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California's 'class of 1972' wineries continue to raise the bar

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Fifty years ago, much of what we now consider Northern California wine country consisted of plum orchards for prunes and groves of walnut trees. These were cash crops that replaced grape vines ripped out during Prohibition in the 1920s.

A renaissance was already underway. Heitz Cellars, Robert Mondavi, Schramsberg, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and other wineries opened in the 1960s and early 1970s with

ambitions of restoring California wine to pre-Prohibition glory and making wines to rival the best of France.

Then came the class of 1972, wineries now celebrating their golden anniversaries. According to the Napa Valley Vintners, at least eight wineries opened in the valley that year, almost as many as in the entire previous decade. It was the beginning of a growth spurt, as more than 40 wineries opened in Napa during the 1970s.

Several of the class of 1972 not only survive today but have helped define California wine over the half-century since. Caymus and Silver Oak, still owned by their founding families, pushed Napa toward a riper, more powerful style of cabernet sauvignon and sparked the craze for cult wines. Diamond Creek (now owned by Maison Louis Roederer) raised growers' eyes off the valley floor to the challenges and rewards of mountain viticulture. Other wineries that were founded or produced their first vintage in 1972 in Napa Valley include Clos du Val, Burgess, Mount Veeder, Rutherford Hill, Smith-Madrone and **Sullivan Rutherford Estate**.

Over in Sonoma County, a civil engineer named Dave Stare, who had caught the wine bug while working in Europe during the mid-1960s, bought a prune orchard west of Healdsburg and established Dry Creek Vineyard, the first winery to open in the Dry Creek Valley since Prohibition.

“It was 50 acres bought on a handshake,” says Kim Stare Wallace, Stare’s daughter who now runs the winery. Stare’s inspirations were the white wines of the Loire Valley and the reds of Bordeaux. He was the first in Sonoma County to label sauvignon blanc as fume blanc, and the winery to this day specializes in that variety and chenin blanc. The winery was the first to use the word meritage — a portmanteau of merit and heritage — on its bordeaux-style red wines. And Dry Creek Vineyard was the first to describe its zinfandel as “old vines,” Stare Wallace says, adding ruefully, “I wish I’d trademarked it.”

Also in 1972, Tom and Sally Jordan bought land in Sonoma County’s Alexander Valley to establish Jordan Vineyard and Winery. Like Stare and other aspiring winemakers, they had become enamored of French cuisine and wine while traveling in Europe and wanted to re-create that culture here at home.

“They were foodies before foodies were cool,” John Jordan, the winery’s current CEO, says of his parents. Jordan winery produces highly regarded cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, marketed primarily to the restaurant trade. And the winery resisted California’s bigger-is-better wave, preferring a European style that is coming back into vogue today. “We like to let the food do most of the talking,” Jordan says.

The winery is planning some anniversary dinners this summer in Denver, the Jordan family’s hometown, Dallas, where it has a large fan base, and Nashville, which Jordan says is “the country’s hot food scene right now.”

In Calistoga, on the other side of Mount Saint Helena from the Alexander Valley, Chateau Montelena was founded in 1882 by Alfred Tubbs. (His name may be more

familiar to us today because of the Tubbs Fire of 2017 that started near Calistoga and spread rapidly across the mountains to Santa Rosa.) The winery had lain dormant since Prohibition until 1972, when it was purchased by Jim Barrett and Ernie Hahn.

This year the Barretts, led by Jim's son Bo, are celebrating 50 years of family ownership of Chateau Montelena. They made a big splash initially: Their 1973 chardonnay won the Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976 that established California as a world-class wine region on par with France. They've even re-created that winning chardonnay by blending a wine made with grapes from the same three vineyards, which Barrett says are still owned by their original families.

Montelena is in the midst of replanting its estate vineyards for the third time, which Barrett says should position the winery to continue making quality cabernet, chardonnay and zinfandel well into the next half-century.

"The first time you plant, you're pretty much guessing," he quips. "The second time, 20 to 25 years later, you do a little better. By the third time — well, if you don't know what you're doing by the third time, you probably should be doing something else."

Other wineries are celebrating anniversaries this year, too, of course. Stony Hill, on Napa's Spring Mountain, was founded in 1952. And the Bartolucci family is marking a century of winemaking at Madonna Estate. But it was the class of 1972 that capitalized on a nascent revolution and propelled California wine toward its modern era of greatness.