS: Did you ever get Picchetti grapes?

MG: That was one of the first families my father had contact with when he came from the old country. In fact, he worked for them. But the only business we ever had with Picchetti was when we bought some bulk wine from them for a couple of years. They had a couple of tanks of really good heavy old wine. I don't know very much about their operation.

CS: I once bought some wine from them in the early sixties. He just drew it from that big cask. It wasn't very good. It had started to acetify. I wondered if maybe they had bought wine from someone else just to have some for their old customers.

MG: I don't think they bought grapes or wine from others. I think they just made their own. The only one I ever did any business with was one of the sons, Hector. We bought bulk wine from them a couple of times, in the fifties. I remember I'd go up and haul it down. I had a little truck with four puncheons on it. That would be about six or seven hundred gallons.

CS: How about the Pourroy family?

MG: I heard from my father that they always had a reputation for making a heavy Zinfandel. My dad was interested in purchasing grapes from them because he knew what they had, but it was no luck. They wouldn't sell the grapes. We did buy some bulk wine one year.

CS: Did you have any connection with the Bordi family on Stevens Creek?

MG: No, not really. I knew they always had wine for sale. We really had no contact with them. And I've never seen a label with Bordi on it. I guess it was mostly bulk sales.

CS: I know they kept their bond into the sixties, but I could never see anything going on. How about Martin Ray? We've got the early history. How about in later years?

MG: He invited me up there a couple of times. That's the only time you could go up there, by invitation. He always had a chain across the road down at the bottom of the hill. I went up once and he showed me all over, through the vineyard. He had draining ditches with tiles. Later on he approached me again. He had some barrels he wanted to sell, some 150 gallon puncheons. He asked me if I was interested and I told him I was. He said that there was only one hitch, you have to buy the wine that's in them. It was a Gamay wine, which I had very little experience with. But the price was right. I think I bought 25 or 30 puncheons from him all full of Gamay.

CS: When was that?

MG: That was in the early fifties.

CS: Where would he get 25 oak puncheons like that? And full of Gamay? He must have been making some bulk wine up there. He didn't have any Gamay grapes.<sup>10</sup>

MG: I think he made this wine and it didn't turn out the way he hoped. It was a very light wine. But I was mainly interested in the puncheons. I kept them for the rest of the years at the winery. At the end I sold some of them up to a winery in Plymouth, Baldinelli. Sobon bought one of my big tanks. He's up there too. I don't know how Martin Ray got them, but I think they were old sherry barrels. Also, one time I did go up there my big power filter, one of the first around here. He wanted me to come up and filter his wine for him, and I did that one year.

CS: That's kind of historic. Martin Ray is known for never filtering his wine.

MG: This wasn't a pad filter; it was a sort of powder filter.

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<sup>10</sup> These were probably what was called, and still is, the Napa Gamay, which is not a Gamay at all, but a lowly French variety called the Valdeguié. Martin Ray perhaps thought he was getting real Beaujolais grapes. But there were none in California then and virtually none today, except what is called the Gamay Beaujolais, which is actually a clone of Pinot noir.

CS: And you could vary the density of the filtering?

MG: Yes, by using different colored powder.

CS: Was that diatomaceous earth?

MG: Yes. That was probably in the early fifties. That was before he started up that Mt. Eden group.

CS: Did you ever have any connection with that group.?

MG: No, not really. There was one of the doctors who was one of the partners who bought wine from me.

CS: I'll bet a lot more came in and you just didn't know it. In the sixties your varietal wines were one of the inside things to know about around the South Bay. My brother came to dinner at my place, maybe 1961 or 1962, bringing along a bottle of your wine as his big find. Then sometime during the next year my wife and I came up and met Louis Sarto and bought some Cabernet for my own collection. Did you know the Bargettos?

MG: My dad knew the family from Italy. He and my mother visited them over there near Santa Cruz. Soquel. But we never did any business with them until later on when Louis was operating the retail store and they sold us berry and fruit wines.

CS: How about the Pucchinelli family who had the winery on Winchester Road in Los Gatos?

MG: Albert Pucchinelli turned out to be one of my best friends. That was in later years. But I never did any business with him. Their winery was where the Elks Club is now in Los Gatos, on the hill there. Later on they moved to Palo Alto. Later in San Mateo. They closed down in Los Gatos probably in the early fifties. We still get together, with Armand Bussone and Norman D'Amico, and Ed Norman, a cork salesman here.<sup>11</sup>

After Pucchinelli moved to Palo Alto I don't think he made wine any more. He bought it from others in bulk and sold it. He had a big wine operation in Palo Alto and San Mateo, with big wine vats. He'd buy tankers of wine and re-sell it to consumers, mostly in five gallon demijons.

CS: So he really had a bonded wine cellar. Where was it?

MG: It was on the Bayshore Highway. You can still see it there.

CS: It's funny, this operation sounds very much like that of the Pellegrini Brothers in South San Francisco in those years.

