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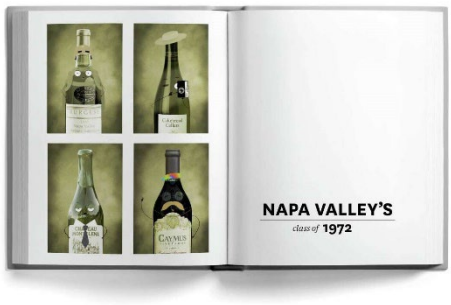
FOOD//WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

Meet Napa's 'class of 1972,' the cool kids who changed American wine forever

This year marks the 50th anniversary of some of Napa's most transformational wineries like Caymus, Montelena, Silver Oak and Cakebread



Agnes Lee / The Chronicle photo illustration from Getty Images and courtesy assets

JESS LANDER, ESTHER MOBLEY
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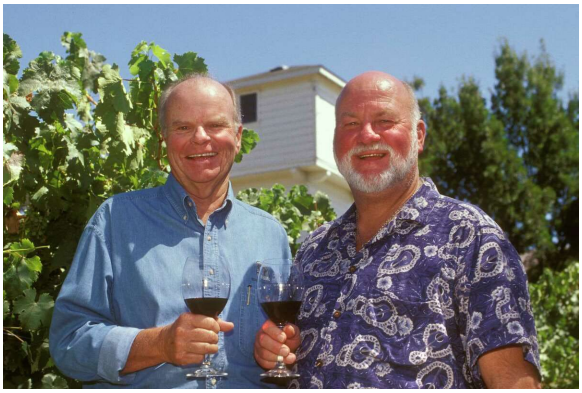
Fifty years ago, something unprecedented, and unlikely to be repeated, happened in Napa Valley.

Within the span of a year, a number of new wineries opened in Napa, many of which — though unknown at the time — would soon become some of the most famous names in California wine: Silver Oak, Caymus, Chateau Montelena, Cakebread, Clos du Val, Spottswoode, Burgess, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Diamond Creek and others.

Never before, and never since, has there been such a concentrated surge of influential institutions in the American wine industry.

While these wineries launched independently of one another, they soon became part of a loose federation: the upstarts trying to put Napa Valley on the global map as a wine region. None could have known just how much they would achieve together, transforming Napa Valley from a sleepy, unknown pasture to the wealthy epicenter of American wine.



Clockwise from top left: Silver Oak co-founders Justin Meyer (left) and Ray Duncan in the 1970s; Justin Meyer, a former monk of the Christian Brothers, with a bottle of 1978 wine; the Silver Oak winery in Oakville seen in the 1980s; Duncan and Meyer in 1997. Photos provided by Silver Oak Cellars

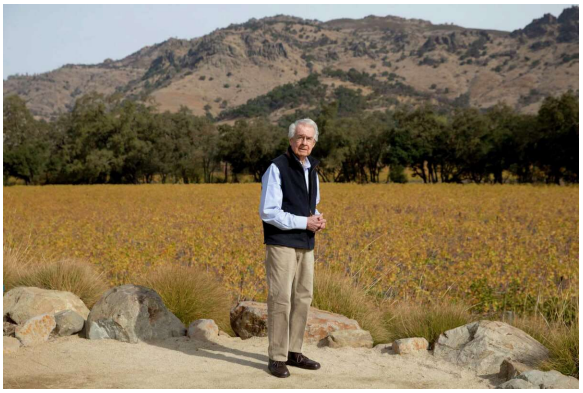
At some point, this group of roughly a dozen wineries became known as the "class of 1972," a nod to their shared founding date. The moniker stuck. This year, as these wineries celebrate their 50th anniversaries, "class of 1972" is prominent in their marketing campaigns and promotional materials.

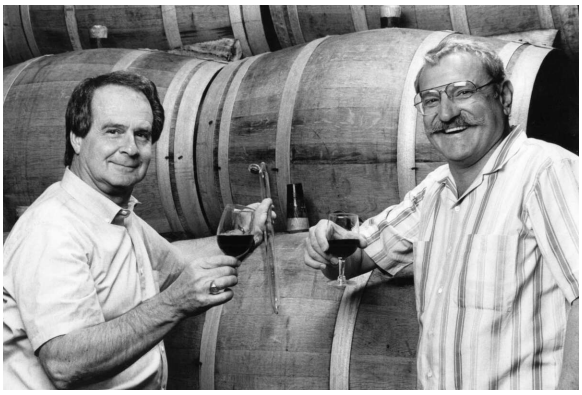
"Really, the way I intellectualize it today is it's like the writers hanging out in Paris in the '20s," said Silver Oak owner David Duncan, referring to the American

expat writers that included Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. “A group that was sharing ideas.”

