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Zelma Long, born in Oregon in 1945, is an American enologist and vintner. She attended the UC Davis School of Enology and Viticulture and worked for Long Vineyards and Robert Mondavi Winery, which she served as chief enologist during the winery’s 1970s heyday. In 1979 she was hired to be chief winemaker at Simi Winery in Sonoma County, eventually becoming president and CEO of the winery. While planning for her retirement from Simi in 1996, she and her husband, viticulturalist Phil Freese, started Vilafonté winery in post-apartheid South Africa. In a separate interview released in 1992, Long discusses her years at Mondavi and Simi; in this interview, Long reflects on the history of winemaking in California and the role of women in the industry; the focus of this oral history, however, is the building of Vilafonté and her work as a consultant to many wineries around the globe.
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Acknowledgements:

As I spoke my wine oral history with Martin Meeker, my thoughts turned to the many people who have helped me, worked with me, supported and encouraged me, through the years. I would like to acknowledge them now.

In my years at U.C. Davis in 1968-69, both Dr. Harold Berg, the department chair, and Dr. Jim Cook, teaching viticulture, were great and willing teachers to my desire to extract as much wine and grape knowledge as possible. Later on, Drs. Roger Boulton, Linda Bisson, Ann Noble, and Jim Wolpert added to my knowledge and answered questions. Mike Grgich was the winemaker who hired me for harvest at Robert Mondavi in 1970, and taught me many of the practicalities, nuances, and creative aspects of winemaking. Robert Mondavi supported my rise to Chief Enologist when Mike left to make wine at Chateau Montelena, where his Chardonnay won the 1976 “Judgement of Paris”.

Bob Mondavi was enthusiastic and optimistic; his high goals for his wines and his interest in innovation inspired me. He was genuinely fun to work with, and had a cellar full of young people relatively inexperienced in winemaking but smart, hardworking, curious and creative....and quick studies. I hired Barbara Lindblom as a harvest intern at Robert Mondavi and she subsequently came to work with me at Simi, took a break to make wines in France, and then returned and has worked with me on and off on many projects, and is a lifelong friend. My friendship with Tim Mondavi is a long one; I first worked with him in 1970 when the two of us were assigned to do a physical inventory of the tanks and barrels of wine at RMW. In later years I worked for Tim after he graduated from UC Davis, and most recently have celebrated with him and his many friends the completion of his new winery Continuum.

My first husband Robert Long and I started Long Vineyards, thus providing my first step into the wine business. Despite our personal separation, we continued to produce some great Chardonnays together over the years. Mary Ann Graf, California’s first woman winemaker, and another lifelong friend, preceded me as winemaker at Simi Winery, then joined me on a 1976 three week tour of France with the great André Tchelistcheff and a group of vintners. She developed her own wine analytical business, Vinquiry, and has helped and cheered me on.

At Simi, Diane Kenworthy, our viticulturist who later became the first woman president of our professional society, the American Society of Enology and Viticulture, helped me on the road from winemaking to winegrowing and together we established the North Coast Viticultural Research Group, which became widely influential in winegrowing. In that group was Dr. Phillip Freese, the winegrower for Robert and Tim Mondavi, and we ultimately merged our professional knowledge to create our South Africa project, Vilafonté, and our personal friendship became a wonderful marriage. Talking wines and grapes continues to be part of our everyday life. Thank you Phil for being the greatest partner I can imagine, in all ways, and a world-renowned winegrower.

Dawnine Sample Dyer first worked for me as a harvest intern at Robert Mondavi; then moved to Domaine Chandon and led its sparkling winemaking for more than two decades. The two businesses, Simi and Chandon, were under the ownership umbrella of LVMH and together we
travelled the technical world, sharing adventures and perspectives. During my time at Simi, two talented winemakers, David Ramey and Nick Goldschmidt, began their careers working with me, and went on to flourish in their own wine businesses.

Wine is an international and historical beverage and in the course my career I have developed international professional friends which I would like to acknowledge: Ben Ami Bravdo, Brian Croser, Monika Christmann, Aubert de Villaine, May-Elaine de Lencquesaing, Ghislain de Vogue, Michael Fridjon, Jean and Noelle Francois, Rosemary George, Denise Lurton Moelle, Paul Pontellier, Michel and Dany Rolland, Nicole and Xavier Rolet, Peter Sissick, Victor Schoenfeld, and Becky Wasserman.

These acknowledgements cannot encompass the many, many people who have helped me along the way, some with just a simple piece of advice, some with good humor and good ideas, good work and good friendship. My fellow workers at Robert Mondavi and Simi Winery have created a rich work environment; my group of women friends, the Goddesses, have provided fun adventure interludes; professional associates have aided in accomplishing professional and industry goals. Our South African partner in Vilafonté, Mike Ratcliffe, stepped forward to join Phil and I to create our wines and business there. All in all, I have been blessed. Thank you all for “being there”.

Today is November 6, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long for the Wine and Foodways oral history project. We are at her home outside of Healdsburg, California and this is session one, tape one. So this interview’s going to start out a little differently than our oral history interviews typically start out in that we already have a number of hours recorded with you in which you talk about family background and upbringing and education and your entrée into the wine industry. So we’re going to skip over that because it’s already in the record. But what we’re going to do today is go over some of that period of time, that interview covered up to about 1991, 1992, and ask you some follow-up questions that weren’t covered in that interview so much in the first interview. And the first thing I want to start out with is going back into history in 1976 and the event that is now seen by many people in history, popular culture, as a key turning point for the acceptance of California wines on the world stage and that was the so-called Judgment of Paris, in which California wines, both Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, bested some top growths from Bordeaux and Burgundy. This wasn’t even mentioned in your 1991 interview. In 1991 what was the memory of this event and why wasn’t it mentioned in your interview?

I think as time has gone by, in retrospect it’s come to be seen as more of an inflection point. That’s one reason. And the other is I didn’t really realize until recently that I was part of the group that carried the wines over for that tasting. And the third thing is at the time the owners of Chateau Montelena were with our group of wine people that were touring Burgundy, Bordeaux. I believe they were at Chateau Lascombes for dinner when it was announced who had won that tasting. But there’s many tastings in the wine business so for me it was nice but it was just another tasting. So it’s gained in importance. And when I realized that I had really been there at this critical juncture and seen it first-hand, then I started to say that’s amazing. I was so fortunate. But at the time didn’t mean that much.

Can you tell me actually about that trip that you made to France with, I know, other winemakers? Who went with you and what was the purpose of the trip?

That was 1976. So I had been working at Robert Mondavi for six years and I just happened to go to a get-together at Louis Martini’s house and they were talking about this trip and I think Louis was heading it up. Someone else was organizing it, going to be the trip leader. And I thought, “Well, I’d really like to go on that trip.” And I believe it was a three-week trip that we took. André Tchelistcheff was with us. And we were visiting Burgundy and Bordeaux. I had been to Germany previously but not those countries. And so I just thought
it was a great opportunity. And I was much younger than most of the people that were on the trip. That I just put my hat in the ring and said, “Let’s go for it.” I’ve always been someone that wants to know more about what I’m doing and I’ve always found that reaching out and having different experiences, going different places really helps me understand.

Meeker: What was the expressed purpose of the trip?

Long: The group that were on that trip were just interested in learning more about Burgundy and Bordeaux. And you also have to understand that I was working with Bob Mondavi and he was the guy that was always traveling to France and talking about the wines of California and carrying his wines and tasting them with French wines. So I’d already heard a lot of this. We’re as good as the rest of the world. And so I wanted to see.

Meeker: So you wanted to compare really between what was happening in Europe or France versus what was happening in California? Was that part of it?

Long: It’s not so much comparing. For a winemaker, going to another area where wines are made is always instructional. Even if it’s not the same wines we make, not the same techniques, but you always learn something, something that you can apply to what you’re doing. And you get a bigger perspective. I think one of the things that influenced me was realizing that the people in Bordeaux and Burgundy had been making these wines from these vineyards for a thousand years. So they knew the vineyards so intimately. In 1976 in California we were more focused on winemaking and less focused on vineyards. The other thing, sort of philosophically, I realized that whatever I would do in the wine business was part of a large picture that started hundreds of years before me and would likely go on. So it was professionally, philosophically, really interesting. And I did learn a great deal about how they specifically make their wines.

Meeker: Was there then a set program, if you will, that you were brought into on your trip to France? Meaning were there appointments made in advance to go to particular estates and then was there not necessarily a curriculum but a clear idea of what you were going to learn at each of the different estates?

Long: There were appointments. And since André was really the technical leader of the group I’m sure that he was the one that organized those appointments. The other thing, they were with top wineries or famous wineries. But there really didn’t appear to be an agenda. The agenda was general. It’s let’s visit Chateau Margaux and have a chance to taste the wines and see the winery. We met Paul Pontallier. And learn whatever there was to learn.
Now, people were incredibly hospitable. This was before Americans were so busy traveling into France to see wines. So people were amazing. We’d start out in the morning at a little hostel where we had croissants and café au lait. And then at ten o’clock we’d be visiting someone and they’d have a little snack for us. And at noon we’d be visiting someone and they had a beautiful large repast of food for us. And then by that time we would fall asleep on our bus before we went to the next place. It was really a phenomenal experience for all of us. The warmth, the openness. The winemakers there would tell us things that they wouldn’t tell their next door neighbor. They were fairly closed in their area but seeing, I guess, who we were and that we were very interested in what they were doing, they were both hospitable and welcoming and informative.

Meeker: I know this was many years ago but can you think of any examples of the kinds of things that it felt like they were revealing to you that they might have kept hidden from their immediate competitors?

Long: Well, one of the things is that there were a group of people who were not intimately involved in winemaking, as I was. They may have owned vineyards. Like Louis Martini they ran a winery. But I was on the ground wanting to know whether their malo-lactic fermentations were natural or whether they added bacteria or what kind of yeast they used or how they decided how to harvest. So I was the one that was asking a lot of the technical questions.

Meeker: On this first trip did you get a sense that their cellar practices were substantially different than what perhaps you had learned at Davis and started to implement at Mondavi?

Long: Their cellar practices are different. We didn’t learn cellar practices at Davis. We learned more the theory and chemistry and microbiology of winemaking. But certainly Robert Mondavi was a leader in good quality control and cellar practices. But Robert Mondavi was also much bigger than most of these places we visited. Most of them, especially in Burgundy, were very small cellars. And oftentimes they were underground and you would go in and you’d be tasting barrels. The barrels, the walls, the ceiling were covered with mold. But that was part of the environment there and it wasn’t considered an issue and the wines were fantastic.

Meeker: So it wasn’t hygienic in the way that perhaps the Mondavi facility was but perhaps their mold actually gave some characteristic to their wine. Is that—

Long: I doubt that.
Meeker: You doubt that. [laughter] It was just pure luck or tradition that their wines turned out so well?

Long: No, no. It’s not pure luck. They know their vineyards like the back of their hand. They grow their wines and then they treat them in a pretty simple way. It’s the way that we make wines too when we have a small winery and we’re working with a couple vineyards. When you have large wineries then you have to approach the winemaking differently because you’re getting grapes from many different sources.

Meeker: So you had mentioned also that in this trip you were part of the group that brought the wine over. Does that mean physically they were shipping cases and you were checking them with your bags? How was it brought over? What was the process?

Long: Well, at the time I didn’t know this was going on and I just realized later in reading and hearing about the trip that we had carried the wine. And I believe the problem was Steven Spurrier had come to Napa and Sonoma and selected the wines he wanted to taste and then gone back to Paris and he wanted to get them over to there. And there must have been some problems with shipping them or some time constraint because I don’t think it would have been a lot of bottles of any individual winery. So evidently, and I don’t know the background about how it came to happen, but it was found that we were going to France and we could take the wine. Now, I don’t even know if it was checked or if it was just carried. There were about sixteen or eighteen of us. And in those days you could carry wine on the airplane. So a six-pack of wine would be easy to carry.

Meeker: Is that something that you regularly did on your trips? Was brought California wine back to the Old World?

Long: Yeah. Yes. After that trip I started to do that because when you’re making wine in California you’re tasting it in a certain context. The context of your winery, the context of your area. But to get your wine out of that context and then taste it gives you a brand new perspective on your wine. And particularly, let’s say, with Cabernet and Bordeaux. The thing in the seventies that we were trying to do was to make Cabernet without some of the green characters it had, that it has naturally as a grape variety. And also to master the tannin component. So tasting our wines with the Bordeaux wines, with the great ones, a sense of where we were with regards to achieving those goals. And also just talking to them about timing of harvest, fermentation, mixing, blending. They are great blenders.
Meeker: So it sounds to me like there were many other more informal tastings that were happening at the estates in addition to these marquee Judgment of Paris kinds of competitions, right?

Long: Everyplace we went the tasting in a sense was the core of the visit. So it’s presenting your wines. And it’s still true. If you come to a winery and want to see what we’re doing, the bottom-line, so to speak, is the wines and how they taste, what their personality is, their balance, their intensity, all the particular sensory characteristics of the wines. And that was what people really expected to show us. And then in addition to that we would generally walk through the winery. We didn’t usually visit vineyards.

Meeker: Oh, okay. So you didn’t actually go out to the fields then?

Long: Once in a while but it wasn’t a real focus.

Meeker: Were the winemakers in France interested then in tasting the wines that you were bringing over?

Long: Well, we’re going back and forth between the ’76 trip and my later trips. On the ’76 trip I didn’t bring any wines and it was pretty well scheduled. When I went later on trips I would set up meetings with winemakers or wineries that I thought were very good examples and I would take my wines and taste.

Meeker: So mostly in Bordeaux and Burgundy?

Long: Mostly in Bordeaux and Burgundy.

Meeker: In addition to Chateaux Margaux what were some of the other producers who you thought to be leading winemakers?

Long: Well, we visited Mouton Rothschild. We visited Latour. We visited Romanée-Conti.

Meeker: Many others?

Long: Many others.
Okay. That’s kind of a test. [laughter] So you had mentioned when you learned that Californians won this wine tasting. There was some subsequent media coverage of it. I think that there was even maybe a front page *Time* magazine article about this. Do you recall any of the immediate hubbub after it?

Some of the hubbub was immediately after the tasting and I was not in the US at that time. And I’m sure there was some follow-up but I really don’t remember.

When then did this tasting actually kind of reenter your historical consciousness as perhaps a transformative moment?

Well, there was that movie, that very funny movie about the tasting.

Oh, *Bottle Shock*?

Yeah.

Yeah. And that was just a few years ago.

Yeah. And our partner in South Africa wanted to show that movie as part of some tastings that we were doing with our wines for fun. And I looked at the movie. It was really so ridiculous. It did show people lined up checking into the flight with their bottles of wine. And I thought, “Wow, that was amazing.” And then it showed the judging. And I suspect that what it showed was probably quite—maybe not the physical environment but the impact. The expectations of the French judges. “Oh, this is clearly a French wine. This is clearly a California wine,” only to be shocked when they were not correct. I suspect that that reflected fairly closely what actually happened. And when you look back at it, that was very early in California. To win a tasting against the best of Bordeaux and the best of Burgundy, judged by French wine experts, was extraordinary.

Well, as you had mentioned in your previous interview, oak barrels, French oak barrels had only replaced redwood casks and stainless steel maybe not even ten years before that.

Correct.
Meeker: That’s a long way to come in ten years.

Long: It is amazing. It’s still amazing.

Meeker: The fact that winning this contest in 1976 did not impact you, didn’t strike you as being amazing in and itself might be remarkable, right? Did you and your generation really have this sense that of course we’re as good?

Long: I can’t say I did. I was working as the chief oenologist at Mondavi. My focus was to take the grapes we had and make them into the best that was possible. So I was really down in the trenches. I wasn’t a winery owner. I wasn’t a wine marketer. I was really interested in how wine can be made better. And I think that’s one of the reasons it didn’t impact me that much. Because that outcome is just a result of doing the work really well and having very good grapes. And that’s where I was.

Meeker: Your grapes at that point in time that you were working with also must have been fairly young, yes? The wines?

Long: Some. Some were, some weren’t. There were old vineyards in Napa Valley. And Mondavi, of course, was crushing a lot of grapes and some of them were from old vineyards. Some of them were from their vineyards, some of them were from growers.

Meeker: Were they doing single vineyard designates at that point in time?

Long: No, they were doing reserve wines but not single vineyard designates.

Meeker: And so does that mean there was a sense that some of the vineyards were more prestigious than others and those vineyards went into creating the reserve? How did that happen?

Long: The reserve was made based on tasting the different lots. We would keep vineyards separate through fermentation and barrel aging and then they would be blended at some time into reserve and the Cabernet. And certainly over time when you’re doing that you do see a trend of certain blocks performing consistently at a very high level and, yes, we did see that.

Meeker: One of the things that I’d like you to comment on is the switch in California from really a panoply of a whole wide variety of grapes, varietals, the
Johannesburg Rieslings and the chenin blancs and the gamays and all this kind of stuff to really by the late seventies, early eighties, Cabernet and Chardonnay with a few related outliers. Why do you suppose that happened?

01-00:23:53 Long: Well, the first thing I would say is that in 1970 Bob Mondavi couldn’t get enough Cabernet and Chardonnay because growers were just starting to plant those varieties. And in order to buy those you might have to buy some Sylvaner and some Carignan and so on. So that was one of the reasons we had a real diversity of varieties. There was historically, of course, Cabernet. But Chardonnay was improved by UC Davis and so—

01-00:24:29 Meeker: The clonal?

01-00:24:29 Long: The clonal programs that they had to develop new clones. And before that the Chardonnay was not a grape variety that the county extension agent would recommend planting because it wasn’t very productive. And back in that time there was more of a split than there is now between the grape grower who really wants production and the winery that wants quality. The Chardonnay that was developed made very nice wines and it was much more productive so it was economic for a grower to grow. So as time went on, from ’70 to ’80, there was more of both Cabernet and Merlot and Cabernet Franc planted. So we were able to grow those varieties. And Bob Mondavi did have a clear vision for what he wanted to produce. The Fumé Blanc, of course, was equally important. But some of these other varieties that we did make ended up being sold out in bulk wine because they weren’t part of the line-up.

01-00:25:41 Meeker: There was no market for them or he was not convinced of the quality? What was the reason?

01-00:25:50 Long: It wasn’t an issue of quality. He had a sense of what he wanted to make. We made a rosé, we made Riesling, we made Cabernet. Chardonnay, Fumé Blanc were really the core. And we made Zinfandel. We made Petite Sirah.

01-00:26:21 Meeker: Pinot Noir?

01-00:26:21 Long: Little bit of Pinot Noir at that time but not much. He’s a marketer. I think he understood that you can only make and sell so many wines and for any wine that you make you have to feel confident that you have enough resource on a continuing basis and some of these older varieties that we were getting in, they were pulled out over time and replanted with Cabernet and Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot.
Meeker: It’s interesting. One of the things I’m getting at here is trying to get a sense from somebody who is really in the trenches, as you said at this point in time, when this sort of cultural decision was made that the grapes to focus on are Cabernet and Chardonnay. You look globally and there are important wine cultures around the world that don’t do Chardonnay and don’t do Cabernet. So, for instance, even in Burgundy, Chardonnay is the white grape but Pinot Noir is the red grape. Why was that not used? In Bordeaux Cabernet was the red grape and then there wasn’t a whole lot of Merlot at first and there wasn’t much Sauvignon grown here, for instance. Not to mention the complete absence of Rhone varietals, of Spanish varietals, of much Italian wine. Why didn’t Nebbiolo catch on in the United States in the same way that Cabernet did?

Long: Well, speaking for Nebbiolo, it’s really hard to find the right place to grow nebbiolo. But going back to those times. Cabernet had been grown in both Napa and Sonoma and made great wines. Simi in Sonoma, Beaulieu in Napa had great cabernets. So I would say, not being able to speak for the vintners, but if I had been in their shoes at that time it would have been a natural choice because it was already a proven grape variety in terms of suitability and productivity and quality and consumer acceptance. I started in 1970. Mike Grgich had made the ’69 Cabernet, a Mondavi that won a big tasting. And that wine sold very easily. So I think for Cabernet it’s a historical success.

I’m thinking about Long Vineyards where we grew Chardonnay and I know in 1966 when Bob Long, Sr., wanted to plant a vineyard, the county extension agent, Jim Lider did not recommend planting Chardonnay because it wasn’t a good enough grape, not productive. He recommended planting Riesling. So we planted both Riesling and Chardonnay. But Chardonnay hit the palate of the public. Chardonnay to me has always been the apple pie of wines because it has that sweetness, the vanilla. The fruit sweetness, the vanilla characters, the spiciness, the soft palate. And I think it naturally caught on with the public much more easily than the other grapes. It’s very expressive.

Meeker: One of the things that I find to be interesting is that it wasn’t as if Bordeaux was transplanted to California or Burgundy was transplanted to California. There was part of Burgundy and part of Bordeaux, right, that seemed to catch on here. And I wonder if you can comment on that.

Long: Well, I think another possible reason for support of Cabernet and Chardonnay was Bob Mondavi’s travels to Burgundy and Bordeaux. And so those were the grape varieties he saw and he saw how successful they were. And France was really the pinnacle. At that time Italy was not producing wonderful wines. Spain was kind of unknown in the United States. I remember Bob Long, Sr. buying French wines from an importer in San Francisco. So French wines
were really sort of the premiere of world wines. And they were Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and Cabernet and Bordeaux varietals. So I think that was another support for developing them.

01-00:31:31
Meeker: What wines were you drinking in the 1970s?

01-00:31:34
Long: Everything. [laughter] I wasn’t earning a lot of money but I remember when I went back and looked at my wine cellar I would have one bottle of this and one bottle of something else. I was always interested in wines from overseas. I didn’t need to buy California wines because Bob Mondavi had tastings every Monday and we would taste our wine, whichever variety we were focusing on, and I would go out and buy the other wines in Napa Valley or other places to taste with them. So I had a tremendous amount of experience and opportunity. He also wanted to taste the best wines. So we would have all the great Bordeaux and Burgundies and he would then taste them with guests with his wines. That was the case from the start. So I was fortunate to be able to experience wines that I would never have been able to purchase personally. But I was curious about other wines like Spanish wines or Italian wines.