How about the old Andriano Winery? That was really a Santa Cruz Mountain winery.

MG: They were there for a long time. My dad knew Mrs. Andriano from way back.<sup>12</sup> Her son Leo became an attorney, and he became my father's attorney. He also handled my mother's estate and my

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<sup>11</sup> Bussone grew up at the Paul Masson mountain winery where his father was the manager since before Prohibition. Later he was a winemaker at Almaden and ended his career as winemaker at the Geyser Peak Winery. D'Amico's father, Chester, owned the Monte Vista Winery in Cupertino, which became the Paul Masson champagne facility in the late forties, until 1959. Norman D'Amico worked for Paul Masson until recently. The stories of these men can be found elsewhere here in the interviews which I made in the early 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting Prohibition story at the Andriano Winery see the *San Jose Mercury*, 10/18/1928. No less than 40,000 gallons of wine were involved. The winery was located on Alta Mesa Road, northwest of Los Altos and still had its bond in the late 1950s.

older sister's. They had a vineyard back there. You can see where the vineyard used to be near Highway 280. 280 put them out of business in the sixties. It went right through the winery. On the hillside there you can see a large number of very large homes today.

Most of her sales were to local people. A lot of Stanford students and faculty bought their wine there. They made red wine. Later on when the vineyard wasn't producing much, she bought grapes from a grape broker in the Central Valley. He had a farm in Sunnyvale, but in the autumn during the grape harvest he'd go into the valley and buy grapes and bring them back here to sell to wineries. We bought some from him one year.

CS: So the vineyard declined up there and they kept up their local business by buying grapes and making wine from them.

You know, we never talked about how you got started using the Knight Smith grapes in Saratoga.

MG: We were buying grapes from Marie Rose Gaspar on Pierce Road, and you go right by the Scott Knight Smith place when you come over from old Highway 9. My father kept noticing that vineyard for two or three years. It was a beautiful vineyard, but it never had any grapes to speak of. One day he stopped in to see Mrs. Knight Smith and he told her that he was interested in buying her grapes, if she had any, but it never produced. She says, "Don't tell me about that. It makes me so mad. I hire these people to prune it and we never get any grapes." Well, my dad says that he could tell her why, that she wasn't pruning it right. So he asks if she'll let him prune it for one year. And if I get any grapes will you sell them to me, he says. She says, sure. So my dad got a couple of men and they went up there one year and pruned them, and the next year it produced so many grapes that the branches were breaking off. Then she got mad because the vines were being damaged. So from then on we always purchased her grapes. That started in the mid-sixties.

CS: So you dealt with Knight Smith's wife.

MG: Right. He never said anything. All he did was review the contract. He was an attorney. But he never got into the conversation about price. That was her baby. She was a rugged woman, a real farmer.

CS: What did you buy from them?

MG: Just Cabernet Sauvignon. They had some white grapes, but they never amounted to anything. In fact, Regnart talked her in to letting him dig them out and planting Chardonnay. But it didn't do well either. It was in the wrong location.

CS: How about grapes from Vine Hill, over near Scott's Valley?

MG: Yes, we did. I don't recall who the owner was, but we talked to the caretaker there and bought grapes there for four or five years. That was before the Smothers Brothers bought it. That was in the early seventies. We bought some nice Chardonnay, some Sylvaner and they had White Riesling.

CS: That must be where Ridge got their Sylvaner grapes in 1968. I had a case of that. It aged very well. Very interesting wine.

MG: Yes, I think they got it there. We would get maybe ten or twelve tons of grapes from the whole vineyard. I was by there the other day and you can see the vineyard, but it's in terrible shape.

CS: Right. You can see it from the highway. It's a mess. I hate to see that.

MG: There were also a couple of old vineyards near the old Los Gatos-Santa Cruz Road, above where the Lexington Reservoir is today. There are some old apple orchards down there. You can see the old

road go off from the highway after you pass Lexington. I remember we had to go over and pick them ourselves. That was right after I got out of high school in the early forties. They were white grapes. I think they were French Colombard or Sylvaner.

CS: There had been some old German families back there before Prohibition who grew grapes. I'll bet that's what was left of their vineyards. Now this was up on the summit, near Skyland?

MG: No. It was down below, above the reservoir.

CS: What are some other aspects of your operation before the sale to the Filices?

MG: We incorporated the whole operation in 1969. Louis and I put it all together as one company. Then we were the stockholders. That continued until we sold to the Filices.

### The Felice Purchase

CS: Let's get into that.

MG: San Martin was one of my biggest accounts. We probably did more business with them than with any other company. We bought most of our sweet wine from San Martin. And we sold a lot of sweet wine. I would go down there maybe three or four times a month and bring up sweet wines and vermouth. They bottled champagne for us as well. Later on we got it from Weibel. And we bought a lot of bulk wine from them when we needed it. This would be for generics and for varietals. I was a very good friend of the winemaker there, Charlie Lico. He had been the winemaker for Bisceglia Brothers before that. There were five brothers and two brothers-in-law. Lico was a brother-in-law. Sometimes when they had a really good varietal, Lico or Michael Bo, the chemist, would tell me to come down and try it, and sometimes I'd take a couple of puncheons.

