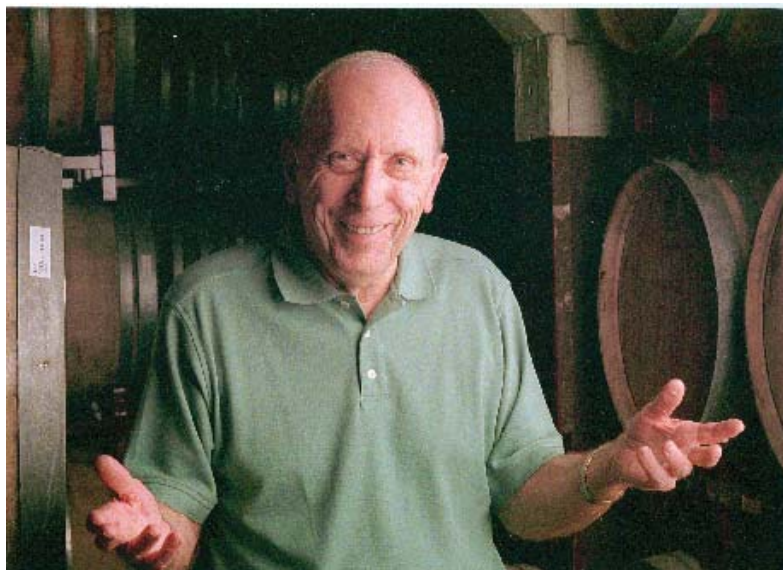




Concannon Vineyard Family Legacy with Jim Concannon



Shortly after the 1849 Gold Rush, family patriarch James Concannon emigrated from Aran Island in the Bay of Galway to Boston. In 1875, James moved to San Francisco. He acquired the West Coast franchise for rubber stamps, and did very well with this business. By 1883, James Concannon had also begun to grow grapes in Livermore Valley, and this is where his family has been ever since. Following his death in 1911, his sons Joseph, Thomas, and Robert continued the family business. Tom graduated from Santa Clara College with a degree in chemistry, and became Concannon's winemaker. Eventually, James' son Joseph and Joseph's wife Nina purchased all interests in the winery from his brothers and sisters. As sole proprietors, they continued the business until Joseph's death in 1965.

Jim Concannon

Meanwhile, Jim Concannon (grandson of James Concannon) was busy studying business and accounting at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in business administration in 1953, and then spent two years in the U.S. Army as an infantryman (but was spared combat when the Korean War finally ended). "When I got out, I took the chemistry short-courses at U.C. Davis for seven months, and then came home to work at the winery. Dad was ready to retire, so Joe suggested that the two of us take over, with me running production and Joe handling sales and finance. In all the time that we had the winery, we never had an argument. We grew up tossing a baseball or football to one another, and always found it easy to work together."

It is easy to want to pigeonhole Jim Concannon as a "gentleman of the old school." And it would fit, to a point. But it would miss way too much of the man. He is, to be sure, a man whose religion and Catholic education gave him a compassionate world viewpoint, one that rails against prejudices from race to religion and all points in between. He is also the scion of an ancient (by American wine standards) wine family, a family that gave California its first Irish wine estate and its first female winemaker (the Hungarian-born ballerina Katherine Vajda, who was the first technically trained woman winemaker in American viticultural history). According to Jim, "I was always deeply inspired by my Uncle Tom. Then, working with Katherine was an exceptional opportunity to learn from one of the most talented people in the business. Between Katherine and my uncle, I was so enthused that I decided to become a winemaker, which is why I took classes at U.C. Davis to sharpen those skills."

Inheriting the winery in 1965, grandsons Joseph S. Concannon, Jr. and James J. Concannon continued managing all aspects of the winery. As an early accomplishment, the Concannon brothers released the industry's first varietally labeled Petite Sirah from their 1961 vintage, in 1964. "We were very fortunate that my father chose not to pull out the Petite Sirah and the Sauvignon Blanc during Prohibition. A lot of growers did pull the shy-bearing wine grapes in favor of the bigger-berried table grapes, to make more money off of the home wine-makers. But dad kept the better varieties. I think he knew that the nonsense [Prohibition] had to come to an end at some point. Perhaps it was a matter of faith.

"Heck, I still work seven-day weeks some of the time, and recently was involved in signing bottles and meeting the public for forty days straight! This is a people business, and I just love interacting with our customers. And I always enjoyed working with the other old wine families: Louis Martini, Andre Tchelistcheff, Joe Heitz, John Parducci, the Pedroncellis, and the Wentes. These were people who were always on hand to help one another. Between the second generation Wentes and the Concannons there were eighteen kids walking to school together. They were almost half the school! These were all down-to-earth people, devoted to their families, and always folks you could have a good time with. Remember, these were people who managed to work their way through the fifties and sixties, when it was a real challenge to sell wine."

Actually, the greater challenge came to Concannon in the twenties, when Prohibition was the law of the land. "It's true," says Jim. "My father had to work with Archbishop Mitty to insure that our wines would be available as altar wine, sacramental wine, to the Catholic churches of the Bay Area. My father also sold to the Lutherans and Episcopalians. His ecumenical approach to life certainly stood him in good stead through the difficult times of Prohibition. The Jesuits, Beaulieu, Beringer, Sebastiani, and The Christian Brothers also stayed open during that period. I know we were blessed to have good stocks of table wines on hand when Prohibition finally ended in December of 1933." Jim was just two when the Great Experiment came to an inglorious end, that end promoted avidly by President-elect Roosevelt.

"My father never pushed my brother or me into the business," muses Concannon. "But you have to remember that we lived out in the country, and I had chores to do. At twelve I can remember taking water out to our grape pickers, working in the hundred degree heat. At thirteen I was helping my uncle Thomas in the lab. He was a full-blown chemist out of Santa Clara University, and an avid rugby player. My brother Joe went to Notre Dame at a time when their football team won forty-four straight. He never saw his college team lose a game in his four years there. I went to St. Mary's, in nearby Moraga, and our football team held Georgia to a tie! Of course, we had John Henry Johnson [later with the San Francisco 49ers] in our backfield, and he ran back the opening kickoff for a ninety-yard touchdown."

Jim Concannon was inducted as a Chevalier in "The Society of the Wine Geese" in 1997 when Ireland's first Wine Museum opened in Desmond Castle in Kinsale. The Wild Geese is the term originally given to those who fled Ireland in the 1600s, but Irish wine historian Ted Murphy decided they would be more accurately served by being called Wine Geese. Desmond Castle, once the custom house, was designated as one of the licensed ports in the 1569 Act to import wines from around the world. It therefore is the proper location for The Wine Geese Society.

A Concannon Methuselah of Petite Sirah and historical information on Grandfather James Concannon is part of the museum memorabilia. A similar bottle was the one President Reagan gifted as "America's gift" on his visit to Grandfather's homeland.

Jim Concannon just proudly celebrated 51 years of devoted service for the winery, continuing the family's legacy. Surrounded by a century of wine and family memorabilia, Jim travels extensively to represent Concannon Vineyard. He is also deeply committed to local public service. Having been a long time member of the Livermore Rotary, Jim also continues to serve as an elected director on the Zone 7 Water Board, a position he has held for the past eighteen years. Since February 2003, Jim has also been an active Board of Directors member for PS I Love You, Inc., an advocacy group for Petite Sirah.