01-00:32:43
Meeker: Were those relatively easy to find at that point in time?

01-00:32:46
Long: Yes. There were several importers in San Francisco that were bringing in a variety of wines.

01-00:32:56
Meeker: Do you remember any particular retailers that—

01-00:32:59
Long: I’m just wondering if K&L [K & L Wine Merchants, San Francisco, established in 1976] was. They started quite some time ago. Esquin Imports was another one. Those are the ones I remember.

01-00:33:13
Meeker: Okay. So this is interesting. People in the California wine industry don’t typically have to buy their wines, at least California wines. Is that what you found? That you basically had access through trade or through industry friendships? That you are able to get good California wines for low or no cost?

01-00:33:40
Long: Yes and no. We could trade wines. If you worked for a winery you could go to another winery and trade wines. But, remember, there were not that many wineries.
Meeker: Yeah. What California wines were you particularly attracted to, say, before you went to Simi?

Long: This is a tough one to remember. I believe Chateau Montelena. I had several opportunities to do old vertical tastings of Beaulieu for example. Some of the old Inglenook, the John Daniels wines, were fabulous benchmarks. André’s wines. But those two producers. Lee Stewart of Souverain had some beautiful Riesling and Cabernet. Stony Hill had some beautiful Chardonnays.

Meeker: Interesting. What was I going to ask about that? Were you developing a palate at this time about wines that you particularly favored? Maybe wines that you decided were not your personal style or interest?

Long: Yeah. Let me just say that having a good palate is the core of good winemaking. Some people may have it naturally but for me the opportunity to taste broadly was an important part of my palate development and to taste the wines that were generally considered to be great wines. So that I was able to develop my own criteria for what constituted very high quality wines.

Meeker: And how did you do that?

Long: Tasting. Tasting and talking. It was helpful to work with Mike Grgich because he’d worked, I think, for ten years with André and he had a very good palate. So if we were doing blendings we would line up a whole group of wines and taste through them and then I would talk with him about them. When I was in Davis I had some basic tasting classes that helped me think about how to approach sensory evaluation. But I think palate development doesn’t really happen overnight. You can always say, “I really like this wine,” but to be able to analyze it, to have an approach to the tasting that helps you assess the wine versus your criteria, that takes more time. Now, I was also fortunate in 1986 to work with Michel Rolland. I brought him over from France to work with me at Simi. And Michel had an incredible palate for Bordeaux varietals. So to work with him and to see what he was looking for I felt was a focused education for those varieties, for Cabernet in particular. So there were many different ways to fine tune your palate. But the more you taste, the better. And the more you taste great wines, the better. And the more you taste with people who have developed palates, the better.

Meeker: Can you give me a sense, I know this is sort of abstract to talk about, but what were these qualities that you were looking for? What were these characteristics, let’s say in Cabernet, that you used to evaluate wines?
Well, I’ll tell you two things. One is how I taste and the second one is what I’m looking for. With regards to what I’m looking for, I think the great wines of the world, no matter what variety they are, are balanced. That is, the interaction between the alcohols and the acids and tannins, it’s seamless. And also the interrelationship between the aromas and the flavors is harmonious. Intensity of flavors is really key to quality and especially key to longevity. So intensity and balance and then expression. Varietal expression or blend expression or terroir expression, personality. Those are the things that I look for. Now, when I’m tasting I’m first looking at the color, both the hue and the intensity, and then I’m looking at the aroma of the wine and trying to pinpoint. For example, with Cabernet, is this a Cabernet that is expressing red fruit or black fruit or some combination or are dried herbs coming through or do we see some greenness in the aroma? So trying to characterize the aroma and the intensity of the aroma. And then on the palate I look at how the wine enters my mouth. What is my first sensory textural experience? And then, for example, I might describe the wine as being smooth or a little harsh and some fine tuning between those. Then I’m looking for how it continues to feel through the mid-palate and then the back of the palate. So I think of it as a line. Entrance, middle, back, and then finish or length. So sometimes you get a wine that it enters beautifully, then it completely falls off in the middle, then it comes back. Or you get something that’s very nice through the beginning and the middle, but then it kind of falls down. And I really look at length. How long the flavors last in the mouth and if you’re getting fruit in the finish. If you have wines that are unbalanced with regard to tannin you’ll find that the finish is astringent rather than fruit. So those are just some of the things that I look at when I’m tasting professionally.

Interesting. So with Cabernet, for instance, could you kind of detail a description of those various characteristics that you found to be pleasing?

Well, first of all I would look for depth of color, intensity of color. I like cabernets that are so dark they’re almost black. So a Cabernet that I would describe as a black red as opposed to dark red is generally preferable because that means it had very good color in the skins. And it’s not just the color but the phenolic compounds which include color. Phenolics also carry aromas, textures and flavors. So that’s like an early clue that there may be a lot of complexity in the wine. Then I would want it to enter my mouth. Doesn’t have to be silky smooth and it doesn’t have to be velvety, which are often the things you look for as the wine ages. It should not be astringent. So it needs to be smooth enough.

The famous mouth-searing tannins.
Yes. We don’t want those. Then I’m also particularly looking for a sense of consistency. So I don’t really want a wine that, say, has a smooth entry but then it becomes astringent in the mid-palate. So I want a consistency of texture. Texture is something people don’t, or haven’t in the past, talked a lot about in wine sensory but it’s very important because it’s something that, if you just consume a wine, you get it. You either like the texture or you don’t. I want to get the flavor immediately. And I’m looking for the kinds of flavors which of course technically are still the aromas, and the intensity of those. I’m also looking for something I call weight. So the wine shouldn’t be heavy but it should have presence and I’m looking for that presence. So we’re going down the palate. And I want that consistent feel from front to back. I don’t want to hit a lot of astringency in the back palate. And then I want that wine to follow through with its fruit characters, perhaps the fruit characters, as I said, for Cabernet would be black raspberry, black cherry. I want those to continue and finish, say, over the course of maybe sixty seconds. I don’t do this all the time but sometimes when I’ve really evaluating length, when I’ve swallowed or spit out the wine I’ll count how long it takes me before the taste finishes in my mouth.

Can you do the same description for me for Chardonnay?

I can but I’m just thinking about it. [laughter]

Yeah, that’s fine.

Let me just say that Chardonnay in California has developed I think along two lines. One is the very big rich lots of oak Chardonnay and the other one is more of a Burgundian style Chardonnay where the oak is a little more subdued. And the Chardonnays that I’ve liked and produced have been more along the second line. So I really want the fruit to be in the forefront. The oak, if it’s present or not, I see as a support system for the fruit. And it also can give weight to the wine. And so you’re looking for a quality of French oak that does that. It’s not overly expressive but it gives some weight. So I would say I would be looking for really a yellow green color, a little hit of greenness and, again, good intensity of color. In the case of Chardonnay I really want a silky entry because I think that’s natural to the grape. The Chardonnay aromas can be varied, from spicy, all spice, cinnamon—

Baking spices?

Yeah. Brown spices. Vanilla is characteristic, really coming from oak. Citrus. Quite a range of fruits. Citrus notes, tropical fruit notes. And I would say
generally my preference is more for the citrus notes which I believe are clonally related and also ripeness related.

Meeker: What clonal strain would bring that out typically?

Long: The clones that were developed at UC Davis have tended to be Chardonnay that ripens at higher sugars and tends to have those tropical fruit notes. And some of these original clones came from the Wente Vineyards and are less productive with smaller grapes tend to have more spicy characters, almost sometimes a little bit of muscat character. And, of course, when you’re making Chardonnay, if you have all of those you have a much more complex Chardonnay and you also have apple and pear. When we had Long Vineyards we got a beautiful block of Chardonnay and we wanted to duplicate it because it was mixed clones from historical sources. Phil and I went through that vineyard, we selected four rows, and we tasted every vine in those rows and we categorized them. And I’m just trying to think. There was citrus, there was green apple, there was spice. There was white fruit, like pear. We had four or five categories. And then we counted the number of vines in each category came up with a percent. And then we flagged the vines so that when they took plant material from those vines and put them into the next block they would do it at that percentage. Larry Hyde in Carneros had taken plant material from Long Vineyards but from a much smaller section and from that plant material, those grapes I had purchased and made wine from at Simi. But they were much more of that muscaty character. So they were a simpler fruit expression. So this is a long-winded answer to your question. But aromatically it’s wonderful for Chardonnay to have a great diversity of those fruit and spicy aromas. I don’t want overripe aromas. I don’t want jammy or heavy aromas.

And then in the palate it’s similar descriptions to the Cabernet in the sense you want nice texture, you want good weight, you want a consistent expression. You want balance between the acids and the phenolics and the alcohol and then you want length.

Meeker: I really appreciate those descriptions. I think they’re great to get recorded. I’m wondering if, looking back, these have changed or perhaps even evolved over the years. Do you think that you would have described your kind of ideal tasting experience in a similar way, say, in the late seventies, early eighties as you do today?

Long: No, I don’t think so. In other words, I think one of the things that has evolved for me is my expertise, my sensory expertise, which is the result of a lot of tasting and blending and also the ability to formulate it into the words that I’ve communicated to you. So I have a system that I use. Many things are talked
about in winemaking but I think the sensory aspect less frequently and I think it’s the core of great winemaking. And I’ve been interested in the sensory aspect and I actually did a series of interviews of winemakers that I work with and winemakers I know, about how they taste, the system that they use. And it was very interesting because it was quite different. Everybody does it differently.

So maybe one way of describing it is that perhaps in 1980 you would have ranked wines the same as you would today if you were to rank them but you maybe then did not have the methodology and vocabulary to explain why that was?

I think certainly that would be true with Chardonnay. I think what I’m looking for is similar and what I enjoy and admire and respect is similar. That my ability to communicate it and to think about it more deeply is enhanced. I think for me the time with Michel Rolland at Simi really helped me focus in on Cabernet characteristics. So that was a strong inflection point for me in my sensory work with Bordeaux varietals.

So the next question then is, looking back on your career as a winemaker, can you identify a point in time that you were able to in fact create the wine that you wanted to taste? That kind of matched these ideal characteristics or at least got close to it?

I certainly think that at Long Vineyards I was able to do that with Chardonnay. It really related to the vineyard because the vineyard, during the time we worked with it, it was ten to forty years old and it produced beautiful fruit and the winemaking was very simple.

Simple meaning small scale and—

Small scale. Small scale of barrel fermentation. I felt comfortable with the barrels that I used. Barrel aging. There was not a lot of technology. Let’s put it that way.

Were you using natural yeast?

No, we were adding yeast.

Were you killing the natural yeast and then adding new yeast?
Meeker: No?

Long: No.

Meeker: You were augmenting the natural yeast?

Long: Right. We would crush the grapes. We would press them with the basket press. So the free run juice was really delicate. It would go into a stainless tank. It would sit there overnight to settle. And then we would rack it into barrels and add some yeast into those barrels. And it really never left those barrels until we bottled it. So it would sit on its yeast, lees during that period of time.

Meeker: Lees. Interesting. What about Cabernet? Was there ever a point that you were able to do that?


Meeker: It’s interesting that you talk about your personal pursuits as opposed to the larger organizations that you worked for.

Long: You can always say there’s two things you can achieve. In a larger organization where you’re working with a lot of vineyards and you may or may not have constraints with regards to space and timing of harvest and harvest yields and so on, your goal is to make the very best wine you can from what you have. And I think both at Mondavi and Simi we were very fortunate to have high quality grapes. There was more diversity in both situations, which means less ability to focus on any one thing. But certainly we made great cabernets and wonderful Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc at Mondavi and Riesling that I was very proud of. At Simi I had more input because I actually purchased the grapes. And during my time there we planted vineyards. We planted a Chardonnay vineyard that was about a hundred acres and selected quite a variety of clones to go into that vineyard. And we planted a Cabernet vineyard that had three major different terroirs. And the grapes we got from those vineyards made lovely wines. But I think in order for me to say I’ve reached the pinnacle of my ability to produce high-quality Bordeaux varietals—it’s been done in South Africa where my husband Phil, who’s a professional wine grower, laid out our vineyard and manages it. So we get
very beautiful fruit and I’ve been able to fine-tune my work with the fruit to produce wines that meet my criteria.

Meeker: Well, we’ll talk more about the South Africa operation a bit later. I need to change the tape.

Audio File 2

This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long. Today is the 6th of November 2014. This is session number one, tape number two. A couple more questions about what you were drinking and enjoying in the 1970s and eighties. You had described obviously drinking French wines and a little bit of exploration into Spanish and Italian. Do you remember when you started to notice Australian, South American, and South African wines? Other new world wines kind of being noticed?

In my time at Mondavi the focus was really on the French wines. In the eighties when I was at Simi I had friends in Australia, winemaking friends who I really respected. And I was working for LVMH and in that period of time I went to Italy to work with Ruffino on developing their Chardonnay program. And I went to Argentina to help Chandon Argentina, who was a sparkling wine producer, start their still wine production. I think in the eighties I went to Australia a couple times. I went to New Zealand. So even if I wasn’t seeing those wines regularly here I was visiting other countries. So I became aware of what was going on in the rest of the world, the new world. I think that was one of the things, in looking back, that that ’76 tasting did. It said the new world is significant in winemaking. Because I always thought before that California was regarded as an amusing curiosity. But after that no longer. And so these other countries were part and parcel with that. I didn’t know anything about South African wines. And, of course, that was during apartheid and so they were really not out in my world. I had no knowledge of them. But I was in Australia visiting the vineyards, looking at the incredible old Shiraz vines. I went to the New World Wine Congress in New Zealand and visited both the north and south island and tasted their wines. They were just starting with Pinot Noir. The Sauvignon Blanc was lovely. But they were behind California in developing their modern industry.

What does that mean exactly?

Most of these sort of new world countries had been making wine for a long time. It’s not really new to them. But modern winemaking to me is a greater approach to what we call wine growing. So thinking about what we do in the vineyard and how that influences the wine and our ability to modify that to
improve the wines, which is not only in the growing of the grapes but in the planting of the vineyards.

That’s something that does seem to across in—I think it was the Africa Uncorked book—that I found a little difficult to get into because it’s like an alien landscape to me, right. I don’t know the wines, I don’t know the geography and so it was hard to follow. But one of the things that was interesting in that book was the way in which at some point they were talking about the problems in the vineyards. The diseases that the vines would have and it would limit their ability to ripen and that kind of stuff. With influence of people like you and your husband, those things start to get fixed.

Yeah. Again, to address the issue of what’s modern. Certainly wine growing is modern. Quality control in the winery is modern. And that means it’s simply eliminating problems. Quality control doesn’t make great wines but it eliminates, say, poor fermentations or overly astringent extraction methods in fermentation of red grapes or unwanted yeast infections. And quality control in bottling helps make sure that the wine that goes in the bottles is consistently the same from bottle to bottle. Bottling is a complicated process and I hate having wines that one bottle is good and the next one isn’t. Because that is just not proper attention to detail in bottling. So the quality control brings up the level so you don’t have wines that are not good for one reason or another. In California you don’t have bad wines. But that was not the case when I started making wine. So that’s another sort of modern facet. I think the third modern facet is the ability to bring the wine and the vineyard together. So you have that wine growing, the understanding of the personality of the vineyard, and then how you respond to that in the winery. I’ve likened it to raising children. Children come with their own personalities. You don’t raise each child the same way. You have to respond to who they are. It’s really a part of wine growing to do that. So those are all part of the modern milieu at the very high level. There’s a lot that can be said about wine technology that has to be applied in very large wineries to be able to make large quantities of good wines. And I don’t mean that in a derogatory way because I think of winemaking like a modern mall or shopping district, where you have a big—

—retail store that’s kind of the central of the shopping. Then you have a lot of little specialty stores. They fit together well. And we have the same thing in winemaking. The ability in California for wineries to make large quantities of good Pinot Noir, good Chardonnay, good Cabernet is tremendous because it also means that those wines are less expensive to produce, they’re more accessible to the consumer. They’re trustworthy. The consumer can buy a bottle if they’ve had it before and liked it. They’re going to like it again. So
those are very important to the modern wine industry. But at the same time these small specialty wineries who maybe focus on one or two varieties and work with one or two vineyards are equally important and bring a different character to the business.

Meeker: Can we go back to that one thing that you had mentioned about bottling. What was the modernization in bottling that allowed consistency to become more standard?

Long: Well, part of it is just the quality of the bottling equipment. One of the things, for example, is that when you’re putting a cork in the bottle we evacuate the head space. There’s always a space between the top of the wine and the bottom of the cork and that’s evacuated. And just when the bottling is going on, making sure someone is constantly watching to make sure the air evacuation is working and it doesn’t change. Because if there is air in there that’s oxygen. And if too much oxygen gets in wine it will reduce its freshness. Similarly, in the filling of the bottles, there’s different filling techniques. In the filling of the filler bowl that holds the wine, there are opportunities for air to get in in ways that could increase the amount of oxygen pickup in the wine, which could be either variable, leading to bottle variation, or it could be too much, which is going to depress the fruitiness and shorten the lifespan. So we regularly check the operations of this equipment, understand the equipment, know what the weaknesses are with regards to quality, and improve equipment if that is possible. And we did the checks of the oxygen in the actual bottling process so we could see that it was consistent.

The other thing about quality control is corks. Developing systems to reduce the level of corkiness. It’s improved immeasurably now with the cork producers having their own good quality control measures and then having us also be able to check them. But I think now one of the cork producers in Portugal is very close to developing a system where they can literally guarantee that a cork will not have a corky problem.

Meeker: Wow. What is that that they’re doing? Do you know?

Long: What I understand, and I could be incorrect, but the concept’s the same. They’re using very strong aromatic sensors to determine how the cork smells. And they were putting the corks one-by-one through these sensors, which moved pretty rapidly but not rapidly enough to produce a lot of corks for a worldwide industry that uses a lot of corks. But now they’ve developed a system where I think they put through ten corks at a time and then if they get a red flag then those get set aside and put through individually. I think they’ve also studied what it is in the harvesting, the growing and the harvesting, and
the care of the cork bark before it’s made, before it’s pressed into corks that’s helped them improve the quality and consistency of the corks.

Fascinating. There’s nothing worse than getting a corked bottle of a really good wine. [laughter]

Oh, amen.

Yeah. I want to go back a little bit. I know that we covered this a little bit but when you talk about your travel to Europe. I know that you had this 1976 trip but you had also previously mentioned a 1978 trip with Robert Mondavi to Europe. And was there a particular goal for this trip?

The goal for the trip with Bob Mondavi was, first of all, for Bob Mondavi to do something that he’d dreamed of doing. He had been to France and seen what they were doing and he really, really wanted to share that with his team because he felt that would give them a perspective that would benefit the winery. And his team was a woman from accounting, one of our maintenance people, our winemaking crew, the cellar manager. It was a broad based team.

How many people roughly?

Maybe a dozen, including Robert and Margaret. So we were in Germany and Burgundy and Bordeaux on that trip. And that, as opposed to the 1976 trip with André Tchelistcheff and Louis Martini, the Mondavi trip was more focused, technically focused. So we would go to a winery with an idea that this is what this winery was doing and we would grill them about how they were doing, what they were doing, why they were doing it. So what the issues were and so on and so forth. And we got the same kind of really great reception that we had received a couple years before. But it was a tremendous opportunity. Bob Mondavi always has had a feeling for wine and food, so we would also go out to great restaurants and have our wines there with the food. It was extraordinary. Extraordinary.

So these were substantive exchanges it sounds like? Yes?

I’m hesitating. They were certainly substantive. But how much of an exchange they were I can’t say because it wasn’t necessarily a constant two-way dialogue. It was more like all of these questions—because on our side you had several technical people who were interested in the winemaking, in the growing, the cellar techniques. And on the other side you might have one winemaker and a barrage of questions.
Nineteen seventy-eight, it’s a couple years after ’76. Mondavi has been around for a decade and been very successful. I wonder if you or any of your colleagues by that point in time started saying, “Oh, they’re totally doing it wrong. They’re old world. I think that we’re heading in the right direction.” Did you ever get a sense? Yeah, was there any sensibility that the new world has now supplanted the old world? They have some interesting things to tell us but they should actually be asking us about things.

No, I don’t think that I felt that way and nor do I feel that way now. Because, the bottom-line is still the wine. So you could go into a winery and you can think this, that, or the other thing about the winery or the vineyards. And, sure, you would see things you didn’t understand, you didn’t agree with. But when it comes to the wine, the wine is beautiful. That means that whatever system they put together has resulted in that wine. And one of the things I’ve seen through the years, particularly in California, is that we’ve had a tendency to discover something new. These are great barrels. This is a centrifuge. That was what we had at Mondavi for clarifying grapes or juice. There’s always some sort of new thing that we’re talking about, that we present as if that’s the answer. The answer to me in winemaking is how an individual puts together a jigsaw puzzle of decisions that they have to make to come out with their wine. And so that if you think of it as a puzzle of interlocking pieces, if you change one piece you may have to readjust the whole puzzle because things fit. Let me see if I can think—well, there was a trend toward low SO2 use. So if you go with that you may have to adjust your cellar practices or your crushing practices to reduce the oxygen pickup. Everything fits together and the people that make great wines have found the fit. And you can say, well, that particular piece of thing they’re doing isn’t right but in their interlocking puzzle it works.

That’s fascinating. I’m wondering from a purely technological point of view, when you went to these French winemakers in the late seventies, were they as advanced technologically? Did they have all the devices that you would have had at Mondavi or then at Simi? Or were they using more sort of time tested techniques that didn’t rely on the same technology?

Well, one of the things that we developed in winemaking in the 1970s was the use of stainless steel to manage fermentations and cooling. And I saw that adopted in Bordeaux in quite a few of the top growths. At the same time, many of them still did their fermentations in large wood tanks. The devices that are used in wineries to me have more to do with the scale of the winery than anything else. Pumps are always an issue. You have to move wine from one place to another. We saw they would use very simple pumps in racking wines, that would basically pressurize the wine to move it from one barrel to
another rather than going through an impeller. That’s really a time tested method. But, again, I think it has more to do with the scale of the winemaking.