It was a heady, exciting moment marked by a high degree of camaraderie and resource sharing. It was the beginning of a ripe period of innovation leading to crucial technological advances in winemaking like temperature control for fermentations. It would lead to life-changing publicity milestones for Napa Valley, like 1976’s Judgment of Paris, the competition in which upstart Napa wines were judged superior to esteemed French counterparts.

The year felt like “a springtime,” a moment of fertile newness, said Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars founder Warren Winiarski. “Suddenly the heavens had opened, the sunlight descended and we were in it.”





Left: Vintner Warren Winiarski in front of the Stag's Leap Wine Cellars vineyards in 2019. Top right: Winiarski (left) with neighboring vintner Carl Doumani, founder of Stags' Leap Winery, in 1986. Bottom right: Winiarski on a tractor in 1970 while planting his vineyards, with son Stephen Winiarski behind him. Photos by Jessica Christian / The Chronicle and provided by Stag's Leap Wine Cellars

Yet, as consequential as the year was, the “class of 1972” is a slogan that has developed a mythology of its own. Invented a quarter-century ago as a clever

way to market the 25th anniversary of these wineries, it fails to tell the full story of Napa's early modern era, and has even become a source of some contention among the vintners from that time.

Still, it's worth taking a closer look at the class of 1972 on this golden anniversary — to examine what happened that caused so many people to open wineries all at once, and what buoyed them all to such an astonishing level of success.

Several factors conspired to make 1972 an appealing moment for starting a winery in Napa Valley.

Until the mid-1960s, Napa Valley was in a slump. Many of its historic wineries had been abandoned during Prohibition, and few new ones were opening. Robert Mondavi changed that when he founded his eponymous winery in 1966.

"Mondavi was *the* brand," said Bo Barrett, whose parents revived a pre-Prohibition winery, Chateau Montelana, in 1972. Robert Mondavi Winery represented a new Napa: something more modern and more exciting than the older properties. And Mondavi's growing fame was bringing attention to the valley as a whole.

Left: Chuck Wagner, left, with father Charlie Wagner in 1984. Right: Chuck Wagner in the Caymus vineyards in Rutherford. Photos provided by Caymus Vineyards

Chuck Wagner, who made the first vintage of Caymus Vineyards in 1972 with his father, gives credit to 1970s hippie culture for making wine fashionable among

Americans. “Hippies considered wine more natural, but more importantly, it was different from what their parents drank,” he said.

Some members of the class of 1972 came to Napa because of a deep passion for wine. Photographer Jack Cakebread, who founded Cakebread Cellars in 1972, got into the business on a whim while on assignment to photograph California winemakers. On the way back to Oakland one day, he stopped in to visit a family friend in Rutherford. “He said, ‘If you ever want to sell this place, be sure to let me know.’ By the time he got home, they called and said, ‘We’re going to sell it to you,’” recounted his son, Dennis Cakebread.

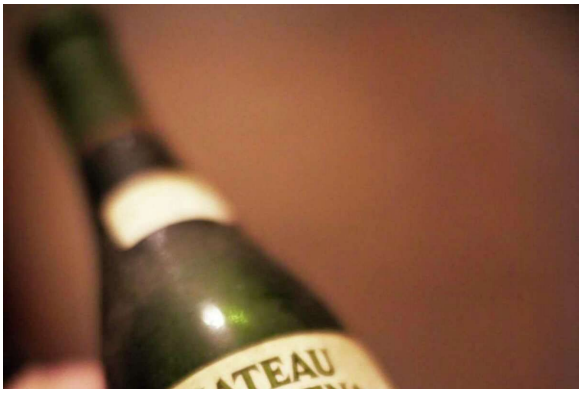
Spottswoode founders Mary and Jack Novak fell in love with Napa Valley and decided to leave Southern California, where Jack was a doctor, to raise their five children in a rural environment. “They knew nothing. They were not fine wine drinkers by any sense,” said their daughter Beth Novak Milliken. “It was the right place at the right time.”