CS: Did you ever hear of San Martin buying Santa Cruz Mountain grapes?

MG: No, I never did. They had a lot of vineyards around Gilroy and they bought a lot of grapes in the Central Valley.

CS: So that's the Filice connection.

MG: Yes, we did a lot of business with them. And in later years they used to bottle some white wines for me. They had a good bottling line that could do things we couldn't do. Then they started talking to me about maybe buying my business.

CS: When did that begin?

MG: That began in the early seventies. Finally, in 1975 we made a deal. Michael Filice, one of the original owners, had two sons, Timmy and Michael, Jr. Mike bought it for his two sons. That only lasted a little over a year. Then there was a default.

CS: What about their operation? What went wrong?

MG: I think they made too big an operation out of a small winery. They got in too deep.

CS: How much were they maintaining the Gemello operation? Or were they just using your label?

MG: I think they were using my label and my name. They bought a lot of grapes in the Central Valley from different people. They really tried to make a quick dollar using my name and it didn't work out. They were making wine at a winery in the valley, the Montcalm place.

CS: Right, the old Cherokee Co-operative. Then after they collapsed that 's the place that Robert Mondavi bought to make his jugs. The Woodbridge operation.

MG: After forty, fifty years of contact with San Martin, that ended it right there.

CS: My impression was that their wines weren't very good.

MG: We took it back in 1976. I had gone to Europe with my wife. When I got back things weren't good. So when I got back I called Louis Sarto and we took the winery back. So we both went back to work. We took the inventory back. They had our Gemello wines in a warehouse in San Jose and we went over and brought it all back to the Gemello Winery. Then we produced wine in 1977 and 1978. That was the last harvest.

CS: What wines were you making at the end?

MG: Almost all varietals. Zinfandel, Cabernet, Gamay, Merlot. Lots of Zinfandel from Amador County.

## Amador Zinfandel

CS: Let's talk about the Amador connection.

MG: I was introduced to Amador about 1970 by Bob Trinchero from Sutter Home. He told me I should go up there and I could make a good heavy Zinfandel. We got our grapes near Plymouth. I got a lot of them from Ed Baldinelli. Later he bought most of my cooperage when we stopped making wine. We also sold some to Fortino, over on Hecker Pass Road near Gilroy.

CS: Were you making those Zins down here?

MG: We were hauling the grapes down here by truck. We introduced the Shenandoah Valley Zinfandel on our label. Then we were approached by people from the Virginia Shenandoah Valley and told we couldn't do that. But we won out. We used that right up until the end. I don't know if it's still legal.

CS: Yes, the Treasury finally settled it. It's OK to use it but you have to have the word California along with it. That was a phony complaint. They don't make enough wine there to float a five gallon barrel.

So why did you decide to quit in 1978?

MG: I was in it for about forty years. It was a long time. It was either expand or get out. We'd have to get the cooling systems and all the new equipment.

CS: What did you do between 1978 and 1982?

MG: We sold wine and brought along the young wines for bottling.

## Paul and Sandy Obester

CS: This is a good place to bring in Sandy and Paul Obester. They now have the Gemello label in conjunction with their Obester Winery at Half Moon Bay and in the Anderson Valley.

MG: My father went over and lived with them in his later years. Paul was working for IBM. Sandy is my sister's daughter, so my dad was her grandfather. My mother had passed away so he lived with them. Well, one time they were sitting at the supper table and Paul said something like, he'd like to make a barrel of wine for home use. So my dad says, let's go out and buy some grapes and I'll show you how to make it. I got some grapes for them, some Zinfandel. They made the wine and it turned out really good. So the following year they did the same thing. So Paul says that maybe he'd like to go into the wine business. They went looking around for a place and they found it in Half Moon Bay.

CS: So your dad was involved in that all the time.

MG: He was sort of a consultant. But he didn't show them everything about making wine. Paul and Sandy did a lot of research and took a crash course at UC Davis. They really put their heart and soul into it. They bought me out and operated the Gemello Winery. That was about 1983. My last bottling was in 1982.

CS: I remember having the fiftieth anniversary dinner there in 1984.

MG: Right. All the tanks were gone and we had the dinner right there.

CS: Yes, it was open. It was a shock looking into the place and seeing it empty like that. That was a great event. All those old wines. And then the winery went down in 1989.

MG: They continued to use the place til then. We still own the front part, where the bowling alley is, about two acres. My friends often ask me how I could be in a business like that for more than forty years and then walk away from it. But I tell them it's very easy. It's not all romance. It was hard work.

CS: I guess that does it. I think we've made an important historical document here.

MG: I hope so. Let's have lunch. I have a 1987 Zinfandel that Paul made under the Gemello label from an old vineyard in San Jose out near Kelley Park. Ancient vines.

CS: Sounds good.

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