Meeker: You, as a group of Americans in Europe, it is a story that we’ve heard about. But there was also a number of Europeans in California, actually going back a fairly long time. You had mentioned André Tchelistcheff, who was an immigrant to the United States, and I guess Mike Grgich, as well. Those are people who kind of packed up their families or they had been packed up and came here and settled and became Americans. I guess I’m interested in envoys from Europe to the United States, to come here and learn in the same way that you were going to Europe to learn. When did that first start to happen?

Long: You mean as visitors?

Meeker: Visitors, sure.

Long: Not just coming and settling.

Meeker: Yeah. Or come to work a harvest or to be employed for a couple of years. It could just be a three-week tour or it could be sort of a more, longer sustained, but not an immigration.

Long: I think that started at Robert Mondavi in the early seventies.

Meeker: It did. Wow.

Long: We had interns frequently from wineries and winery owners that he had met in his travels. They would send their young men mostly, occasionally a young woman, to work in the cellar during harvest or to work in the winery or to be in the winery or to come and see the winery. But it was as if the more forward thinking wine people wanted to see what was going on in California and their young generations were their envoys.

I think in terms of influence, that the Mondavi-Mouton partnership was really key because it brought a more experienced palate for Cabernet to the Napa Valley and in planting the Opus One Vineyard and importing some of the techniques that they expected to use in the vineyard, although we had already developed our own ideas about using similar techniques from what we had seen in France. But, again, I think the palate, the blending, the idea about what the wine should taste like created wines that were different and more sophisticated than what we were doing. And I saw the same thing in Oregon. It’s as if someone comes in, they take the same ingredients you have, and they
make something different. And, again, I don’t mean to downplay the wines we were producing, because we were producing some beautiful wines. But I just think the French Bordeaux palate brought some new information and new perspective into the Napa Valley winemaking.

02-00:23:50
Meeker: I think the first Opus One vintage was, what, like ’79 or something?

02-00:23:55
Long: That’s correct, yeah.

02-00:23:57
Meeker: So you were just ending your period at Mondavi and heading over to Simi. What did you think of Opus One? Was this like a big headline thing or was it just like a next logical step?

02-00:24:11
Long: Well, working at Bob Mondavi, he was always doing something new and interesting. He had a joint project in Australia. He started his great chefs programs. There was always something to see and know and think about. So it was like, well, this is another initiative that Bob has started and, again, I’m in the trenches. So my relationship with that, although it wasn’t very long, was with a winemaker that came over who was the winemaker for Mouton and a really lovely guy.

02-00:24:51
Meeker: Who was that? Oh, I’m sorry.

02-00:24:53
Long: His name was Lucien Sionneau.

Meeker: Did you taste the Opus on its first vintage?

02-00:25:05
Long: I did.

02-00:25:07
Meeker: Was it a revelation?

02-00:25:11
Long: No, I don’t think it was. Seventy-nine was not the greatest vintage. It was a difficult year. There was rain and then all the vintage—so on and so forth. But as the years went along I think the wines set a different style, what I would call a more sophisticated style. Less rustic. Rustic is a word that the French used when they come across a wine that’s maybe not fully harmonious or where this balance between tannin, acid, and alcohol isn’t fully resolved. And it’s not a compliment.

02-00:26:04
Meeker: It’s not a compliment.
So I saw the Opus wines move to this sort of level and really a lot of it was in the blending of harmony and completeness and length that we hadn’t quite mastered.

Okay. Also during this period of time, seventies and eighties, based on the résumé that you had included in the interview from the 1990s, you had a whole list of presentations listed. In essence, these appear to me to be research presentations. They were on topics such as the manipulation of grape flavor, moderating sugar, botrytis, malo-lactic fermentation, the use of sulfur dioxide. Sort of practical based research. Did you consider yourself a researcher?

Not in a scholarly sense but in a pragmatic sense, yes. It was very early in the wine business. In the seventies we tested different methods. I supervised a small lot winemaking program every year.

What does that mean?

Particularly with white wines, bring in juices and ferment them in small containers, looking at either—

Like carboys or something

In 5 gallon glass carboys. Looking at different vineyards or different yeasts or different fermentation techniques, temperatures, and so on. So I did that clear through my time at Simi. And when I went to Simi I established the North Coast Viticulture Research Group which was a group of viticulturalists from Napa and Sonoma. And we did research because we were all planting. So we looked at different clones, different rootstock, different trellising, different vine spacing, and the effects of those on the wine flavor. So there was a tremendous amount of discovery. And during that time there were also researchers. I was going to say serious researchers but people that spent their full time looking at viticultural practices and winemaking practices in different parts of the world that would come and lecture at our annual American Society of Enology and Viticulture meetings. So a lot of information was coming in that would impact our thinking about what we were doing, what we might do differently, what we might look at.

One of the things about doing research in the vineyard. It’s not a lab. There are many infinite, in essence, variables, very few of which the viticulturalist, the researcher can control. You had mentioned pruning, for instance, or having the vine on the—
The trellis. The trellising. Yes, thank you. Those are things that you can change year-to-year or row-to-row and compare to one another. But then there’s weather, there’s soil, there’s lots of other things that are really kind of up to mother nature. So it’s not a closed lab environment where you can say, “Okay, we changed the trellising and therefore it does have this effect on the taste of wine.” How did you mitigate those elements that you could know and change versus the larger jigsaw puzzle that you had mentioned before that was not changeable or even knowable to you?

Well, the first thing I would say, that for me the outcome was always in the wine. The second thing I would say, and let me just go back on that. Some of the researchers were from Davis and when we first started working with them they really were separating viticulture and winemaking. There wasn’t a “winegrowing” thinking, so that the viticulture work didn’t flow through into wines. And when this North Coast Viticultural technical group started working with them, when we were funding research, we insisted that if we were looking at variables in the vineyard, that that would flow through into the wines. And we would evaluate the variables based on the wines. And that’s key.

The second thing is to realize that if you get a certain outcome with one particular site it may not be precisely that way with another site and that’s just the way it is. But we could get clues. And I want to tell you about an experiment we did as a group with a Davis viticulture researcher, Mark Matthews, whose specialty was water relations in a vineyard. And this was done at Phelps Vineyard. It was done with Cabernet Franc. And the vineyard was on the top of a knoll and he divided that into different watering systems through the season. So if I remember correctly, one he started watering the vineyards in the first of June and continued clear through the harvest. Second one the vineyard got no water. The third one it was watered from June to veraison, which is color change, sometime toward the end of July. In the fourth it was watered from veraison to harvest. So it was four different systems. And he had enough vineyards and enough rows and enough tonnage that each one could be made into wine. And this was a professional researcher so it was setup just about as well as it could be. The wines were so different. So the wine that was watered all the time was this lovely medium red, extremely aromatic, red fruit, soft, easily approachable wine. At the other end the grapes that got no water made a very dark, very intense, kind of jammy wine. And then the two in the middle were much more similar. And I’ll talk about my favorite, which was the one that was watered from veraison to harvest, which is often when our vineyards run out of water. It was in the late summer. Depending on how deep the soils are. But that wine had this
intensity, this dark red black color, and it had this lovely black fruit, and it had this lovely weight. It was a gorgeous wine.

So here’s my thinking about these wines. If you were to put each one in a bottle they would have a different value. My favorite might sell for, in those terms, fifty dollars a bottle. The lighter one might sell for fifteen. It’s not that they’re bad or good. It’s that they’re so different. One was so much more complex and rich and the other one was light and fruity. If you look at it from a grower perspective, if they were selling those grapes to a winery, the grapes producing the light fruity might get $2,000 a ton where the others might get $5,000 a ton. So here you have one operation of many in the vineyard, just application of water, that had this enormous impact both from an economic and a quality and a style perspective. Now, if you took that to another vineyard it might have a very different result because the depth of soils, the water holding ability which affects whether and how and how much and when you apply water. And also that’s affected by the weather. Is it a mild season or a hot season? But what you do know is it makes a big difference.

02-00:35:30
Meeker: Okay. It’s interesting because obviously the gold standard of research is it is reproducible. Is the knowledge you produced in one experiment, are you able to reproduce it in a similar experiment. And it sounds like the answer to that is yes and no.

02-00:35:48
Long: Actually I think it would be very reproducible in that site.

02-00:35:52
Meeker: In that site. Okay. Well, that’s interesting. So in that site. So this then brings up this big question of terroir, right?

02-00:36:03
Long: Okay. Let’s go to a site that has, say, clay soil. That soil, and you have the same range of watering systems. In that instance the fruit that was watered clear through the season probably would not show very well at all because those soils hold moisture, even though they don’t give it up easily. I think you would still see a significant difference. And one of the things that’s not obvious in this is that what we learned in the seventies about winegrowing is that big canopies that shade the fruit don’t produce the fruit that have the rich colors and the rich flavors. That some light in the canopy is important. So if you’re doing an irrigation system that starts early in the season when we still have a full soil profile from the spring rains or from winter rains, you’re going to encourage all this vegetative growth which then has a negative impact on the fruit quality unless you go in and modify the canopy. So there’s definitely interaction here between soils, between water, and between canopy and therefore grape chemistry and wine quality. That’s what makes it such an interesting business.
Meeker: Yes. Yes, indeed. It’s just the number of variables is almost infinite. If the number of variables are infinite, there’s still like the top ten variables that seem to have the greatest influence and then maybe the next level that has some influence but is not going to create a completely different wine from one change to the next. Is that kind of maybe a way in which you would see it?

Long: Well, certainly I think water management, be it deciding not to do any water or any that relates to soil, it’s essential. Grape vines are still plants. They still need some water to ripen the grapes. And we’re in a Mediterranean climate where we don’t get summer water so that always has to be considered, as opposed to Europe, France gets water (rain) in the summer. Soil management has become better understood and more important in terms of nutrition and depth and understanding the soils. Canopy management was really developed in the eighties and that influences a lot of things. A big canopy will resipre more water, so that effects water relations in any vineyard. It will also impact the light on the fruit, which will impact the style and the flavor expression. That’s going to happen in any vineyard. And crop level is important. It’s not just the lower the better. It’s like what’s appropriate for a particular site. So those are four things off the top of my head that—

Meeker: Okay. We can go on and on and on about that, right? In the time that we’ve got, around twenty minutes left today, I want to go back to your work at Simi. And in 1989 you moved from being a winemaker to CEO. Can you tell me your thoughts of how you felt about leaving the cellar and I guess going into the office? Is that an accurate description of what the transition actually was?

Long: Well, first I want to say that when I was approached for the winemaker job at Simi, in the course of the interview I told them that if the president position came open while I was there I wanted to be considered for it. Now, at the time I said that I didn’t really know if I really wanted that but I just thought, “Let’s say I did put it out there and then people will have that in their mind.” It was difficult to walk away from the winemaking. But at the same time, having been the winemaker I realized that there is someone who is on the ground interacting with the grapes and the wines on a daily basis who has the knowledge to make the hundreds of decisions that need to be made about a wine and that you can’t kind of stand back and be less involved and make those decisions. So you have many people who characterize themselves as the winemaker when they’re the head of the business or whatever that aren’t really the person that influences the wines. They may have an influence. Like the president of a winery has an influence by what resources they provide. For example, in my watch we developed a whole new Chardonnay vineyard. That’s a huge resource to provide to the winemaker. But I’m not one that thinks I can do everything. And I found being the head of the winery really fulfilling in the sense that I was working with a team of really great people to
accomplish the bigger goal of having a successful business. So in some ways it’s not that different for making wine, only the ultimate thing is the business. So you’re taking the component parts and trying to work them to achieve a very good business. At the same time, it was frustrating from a marketing perspective because Simi was owned by LVMH and their company in New York was the marketing company. And so their performance and influence had a marked effect on our outcome.

Meeker: How so?

Long: Schieffelin was primarily selling sparkling wines, brandy, Hennessy cognac and they also were paired up with distillers in Europe. So they were importing distilled products, selling champagne, selling sparkling wine from the non-champagne countries. And our Simi business was like one and a half percent of their gross revenue. So we didn’t really necessarily get the kind of attention that I would have liked to have seen. But more than that, in that period of time when California wine was really growing amazingly, they didn’t have the mindset to handle still wine, in my opinion. They were expert at distilled spirits, at champagne, but they weren’t expert at table wine. So I saw some instances where they felt the market for our wines was going to be weak that year and so they kind of pulled back when, in fact, California wines grew tremendously and we didn’t. So it was a mixed blessing.

Meeker: I’m trying to figure out how to get to this because I feel like it wasn’t really covered much in the previous interview with you. And that is the relationship between the winemaking process, the science and the art of winemaking, and then the business side of things. And particularly in a situation the way in which you described it. Simi, one to two percent of the business, very small piece of a larger conglomerate. Making a good wine product but then having to, in essence, fulfill the direction of the larger corporation entity that’s giving maybe specific or maybe general direction. When you were a winemaker how did you deal with that? Were you getting pretty clear instructions about everything from number of gallons of wine to what kind of wine they wanted?

Long: Well, the “instructions” from the mother company didn’t obviously come down like that. LVMH particularly, and even Schieffelin were quite hands-off in terms of all of the business except for the marketing. The issue wasn’t direction that was frustrating, it was lack of performance on their part. When Simi was sold to Constellation, the sales, the production and sales of Simi wines skyrocketed because Constellation was a wine only—

Meeker: When did that happen?
I believe it was 1999. And I wasn’t really there. I was not part of the business when they took over but I did see the really dramatic improvement on the marketing and sales side when it was under the aegis of a company who was focused on wine sales.

When you were a winemaker, how was your performance evaluated?

I want to go back to your previous question.

Okay, sure.

And say what was the impact of business decisions on the winemaking. And I worked for Michael Dixon, who was the president of Simi during the eighties. And it was this interaction with him and Schieffelin about the wines that were being successfully sold and the volumes and what to try to grow and what to try to shrink. When I came into Simi there was Gewurtztraminer. There was Pinot Noir, there was Zinfandel. There were a number of wines that weren’t a focus. And so we reduced our line down to Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, rosé, and Cabernet. And so that would have been a decision that I would have provided recommendations on. “This is our grape supply. We don’t really have a good Pinot Noir grape supply. Why are we making this wine?” And I never felt that I was restricted. In other words, I felt I had a lot of freedom but it was my responsibility to provide recommendations on the feasibility of making the kind and volume of wines that might be desired. It seemed to work out. I don’t ever remember issues.

So you don’t remember them coming to you and saying, “Listen, it appears that the American palate is starting to change. People want a Chardonnay that’s going to be good for the hot tub. Higher alcohol, more oak.”

Absolutely not.

Okay. What about the impact of wine critics, of wine publications? I don’t know when Robert Parker starts to be a big name. I think that was like the mid-eighties or something. Did you feel the impact or influence of that? The criterati.

Well, I would say not so much as we’ve seen in the last decade or two because I’ve seen things go from individual wineries producing the wines that reflect their sites or styles to hiring a winemaker and saying, “You’ve got to make a ninety-point wine.” That’s a big difference. I never experienced that. But I
certainly saw the impact. At Simi we made a very pretty, refined, elegant Chardonnay that seamlessly fitted into the burgundy style but it wasn’t the big heavily oaked Chardonnay. Still, our Chardonnay grew but it wasn’t right on the Parker style. And I’ve always thought if it had been Roberta Parker instead of Robert Parker life would have been very different.

Interest. Maybe the question to ask is what kind of publications were reviewing wines at that point in time and did you pay attention to those?

Well, *Wine Spectator* was a big one and our parent company, LVMH and Schieffelin, the marketing company, had a very strong relationship with the *Spectator* team, which benefitted Simi. It allowed us to get some good stories written about us. Parker began to be very influential. I can’t say it really influenced my decisions. Because our Chardonnay program at Simi was so successful, that wasn’t a particular challenge. But it was the Cabernet program that I really wanted to improve and, again, going out and bringing in Michel Rolland, who’d never worked in California, but he’d actually been recommended to me by Robert Parker. So I called Robert Parker and said, “I’m looking for an advisor in Bordeaux and you’re over there a lot. What do you think?” And he recommended Michel. So Michel’s coming over to see me was his first entrée into California. He didn’t even speak particularly good English at that time but he was a great educator.

Do you speak French?

I can speak a little French. I can understand. If I’m in an environment where people are talking about wine in French I have an idea of what they’re saying. And I’ve always wanted to learn to speak French but the way I’d like to do it is to go there and be there and life just has taken its own direction.

You’ve had a pretty adventurous run as it is.

Well, let me just tell you this. John Wright, who ran Domaine Chandon, spoke French. But he said, “I would never speak French in a business meeting because they’re much better at speaking French than I am.” It would have been nice but it wasn’t really essential for me to speak French.

You mentioned Parker in that you reached out to him. Were you friendly with him? What’s the relationship there?

I met Robert Parker in Washington, DC. I think it was early in my time at Simi and it was early in his time writing. It would have been in the early
eighties. And so I knew him. I didn’t know him super well but I knew him well enough to give him a call, get his input.

Meeker: Anyone who I think becomes a well-known figure also has a tendency to become a lightning rod. Do you feel like the way in which people characterize his palate and his influence on wine is accurate or not?

Long: What I have respected about Robert Parker is that he has a very consistent palate. I’m not sure that he agrees, because I’ve read that he doesn’t. But the kinds of wine styles that he likes are really consistent. I did a vintage in 2011 in Bordeaux and at that time the owner of the chateau that I was working for had gone to Pontet-Canet, who was then doing a biodynamic program, and done a tasting. I think it was the 2010 vintage. He came back saying it was such a sensational wine. And I think Parker had given it a hundred points.

Meeker: For a biodynamic wine.

Long: I was just in New York last week doing a Cabernet seminar with Santa Rita, the Chilean winery, and my technical counterpart, Brian Croser from Australia, and two winemakers from Santa Rita, and with the press we tasted twelve great cabernets from around the world. And that was one of them. And I was particularly interested in tasting it. And when I tasted it, that Pontet-Canet, I thought, “This is a Parker wine,” because it was very ripe and very rich. Kind of like a Napa Valley wine. I understand why it got a hundred points but it wasn’t a typical Bordeaux style wine. But that’s the influence. If you stop and think about it, that says a lot about his influence on Bordeaux winemaking. And yet I think his influence now is waning.

Meeker: Well, he’s sort of moved into semiretirement, so that’s part of it. But the influence lives on perhaps even after he will.

Long: I don’t know. I think it was a chapter, a period of certain wine styles that were supported by him.

Meeker: So you never really felt much pressure when you were at Simi to kind of pivot a little bit more in that direction?

Long: No, I didn’t. But, remember, I was the winemaker there in the 1980s and then I was the CEO in the 1990s. And I’m perfectly glad that I wasn’t in a position to have to try to make a wine that Parker would like.
So when you were CEO did you feel like you were ever in a position to ask your winemaker to make a wine that was perhaps more marketable to the then contemporary palate?

Well, you know our wines in the 1990s were made by Nick Goldschmidt, who’s gone on to develop a very successful business of his own. But he did a great job with those wines in the 1990s. The 1990s were glorious weather years. In the 1980s there were years that were really hot, there were really difficult years. There were only a few really great vintages. But ’90, ’91, ’92, ’94, ’95, ’96. There were many, many fine vintages. And we continued to have Michel with us. So he was a presence from a sensory perspective, from 1986 when I brought him in clear through the 2000s. So between Nick’s skills and Michel’s consultation in the quality of the vintages, we produced really stellar Cabernets.
Meetker: This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long. Today is the 13th of November 2014. We are at her home outside of Healdsburg, California and this is session number two, tape number three. So there’s a lot that I want to accomplish today and I want to start out by following up on just a few questions around your period of time as winemaker at Simi. Then I want to know a little bit about your term in the administrative leadership of Simi from ’89 to ’96. And in that context I’m going to ask you some questions around the marketing of wine and the degree to which you were involved in that or not. I’m kind of interested in your observations on how wine marketing has changed over that period of time. And then we’ll go on to some other issues. These are kind of like some housekeeping questions, sort of leftovers, but I wanted to ask you about them anyway.

In a couple of the background interviews I’ve done I’ve asked people who’ve known you well, and I said, “Can you think of any particularly challenging vintages that Zelma has had to deal with and how did she respond to those?” And a couple people referred to a harvest, and it’s not entirely clear what year it was, but this was, I believe, when you were at Simi and the Chardonnay didn’t complete fermentation. And this was, it sounds like, something that was not just at Simi but also with many other winemakers in the area. Is this something that you remember and, if so, can you describe it and tell me how you responded to this particular bad problem.

Long: Well, I do remember that there were many vintages in the 1980s that were challenging, especially in the early eighties. The particular vintage that I remember where we had fermentation problems with Chardonnay was 1980. That was my first vintage at Simi and we were in a new fermentation cellar. And it’s not unusual that fermentation difficulties are generally known. We see that with both alcoholic fermentation and malolactic fermentation, that some vintage comes along and everyone “has problems.” And I associate that with some impact of the vintage on the plant nutrition because the grapes, work off of the nutrition that’s in the grape juice. And, unfortunately, we can’t really predict that. We don’t know what it is they’re missing and therefore we have no way to measure it.

But that year it was very interesting because it turned out not to be a problem, it turned out to be a benefit. So I had the Chardonnay. And at that time, my first year at Simi, I was fermenting much of it in stainless steel. But I was also fermenting in barrels. The barrels finished fermentation, even though they took a long time, but they’re a smaller container. They keep the heat of fermentation so it’s easier to finish. But the tanks lingered on until spring. As it turned out, the wine was wonderful. We learn as we go along but it’s not
that unusual to have wine sitting on its yeast lees. It’s a little unusual to have it fermenting for four or five months but the fermentation conditions are not oxidative in any way. The wine is protected. It has this nice contact with the yeast lees. So when they start to deteriorate, that deteriorating yeast adds richness in texture to the wine. So the wine turned out to be lovely. It was a super vintage.

03-00:04:42
Meeker:     And this was 1980?

03-00:04:43
Long:       This was 1980.

03-00:04:45
Meeker:     This was, you said, your first vintage there. I’m wondering if it was particularly stressful. I know you are a winemaker at a well-known winery, there to make your mark, and your first vintage has problems. You didn’t know it was going to turn out to be such a good wine.