Left: The gate leading into the family house at Spottswoode, a 19th century winery that the Novak family revived in 1972. Right: Beth Novak Milliken, now the president and CEO of the winery her parents founded, in 2016. Photos by Chris Stewart / The Chronicle and Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Others were simply canny businesspeople. Ray Duncan, who came from the oil business, had read a report predicting that average per-capita wine drinking in the U.S. was about to skyrocket — from 0.5 gallons per year to 5 gallons within the decade. (Consumption didn’t quite reach that level, but it did rise in the 1970s.) Chateau Montelena founder Jim Barrett, a lawyer in Southern California, had similar financial motivations: He wanted to take advantage of an investment tax credit that was part of the Revenue Act of 1971. His law partner called Chateau Montelena “a tax break that got out of hand,” his son Bo Barrett recalled.

Whether driven by passion or ambition, these vintners' investments paid off. "Land, you couldn't give it away back then," said Dennis Cakebread, whose father purchased the Cakebread estate for $2,500 per acre. Ray Duncan bought his land for about $4,000 per acre, his son said. Today, some estimates put the average cost of Napa vineyard land at over $300,000 per acre.

Several '72ers would cash out, a sticking point for some of the remaining family-owned wineries celebrating this milestone: Single-vineyard visionary Diamond Creek Vineyard sold to a French Champagne company in 2020; Burgess Cellars, a leading producer of mountain wines in Napa, was acquired by Gaylon Lawrence Jr. in 2021, both for undisclosed sums. And Winiarski sold Stag's Leap Wine Cellars to a larger partnership in 2007 for $185 million.



Left: Chateau Montelena's 1973 Chardonnay was the winning white wine at the Judgment of Paris, the competition that elevated the reputation of Napa Valley worldwide. Right: Bo Barrett, son of the couple that bought Montelena in 1972, seen in 2008. Photos provided by Chateau Montelena and by Craig Lee / The Chronicle

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A far cry from the international tourist destination it is today, the Napa of 1972 felt remote and, in some ways, unremarkable. Growing up on his family's prune farm in the 1950s in the "lazy little town" of Rutherford, Wagner said he didn't have many friends around but had "a dog and a fishing pole and a bike."

There was a sense of a shared mission. Barrett borrowed pumps from Caymus and bottle labelers from Raymond Vineyards. André Tchelistcheff, winemaker for Beaulieu Vineyards, and Robert Mondavi famously took many of the new, untrained vintners under their wings. Milliken said the Duckhorns and the

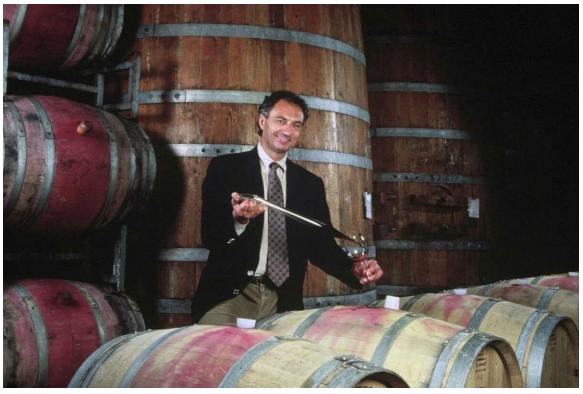
Shafers encouraged her mother to continue with the wine business after her father's untimely death in 1977.

Scenes from Rutherford Hill Winery's opening day in 1972. Photos provided by Rutherford Hill Winery

The camaraderie came out of their shared struggle, Wagner suggested. “Everyone was in need. No one had money,” he said. “We were all striving to find success.”

It wasn’t immediately clear to many of the ’72 vintners that their businesses would work; Barrett said it took Montelena until 1982 to turn a profit. But the Judgment of Paris in 1976 certainly helped. That event, in which a panel of French judges deemed Napa Valley wines superior to French versions, amounted to “a revolution,” said Winiarski, whose Cabernet Sauvignon was the competition’s winning red wine. Suddenly, American wines could be seen as worthy of comparison with the European classics, and Napa Valley was considered the pinnacle of what American wine could be.

The Judgment of Paris, immortalized in the Smithsonian Institution and in movies like “Bottle Shock,” is often credited as the point when everything changed for Napa. Arguably, however, it was the quieter, more disparate activity of the preceding years, including 1972, that constituted the true revolution.



