

RETURN TO ROOTS

A WINE 50 YEARS IN THE MAKING

BY STEPHEN W. RUSSELL

Life sometimes comes full circle, as this story will confirm.

I entered UC Davis as a freshman in 1956, still searching for the direction my life would take. I quickly discovered that I had interests in microbiology, biochemistry and the food sciences, which led me to major in winemaking – enology. At that time it wasn't the popular curriculum that it is today: there were only two students – a Catholic brother and me – in the entire four-year curriculum. During those years, I was taught by professors who were or became icons in the field, including Maynard Amerine, Harold Berg, James Guyman, John Ingraham, Harold Olmo, Vernon Singleton and Dinsmore Webb.

At the time of my graduation in 1960, small, boutique wineries essentially didn't exist. So I went to work for Ernest and Julio Gallo and learned from a wonderful mentor, Lou Stern, how to blend their red and dessert wines. The trick with the red wine was making each batch of, say, Hearty Burgundy, taste the same, even though each bottling was made from entirely different wines. I can remember the anxiety of creating blends that first had to pass Julio's extraordinarily keen palate; he would taste each of them against a library of past releases.



Once he approved, the next level of anxiety began: would a small mistake in the volume of a wine in my one-liter laboratory blend translate into a 100,000 gallon mistake in the cellar? Fortunately, that never happened!

I also had the chance at Gallo to work with an eclectic group of people, some of whom went on to become winemaking legends such as Richard Peterson and Dimitri Tchelistcheff.

As important as those Gallo experiences were, the corporate approach just didn't have the cachet – the 'romance' – that I had expected winemaking to have. With a 20-something's wisdom, I decided – to the



ABOVE: Prodigal's Estate Pinot Noir.

RIGHT: Mary and Steve Russell on the destemmer-crusher at their new Rancho la Viña Winery.

great consternation of the professors at Davis who had trained me – that I had made the wrong career decision and went back to school.

I next became a veterinarian. Shortly after beginning practice, I received a Western Union telegram that informed me that winemaking great, André Tchelistcheff (father of Dimitri), was retiring from his position as the winemaker for Beaulieu: Would I be interested in interviewing for his position? One of the hardest career decisions in my life was declining to pursue that interview.

Private veterinary practice wasn't it, either. I then pursued a Ph.D. in comparative pathology and board certification as a veterinary pathologist. At that point, my mother was beginning to conclude that she had a son who seemingly couldn't stick to a job for very long. However, it was the Ph.D. that ultimately provided what I had been looking for: the research that it led to would continue to challenge me daily over the course of my subsequent academic career.

The first step on that continuum was Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla. During my tenure there I met and married my wife, Mary.

made all of the arrangements. Three days after arriving Mary and I looked at each other and said, "This is it!" We were hooked — on the area, the winemaking and the people. We returned to Kansas City, I resigned my faculty position, we packed our things and never looked back. We returned to the Valley, for good, in late December 1998. We continue to pride ourselves on never doing anything precipitously!

During the next year we purchased our home and five acres on Santa Rosa Road and I started a consulting practice helping universities raise grant dollars to fund research. In 2001 we put in steeply sloping Quinta Santa Rosa Vineyard, consisting mostly of Pinot Noir (clones 667 and 777, with 115 just added). We were lucky enough to convince Jeff Newton, Larry Finkle and their associates at Coastal Vineyard Care to manage it.

Our first vintage, 2005, has just been released under our new label, Prodigal Wines. We had again been lucky: Norm Yost of Flying Goat Cellars agreed to be our winemaker during that and the subsequent 2006 season. During that time I wound down my



Steve and Mary enjoy good food, good wines and good friends on Thanksgiving 2006. From left: Mary Russell, Bruno D'Alfonso, Steve Russell, Kris Curran and Norm Yost.

consulting practice and Mary and I tooled up to take over as chief cellar rats and winemakers, which we did during this last 2007 crush. Coincident with that, we received our own bond and moved into the Baer family's new Rancho la Viña Winery on Santa Rosa Road.

We have been very pleased with the early reception for our wines. For instance, the Wine Enthusiast gave our Sta. Rita Hills appellation blend a score of 90. Bloggers, such as the

From Scripps we went to the University of North Carolina, where I was an associate professor; the University of Florida (professor and department chairman); Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons for a sabbatical year; and the University of Kansas Medical Center (Wilkinson Distinguished Professor of Cancer Research and director of the KU Cancer Center).

During all that time, I never lost my love for wines and winemaking.

By 1998, Mary and I had begun to think about retirement and returning to California. We joined two long-time friends here in the valley, Don and Betsy Cramer, for a wine-tasting tour of Santa Barbara wineries. On that trip Mary and I met Rick and Diana Longoria. That meeting irrevocably changed our lives because it led to an invitation to participate in their 1998 crush. They graciously

Prince of Pinot, princeofpinot.com, and GrapeNutz, grapenutz.com, are beginning to take notice. The local blog, Santa Barbara Winemakers, sbwinemakers.com, notes: "Steve Russell at Prodigal Wines has an incredible pinot noir, picked in the first week of September [2007]; racked off it has an amazing potential to show what this varietal can do. Dark, inky with cherry and licorice notes I haven't found in pinot before. Not overextracted either, bright and fresh." Ahhhh, now that's happiness.

The prodigal son has returned.

Stephen W. Russell, DVM, Ph.D. is proprietor (with wife Mary) of Prodigal Wines, prodigalwines.com, and a master of many fields. He has recently "retired" to pursue his passion in winemaking.