03-00:05:06
Long:       The thing that actually made that vintage stressful is what normally happens when you’re building a new winery. When I came to Simi my job was to build a new fermentation cellar. So the stress is is the cellar going to be ready when the grapes are ready? It’s kind of like a horse race, two horses neck and neck. But, in fact, the cellar was finished enough so that we could receive and process the grapes into juice. But that was the biggest challenge.

Every year I think there are what you could either look at as problems or possibilities or opportunities or issues, depending on how you’re feeling at the time or what the situation is. But making wine is not a straightforward process, especially when you’re dealing with grapes from many different vineyards and usually several varieties. At the time I started at Simi I’d had ten years of experience at Robert Mondavi with a vast variation in grape variety and source. So I don’t remember it being particularly oppressive.

Some of the bigger challenges were ’83. Eighty-two and eighty-three both were rainy seasons and in ’82 we had a grower that grew 400 tons of grapes for us and his vineyard got caught in a rainstorm. It was a fairly vigorous vineyard, so there was a lot of canopy over the grapes. And the grapes rotted. So I had to reject taking all those grapes, which did not make the grape grower happy. But on the other hand I didn’t feel I could make good wine from them.

[break in audio]

I was talking about this particular challenge of having to reject 400 tons of Chardonnay in 1982, and then replace it in a season that had been rainy. I think that was my biggest challenge. It was scary to do that, but necessary.
Nineteen eighty-four was a very hot year, so all the grapes came in in three weeks, which is really difficult to handle.

Meeker: Three weeks after veraison?

Long: No, no. They came in within a period of—

Meeker: Oh, within three weeks. Okay.

Long: Within a three week long harvest period. Normally at Simi our harvest would be about six weeks, so that’s a significant compression, which means the facilities which worked very well over a six-week period come under pressure over a three-week period. And the other thing it means is that the grapes were quite warm when they came in. And we had cooling facilities to cool the juice. But with a lot of grapes coming in in a short period of time and the need to cool a large volume, it was also putting pressure on the cooling systems. So that was a challenging year. Nineteen eighty was actually a very good vintage. The next really easy vintage was 1985, which was an outstanding vintage in the eighties.

Meeker: That’s interesting because I went to one of those cheat sheets, looking at different vintages. And it could very well have been Robert Parker, so take this whatever grain of salt is required. But he identified north coast Chardonnay in 1985 as the lowest in like twenty or thirty years. I think he gave it like a seventy-four or something like that. Not according to your memory?

Long: No. One of the things I’d have to say is that my winemaking style is different from what Parker prefers. He’s always preferred very big rich highly wooded wines and I was always, with Chardonnay particularly, using the Burgundian wines as more of a role model, which is more freshness, more delicacy, but a lot of flavor.

Meeker: I know that in the eighties Parker wasn’t as big of a name as he became subsequently. But did you ever have to deal with consumers or buyers who would have said, “Oh, gee, I understand that this is not a great vintage so we’re not interested in buying this,” when in reality you thought that this was one of your better wines?

Long: I didn’t have to deal with that as specifically as you’ve laid it out. But 1989 stands in my mind as a year for Cabernet that was difficult. But there were some very nice wines made and not just at Simi, in general. However, the
winemakers really complained about that vintage. American winemakers at that time weren’t as savvy as the French winemakers. I remember being in France, this would have been 1986, at Château Margaux. And I had gone there to see what Merlot looked like when they harvested it, to have a sense of what their criteria for ripeness was. And we got there with my viticulturist at Simi, Diane Kenworthy the day before the rain started the grapes were beautiful. They were rich. They were pure. They were a clear expression of fruit. And then that night, even as we were driving back to our hotel, the heavens just burst open. It rained so hard you could hardly see to drive. So what do you think about the next day? Well, in California we probably wouldn’t have harvested again for three or four days. They were out there harvesting the next day. Everyone was. And what they said about the vintage was it was a lovely, approachable, fresh easy vintage which means the wines were not big wines.

Meeker: Yeah. Not a vintage to cellar?

Long: Right. But they had positive ways to deal with negative vintages in terms of communication that was more effective than a litany of complaints. Because if winemakers start to complain about the vintage what’s the press going to do? They’re going to pick it up. So 1989 for everyone that I knew was a difficult year in terms of marketing and sales.

Meeker: So that really did have an impact, then, on the consumer?

Long: Yeah.

Meeker: Interesting. How does the winery respond to that then? Did you learn anything then maybe from your French experience that you could then import to the marketing situation in the States?

Long: Well, I think first of all, that ’89 wasn’t the only difficult vintage. I mentioned some of them in the early 1980s. Not everyone performs the same. Not every vineyard performs the same. We have quite a bit of variety in the North Coast. We have enormous variety in soils, both because of volcanic eruptions and because we’re on this intersection between the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate. So we’re a jumble of soils. We also have different distances to the coast. We have different wind patterns. So in modern terms the terroirs here are quite variable. I think even despite a general comment about the vintage it’s really dependent on where the vineyard is, how it’s taken care of, when it’s harvested, how the winemaking is done. And you have to deal with it on those terms. You have to go to the people to whom you’re selling and say, “Taste the wine.” And these are the things we have to say about this vintage.
Meeker: But to taste it without some prejudice, as well.

Long: I think the prejudices generally are mental prejudice. If you’re dealing with people in the wine business that taste wines every day, they may not agree with your palate but they’re pretty savvy. Nonetheless, I can explain to a distributor or distributor sales people or retailer or a restaurateur our circumstances but they still have to go out and sell the wine to the consumer and they can’t do the same level of communication that I’ve done. And that consumer is going to read the general comments about the vintage. So it’s challenging.

Meeker: Were any of these vintages such that there was an overabundance of wine produced and then it had to be bulked out or turned into brandy? Did you ever have any of those experiences at Simi?

Long: Not personally, no. No.

Meeker: Another question that keeps on coming back up again, of course, is phylloxera. This has been coming up time and again and every time that people think that it’s been put to rest there’s new outbreaks of it. And I know that it was, what, the late seventies, early eighties, or in the 1980s that—I don’t know if it was a new strain or exactly the way to talk about it but a lot of the vineyards in Napa had to be pulled up and replaced. Is this something that you had to deal with at Simi at the time? And let me know if I’m getting this wrong because I might be getting the history incorrectly.

Long: No, you’re correct. I’d say from the second half of the eighties to the middle of the nineties there was a period, sort of the high period, where vineyards to come out. And it was worse in Napa Valley because the vineyards are so contiguous. In Sonoma we have various valleys. So even if a couple of vineyards are contiguous, then there’s a space until the next vineyard so it doesn’t spread as quickly.

I’m just thinking that we planted our first Cabernet vineyard in 1981. So it was planted. We knew about rootstock at that time because of this North Coast viticultural group I told you about earlier. So that was all planted on phylloxera resistant rootstock. And subsequently the same thing. So phylloxera in our own vineyards was not a problem. And I don’t think it was a problem for Simi in general. Sonoma County was slower to be hit with phylloxera. Slower to replant and not all the vineyards have ever had to be replanted.
Meeker: So this wasn’t anything that particularly impacted your work?

Long: No.

Meeker: Time and time again new threats appear on a horizon. Oftentimes they materialize, oftentimes they don’t. For a period of time, I think in the nineties, there was a lot of talk glassy-winged sharpshooter. I’m wondering when these things come on the horizon, how do you determine what’s a threat that you have to do some sort of measures to address and what is not a threat yet, at least.

Long: It’s very difficult. I think in general the public doesn’t really appreciate the challenges of farmers. I don’t mean just grape growers or wine growers. But it can be very scary. I think the question on the glassy-winged sharpshooter is really interesting because in Southern California, around the San Diego area, there were a huge number of vineyards pulled out. But there was also a large effort to contain it from coming into Napa and Sonoma by working with all of the different people that import plant material of any kind. And it doesn’t seem to have become a major problem here. But I think that was because there were significant measures taken. Oh, just slipped out of my mind.

Meeker: A sort of blight, right?

Long: Well, we have two problems. One is mealybug that we’ve got in South Africa that spreads leaf roll virus. And the other one is this red leaf—

Meeker: Blotch or something, right?

Long: Red blotch. And that to my knowledge is yet unexplained. So the vector for that, how it transfers from one place to another, isn’t known, which is very difficult because it has the same effect as leaf roll, which is to make it difficult for the vine to fully ripen its grapes. Now, the overall arching goal is to have virus free plant material because when plant material has viruses they often interfere with the ripening of the grapes. They interfere with the chlorophyll in the leaves. So you might get grapes with a good content of sugar but the acid might be low, the flavors might not be so intense. So when these problems come along it really has a potential high quality issue. And red blotch is significant now.

The other things that happen in these situations is the university goes to work to do the research. And I think in the case of red blotch there’s been a fairly quick analysis of what it is, and that was done by the virologists at UC Davis.
We have a tendency in the wine industry, to my way of thinking, to downplay or denigrate UC Davis but, in fact, UC Davis is a real backstop for a lot of the issues we have. So we understand what the mechanism is but we don’t know how it spreads.

As an aside, you say downplay or diminish UC Davis. Can you explain what you’re talking about there?

Well, it started back during phylloxera where UC Davis had recommended use of a rootstock that ultimately turned out to be sensitive to phylloxera and that was a major financial problem, as we’ve just discussed. But I think the other part of it is UC Davis is an intellectual educational institution and they’re more setup to talk about the scientific background and issues of wine and grape vines and the sort of nuanced creative aromatics. Professor Ann Noble at UC Davis did the Aroma Wheel, a researcher in Australia did a texture wheel. So the ability to communicate the creative aspects of wine has come into the university—Let me back up. What I’ve seen in California, I’ve also seen it in South Africa, is that the industry has a tendency to not pay attention to the work that the universities do when it’s incredibly useful. I’ve always read the journals and looked at the studies because they’ve helped me understand what goes on. If you understand the background, the behavior of a plant or fermenting juice, it helps you make good decisions. But they were really never setup to make great wine. That’s not the university’s role. So I think it gets criticism because of that. I also think in today’s era of natural wine that promotion of, “This is all hands-off, it’s very delicate, it’s not like UC Davis, it’s not scientific,” it’s a way of positioning and marketing.

Well, I want to talk about the natural wine and bio-dynamics, perhaps later on, because I see what you’re getting and I think that’s an issue. We should talk about UC Davis but perhaps a little bit later on. In, I think it was 1988, Simi sent you to Stanford to get some training in running a business. I think it was like an executive—

It was Stanford Executive School.

Yeah, executive school. Can you tell me a little bit about what was the motivation to send you to this? What did you learn there?

Well, the motivation was that they were going to promote me to being president and then CEO so they felt that that business experience would be useful. And it was a two-month summer program. It was extraordinary. At that time there were 180 students. Eight of us were women.
And Marimar Torres, who developed a winery after that, was one of them and she’s remained a good friend. In terms of what I learned. There was a very good accounting professor who was brilliant, and so I got some additional perspectives on the role of accounting in a business and the relationship of accounting principles to the motivations for the business. But what I learned, I think more than anything, was, let’s say, the internationalization or the globalization of business. In that group probably 60 percent of the people were from around the globe. So I learned more the big umbrella of business environment that we work in than little specific operational things. I’ll say the professors were incredible lecturers. They were the best I’ve ever had. So it was extremely valuable for me and it gave me a sense of confidence in moving into the leadership role. There’s much more leadership training now and it starts earlier for people. When I started at Simi as the manager I decided to develop teams because I could see that the teamwork approach was much more suitable for individuals. They were not into a patriarchal structure anymore. So we developed teams for winemaking and wine growing.

I had a winemaker, a vineyard manager, a financial person, and marketing person. Four people. And one more, lab director, who was German. Winemaker was Australian. I’m sorry, New Zealand. He would hate it if I said—

— he was Australian. And I hired someone as a consultant who did teambuilding and so we developed a system and implemented that system that made use of more input for all the decisions that we had to make.

And were these ideas generated in part from your work at Stanford?

I can’t say. I think certainly I understood that people working as a team was the direction to move in. I also responded to who the people were, who were the managers, and how they wanted to manage. That there was a trend to greater openness, greater sharing of information. But at the same time it was awkward because it was new. Now teamwork, that’s the way things are done so you learn it from the start in a business. But there I was creating a new approach to the management of the business.
In the previous interview you did mention this Stanford executive program and you did mention in passing that one of the things that you really got out of it was in fact this global perspective and also, relatedly, that it would be important to expand Simi into the export business. And in that interview you kind of left it at that. There wasn’t any follow-up question. So I’m wondering if you can tell me a little more about Simi’s international role, say, in the 1980s and then the efforts that you took later on to expand its global presence.

Well, let me first make a remark that I think identifies the California wine industry in general, and that is that we now have the biggest wine market in the world and clear through the time I’ve been in the wine business what I’ve seen as the driver for export has been challenging years in selling locally. By locally I mean in the US. So either wineries have an excess of fruit or the economy, more normally, the economy is difficult or the year that we started into Iraq—there were various—

Which Iraq? Under—

Under the first George Bush.

Okay. So I think that was ’91.

Yeah, it was ’91. And I remember sales just dropped off because everyone was in front of the television looking at what was going on. And various conditions within the United States that would make the market either flourish or contract. And when it was contracting, then people would think about exporting. The problem with that from the exporter’s perspective is that any importer, someone importing California wines to another country, or distributor has to work to establish a brand. And so you can’t go in and sell your wines one year and then come back and not be there. You have to commit to the cost, which is substantial, of marketing separately into other countries. Now, we also had a marketing group in New York, Schieffelin, who was expected to market our wines primarily in the United States. So we never really developed a big export market. And I think for those people who have done that and done it consistently it’s been a good investment but it has to be done over a ten-year period. And the US market has continued to grow. So it’s continued to absorb the wines that we’re producing.

Moving into the international market was not something that Simi really accomplished when you were there?

Not in any significant way.
Okay. Does that mean maybe 5 percent of its product or even less?

Maybe 5 percent.

Maybe 5 percent. Okay. Was that a disappointment that there was not support to see that happen or was it just not a good business decision to try that anyway?

I think ultimately it was a good business decision because for the most part we had a home for our wines in the United States and it was a significant marketing expense to establish those new markets.

Was there a sense that there wasn’t much interest in California wine around the globe? That there were either other large markets, say France, that really had their own indigenous wine cultures that were dominant and then there were emerging markets, Japan, China, or something like that that were going to be difficult to crack?

Well, we did export to Japan and Japan at that time was, from my perspective, a wonderful importer. I considered Japan the French of the east. They have very high aesthetic principles. So their sales groups would come to see me and we’d have a meal and serve them wines. They would be extremely attentive to the wines. And I did go to Japan on a trip to do marketing. But nonetheless, I don’t think there’s been a general drive to get California wines from the rest of the world. But you can’t expect that. In other words, if we look at it the opposite way, what countries are successful bringing wines into the US, they’ve established a presence, they’ve spent money, their winemakers come on a regular basis and tour the country. So they have spent the time and money to establish their country, first of all, and then their wines within that structure.

Well, now that we’re talking about marketing, and I think we’ve kind of shifted from your period as winemaker to your period as president and CEO, let’s continue to talk a little bit about that. Last week we talked a little bit about the influence of the wine press and writers like Parker and others. And from what you said in that discussion, it sounds like, at least when you were a winemaker, that institution, the wine press didn’t have a major impact on the way in which you were making wines. I’m wondering if that changed at all when you become CEO and president. Were you getting maybe different kinds of pressures from your bosses to pay closer attention to what critics were saying and how the market was evolving vis-à-vis the critics?
Well, I think the answer certainly is yes in the sense that both the *Wine Spectator* and Robert Parker emerged in the second half of the eighties, in the nineties as being very powerful forces. And then, of course, the 2000s. And our marketing company in New York, Schieffelin, who was marketing cognac and champagne, had a very close tie, particularly with the *Wine Spectator*. And, of course, there has always been discussion about how transparent the *Wine Spectator*’s ratings are and there’s never been that discussion with Parker because Parker has conducted himself in such a way to preclude that and also has a very distinctive, very consistent style. So you have one person, his style, you know what he likes. With the *Wine Spectator*, it was many different people tasting. So, of course, they had an impact. And I think during my period as winemaker the impact was not so strong. Then when we get into the 1990s we had a series of fantastic vintages, especially for Cabernet. And our cabernets were very, very strong. And so we really didn’t have any trouble selling those vintages. They were in demand.

Meeker: It was like a rising tide lifting all boats or something like that?

Long: I don’t remember the individual scores that we got on those wines but I just remember the wines were fabulous. And it’s easy to sell fabulous wines.

Meeker: Yeah. Another way in which wine is marketed and sold, of course, is tasting rooms. I think in all of the wine interviews that we’ve done, maybe only Robert Mondavi talks about it. And I’d love your thoughts on this. Maybe looking at your period of time at Simi, and I know that you were a winemaker, then CEO, so I can’t imagine you were spending a whole lot of time in the tasting room. But I wonder if you can provide me like a thumbnail sketch on the evolution and transformation of wine tasting at the winery itself for the public.

Long: Okay, well, I want to back off and take the umbrella view. When you were asking questions about exports and their part in the business I was thinking what’s actually happened is exports haven’t been so important but direct sales have become so important and I think that’s happened over the last twenty years. That’s been a trend. Now we have a thousand wineries in Napa and Sonoma and there’s no way any distributor could represent them all. The distribution system over the time I was in Simi shrunk significantly in terms of the number of distributors. So it was a period of consolidation for distributors and they’re very powerful people. The portfolios are huge. So for a winery like Simi who’s part of a larger marketing group that represents extremely valuable products to a distributor, we had a greater advantage to be noticed and sold than someone who’s making 500 cases of Pinot Noir in western Sonoma. So all of these new small initiatives all over the country
have been challenged how to sell the wines. And the direct sales are so important.

Now, speaking of Simi in particular, we actually were very well-placed for direct sales because we were in the city of Healdsburg, right on the main avenue. We had this beautiful old stone building which was historical and interesting to visit. We had a tasting room that was established when I was there. We had really good staff, well-informed. We trained them so they knew about the winery, the history, the winemaking process, the vineyards, and so on. And if I remember, the tasting room sales were about 5 percent of our sales and 10 percent of our gross revenue. So when you sell directly it’s much more profitable. Now, you have to remember that if you’re buying a wine for twenty dollars a bottle, it left the winery for about ten and the other ten were picked up by the distributor and the retailer or the restaurateur. So if you’re selling at the winery for twenty dollars a bottle you have an opportunity to get that revenue that otherwise would go into the distribution system.

Meeker: So you said that the tasting room at Simi wasn’t open until you got there in ’79?

Long: No, it was open.

Meeker: It was already open.

Long: It was fully operational when I arrived. I don’t actually even know if Michael Dixon started it. In fact, let me just correct myself. When I came to Simi, next door to the main building was this huge round barrel-like building and that was where Isabelle Simi Haig sold wine. So Simi had this long history of direct sales. And ultimately we tore that down and we built a hospitality center, which was a kitchen, a conference room, and a dining room and that was really part of our hosting our distribution clients.

Meeker: Maybe going back to the 1970s when you were working at Napa. Did you see direct sales really start to boom? You start to get like Heitz and you get Grgich and you get all these other high-end producers. I believe most of them probably had tasting rooms. I guess from your observation at that point in time, did you see these direct sale tasting rooms start to pop-up regularly? Was this something that was obviously transforming the retail landscape in Napa?

Long: I don’t think I would say it was obviously transforming but I think the growth in direct sales has gone along hand-in-hand with the growth of consumer interests. I remember when I started at Mondavi there was a grape tasting
room program. There was an educational program, then Beringer had a big beautiful tasting room with their old house. So there were always consumers coming to the Napa Valley that could go and taste wine. Christian Brothers, before the CIA bought that gorgeous building, when they were there, they hosted tastings. That was way back in the 1970s when there were not many wineries. And I did see tasting rooms from the beginning being part of winery strategies, particularly when they were on Highway 29.

Meeker: Not to put words in your mouth, but it seems like it would make sense to describe it as a slow evolution rather than something that all of a sudden jumped onto the stage at one point in time?

Long: That’s how I saw it. It had started before I got into the wine business and it was a relatively natural part of wineries development. But the growth of the number of wineries and the competitiveness of the business, which took an exponential curve, changed the direct sales from something that would be “we want to have tourists come and visit us, we want to accommodate them, it’s a good public relations” to “we have to have direct sales if we’re going to survive” on the part of many small wineries. So that was a big change in the motivation. And that’s happened really, I would say, either since the mid-nineties or the 2000s because of the increase in the number of wineries and wines.

Meeker: So it seems like before the 2000s a tasting room was, yes, something you would have to maybe establish your brand or something like that but it wasn’t necessarily a business essential. But especially now with more wineries competing with fewer distributors it has become a business essential.

Long: I would say early on it was a marketing essential. It was an outlet to influence consumers directly. But, yes, now it’s a business essential for many, many people.

Meeker: There’s a couple of ways also in which tasting rooms have evolved, even since I’ve been going to them. Anyway, two things. One is charging for tastings and then two is all the other stuff that gets packed into tasting rooms these days. T-shirts and birdfeeders and, you know, cheese plates and all this kind of stuff. I don’t know what Simi was like when you were there. Did you have a role in determining how the tasting room would be? What are your thoughts on that?

Long: Well, my thoughts have always been on wine quality and so I wanted the focus in the tasting room to be on wines. We had a few other things but some of these tasting rooms are like a retail store and that wasn’t what I wanted. I
wanted people to think about the wines and to think about the winery and the history and those things. There’s certainly different philosophies about how you run a tasting room. And nowadays it’s a particular specialty. There are seminars and educational opportunities to train people about how to successfully run a direct sales or a tasting room operation.

Meeker: Have you been to Simi in the last couple of years?

Long: Yeah, I was. I was there two years ago.

Meeker: How would you differentiate the tasting room today as it was when you were president and CEO?