Left: Clos du Val winemaker Bernard Portet in the 1990s. Right: An undated photograph of Clos du Val with bottles from its inaugural vintage. Photos provided by Clos du Val

There were also major challenges ahead that would threaten the budding industry's progress. The most devastating was the phylloxera outbreak in the 1980s. A parasitic insect that destroys vines, phylloxera spread rapidly through vineyards, resulting in the loss of 12,000 acres of vines in Napa and Sonoma counties by the mid-1990s, according to research in the journal California Agriculture.

Vintners were forced to start over and replant, but also were able to reassess their farming approach. The mass replanting coincided with the availability of new technologies like drip irrigation. The grapes and wines got better. "It was pretty scary at the time," said Bruce Cakebread, also the son of Jack Cakebread. "But it helped move the valley. We jumped quality faster than we would have if we didn't have phylloxera."

As affinity for Napa wines grew, hospitality in the region began to evolve, too. "Back in the early days, we just had a gravel parking lot and people would wander in," said Bruce Cakebread, who recalled that during harvest, they'd take a glass of grape juice from the press and pass it around the tasting room. "As more people came, we realized we needed to do a better job of educating them."

Al and Adelle "Boots" Brounstein, who founded Diamond Creek Vineyards, at their property on Napa Valley's Diamond Mountain in the early years. Photos provided by Diamond Creek Vineyards

It's hard to imagine now, given Cakebread's massive new wine tasting campus where appointment-only experiences cost up to $150 per person, but for a long time, the winery didn't even charge.

No one interviewed for this story could pinpoint the first time they heard the phrase "class of 1972." Several ventured that it must have been in 1997, around the time of the wineries' 25th anniversaries. Wagner and Milliken claimed never

to have heard it. The term, in other words, was a post-hoc creation designed as a marketing catchphrase — one that's being given new life in 2022, now that there's an even bigger anniversary to mark.

Just as it might in a high-school setting, it's easy to get the sense that the term "class of 1972" can evoke a cool clique, a group that other wineries wish they could claim to be a part of. And as with any high school clique, there's a certain amount of petty drama involved. Some vintners, citing technicalities, griped to The Chronicle about the inclusion of certain wineries in the group: Someone's land may have been purchased in 1972, they argued, but it wasn't their first vintage, so were they really a member of the class?

Left: Employee Michael Miller walks through the caves at Burgess Cellars in 2009. Right: The Burgess vines overlooking Bell Canyon Reservoir in St. Helena. Photos by Lianne Milton / Special to The Chronicle

Others feel totally left out. In addition to sometimes omitting Sonoma wineries like Dry Creek Vineyard, Jordan and Chalk Hill, the class of 1972 also excludes many of the ensuing decade's innovators in Napa. Joseph Phelps, whose Insignia wine became the paradigm for high-end red blends, missed the deadline by one year; his winery got its start in 1973. The Eisele Vineyard, which would later be the foundation for the "cult wine" era, was planted a bit too early, in 1969.

These minor issues underscore another fact: In the universe of wine regions, 50 years is not very long at all. The French estates against which those California wines competed in 1976 are centuries old. One has a history of grape-growing back to 1423.

Certainly, Napa Valley has transformed in staggering ways since 1972. But it's only half a century, and the challenges ahead — including an uncertain labor

market, shifting consumer tastes and above all climate change — can seem, at times, to threaten to undo the last half-century's accomplishments.

Or perhaps, just as phylloxera did, they will drive another era of evolution and positive growth.

The members of Napa Valley's class of 1972

Meet Napa's 'class of 1972,' the cool kids who changed American wine forever
Chronicle composite

These wineries trace their starts to the year 1972. In some cases, 1972 marks the moment when a vintner bought their land; in other cases, the land was already purchased, and 1972 represented the first year they produced wine. For these purposes, we're admitting them all to the class. This list doesn't include several important non-Napa wineries that began in 1972 like Jordan, Chalk Hill, Dry Creek Vineyard, Scheid and Edmeades.

1. Burgess Cellars (now owned by Lawrence Wine Estates)
2. Cakebread Cellars
3. Caymus Vineyards
4. Chateau Montelena
5. Clos du Val
6. Diamond Creek Vineyards (now owned by Louis Roederer)
7. Mount Veeder Winery (now owned by Constellation Brands)
8. Rutherford Hill Winery (now owned by Terlato Wine Group)
9. Silver Oak Cellars

10. Stag's Leap Wine Cellars (now owned by Ste. Michelle Wine Estates)
11. Stags' Leap Winery (now owned by Treasury Wine Estates)
12. Spottswoode Winery
13. Sullivan Rutherford Estate (now owned by Juan Pablo Torres Padilla)