Long: Let me just think how to say this. Simi appears to have thought about the strategies to bring consumers in. And one of the things I noticed, the signage outside says that they offer pizza. So they’ve setup a wine and food kind of thing, which I think is very smart. That’s a very natural evolution. They also have a sign that says ‘bicycle friendly’, which in Sonoma County makes a lot of sense because there’s so many bicyclists. So it seems to me that they’re taking the route of natural growth, things that are appropriate for wine and appropriate for the community without trying to be a general retail store.

Meeker: Okay. What about charging for tastings? Was that ever on the table when you were heading up their operations?

Long: Charging for tastings started, to my knowledge, in the Napa Valley. And I think one of the reasons it started was to try to manage alcohol consumption and try to impose the idea that tasting wine is a serious business. Not super serious but as a tasting room we’re here to help you learn about our wines and how they’re different from someone else’s wines. And so I think the wineries were trying to exclude people that came in just to have a lot of alcohol.

Meeker: And fees were one way to do that.

Long: Whenever someone has to pay for something they tend to respect it more.

Meeker: So it wasn’t necessarily recouping expenses as it was—

Long: I can’t say that. It was obviously income but we didn’t charge for tasting.
Meeker: You didn’t?

Long: No.

Meeker: Is there anything else about the sort of tasting room experience during this period of time that is somewhat memorable or worth recording? I know that’s sort of a vague question.

Long: Yeah. Perhaps as a conclusion to the tasting room experience I could say that I think it’s been very valuable to establish people’s interests in wine. Because Napa and Sonoma are so close to San Francisco we’ve become a natural place to come and the tasting rooms provide an experience to people about wine, how it tastes, what the wineries are like, what the vineyards are like. There are many different variations. The other development was the tasting rooms in the towns. So in Healdsburg now we have, I don’t know, maybe a dozen tasting rooms which again seem to be pretty successful because they are there over a period of time and they’re a little more convenient. But they offer a very different kind of experience and some of those tasting rooms do food and wine pairings, which are maybe more easily done in that urban environment.

Meeker: One of the things that I find to be interesting about tasting rooms is, and you kind of hinted at this, and that is they do seem to match the way in which the owner or the company is trying to position the wine itself. And sometimes they’re very rustic. I don’t think it’s just an accident that it matches their rustic wines, right? There’s a tasting room in Healdsburg, I think it’s the Deloach one, that is now owned by a French Burgundy based producer. And I’m trying to remember. But it’s very elegant, right, and so I think what they’re trying to do is create sort of an elegance in their wines.

Long: I think that’s Jean-Charles Boisset that you’re referring to. Yeah. Well, there’s no question that wineries and tasting rooms reflect strategies of the businesses in the sense of multi-winery ownership or strategies or personalities of the individual. And I think that’s one of the things that makes them really interesting to consumers, is they’re not all the same. Maybe some are sophisticated, some are rustic, some serve food, some have a variety of other things to look at. Some have great wines. If you were to come into Healdsburg as a tourist and to spend time in those dozen retail shops that are for wineries or you go to Seghesio or you go to Simi, which are in-town wineries, you would really have a whole range of experiences of different personalities, different levels of sophistication, different wines, different wine styles. You could learn so much just doing that. It’s a great advantage.
So when you were at Simi were there actual conversations that were had that say, “Listen, this is what we think our wine is like and one way to get people to understand that is to create a consumer experience for them that matches that in some way.”

Strategically the tasting room was under the oversight of our marketing director and he naturally thinks about positioning and communications. And, again, because philosophically we were focused on wine more than on other materials, he was concentrated on teaching the staff how to talk about our wines. And part of that was just interaction with the winemaker, the cellar master, the vineyard manager. So over time they would come to understand what the specific philosophies were governing each of the activities in the winery.

Interesting. Okay. That’s kind of what I was trying to figure out, is how much communication there is between, say, people in marketing and then people making the wine and if there’s a real clear line of communication for one to express the other in many ways.

In our tasting room at Simi and actually for other marketing reasons we had significant educational programs. We had systems and opportunities for people to learn.

I wonder if throughout the eighties and nineties you start to see emergence of perhaps a class of people who work in wineries on the retail and marketing side. All of a sudden do you see it as becoming a job, like a profession in some ways?

I would reinterpret that question to say do I see different skill levels or career levels in a winery developing. And the answer is yes. We have a small business, small group of wineries with a small number of employees who covered many different areas. As the wine business grows—it’s huge now—things that used to be done by two or three people or by someone that would come in casually and be taught now becomes a profession. And in that period of time in Sonoma, Sonoma State developed a wine business program and so they teach wine accounting, they teach wine marketing. I don’t know if they have a class but they have events on marketing through tasting rooms. So yes. There’s been a huge expansion of job opportunities and career specialties in the last twenty years.

Have you noticed how that expansion of, say, training and education has actually impacted the industry?
When I first went out in the market, when I started at Simi, the distribution system, the salespeople I would characterize as good old boys and they didn’t know very much about wine and they relied on their relationships to sell. Now you go out and you have master sommeliers, you have trained retailers. The professional marketer’s knowledge of wine is really extraordinary. To me it’s like 180 degrees, a sea change. So there’s a tremendous amount of knowledge and education among the people who are selling directly to consumers. It’s great.

Do you think that that’s impacted the quality of wine available?

I think what having that level of knowledge in the market has done is it’s helped educate the customers and it’s helped perhaps better define the wines that they’re selling, styles, quality levels, what this wine has to offer to you the customer, what makes it special, what makes it different. Maybe it’s particularly well-priced. But more information. Because wine, of course, is a very complex consumer good and so having people in the market that can assist the consumer in making decisions is really valuable and it’s changed immensely.

Yes. Bob Mondavi was a genius when it came to marketing and I think one of the things that made him so good was his natural enthusiasm for what he was doing and also his ability to communicate insistently. So I think about wine, food, and the arts as just part and parcel of what Robert Mondavi Winery was at the time I was there. He had art exhibits, they have the great chefs program, they have these music concerts. He put a great deal of energy into that part of the business in addition to the normal marketing through the distribution system. So I started out thinking that’s the way you do things. But if I look historically, when I started at Robert Mondavi and then I look at what we have now, those early years you didn’t need to market wine that much because wine was so interesting and so new in the seventies and it was relatively good, that it sold out quite easily. But by the time the eighties hit there’s more wineries coming into the business, it looks like a successful business, so there’s more competition so there’s more need from a marketing perspective to establish oneself, in having one’s own identity and personality as a wine brand. And there’s many different ways to do it. Some wineries do it by basing their wines on an estate: “My wines come from my vineyard.” They do
it by basing them in one or several varieties: “I’m a specialist in Cabernet and Cabernet Franc.” The list is endless. But the need for marketing in the wine business now when we have so many wineries is to tell the consumer who you are and why they would want to buy your wines instead of someone else’s. And that to me is what wine marketing’s all about.

But at the same time, in this period of years there’s also been the need to educate the general public about wine. Like me, I didn’t grow up drinking wine. I didn’t know anything about wine until I’d gotten into the wine industry or just before. And wine can be daunting when it comes to choices. When I went to Stanford Executive Program they gave Marimar and I a chunk of money to go and buy all the wines for the SEP meal program. And I understand: You go into a retail store and it’s just overwhelming. And then there are the wines around the rest of the world. But the wine business, because of the intrinsic interest or complexity of the business, the agricultural part, the creative part, the winemaking and then the marketing that layers onto that and the winegrowing, it’s a really incredibly interesting complex business and it very much reflects the people who make the wines. We have corporate level, which are very sophisticated marketers. We have individuals with their own systems, wines. We have that all over the world. And it’s a very old product. So educating people through marketing I think was, and has been, and is still essential to our business.

The other thing I think is essential and still relatively undeveloped in our culture is the tasting. So people can’t enjoy wine unless they enjoy the taste of it. And it’s easier to enjoy the taste of something if you understand a little bit about it, even if it’s just this was made by Joe Blow and he lives in Healdsburg and he has five acres of Cabernet and he started making this thirty years ago so the wines are now twenty-five years old. People who grew up in my era, and I think this is still true, haven’t had a lot of focus on taste. I didn’t grow up sitting at the table and talking about the taste of foods. We would talk about the food but now, “How does this taste? Why do you like it? What’s the texture?” Now, I do that now with my husband. We talk about the food that we eat and what it is. Is it balanced, how much flavor, and so I think the wine industry in a sense brought in the interest in and need for more attention to that aspect of our natural senses. We have visual. Very strong aural. Very strong. But taste is not very strong still in our society. And if I think there’s one part of our business that can be really enhanced it’s to help develop consumers’ taste appreciation, not just for wine but for food in general. And no doubt we’re moving in that direction. You look at restaurant menus and the descriptions they have. Again, you look at sommeliers and their ability to talk about the wines. These are all things that help educate people about what they’re drinking or eating or smelling.

Meeker: It’s interesting. What you’re talking about is a slow cultural revolution that’s happening and one could argue that it in fact does come from the wine
industry, particularly the Sonoma and Napa wine industry in the late sixties and early seventies and then growing from there. Because it’s in that wine industry perhaps that the language of taste starts to emerge in the domestic context.

Long: This is true. The French, for example, have a developed sensory language and I have purchased some books in French that are translations between five different languages, where you see the kinds of descriptive words they use. And I mentioned working with Michel Rolland. It was actually useful to pick up some specific terms that he would use to describe wine. But the big picture was they had a wine taste language, it had been long developed, it was part of their culture, and we didn’t.

Meeker: Can you give me an example of maybe some of those words or concepts? I know that there’s terroir, right, and that’s kind of a big one. But maybe some of the more specific concepts to taste that are words that you’ve discovered.

Long: Well, I think I mentioned earlier but the word rustic sticks in my mind with regards to Michel. I think for him I would interpret that in modern language as unbalanced. And unbalanced particularly with regard to tannins. So that was his word. And the fact that I learned to link that word with certain ways that the wine tasted. So the other thing about the taste language is it has to be learned with some food. Someone has to say this is the sensory description of this food. And it’s different from preference. It’s just a description. And as a winemaker you learn to describe separately from preferences.

Meeker: So take jammy, for instance. First of all, do you know if there’s a French analogous—

Long: Probably. I don’t know the French term but if I were to think about the word jammy, the French would probably consider that the equivalent of overripe or excessively ripe. Their language to me doesn’t tend to sound judgmental. What I just said, excessively ripe, sounds judgmental. Overripe I think a little less so. But their language doesn’t seem to be so judgmental. But in their styles that particular character was less desirable because, frankly, they couldn’t get their grapes overripe for the most part except in the Southern Rhone.

Meeker: Well, I mean, that’s an interesting term as far as developing a domestic language around taste. I don’t know if that’s a term that would have been translated, for instance. It’s kind of something that I would guess would have been *sui generis* of someplace, like just kind of emerged. But it’s a term that
some, like myself, might see as a less desirable category but others, that’s what they look for in the wine, is a luscious jammy-ness.

04-00:10:29
Long: Right. That’s right.

04-00:10:32
Meeker: That is an interesting discussion. I think we should kind of continue this throughout, this sort of idea, or thesis, if you will, of the development of kind of a—

04-00:10:45
Long: Taste language.

04-00:10:45
Meeker: —indigenous language, taste language. Let me actually ask you. So in 1996 you finished your term as CEO of Simi. Looking back upon the seven years you were in that position, do you have a sense of what your main accomplishments were?

04-00:11:10
Long: I think my accomplishments there, one was to continue to develop the grape resources that we had, was to grow the production, was to develop the very strong team that could operate. I felt when I was marketing quite a bit, in the sense of being out in the market and speaking about the wines, I felt like I could go away and things would just run. And continuing to develop the Simi brand.

04-00:11:41
Meeker: What were some of the main challenges that you experienced during that period of time?

04-00:11:52
Long: I had a very strong team so I didn’t experience challenges particularly in winemaking and finance. The vineyard presented some challenge because we were still, the wine industry in general, were still early in our ability to grow wine. So trying to make the change from growing grapes to growing wine for the people that were running the vineyards or by the people who are running the vineyards was more of a challenge because they still looked at healthy grapes and a good crop as the most desirable outcome. And that historically has been true for grape growers. That’s what a grape grower is. But if you’re a wine grower the outcome is the quality of the wine that you make out of those grapes. So that was a challenge, to change the operation of the vineyards from growing grapes to growing wine. And I spent a lot of time doing that. This North Coast Viticultural Research Group that I alluded to earlier was part of my education about what you do in the vineyard to impact the wine. I think during my whole time at Simi that was one of my focuses. It was a great, powerful tool to improve wine quality.
Okay. How did you go about doing that, I guess? How did you go about influencing grape growers to think about being wine growers, in essence, as opposed to simply increasing yields and having—

There are two sort of categories of winery influence on grape growers. One is on your own vineyards, which you control, and the other is on vineyards that you buy. In our own vineyards it was a combination of educating our vineyard managers, linking what they were doing with the wine, and actually changing the practices. And during the time that I was thinking about wine growing we planted all of our vineyards. We planted our Bordeaux varietals, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay. So I was able to influence those substantially. When it comes to buying grapes I think the first thing you have to look for are good quality grapes. In other words, vineyards that relatively naturally in their environment are going to produce good quality. Then there are always growers who are really interested in doing a better job or a different job, who are very willing to interact on quality, and trying to work with those people as much as possible. And then also pay for good quality grapes. So we would tend to develop relationships with those people and I would name Angelo Sangiacomo, who was a pear grower and then converted to grapes down in the Carneros and was always seeking to help his buyers by making his grapes more and more suitable for what they were looking for.

And one of the things he did, which was very interesting, and we suggested this to him, and we started at Simi, is we did a tasting. He had eight or ten different Chardonnay blocks. So people would buy from one block or two blocks and often keep those wines separate. That’s what we did. So we said, “Why don’t we actually get the winemakers together that are making wine from your different blocks and we’ll taste them.” So we did that. And the woman who started that, implemented that for Simi was Barbara Lindblom, who still does that for Angelo Sangiacomo. But it was extremely interesting. Let’s say we would buy from two blocks and those blocks were large enough so there were four or five other people making wine from them. So you’d sit down. Same grower, same terroir, same grapes, different winemaking practices. And the wines were vastly different. It was so fascinating and not unexpected. But what it served to do was to indicate to some people who were not making good wines from those grapes that it was possible to do so. So I think it was helpful to some people who came in relatively new to working with those grapes and it was particularly interesting in years where there was rain and there was mold and to see how different the outcome was among the winemakers. So that was a wonderful and not unexpected example of the power of the choices one makes once the grapes are ready to go. So we have the whole thing about the terroir. The right place, then the right match of grapes, then the right winegrowing. And then someone has to decide when to pick them and how to handle them from there. And all of those things have an impact on the final wine. That’s why it’s such an interesting business.
And so in ’96 you left Simi and you went to the larger Chandon I guess. I don’t know, was it like a corporate office or something like that, to become VP of business development. What was the motivation to do that?

The motivation was that LVMH decided to—what is the word— consolidate. Consolidate Simi and Chandon and so they hired a business manager with business experience. So the job I had been doing essentially came to an end. It was sort of an early indicator of the whole trend of the industry in terms of consolidation, where individual wineries with their whole staff, someone buys four of them and then has one overall administrative staff. So for me it was just kind of a wind down of my time at Simi.

Can you give a description of what that job entailed and how it was different from the previous position of CEO?

Well, I no longer had responsibility for the operations of the winery and I was really doing special projects, to look at new ways of developing business. And one of the things we looked at was the possibility to help these large multi-location restaurants buy wine. So we actually contacted some of the chains, a more common way to call them, to see how they sourced their wine and if we could be of any assistance as a little separate business to helping them do that. Eventually that did not come to fruition because it was a bit of a diversion from the main focus.

Sounds to me like this work is somewhat also a diversion to your main interest.

Yes, it was.

And so then in 1999 you ceased working for Chandon.

End of ’99, yeah.

End of ’99. And that then takes us into other pursuits, particularly down in South Africa and so forth. So we’ll get to that. But before I get there I want to switch gears a little bit and ask you to talk a little bit about basically the role of being a female pioneer in the wine industry. And that’s kind of a big category and that’s a little probably tricky to talk about. But it’s interesting. When I’ve done the background interviews, and three of them have been with women who’ve worked with or mentored in some way, all three of them basically said you have to ask her about what it was like to be a woman in the
wine industry. And they all said something to the effect that this was something that was very central to our lives but it’s not something that we really talked about that much. Like you would talk about experiences perhaps of sexism or something along those lines, perhaps, but it wasn’t as organized as getting together in a feminist consciousness raising group. Yes. I guess it’s a very broad question. But amongst you and your close friends who are also basically women pioneers in the wine industry, how essential was that factor in your career?

Long: So how essential is being a woman in my career?

Meeker: Yeah.

Long: First of all, when I went to school at UC Davis I think there were five people in my enology class. And I was a woman and four guys were men. So I thought, “Well, it’s not a big deal.” I never thought, “Gosh, I’m the only woman.” I never thought that. I’m like, “This is really interesting.” And then when I got to Robert Mondavi it was pretty much the same thing. I am a very focused person. So if you talk about a personality that is sensing everything in their environment, that’s not me. I’m like the searchlight. And I was really focused on learning about winemaking at Mondavi and it was so much fun and it was so interesting and it was so fascinating. And I rose very quickly through that organization. I started as a harvest intern in ’70. In ’71 I was part-time. Then I thought they needed a full-time person so I applied for that job and got that job. And then the next year Mike Grgich left and I was promoted to chief oenologist. So that’s not a problem for a woman, right? And it put me in a position of working in a leadership position in a leadership winery, which was a tremendous advantage. So unlike other women who, from what I understood from them, kind of came in a different route, I just fell into a fantastic opportunity.

The challenges at Mondavi were not so much a challenge in being a woman as being a non-family member because the focus was always on the family. And I particularly remember people from overseas, men from overseas coming to visit and saying, “Gee, you’re a woman and you’re leading this business.” What that told me was that was not the case in their country. And it’s changed so dramatically, which is fantastic. When I came to Simi, I was approached for the job.

Meeker: And a woman had preceded you there, as well.

Long: Yeah, Mary Ann Graf. But what I think I did to my advantage was when I went into Mondavi as a full-time person and Simi is I stated what I wanted.
What I wanted to accomplish, what I wanted to be. In the case of Mondavi I wanted to be full-time, assistant oenologist. In the case of Simi I wanted to be vice president of winemaking and have a shot at president. So that establishes who I am and what my vision is. I hired quite a few women, which was great because they were a lot of very competent people and they’ve gone on, like Dawnine, to have their own business. A contemporary of mine at the time was Merry Edwards. And I think Merry Edwards would have to speak for herself but it was my sense she had a little bit of a rougher start. But she’s been fabulously successful through her career.

I remember having some experiences of visiting wineries in Italy and I went with a guy that I was living with at the time. And I would go into this Italian winery to meet the winemaker. The winemaker would start talking to him and so I would just start asking questions. “What varieties are you growing? How do you decide when to harvest? What do you ferment in? What are your fermentation?” And pretty soon he and I are having this great conversation. So there always seemed to be a way to go beyond that. So I would say being a woman in the wine industry as a pioneer probably gave me a spotlight or a position that I might not have had otherwise. And I was also a good speaker. Again to go back to the educational aspect, I was very good at explaining winemaking and what we were doing and why we were doing it and how we were doing it. So that also helped my positioning.

Meeker: It’s a profession that really requires technical expertise, and I think you could find in other professions that similarly require technical expertise, once women were given the opportunities, if they were able to demonstrate that technical competence pretty soon prejudices or men blocking their careers, those would fall away more quickly.

Long: That’s true. I came into studies of oenology and viticulture with a general science background, so I was primed for understanding the microbiology and biochemistry of wine.

Meeker: Amongst you and your cohort did you ever talk about being a woman pioneer? I know that, for instance, there was this kind of social networking group, Women and WineSense, right. What was the nature of those kinds of meetings and conversations? Was it more just groups of friends getting together or did it have sort of a feel of a feminist consciousness raising session, where we’re talking about different problems we’re experiencing and how to address them?

Long: I can’t honestly say that I remember being in a feminist consciousness raising situation. What I do remember is a group of women who developed, and this was kind of a personal group—most all of whom were in the wine business in
marketing or hospitality or public relations or winemaking or UC Davis, plus it included some attorneys and some women in other fields—that started thirty years ago. No, started at Simi. When I started working at Simi we got together and we would just get together and do fun things. Like we would go floating down a river, go to the beach, rent a houseboat on a lake. And usually it would be fifteen or twenty of us. And the thing that was primarily common was that we were in the wine business, most of us. Even so, I don’t remember having a lot of conversations about the problems of being a woman in the wine business. The conversations were more about, “Well, what are you doing? How’s your career developing? What do you think about this aspect of the business? What about these wines?” It wasn’t “these are the problems” as much as it was “this is what we’re doing.”

Meeker: So it was more perhaps analogous to men getting together in their clubs.

Long: Yeah. I think that’s probably true. And the Women for WineSense came along toward the end of my development as a winemaker and certainly it’s a networking group. That’s been incredibly important. But I think that was why it developed. It developed for women to network around wine and for those people that have careers in wine to develop other contexts to help them develop their career.

Meeker: Let me back up and say in pre-interviews people have talked about your role as a mentor to both men and women in the wine industry. I’m wondering for the women you mentored, was it very often that they would come to you and say, “Listen, I’ve got this problem working with men in the cellar or men in the front office. How have you dealt with this? Obviously you’ve been successful. How have you dealt with this?”

Long: No, I didn’t have a lot of those conversations.

Meeker: Really?

Long: Yeah. As the wine industry grew and became so alluring to people I would have people from outside the industry who wanted to get into it come and talk about how to do that. I would also have people from other wineries that felt stuck in their position come and want to talk just about moving on, what the opportunities were. As time has gone on, I have become, which I think is kind of natural as you grow older, is to become more of a mentor, to take more of the big picture and to be able to understand issues because you’ve experienced them and to help people problem-solve.
And in that, the question of gender is discussed or not?

Well, not so much. I think my focus has been pretty much career oriented and my mentorship has been pretty much career oriented. I can think of working with some people at Simi and they were having challenges in the job. But the challenges weren’t a woman trying to work with a guy. They were like one manager trying to work with another manager who have completely different personality profiles. Those were the kinds of things that I recall.

On this question, it’s pretty interesting. So my former colleague at my work tried to get a project going on women and wine. And I know that he did do at least one interview and it was short, maybe a two-hour interview with Merry Edwards, and this is public. It’s up online and everything. It’s very interesting because it’s clear that from the outset she was not entirely comfortable with this notion of a project on women and wine because while she did discuss some challenges that she faced early on in her career she doesn’t see her being a woman as particularly impactful on the kind of winemaker that she became. Is that something that you would agree with?

Well, that’s a different subject. I would have to say again I think that I was fortunate to start out in a very strong position in a forward-looking winery. But I think for all of the women in my cohort, we also came into the wine industry at the time it was like growing dynamically. So maybe on the negative side there weren’t women doing these jobs but on the positive side they needed someone to do them. So the opportunities were great. Much greater than now. There were people that became winemakers from every kind of profession you can imagine at that time that couldn’t move into winemaking now as a professional career because they wouldn’t have the background.

I’ve always felt privileged to be a pioneer woman in the wine industry and I’ve also felt proud to have hired so many talented women and have them go on and be a success. I figure that the way that I help them is by doing what I’ve done. I’ve become a benchmark. But I think probably maybe where Merry is coming from is we all want to be known as a winemaker who’s successful in the outcome of what we do. So being a great winemaker, let’s say, is more important than being a woman winemaker.

You would share that sentiment?

Yeah. See, I don’t know how to explain it. I’m a woman. When I started there weren’t many women. But it wasn’t really an impediment to me that I could sense. I’m sure that there were discriminatory things that happened around me.
but, like I’ve explained, I’m like this. And as long as I was moving in the way I wanted to go and learning what I wanted to learn I was very happy. And I had great experiences. Just a simple example was there was some men’s group of tasters in San Francisco, I can’t even remember their name, the name of the organization, but they asked me to come and join them because they thought it was time to have a woman. [laughter] Which I thought was funny. But I looked at it as an opportunity. It’s like, “Great, I’ll do that.”

04-00:38:29
Meeker: Did you and your colleagues, whether they’re men or women, ever talk about compensation or did you feel like you were being compensated on the same level as men?

04-00:38:40
Long: That thing about women are always compensated less than men, I didn’t deal with that. When I came to Simi I said, “This is what I want to be paid,” and then they paid it. Now, I know that one of my competitors for that job wanted to be paid more. So it’s just an example of women underpricing themselves. I love the wine business and I just wanted to be successful.

04-00:39:29
Meeker: It’s an interesting business in that a lot of women I’ve talked to kind of have a similar take on it. Obviously you don’t want to deny your basic fact of being a woman and that it was a unique circumstance that you found yourself in. But it also didn’t necessarily define your life, that you were able to achieve on a level of your male cohort. The statistics are unclear but women in management positions in the wine industry is still pretty low. I think it’s, what, fifteen to twenty percent or something along those lines.

04-00:40:31
Long: Oh, in management? I don’t think it’s probably that much. There is a psychology professor at Santa Clara University, Lucia Albino Gilbert who has studied the women in winemaking. And I think she said even for winemakers it’s something like 10 percent of the winemakers are women. So it’s still lower in numbers than people think because there have been some very successful women who have had a lot of publicity.

04-00:41:01
Meeker: Would you try to attribute that to anything? Why are there so few women winemakers, for instance?

04-00:41:10
Long: Well, why are there so few women in science and math, such that it’s been a focus of universities and high schools to try to get more women in science and math? Because I think that kind of technical background and science background is important in both growing wine and making wine.

04-00:41:32
Meeker: So there’s perhaps a parallel?
Long: I think there could be.

Meeker: Interesting. Another thing that somebody mentioned in a background interview was kind of, in fact, some ways the opposite of being a woman as being a liability. And that thinking about it actually as being something that will assist the winery in marketing, particularly in the eighties and nineties when, as you had talked about before, there are so many more wineries and it’s hard for wineries to get themselves noticed. But perhaps in some cases a woman winemaker can help differentiate the wine. People might sense a different quality to the wine, perhaps a more feminine quality to the wine. The wine might potentially appeal to women more. Women buy more wine than men. Did you ever get a sense of you being a woman winemaker contributing to a winery’s marketing efforts?

Long: I am sure I contributed to marketing efforts. Certainly early on at Mondavi’s, they had a lot of press people come through. I had a lot of pictures taken of me climbing up on barrels or doing whatever I was doing because it was unusual. I think that it falls in line with what I was talking about earlier. That as a winery, as the number of competitors grow, you have to distinguish yourself in some way, and especially early on when there were not many women winemakers, that having someone on behalf of the winery, as a woman speaking, will be something different than as a guy speaking. And then there’s the whole question of do women taste differently. We know scientifically that women have more sensitive palates and I think for that reason they tend to make more subtle wines because they may be able to sense something that a guy can’t. I’ve always thought Robert Parker was successful for men who had money and wanted to compete for the best wines and wanted those powerful tastes. Maybe it has some relation to having powerful cars. But I often found when I was doing public tastings that the women liked my wines better than some of these big heavily oaked wines. So I’ve said before if it had been Roberta Parker instead of Robert Parker things would have been completely different. And I do think women have different palates then men as a general comment.

Meeker: Yeah. Well, that’s interesting because that then opens up this whole idea that perhaps gender differences are extraordinarily important in the wine industry. Because if you have a large segment of the population as having a different way of tasting and perhaps a more sensitive palate, as you said there is scientific evidence for this, I think the idea that there is like a greater percentage of women who are super tasters, right, who can truly identify unique palate differences, right? Then perhaps there is an argument to be made for the centrality of gender as a category of analysis in the wine industry.
Well, we know that the women buy the majority of wines. But there hasn’t seemed to be a linkage with those women necessarily reaching out to the women winemakers. Now, I think Women for WineSense have done some tastings that really try to address that issue. But I think that’s more of a marketing issue. And I’m not sure that marketing wine to women because the wine was made by a woman is really all that successful.

Meeker: It has been tried, yes?

Long: Probably. But there’s no question in my mind that the palates are different.

Meeker: Well, let’s continue talking about these issues as we go along. We’ve got a few more minutes today. I want to back up a little bit and talk about something that wasn’t really talked about all that much in your previous interview except at the very beginning and that is your work at Long Vineyards. You did mention that this is the site that you realized your ideal Chardonnay, I think. We talked about that last week. I know that you and Long were married at the time that that project started. You got a divorce. But then you continued working with your ex-husband then your new spouses also played a role in it. I see that you were listed on the website at some point as the architect of the winemaking process. What does that mean exactly?

Long: That’s a good question. Well, in making buildings you’ve got the architect and the contractor. The winery’s fairly similar. Someone has to decide what needs to be done and sort of the structure of the winemaking. And someone has to get it done. And in a one-person winery it’s the same person. In a ten-person winery it’s probably different people. With regards to Long Vineyards, that was started contemporaneously with my time at Robert Mondavi and it was started because Bob’s father planted a vineyard in the sixties. And I tasted the wines that were made out of that vineyard in the seventies. They were very good. They were made by a friend of ours, the Chardonnay. So we decided it would be good to start our own winemaking project like many, many people have done through the years. But we were fortunate in that we were starting with vines that were ten years old. Yeah. The vines were a diversity of clones and had a lot of different flavors.

The architect of the winemaking process means I determined when the grapes were harvested and how we would handle the grapes through the fermentation and finishing and what kind of barrels we would use. And I determined it conceptually and then I monitored it along the way to make sure that that happened or maybe it shouldn’t have happened the way I thought it might. Sort of make the change to adapt to the circumstances. But that’s very classic architectural work.
So this happened contemporaneously with your time at Mondavi and at Simi?

Yes.

Was there an endpoint to your work with Long Vineyards?

There was. I can’t remember exactly when it was. Let me just think about this. It would have been in the early 2000s. Seventy-seven was our first. We finished around 2005. Made it through twenty-five years.

How were they sold? Were they distributed or was it just a very small production?

It was a small production. We generally made two to three thousand cases. We made Chardonnay and Riesling at the beginning. We eventually planted Cabernet. And we bought some Sangiovese and sold that. We made the first Pinot Grigio in the Napa Valley from grapes that we bought.

Oh, wow.

So even though we were small we were bold. Bob Long was the salesperson. That was his responsibility. And we had one person, Sandy Belcher, who worked for us in sort of multiple—in the cellar, answering the phone, receiving visitors. But there were just basically three people in the business.

What was your case capacity at its height?

Do you mean the capacity or what we actually produced?

What you actually produced. Yeah.

About 3,500 cases.

Okay. So a very small operation.

It was very small.
Meeker: What were some of the key differences between that operation and then at Simi at the time? That was many times larger.

Long: Well, I always thought that the opportunity to start and develop Long Vineyards was useful for me because I ended up on a very small-scale seeing the full part of the business, the full view of the business. So when I came to Simi I actually brought that with me, which I think was one of the benefits to Simi of having me not only as an experienced winemaker at Mondavi but having my own small business. And I agreed at the time that I would continue to do the work with Long Vineyards but not be involved in Long Vineyards marketing, which was fine because that’s what Bob was doing and I didn’t want to do it anyway.

Meeker: And so if you don’t mind my asking when was it that then you split up?

Long: Nineteen eighty-one. We were divorced in 1981.

Meeker: But you continued to work together for years after that?

Long: Yes, we did. Yeah.

Meeker: Is there anything else about Long Vineyards that you think is worth committing to record?

Long: The key points to Long Vineyards for me were the quality of the plant material and its diversity in terms of old clones and diverse clones.

Meeker: So you’re drawing from Wente, as well as the Davis clones, yeah.

Long: Right. We didn’t use the Davis clones.

Meeker: You didn’t? Okay.

Long: No. The ability to work with fruit on our own property. A very simple winemaking process so that the quality of the fruit came through in the wines. So Long Vineyards for me was really two things. It was an opportunity to express successfully some very great fruit and also an opportunity to have a sense of what the whole business was.
Meeker: So when you talk about a simple winemaking process, I kind of want to know not what’s involved in that but what’s not involved in a simple winemaking process? What are the kinds of things that maybe you would do in a larger complex operation that you didn’t do at Long?

Long: I was just recently reading an article by a current winemaker who’s considered a very high-quality winemaker in Sonoma. And he said, “Rain isn’t as much of a problem as it used to be because we have the ability to take the rain out.” Which I thought was charming. It is charming that he expressed it that way. It was something many winemakers might not mention because it’s technology that’s employed in Bordeaux as well as here. But I guess simple winemaking is deciding to harvest the grapes. For white wines, crushing and pressing them to get the juice out, fermenting the juice, and having a place to keep the juice while it’s finishing. It really is not very technological. There’s still a lot of brain power in the decisions, the timing, and what you do but there isn’t a lot of applied technology. Even at Simi we basically were doing that on a larger scale. In other words, we didn’t use the kind of technology that winemakers commonly use now. Alcohol removal, removal of other undesirable compounds. There’s quite a bit of opportunity now to improve wine through technology and I think it’s employed primarily by larger wineries who are getting large volumes of grapes from very diverse areas where the grapes are not always the best. If they’re going to produce a large case volume of a good wine at a fair price they may have to use technology to even out the bumps in the quality of the grape supply. And I think it’s a very fair thing to be doing because that ability to make a very large volume of good wine is one of the things that’s brought a lot of consumers to enjoy wine. But it’s not what I do.

Meeker: Are you talking about the addition of, like, what’s this, the purple stuff? You must know this, right? It’s like a grape concentrate in essence that gets added to red wines?

Long: We don’t really need grape concentrate in California. Grape concentrate would be a way of adding primarily sugar and we generally have plenty of sunshine and plenty of sugar. But, yeah, that would be a technological approach. Removing volatile acidity would be one. Removing TCA would be another one, the corky character sometimes you get even before you’ve bottled the wines.

Meeker: How is that?

Long: It’s generally from wood in the cellar that becomes infected with mold and somehow that gets into the wine. It’s not common. It’s uncommon but it does happen.
Today is the 9\textsuperscript{th} of December 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long for the Wine and Foodways Oral History Project and we are in session number three. This is tape number five. Today I’d like to wrap up to a certain extent the work that you’ve been doing in Sonoma, in particular focusing on the Alexander Valley Winegrowers Association or group. I don’t know what the proper title of it is. And then I think we’re going to kind of move more into the global arena with your consulting and your establishing Vilafonté in South Africa.

So let’s get started and talk about the Alexander Valley Winegrowers. Nineteen ninety-two, you’re the founding president of the organization. Can you tell me what the organization mission was, why it was founded?

The mission of the organization is to promote the Alexander Valley and to bring it to the attention of wine buyers. And it was controversial because we had for quite a period of time a Sonoma County Wineries Association who was really focused on marketing for Sonoma County. But Sonoma County is a large appellation that encompasses a lot of different environments and I felt that those environments needed to be subdivided, more reflecting the geographical nature. We have a lot of valleys. Sonoma Valley, Alexander Valley, Green Valley, and so on.

Yes. [laughter] So along with other key wineries and growers in Alexander Valley we decided to move ahead and form our own association that we could use in promoting Alexander Valley, which is an appellation, which is on a lot of people’s bottles as an appellation. And I don’t know if we were the first, but we were certainly one of the first in Sonoma County to develop an association with our appellation.

So it was largely a marketing move?

It was a marketing move, exactly.

And this was when you were still at Simi and Simi, of course, just north of Healdsburg, is in Alexander Valley, correct?
Simi is in Alexander Valley, and the vineyards that we worked with, many of them, although not all of them, were in Alexander Valley. The vineyards we owned, that we developed here on Chalk Hill Road, and Highway 128, were Alexander Valley appellation.

Okay. They’re not Chalk Hill appellation? Isn’t there a small Chalk Hill appellation?

No. We’re in Alexander Valley right now. But the Chalk Hill dividing line is not far from here.

Okay. Why was it controversial, first of all?

It was controversial because the Sonoma County Wineries Association executive director felt it was, in a sense, a threat to the focus on Sonoma County. But if you stop and look at it, and I’m thinking now about Mendocino County because Mendocino is in the same position now that we were then. People relate more, I believe, to appellations because the appellation is smaller, it’s something you can grasp, you understand what a mountain is or what a river or a valley or a coast. And it just has more intrinsic meaning and it really has meaning for the vines. But you’re talking about Alexander Valley in the context of Sonoma but you’re focusing on Alexander Valley. And I think that in hindsight it’s still the best direction to move. Now, for example, do we talk about Napa County or Napa Valley? You know, there are other appellations in Napa County. But I think the reality of geographical variations is more powerful than the political appellation of a county.

So it’s almost as if this preexisting organization [Sonoma County Vintners] kind of saw it as an existential threat and that was perhaps the main objection to the establishment of a more appellation focused organization?

It certainly wasn’t an existential threat to their survival because there is a valuable function for a county-wide organization. Oftentimes it’s political because the same kind of organization is in existence on the grower’s side. There’s a lot of political issues about any set of businesses working in a county. But essentially you’re correct that they were seen as taking away from the focus on Sonoma County and moving the focus to appellations, which essentially was correct.

At the time did it seem like Sonoma Valley was dominating in that organization? In other words, did the folks in Alexander Valley feel that they
weren’t getting the same kind of attention from the Sonoma County vintners association that, say, people in Glen Ellen and the town of Sonoma were?

Long: Sonoma Valley was not seen in a competitive way to Alexander Valley. It’s in a very different part of the county. It takes me an hour to drive from here down to the city of Sonoma and it’s a very different climate, more related to the climate of the San Francisco Bay. We’re more related to the ocean climate. So that wasn’t an issue. I think it was just the startup of appellations created some concerns. More benefits than concerns.

Meeker: Okay. Do you feel like you’ve adequately described the concerns that were brought up?

Long: I feel I have but I don’t know if you feel. You’re the listener.

Meeker: Well, let me actually go into it a little bit more because I think it was in the previous interview you were talking about the US appellation system and you said, “I believe currently appellations are primarily locators for people.” In other words, in the traditional European system, an appellation of, for example, Pauillac and the Médoc in the Bordeaux is meant to mean: this is a particular piece of ground that will produce wines that are uniquely distinctive within this area. But then you say that in the US it’s primarily to designate location and geography rather than something as distinctive as terroir. So the way that I interpret that meaning is that appellation, rather than being a threat because it divides larger pieces into smaller pieces, actually isn’t dividing pieces small enough, into meaningful, distinct terroirs.

Long: Well, that begins to get to a question of how small is small enough. And, for example, in South Africa we have a vineyard that has a hundred acres of land and fifty acres planted and we make wine from that in two and a half acre blocks and each of those blocks is different. So there’s an infinite subdivision that can be imagined.

But the original appellations in Europe did have geographical constraints. So any appellation that I know of, anywhere in the world, has differences within the appellations. So somehow you have to make the distinction and making a distinction in a geographical basis is one way to do that. And per the regulations, the US regulations, you have to have professional geological input to draw those lines. Now, not only is there a political element to county lines, there’s a political element to appellation lines. A friend of ours is an attorney in Napa who has worked with a lot of the appellation groups as they develop their appellations and draw the lines. And it has to be done on consensus. And sometimes you’re in a valley, the edge of the appellation isn’t
always neat. So if you’re in a valley you can say it’s ridgetops that are the boundary, and you can say Carneros appellation stops at the bay. But there’s always someplace that’s debatable and who’s inside that place and who’s outside it has financial impact.

05-00:10:17
Meeker: So at this time when you establish Alexander Valley Winegrowers Group and it is trying to create in the public consciousness an idea of appellation as opposed to county: Did you feel that this is great but it still needs to go a lot further at that point?

05-00:10:45
Long: I definitely felt it was a starting point. It took the public mindset from larger politically drawn boundaries to smaller geographically-drawn boundaries. I think it made the winegrowing more, as I said, real to people. But the appellations that we use as benchmarks in Europe have had hundreds of years to develop so one could easily conceive that with time our appellations might evolve or subdivide. But I think there’s also a danger in too much subdivision when it becomes subdividing for a marketing purpose. So it would make more sense to subdivide when you have begun to understand the real effects on the grapes of different parts of an appellation.

Now, Sonoma Coast is a good example because Sonoma Coast was really developed for marketing purposes and it goes along a large part of the coast and it goes inland. So it is no doubt an appellation that could be fine-tuned in the future.

05-00:12:11
Meeker: Well, that’s an interesting point. I wonder, you as a winemaker, did you observe that process happening, the creation of a Sonoma Coast appellation? I know that you don’t have much play in that particular geographic area but did you develop an opinion on it? Did you have conversations with your fellow winemakers about this process happening?

05-00:12:34
Long: I wasn’t involved in the Sonoma Coast appellation development. The opinion at the time was that it was too broad. That it was done for a marketing purpose. So let’s say those are the negatives. The positive, from my standpoint, is that it did call attention to the coast and all of those little vineyards that are near the coast and are strongly influenced by ocean environment now have a greater recognition.

05-00:13:13
Meeker: On the other side of the equation, as far as subdividing existing appellations for the right reasons, I’m wondering if there’s any areas that you’ve worked, Napa, Alexander Valley, where you would advocate a further refinement, perhaps creation of sub-appellations or something along those lines?
I haven’t really thought about it because I developed the Alexander Valley appellation group in Sonoma County. That’s where I primarily worked. And in order to envision that, it takes a lot of understanding of each appellation. So I would say that would be a study someone could make. To say, “Here’s all the appellations and here’s ways that they might be enhanced.” But I also know that once you start to change boundaries or subdivide it becomes kind of a hot button, a political hot button because again you’re impacting someone’s way of life.

There are personal relationships there, too.

Yeah.

It’s not just something that happens in the abstract. It’s actually winemakers and growers who have known each other perhaps for many years literally setting up new boundaries.

I think that for the most part our appellations in Sonoma County are well-constructed. And I think it’s better to let time pass to see the wines that are coming out, to see which grape varieties do better in which appellations, which are more suitable and then come back and look at it. I wouldn’t really advocate a subdivision now. I doubt we have enough information.

Grape varieties is interesting because, of course, in Europe grape varieties are attached to appellations. If you want Côte de Beaune on your label it has to be a Chardonnay or Pinot Noir basically. Do you have any thoughts on that approach and whether something like that would be appropriate in the United States?

Well, I spent a lot of time with Dr. Deborah Elliot-Fisk, who is both a geographer and a geologist at UC Davis. And she’s the expert that’s worked with a lot of the appellation groups and she actually helped us go through Simi’s vineyards and better understand the soils and their histories for growing purposes. And one of the things she taught me is that Sonoma County, for example, has an extreme mix of soils that come from the bedrocks that are both volcanic and sedimentary; they come from the fault, the interaction of the pacific plate and the continental plate. So we have a much more varied geology than any of the French appellations. And then we have all this variation due to coastal climate, to a more inland climate. So we have an extremely complex group of terroirs.
And, again, being an American I don’t like constraints. So the opportunity to plant a lot of grape varieties here and see what works here I think is of tremendous value. But it just takes a long time. Napa has worked out that it’s a Cabernet or Bordeaux grape growing area with some other varieties attached. But that’s taken a while to develop and that’s on the back of Cabernet being grown in Napa Valley and revered since the mid-thirties. Maybe a hundred years.

Meeker: Okay. Well, I’m also interested in the experimentation side of things because it seems like there are countervailing tendencies. There’s the tendency to try to improve on a grape that’s shown great promise. Cabernet or Zinfandel in the Alexander Valley. And then there’s the other tendency, which is, you know, there are thousands upon thousands of different grape varieties, some that are recognized around the globe as noble grapes, some may be but they just haven’t really found the right spot. Do you have any thoughts on those countervailing tendencies and how you managed those over the years?

Long: Well, what you mentioned in terms of the opportunity for many other grape varieties that aren’t grown here currently is one of the reasons that I would not feel comfortable in constraining an appellation to certain varieties. In Mendocino County, the county viticultural advisor, Glenn McGourty, has an experimental vineyard where he’s brought in many of the Mediterranean varieties grown around the Mediterranean that we don’t grow and that’s valuable. And what I see in Mendocino is a movement toward exploring some of these, say, different Rhone varieties, Greek varieties. I mean there are truly hundreds. So that’s healthy and it’s exciting.

Meeker: Is that anything that you ever undertook yourself?

Long: I did. We had about a hundred acres of vineyard at Simi and I took that three acres and planted Nebbiolo and I planted Malbec and I planted some different clones. I planted Petit Verdot. Now, the Petit Verdot grew into something that we used and liked but nothing else did.

We used the Petit Verdot. We liked it. The Malbec was challenging to grow. That particular clone of Malbec was not particularly productive. It was an alternate bearer. In other words, grapes one year and no grapes the next.

Meeker: Oh, wow.

Long: Not a suitable clone.
Did you know that when you planted it?

No. When you start a new variety you’re pretty innocent. You do your due diligence but you don’t necessarily know all the different variations in that piece of plant material or how it adapts to your climate in your soil. So it takes quite a bit of time to assess whether a new variety is going to do well. The Nebbiolo was the strangest looking grape I have ever grown. It had all these long trailing thin canes with all these little bunches hanging on them. Now, I never really pursued Nebbiolo so I couldn’t say if that was clonal or varietal. But yeah. I learned something from some trials.

One of the things that I find interesting is that you look in catalogues, local stock providers or just in California, and they offer hundreds, really, of different varietals and you just don’t really see the vast majority of those on bottles. Does this mean that, yes, they have them in their catalogue but nobody’s really buying them? What do you think?

Why do the nurseries have a variety of grapes that people don’t seem to be using?

That’s a business question. I would presume that they do because they feel there is some possibility or someone has requested that they handle those varieties. But I think for the most part it takes a larger winery who’s really committed to experimentation and trying new varieties, who has the land to do that, or a small winery who’s really interested in developing something new, to get a new grape going. Now, Glenn McGourty in Mendocino County has had a real interest in helping Mendocino move beyond the traditional Chardonnay and Cabernet that’s been so successful in Napa and Sonoma. And so he’s tried all these different varieties. And that’s a very appropriate strategy for someone in his position. He’s a research fellow associated with the University of California whose business is to support the grape industry in his area. So that’s been very beneficial for that.

I don’t know much about this particular role. And can you describe what it is and maybe how this person interacts with established wineries and winemakers?

Yeah. Well, to move back, a long time ago there were established what were called land grant universities. Oregon State University, my school, was one. UC Davis is another. And they were tasked with providing services to the
agriculture growers in their area. Because our focus is so much on viticulture there have been assigned specialists. So Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino all have a specialist who deals with viticulture primarily, not so much enology. And they’re there to help the grape growers improve, change, address diseases, whatever is needed. And they’re linked to UC Davis, which is their technical resource.

Meeker: So the university then has a plot of land in each of these areas that that specialist farms?

Long: I’m not sure about Sonoma. Definitely Napa has, in a great area of Napa Valley, an experimental station that’s been there for fifty years. And Mendocino also has an area.

Meeker: Where is the experimentation station?

Long: It’s outside of Hopland.

Meeker: Okay. So not the Anderson Valley. More inland?

Long: Correct. And that’s another challenge, of course. When you have a county such as Sonoma where you have so much variation, what might work in one area might not work in another. But, still, it gets the conversation going. And for Mendocino, quite a bit of the county is not directly associated with the coast. And there are already some old vines in Mendocino, like Carignane, which for a long time were just considered ordinary uninteresting grapes. But once we started tasting wines from Priorat, where Carignane is combined with Grenache and makes great wines, I’ve gone back and looked at some of those Carignanes. They’re from old vines, they’re inexpensive and they can be wonderful more in a blend than on their own. But it’s just an example of something that’s existed around us for a long time that hasn’t really been developed or appreciated.

Meeker: Those wines that you’re talking about in which you’re using Carignane in a blend, this is beyond Simi, I’m guessing? Or was it at Simi?

Long: No, no, it wasn’t at Simi. These are wineries in Mendocino and Priorat, of course, is in Spain.

Meeker: Sure. So this is consulting work that you’ve done?
Part of it is consulting work but my consulting work in Mendocino has been with an established old Cabernet vineyard belonging to Danielle and Mario Rosati. But in the course of working there I began to realize that there are all these other grapes that are being grown which I think is very interesting.

The Alexander Valley Winegrowers Association. You were founding president in 1992. Who were some of the other players alongside you in establishing this organization?

Well, Deborah, of course, made a list of some of the major wineries in Alexander Valley.

Okay. But Jordan, Seghesio, those producers perhaps?

No, Jordan wasn’t active. Seghesio wasn’t active. There were quite a few growers.

Okay. Did you continue to play a role in it after your time at Simi?

No.

Okay. So it was largely associated with that?

Let me just answer that question more fully. After I left Simi what I had was my own business and during the time I was at Simi, especially in the late eighties and the early nineties, I was active in a lot of local, state, and US organizations because I felt that that was part of my role, to contribute. Once I left Simi that all went away because then I was a small businessperson, didn’t have time for it. Someone else’s work to do.

Okay, fair enough. As far as that organization, how did it fund itself? How did it pay for the marketing work that it did?

I have to tell you, honestly, Martin, I don’t remember. I’m sure we must have had dues of some kind but I just don’t remember.

Okay. Let me ask you about another organization that I think was talked about in the other interview and that was the American Vineyard Foundation. Can you tell me when it was established and what it was set out to do.
I established that when I was on the board of the American Society of Enology and Viticulture. It was established as a fundraising organization to fund enology and viticulture research, primarily at UC Davis but not exclusively.

And is this also something that you sort of termed off of by the time that you left Simi?

Absolutely. Let me just say that the American Vineyard Foundation became a fundraising, and still continues to be an organization that raises and distributes funds for research. But at that time it was also involved in the larger fundraising for the country. We have some constraints in raising funds for enological research because of the fact that wine is alcohol, which is politically sensitive. So there’s some areas of funding that we can’t access, as opposed to Australia, for example. Australian government has done a huge amount of funding for their wine business because it’s a major export for Australia. A very serious source of tax revenue. That isn’t so much the case for the United States. Most of the revenue in the wine business is held within the US and is gained within the US. But there was this constraint with regards to funding that we tried to address.

Can you give me a little more detail on that? Do you recall examples of research that was not being funded that needed to be?

What I can’t remember are the funding sources in the US government, I cannot remember specifically, that could not fund because the research dealt with wine. The need is significant, not just in California but across the country because the viticulture business has grown so dramatically. It’s an important agriculture business. And it was easier to fund vineyard research because that didn’t directly include wine. But as to the specifics, no. They’re buried somewhere in my notes.

Do you have any thoughts on the legacy of that foundation? I know it still exists in 2014-2015. Apparently it’s funded $1.25 million for research which is—

Substantial.

—substantial. Not in comparison to cancer research, for instance, but it’s still substantial and it looked like it was mostly for things such as pest management and vineyard practices. I looked at the different projects that
were funded. But do you have any thoughts on the legacy of the work that you did with that organization?

05-00:32:05
Long:

I felt that I was part of a larger process. Any technical business requires research and agriculture is particularly challenging because we’re always facing new pests and diseases. So just as we think that we have a healthy environment something new comes along. Oftentimes imported from another country, either by accident or just something happens to ride along on illegal plant material coming in. So in order to maintain the health of the vineyards we have to be attentive to these things. Now, currently we’re dealing with red blotch and there’s some research that’s just come out on old plant material that they looked at. I mean old like fifty years old. That they looked at and found some evidence of red blotch. So it’s apparently been something that’s been in our grape environment for decades. It’s something that apparently exists in other countries. But it doesn’t seem to have been as extensive a problem as it is now. But red blotch was identified at UC Davis by a researcher in the plant foundation service (FPS). So those are the people that somehow have to have money to do what they do. And that’s why funding really supports the industry. Industry supports the country.

05-00:33:54
Meeker:

Sort of as a digression you had just mentioned the illegal importation of different plant material. This is something that a lot of growers take great pride in, sneaking in a particular clone or vineyard cutting from Burgundy or Bordeaux or something like that and then replicating it and planting it. Do you have any thoughts on that practice?

05-00:34:24
Long:

The practice of bringing in illegal materials is really dangerous because you can bring in a virus or a disease that can spread through the industry. That’s actually happened. And what I’ve seen, it’s not so much grape growers doing that, because farmers are really sensitive to the potential for damage to their crops. But I see wineries doing it because they think there’s something special about that plant material. I’m not so sure that’s the case. I think plant material is very reflective of the site where it grows. And we do in fact know that there are significant clonal differences between varieties. But there’s a tremendous amount of clonal material available that we know is free of disease. I’m a proponent of having healthy plant material as the first basis for having fine wine. Because if you have a diseased plant it’s not able to develop the aromatic and flavor compounds in the grapes and the balance of those compounds in the same way that a healthy plant can. So I would advocate that if someone wants to try something new, which is certainly possible, there are professional organizations overseas that grow a lot of plant material and it can be brought in through the foundation plant system. It’s slow and that’s what keeps some people from adapting that system, because the plant material has to come from a professional group in wherever, Europe, Australia, be brought.
in and tested to make sure it’s clean before it goes out into the fields. So I’m not a supporter of bringing in illegal plant material.

And furthermore, let me just say I think it’s a non-professional approach and I felt that it was more common, let’s say, in the eighties and nineties when we were really beginning to focus on vineyards and we were beginning to talk about clones. We weren’t really as knowledgeable about what was going on in the rest of the world as we are now. The FPS every year sponsors a seminar on some plant grape variety and there was a fascinating seminar several years ago on all the different varieties that are in Spain and Portugal. They have something like six or seven hundred different grape varieties and one of their professional experts who’s worked with these all his life was here and talking about it. So I’m thinking, well, why not go to his environment and do some due diligence and do some research and bring some of these back? It’s very exciting. But that is a more professional way to approach than going to someone’s vineyard and taking a piece of plant material.

05-00:37:42
Meeker: You said the American Vineyard Foundation came out of your work with the American Society of Enology and Viticulture. How is it that you became a board member of that organization?

05-00:37:53
Long: I was put up for Board membership and voted in.

05-00:37:58
Meeker: And this was back in the 1980s, correct? Perhaps? We can look at dates later. I think I have it somewhere. I don’t mean to test you like that. Can you tell me about the other work that you did?

05-00:38:11
Long: It was. It was in the eighties because that’s when I was at Simi for the first time.

05-00:38:15
Meeker: What can you tell me about the other work that you were doing as part of that board?

05-00:38:22
Long: Very little. Let me just say, generally, the ASEV is the group that works on behalf of the professional wine and vine growers in the United States. And it serves to identify professionals, to link them together, to identify issues that they want to hear about. And so the annual meeting is really a meeting to report research, both from wineries and from universities. So it’s an ongoing support system for the industry.

05-00:39:06
Meeker: Well, maybe this is a time to sort of segue to more of the global work and maybe a way to do that is talk about a global organization. I think, I was a
little unclear about this, but AVERN, the American Viticulture and Enology Research Network. Is this—

05-00:39:29 Long: 

That is not global. AVERN came out of the American Vineyard work and it was something that I developed with Pete Downs, who was working for Kendall Jackson, to be a broader group of concerned professionals with regards to fundraising. So we had meetings that brought in people from around the country to really identify fundraising opportunities in the government and to bring together people who had the connections to tap into those.

05-00:40:12 Meeker: 

So in some ways AVERN was related to the foundation but kind of a handmaiden for its fundraising activities?

05-00:40:20 Long: 

Well, AVERN had a broader platform. The American Vineyard Foundation is really California based. AVERN was nationally based. But they’re both concerned with raising funds for research and enology and viticulture.

05-00:40:36 Meeker: 

Well, maybe before we get into the global stuff, could I get your perspective on increasing awareness of wine grape growing regions in the rest of the United States? Is there a point in time that you as a California winemaker starts to notice what’s happening in other parts of the country?

05-00:41:06 Long: 

The answer to the question is yes and I had attended a symposium, it was in Kansas City, on Midwest wineries and I attended the eastern section of the American Society of Enology and Viticulture as an invited speaker. And along with that we were toured through Virginia to look at the wineries there. And the presentations were mainly from the East Coast. Each of these areas has their own issues. Of course, the East Coast tends to have weather issues that we don’t have and climate challenges for the vineyards. The Midwest at that time was quite a sizable group of very small wineries operating, people that were really interested in growing grapes and making wine and looking for input, both from each other and from the outside. It’s challenging to provide the input. It’s easier to do it with winemaking than for wine growing because the fiscal physical environments are so different. They really have to work at their own problems. But what has happened over the time that I’ve been watching that is—I know the state of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and several other of those eastern and southern states have their own extension enologists and/or viticulturists that begin to link people together within the state and identify issues and have these symposiums which bring together both practical and professional advice and help grow the industry in their area.
From the point of view of somebody who not only makes wine but drinks it, what about your introduction to these other regions? Did you find any that you felt to be particularly promising? Did you find others that you felt maybe were better for making peach wine or something?

Well, I’ve been in Upstate New York, which has some lovely wines. Been in Long Island, which has some wonderful wines. I spent some time at wineries in Virginia early on, probably twenty years ago, and I tasted some wonderful wines there. I’ve been to Texas. I’ve spoken in Texas, I’ve tasted wines there. So there are a lot of opportunities, I believe, around the country for fine wine making. I’m not sure whether I would say for great wines. I think there are places that you can grow great wines. But for making wines that are enjoyable beverages at reasonable costs. And how wonderful it is for someone in Pennsylvania or Texas or Kansas to have a wine that comes from their backyard. So that’s what I think is the great opportunity in these areas.

Washington State is different. Oregon and Washington are major winegrowing areas. Very different climates but they have the climates to be suitable, they have the acreage and the water to facilitate significant growth in vineyards. And they make some great wines.

Soils, as well?

Soils.

I guess one of the things I’m kind of trying to get at here is from a winemaker’s point of view and also from somebody who drinks wine, who knows something about it. And kind of an expert’s observation on the degree to which Americans are becoming a wine drinking people and traveling around and seeing these small operations in somewhat unlikely places. Have you noticed much of a change in the last several decades that you’ve been doing this?

I’ve noticed an incredible change in people’s wine consumption since I started. At Robert Mondavi in 1970 there were nineteen wineries in Napa Valley. Wine was an exotic beverage for the most part except for Italians in California that had been drinking it for generations and fortunately making it. My relatives up in Oregon thought that my working in a winery was just unusual. And now what I see is that almost all people drink wine. Professional people really have to drink wine. They have to know about wine. It’s part of being professional, is being able to go out to dinner and have a glass of wine and order wine. It’s just a pleasurable beverage with food and it’s a historical beverage. People have been traveling. They see the wines in other countries.
It’s just become a matter of fact. So as a winemaker I’ve gone from being someone in an exotic industry to, “Oh, yeah, you’re a winemaker. Of course.” And I think it’s wonderful. I love wine. And I respect wine. And so it’s not a beverage that, unless you have a genetic tendency to be sensitive to alcohol, it’s not a beverage that’s particularly problematical. And it’s such a social beverage with food and wine and people together. It’s a good mix. So it’s something that I didn’t anticipate doing, that I knew little about, but that I’ve been very proud to be involved with and lucky because it’s such a combination of agriculture. I consider agriculture kind of the basis of our country. And at the other end it’s global and it involves so many points of focus in between. So many skills, from business skills to financial skills to marketing skills to agricultural skills to creative skills to technical skills. And it’s a very complex business. And wines themselves are very complex. The opportunity to make something that’s really beautiful from a taste perspective is a remarkable opportunity.

05-00:48:54
Meeker: This concept of terroir is so difficult to define and it can mean so many different things to so many people. But I think that, from my perspective, it’s not complete unless you add a cultural dimension to it. Unless the people somehow get mixed into it, their preferences, their likes, their fears, their history. And I’m thinking as you’ve traveled around the country, tasted wine in Texas and in the Mid-Atlantic states, do you notice local culture, personalities, having any impact on the way in which the wine is being made in those areas?

05-00:49:47
Long: Well, let me back up and say I think the concept of terroir can be looked at in two different ways. From a scientific perspective, we refer to it as vine micro-climate, which means it’s what the vine experiences and that influences the chemistry of the grape and therefore its potential for wine. So that is the non-cultural way. That’s just the vine in its environment. The cultural additions come in when you’re making wine because you have a group of people making decisions about how to express what the grape presents. As to the question of are there cultural differences within the United States that influences how wine is made, I still believe the driver for the wine flavors and character are the vines and the grapes. As winemakers we can be skillful in eliciting the best from those grapes. As to the question of are there individuals that influence what happens in various areas, absolutely. They might be someone like the extension agent that I referred to in Mendocino who’s come up with the idea to trial different grapes, probably encouraged by the people there. There could be a winemaker who develops a particular system of handling a certain variety grown in a certain state that really works well that then becomes influential. So there could be someone who’s a marketer who is incredibly successful about talking about converting grapes into wine and how that works in that area. So, yeah, people definitely play a
strong role in many ways. But I’m not sure that that’s the same thing as terroir. I do think it’s culture.

05-00:52:01
Meeker: I have heard some people talk about the concept of cultural terroir. Maybe that’s a little too wishy-washy for a winemaker like yourself?

05-00:52:15
Long: I think the idea of cultural terroir is good. It’s actually a good description for the approach that encompasses the human element.

05-00:52:27
Meeker: Okay. It makes me wonder, although I’m probably being very stereotypical here in my thinking. I’m wondering do winemakers in Texas think that they need to make a Texas wine and that would be maybe spicy, maybe really big? You see what I’m getting at?

05-00:52:57
Long: Powerful like the Texans.

05-00:52:59
Meeker: Exactly. Independent. Not going to follow what’s happening in California. Maybe people on Long Island are going to make a wine that is old. Old money, old style, old world. You have people like Jim Clendenen and a lot of people out on the far Sonoma coast, the new wine movements. They’re making wines that are funky, don’t shy away from Brettanomyces, for example. I think there’s like a cultural dimension. Those are decisions that are made that I think are related to where the winemaker and the growers are coming from personally. Does that seem like a reasonable hypothesis or is this something that in reality you’ve never encountered in that particular way?

05-00:54:05
Long: Well, I would start by saying that in California, and thanks to Robert Mondavi’s forays into France, we definitely had the French benchmark for our Bordeaux wines and we were enhanced in our ability to achieve that by bringing on our consultants and having the French come over and invest in Napa Valley primarily. So we imported an outside benchmark and I think at the time that was done it was useful because it gave the customer something to refer to. It was useful because it brought in expertise. But then the trend does begin to change, to say, “Let’s be who we are, let’s not try to be someone else.” And who we are depends on where we are and what’s going on. I’ve never heard of anyone thinking that, “We’re in Texas, we should make a big powerful wine.” The Texas wine people I know are like, “We’re in Texas. We have our challenges with learning how to farm vines in the sites that we’ve chosen.” And I do believe still that the determining thing in the wine, the driver, is the grapes and what they bring, their chemistry, their character, their variety, what they bring to the wine. There are a lot of different ways to express it but let’s say with old fashioned photography you exposed a negative and with that negative someone in the darkroom could make a lot of different
variations. So the grape is our negative. Or to put it in another context, and that would be high fashion, where you have a very creative designer who has a certain type of fabric. And that fabric creates opportunities and constraints and the designer puts their own style on top of it. And the winemaking is the same way. The grape is both the opportunity and the constraint and then the winemaker lays their style wherever that comes from, wherever their source of creative input is on that grape. But in South Africa, which I know we haven’t come to that—but, see, what I want to do in South Africa is I want to express what the grape is in that environment. So I don’t really want to overlay some style. So it can be many different ways. I don’t know if I’ve addressed your question completely but that’s a start.

05-00:56:54
Meeker: Well, it wasn’t so much a question as it was sort of an idea.

05-00:56:57
Long: Hypothesis.

05-00:56:58
Meeker: Hypothesis that maybe doesn’t make any sense. Let me just put one more idea out there and let you comment on it. And that is you talked about really there was an importation of French and to a lesser extent Italian winemaking culture in Northern California. An historian might suggest that in the early to mid-1970s, at the same time there is a cultural premium placed on self-actualization, discovery of self, finding out who you are, throwing away the shackles of culture, that that’s the same time that the wine industry is deciding we don’t need to play by France’s rules anymore. We don’t need to make so-called “Dago red” anymore. We can create our own world. And maybe that’s sort of the impact of kind of a cultural sensibility in a particular time and place on the way in which wine is made.

05-00:58:07
Long: Well, you see, I think the 1970s and to a certain extent the eighties, were times that we were still looking to outside benchmarks and very much bringing in outside expertise, both in viticulture and winemaking. So just from a timeline, I don’t know if what you’re saying would reflect that. But certainly the wine industry that I grew up in was quite entrepreneurial and very inventive. Even if we were looking elsewhere for inspiration, I still do that because I could learn from many different sources. But I don’t think it was until the nineties that we have the grasp on the essential winemaking process, we had confidence, and we had a better grasp of growing wines, that we begin to really take our own direction. That doesn’t speak for everyone but I think as a general rule that’s the case.

05-00:59:20
Meeker: Can you think of an example of maybe a winemaker or a wine that really did take that own direction?
One doesn’t come immediately to mind, Martin, because I don’t see it so much as something an individual did but as the trend of the whole business. There was still a desire to go overseas and see what other people were doing but there was more focus on what works for us or what works for me or what I think, how I want to style my wine. One of the interesting activities that I may have referred to earlier was the tasting that we started with the Sangiacomo brothers, who had sold Chardonnay grapes to many different individuals. We mutually developed the idea of getting together and tasting all those wines. That was the ultimate environment to say, “There’s this vineyard and seven people are making wine from it and look at how different the wines were.” And that kind of environment can help a winemaker think, “Well, what do I want to do?” If you’re a novice winemaker, you look at all these wines, you realize the opportunities that exist and then you can start to put your own individual layer on those opportunities. I can’t speak for today. Our wine business is much more corporate today in my sense. Fortunately we still have a really good band of small wineries and specialist winemakers.

This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long. This is interview session number three, tape number six. What I want to move on to now is a discussion of your consulting work. In preparation of leaving, I guess at that point it would have been Chandon, you started setting up basically a consulting business. And can you give me an idea of what you imagined your post-Simi/Chandon life was going to be like? What kind of work did you think that you were going to do?

I knew that I would be retiring at the end of 1999. And, in fact, in ’97 we purchased the land in South Africa and started planting. So I knew that by the time I left Simi it would be early but soon enough to start working on that project. I didn’t really envision a post-Simi consulting because I never really thought of wanting to do consulting. And since we’re talking about it specifically, I will do that but my consulting came about by accident. I was at a seminar on Sangiovese, I believe, and a grower in Oregon who was there approached me and asked if I’d be able to work with him. He was a very small winery. And I thought, “Oh, that would be fun.” That was it. That was the start. [laughter]

Well, consultants are, I was going to say, a dime a dozen. That’s probably not the right way to put it. There are a lot of consultants out in the wine industry. There are vineyard consultants, there are cellar consultants, winemakers. So this wasn’t something that you ever thought was going to be part of your post-Simi life?
Long: I never anticipated doing a consulting business and as a result I didn’t even construct it as one. I wouldn’t think about a business with a serious strategy and so on and so forth. I just responded to people coming to me to do work. And because we were doing Vilafonté at the same time and quite a lot of time outside the United States, there was a constraint to what I was willing and able to take on. But it became really interesting to me to work with people.

Meeker: Can you give me an overview of the role of consultants in the wine industry?

Long: I think consultants in the wine industry have really evolved during the time that I’ve been in the industry. One of the reasons, I believe, is that many new people have come into the industry who need technical help and marketing help. But for me, I see consulting in my field as primarily being useful for two reasons. The most important, from my personal standpoint, because that’s what I do and love to do, is to give advice to people on how to improve their business, whether it’s vineyard, winemaking, the whole business strategy. I don’t consult on market. The other reason for people to hire particularly winemaking consultants is that there are always some that have evolved to have a special style that’s very successful and develop a name as a consultant. And they become valuable for someone coming into the business, to say, “I can hire so and so.” Now, I did that in a sense with Michel Rolland, except at the time that I hired Michel to consult for Simi, which was 1985, he was not a well-known consultant. That was the first time he’d consulted in the United States and it was only over the next ten years that he began to develop. And he was just beginning at that time to develop the reputation that he has now.

Meeker: When you actually did your consulting, can you give me an example of what a typical consulting arrangement would have been like for you?

Long: In terms of?

Meeker: Well, what was the work that you were doing, how much time would you spend on a project? Was it sort of a fly-in/fly-out or do you actually spend a lot of time there? What was the nature of the work?

Long: The nature of the consulting work that I have done has been really diverse and I’ll just give you some examples. One example would be working with a small winery and a winemaker that loves wine and wants to make good wine but is relatively inexperienced and needs another palate. So I would come in maybe once or twice a year and do blending for that individual’s blends that were coming out the following year. And at the same time there would inevitably be questions on various technical issues, so I would end up looking at their
winemaking process, looking at the equipment, answering questions they had about, “What about this? What about that?” Priorities for expenditures and so on. So that would be one—

Meeker: How long would that take?

Long: Maybe two or three visits a year. Typically when I work for someone I’m working on one type of wine. And so my schedule would relate to whatever was going on with that wine. But with one exception I have not played the role of the consultant that comes in and makes the wine. That wasn’t anything I wanted to do.

Meeker: So other examples of consulting work?

Long: Another example was working with a couple in eastern Washington that was starting up a wine business. They started by working with someone and then establishing their own brand. So I was there to answer whatever questions they had. Often they were some kind of financial questions. “Is it better to grow grapes or buy grapes? Or what about starting a vineyard?” There were always blending questions. “Will you taste our wines and give us your input?” There were vineyard questions. “I want to make a Chardonnay of this style. What can I do in the vineyard to accomplish that? Or what about the grapes from this vineyard? Are these grapes going to be good for the wine I want to make?” So that has been another example. That kind of consulting I’ve done several different places.

In Mendocino I have a client whose winemaking process I actually specify. I oversee it, working with a winemaker who’s implementing my direction, and I work with a grape grower to provide input, primarily, “This is the way the grapes are. Let’s see what we can do to improve them.” My client in France, Nicole Rolet of Chene Bleu, is another start-up. Started up in 2006 but in that particular instance they had an old vineyard and they’d spent ten years bringing that old vineyard up to good performance. In other words, it was completely rundown. And then they built a winery and wanted someone to come in and just sort of look over the business, they have a winemaker, they have a vineyard person, and answer questions, solve problems, be what I call the red flag. “You’re not really looking at this carefully enough. Let’s spend some time on that.” And that could be technical, could be marketing, could be financial.

In Israel I was asked to come in. The Israeli experience (Golan Heights Winery) has been fabulous. The situation is that the winery is owned by the growers but the winery was not satisfied with the grape quality and so they needed someone to come in and set some standards, basically do some
education. Say something like, “You the growers are the owners of this winery. If you want this winery to make this kind of wine, this is the way your grapes need to be. And in order to get the grapes that way, these are some of the initiatives that need to be taken.” And I was working within the winery with a viticulturist who’s brilliant at working with people and developing systems for quality control and monitoring and communications and all the things you need to do to tie the vineyard and the winery together. So that was my first job there.

Now I’m doing more consulting on the winemaking and most particularly blending a particular wine with a winemaker that comes out probably every other year. So have I given you the range of types of activities?

I think so. And now I’d like a little more detail. So, for example, this project in Israel: You had mentioned working to tie the vineyard and the winery together. Can you describe for me what that means and maybe some of the problems you found and then what recommendations you would have made for them?

Well, at the time that I started with them, I found that the criteria that they were using for harvesting grapes and the way they were managing their water in their vineyards was leading to grapes that took a long time to get ripe, primarily because they weren’t applying enough water at the correct times so the vines were struggling to ripen the grapes. So the grapes had less ripe flavors, more variable flavors. So what we did was develop a database of information for them to collect on the irrigation management. But at the same time, every time I went there, which is two times a year, I was doing presentations for the growers on what quality grapes look like, what kind of measurements we can take to assess the quality, what the related time, let’s say, would be for Cabernet from bloom to harvest. So if bloom to harvest is normally 120 days and it’s taking 145 days for the grapes to get ripe, that indicates some problems with the vineyards and indeed they did have virus in the vineyards, which makes it much more challenging to manage those vineyards. So in that case my time and attention was focused on particular vineyards. And we still go as a group, I go twice a year, and visit vineyards that they have identified. So I’ll start by tasting the wines from those vineyards from the previous vintage and assessing them. Then we’ll go to visit. And the viticulturist and his assistant will have summarized the performance of that vineyard in many different aspects. We’ll go over them with the grower. This is in the field. Strategize about how to improve the winegrowing for the next year. And you have to understand, this is a really sensitive thing because the people you’re working with are proud of what they’re doing. So you don’t really necessarily want to criticize them. What you want to do is show them the goal and show them ways that we might get there. And I don’t really do a lot of that directly. I’m there but it’s the
winemaker and the viticulturist who work with the vineyard manager have those discussions. And at this point, since I’ve been doing it for quite a while, I’m just there as an observer, essentially thinking, “How is this relationship going? How’s this vineyard developing?” And if I see some red flags I raise them.

Meeker: How many years have you been working with this particular winery?

Long: I think about ten years.

Meeker: Had you worked in Israel before?

Long: Never.

Meeker: So given this is a different part of the world, how long did it take you to learn the terroir in the more scientific definition of it?

Long: Well, I was aided by the fact that the winemaker is an American. He was born and raised in the United States and educated at UC Davis, as were several of the other winemakers there. So there was a very strong technical understanding of winemaking. The understanding early on of winegrowing was something I could bring and then as they begin to develop new vineyards, Phil Freese, my husband, came in as a professional viticulturist to help them establish those vineyards. I found it very easy to work with the Israeli group because they’re highly professional. They produce an amazing range of wines at very high quality levels. They’re the kind of client that you say, “Well, consider doing this.” Let’s say, “Consider keeping this data on the vineyard.” So you come back six months later and they’ve kept that data in more detail than anyone I’ve ever worked with. But then they’ve also said, “Well, maybe if we learned from this, maybe we’ll learn from that.” And so pretty soon you’ve made one suggestion and they’ve taken it in many different directions. Really brilliant people. Really brilliant and really nice people. It’s been a pleasure to work there.

Meeker: What kind of varietals are they working with?

Long: The Golan Heights, it’s kind of like a tilted rectangle and it’s not very big. I’d say maybe fifteen miles wide and thirty miles long. But it’s tilted at the northern end toward the mountains that feed the water down into the Golan Heights and make it an agricultural area. So at the highest elevation the farm is about 3,500 feet and they grow Chardonnay there for sparkling wine and still wine and they grow Pinot Noir and they have some Merlot. And then you
come down a little in elevation, they still have Pinot and they have Syrah on
down to very low elevations where they’re growing Muscat because it’s
warm, down close to the Sea of Galilee, which is below sea level.

06-00:17:10
Meeker: So you had already worked with many of these grape varietals. When you take
consulting jobs does the grape varietal ever play a role in your decision? In
other words, I bet that there—

06-00:17:25
Long: I understand what you’re saying. It hasn’t. For the most part the people that
I’ve been working with are growing within the range of what we would call
sort of common varietals, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnays, some Sangiovese,
Nebbiolo, Syrah. The Bordeaux varietals. And this particular winery in Golan
Heights was also making sparkling wine and dessert wine. But because I’m
not so much focused on a particular process so much as helping the business
be successful—for example, my French client has old Syrah and Grenache. I
had not worked with Grenache before so I basically learned from the
viticulturist and the winemaker the things they’re concerned about in working
with Grenache. But at the same time I know Grenache from a tasting
perspective and so I can taste the wines. Go do barrel-to-barrel tasting,
provide my input on the wines very comfortably.

06-00:18:49
Meeker: One of the things it sounds like you do quite regularly is advise when it comes
to blending. And I assume that that’s different lots of the same grapes and
then also like southern Rhône varietals of many different grapes. How do you
approach consulting around blending?

06-00:19:10
Long: When you’re consulting around blending, the first thing to do is to have an
idea of what your client wants to accomplish in terms of style and what level
of quality they’re working with. I really prefer to consult with people working
at the highest level of quality as a goal because that’s where my expertise is
and that’s where my interest is. A lot of the issues around blending, some of
them are style issues but a lot of them are quality issues. And quality issues to
me would be clarity of fruit. [break in audio] So blending issues regarding
quality have to do with the clarity of the fruit expression. Say the complexity
of the fruit expression. When you’re blending you hope for some complexity.
The balancing effects of the different grapes. The harmony that you want to
accomplish. The consistency through the palate. Having a nice finish. In other
words, you want wine to have a long finish, and have flavor in the finish
rather than an acidity or astringency that interferes with the flavor expression.
And you want to have intensity of flavor. So you’re looking at these as the
components of a blend that in a sense are not driven so much by the grape
variety but driven by how the components come together and what you have
to work with.
Meeker: Rather than guess it, why don’t I ask you. How do people express what it is that they want to you? Are they using metaphors to compare, to say, “Listen, I want a Pauillac,” or something like that? Or, “I want a Meritage” or something? How is it that they’re expressing their desires for what they want their wine to be like to you?

Long: Well, one example would be a client I worked with in eastern Washington. This young couple that were starting up. And she was very clear that she wanted a Chardonnay that was not heavily oaked comma with a fruit expression that would come up in a very expressive manner. And it wouldn’t have a lot of oak impression that was obvious in any way. That’s a pretty clear direction.

I would say in the project I’m doing with blending a Bordeaux/Syrah blend in Israel, the winemaker, Victor Schoenfeld, is very experienced, very sophisticated, has a great palate. In a way, the way it evolved was he identified the wines that were available for the blend. I do several initial blends and he comes in and tastes them and provides his input. So it’s a system that, rather than having a description, has an evolution in the process.

Now, when I made wine at Simi we actually did written descriptions for our wines, what we wanted in the visual aspects of the wine, in the aromatics, in the palate. And that was useful for me at the time. It was useful in working with different winemakers, which I often have, of getting people to try to be more specific in what they want to achieve, and it was useful from a communications perspective. But I haven’t used that method in the Golan Heights project. Excuse me, one more thing, Martin. I think in that particular project the direction was to produce a wine at the very highest level of quality from the grapes that they had. So that was a clear direction.

Meeker: So the direction wasn’t, “Listen, I want something that’s more Merlot based or cab based.” It was, “This is the raw material you have to work with.”

Long: Right.

Meeker: Has that changed over the years or have the blends been fairly constant in this example?

Long: Well, the blends are of Cabernet, Syrah, and Merlot. That’s always been a constant. But the relative proportions have changed depending on the success of the vintages with those different varieties and they’ve also been planting vineyards and adding vineyards. So the source of the wine has evolved.
Meeker: So that’s an interesting blend. It’s not a conventional French blend. I guess back in the old days they used to “hermitage,” I think, Bordeaux by putting Syrah in it and then there’s a kind of well-known cult wine from Provence that’s cab and Syrah [Domaine de Trevallon]. So it’s not unheard of. But how do you approach a wine like that that doesn’t necessarily have an old world benchmark?

Long: It’s just what I described to you. The winemaker knows his wines very, very well. He knows the vintage, the wines that he thinks are good candidates. It’s usually eighteen or twenty different wines. And then I basically go through and taste each of them. I let them sit overnight. I come back and taste them again. Because I want to establish the concentration or the durability of the wine. Like in that eighteen or twenty some will disappear and others will come forward and then it takes me usually a week, which means every day spending half a day putting together four or five blends, then tasting them with the winemaker, thinking these are strengths and weaknesses, this is our favorite, and moving forward.

Meeker: When you’re doing the blending process and tasting, does food ever come into the equation?

Long: No.

Meeker: Do you have any experience or thoughts on more radical blending approaches? I’m thinking of like Sean Thackrey’s wines out here in Marin County where he’s—

Long: You mean blending more unusual combinations?

Meeker: Correct.

Long: I think that’s fine. It’s innovation. Innovation in whatever endeavor we’re doing I support. I think I’ve said this before but I believe that our taste sense is one of the undeveloped senses in our human repertoire. Visually it’s very developed, aurally it is very developed. Taste is not yet particularly developed, not fully appreciated, not fully distinguished. And so if you have wines that can bring a different palate of flavors and you can make that work commercially, I think that’s fantastic, especially if you can communicate it and if it has response from your customers.
Meeker: This point that you make around commercial viability of wines. Do you see that really as one and the same as high quality?

Long: No, I don’t see commercial viability and high quality as one and the same. When I say high quality I mean wines that I think are at the top level of wines from around the world with regards to balance, harmony, concentration, complexity, and longevity. But you can have good quality wines at many different levels of price point.

Meeker: Okay. So I see what you’re saying.

Long: I think I didn’t probably completely answer that question.

Meeker: Well, maybe another way to ask it is public wine preferences, based on wines that seem to sell well, versus personal wine preferences. How does that, or does it, play a role in the consulting process?

Long: First of all, just from a viability standpoint, whatever business you start-up has to live in order for you to be able to do the work you do. So the customer response to what you’re making is critical but it can really be supported by outreach and communication. If the wine product is essentially good, it has a good flavor, it’s balanced, it’s not unpleasant in any way, and I think that unusual combinations, new techniques, new areas tend to most easily emerge from small initiatives because you’re not risking a lot. You’re making maybe two barrels of something or a new blend and seeing how it works. A winery that has large volumes of products can’t take those kinds of risks except in a research or experimental basis. So I’ve seen a lot of interesting developments emerge from small businesses.

Meeker: Have you been in situations, consulting situations, where the owner of the winery is wanting a commercially viable wine that may not be the kind of wine that you think is—it may have quality but it may not be the kind of wine you’d like to drink? How do you respond in situations like that?

Long: Well, I choose my clients. I choose my clients as people who are making the kinds of wines that I want to be involved in is the simple answer. But also, in many of my consulting experiences, I was there more to support what they wanted or to support their winemaker or solve their issues rather than drive their style. So if someone wants a certain style and I’m consulting for them I see it as my job to help them accomplish it. My choice is whether to work with people or not and I tend to work with people who have high aspirations
and the resources, human, financial, persistence, willingness to persist through difficult times to accomplish those goals.

Meeker: In Israel are there particular issues around the site itself that were very much different than, for instance, what you encountered here in California that you learned over the period of time of your working with them?

Long: You mean the terroir issues?

Meeker: Correct.

Long: As opposed to political issues. [laughter]

Meeker: Political issues are interesting questions. You can certainly add to that and we’ll certainly talk about that in South Africa around the regulatory environment, which I know is different down there. But yeah. Maybe start with terroir and if there’s anything else.

Long: Well, the terroir is actually really interesting because the Jordan Valley, which separates the Galilee, what they call the Galilee and the Golan Heights, which are both sources of wine, of grapes, that valley is an extension of the Great Rift Valley that’s in Africa. It’s a major fault between two plates. So on both sides of it you have completely different soils. On the Galilee side you have these old red clay loam soils that are gorgeous. On the Golan Heights side you have volcanic soils because that whole area was volcanically evolved. They’re both good soils. They’re just quite different.

Meeker: And are they growing grapes in both of those different terroirs?


Meeker: How do you deal with those? I guess you’ve dealt with volcanic soils obviously in Napa but these other soils I think are not familiar to California.

Long: Well, in a sense I don’t deal with the soils, I deal with the grapes primarily. My role would be, for example, if I see a winery that hasn’t done soil studies, to suggest that they do soil studies so they know the nature of their soils. And that’s something that Phil has done with the Israeli people and found that some of the assumptions they were making in certain sites—there were some sites that had a lot of volcanic rock. And the assumptions the growers were
making weren’t really consistent with the realities of the soils once they got in with a backhoe and dug a hole three feet deep. But that’s the same thing that happened in Napa and Sonoma twenty years ago. I remember this. People would call in Deborah Elliot-Fisk for an explanation of why a certain area in the vineyard was not doing well and so she would go in and dig and it was because it was so rocky the vines could hardly get any—well, let’s put it a different way. It was a very rocky area and the vineyard was being provided with water for most of what was loam and so the plants in the rocky areas really didn’t have enough water so they weren’t prospering. It took us a long time to really start to look at the soil.

Meeker: You had mentioned your husband Phil Freese. He’s also a consultant but more on the viticulture side.

Long: Correct.

Meeker: When you met he was working at Mondavi?

Long: I met him when I was working at Mondavi. Phil is a PhD biochemist who grew up on a farm swearing he would never be in agriculture again. So after he graduated with his PhD he went to work for a friend of his who was farming large acreage of grapes for Robert Mondavi. So he was first a grape supplier. When I moved to Simi he left farming and moved into the viticulture position at Robert Mondavi. But he doesn’t see himself as a grape grower. He sees himself as a winegrower, which is really the proper way to look at it if you’re making fine wines. It all goes back to the vineyard. Whatever choices you make in the vineyard will impact the grapes and their chemistry and what they can produce in the wine. So he usually doesn’t work for vineyards. He works for wineries who want to make changes in their wines. In the case of our Israeli client, he’s also had an extensive history of developing new vineyards, so they needed some technical input in their vineyard development.

Meeker: You two married in 1989? Is that right?

Long: Nineteen ninety.

Meeker: Nineteen ninety. And how closely do you work together? Because it sounds like he’s doing viticulture/winegrowing, you’re doing winemaking. It seems like a great partnership.

Long: It is a great partnership. And one of the reasons that we did the Vilafonté project is because we wanted to take our mutual expertise and invest it in
something that was truly ours. And we wanted to start with a clean slate, which was a piece of land that hadn’t been developed.

[break in audio]

06-00:37:45
Meeker: Let’s just do the introduction to South Africa because I know that the story begins well before 1997, when you actually buy property. So can you tell me your first introduction to the wines of South Africa?

06-00:38:05
Long: I was invited by letter in 1990 to come to South Africa to speak to the Cape Estate winegrowers. I didn’t realize it at the time but prior to that, during the eighties, I had been visited by a group of South African winemakers—as I did normally at Simi, I hosted and did a tasting and did the professional hospitality for them. But apparently, because that was still the era of apartheid, apparently they had had some very poor experiences with visiting wineries and so they remembered their time with me and at Simi in a favorable way. And they wanted to get more expertise in use of barrels. So they invited me specifically to talk about the use of barrels in winemaking.

Now, at that time Phil and I were engaged and we talked about this journey and decided we would want to go together and take some time to spend in South Africa because neither of us had ever been on the African continent. Phil at that time was the chief winegrower for Robert Mondavi.

So when they discovered he was coming the invitation extended to include both of us and we ended up doing a full-day seminar for the industry there, for the winemakers and winegrowers there. And then they sent us to three different parts of the Cape wine country to stay with people and to provide a day in each place for winemakers to bring in their wines for us to taste and to discuss whatever it was that was there to discuss. So we just had this fantastic opportunity to taste a lot of wines, to meet a lot of people, to see a lot of the traditional winegrowing region there. That was how it started.

06-00:40:20
Meeker: You didn’t have any misgivings about going to South Africa at that point in time?

06-00:40:24
Long: We didn’t. For us it was Africa. New continent. We weren’t afraid. Apartheid was a terrible thing. It’s a long trip to fly to South Africa. By the time we got there we were very tired. Our host picked us up at the small airport in Cape Town. We were in our own car following him on the freeway, driving on the opposite side of the road to what we were used to, and he took us to this hotel in the wine country and sat down and wanted to chat with us. We’re like just barely awake. And so the first thing he said was, “What do you think about South Africa and apartheid?” He was a wonderful man. Jewish. He was a
Lithuanian Jew whose father or grandfather had immigrated to South Africa. And he actually employed blacks as managers at that time, which no one did. He was just one of those people that was an extraordinary leader, that I felt privileged to know. This was Sydney Back. But I still remember that first question.

I think the specific conditions, political conditions, at the time we were there we didn’t see very many black people. They were kind of like hidden. The ones we saw were quiet. But our focus was the wine industry and to help them and we just ended up thinking what a beautiful country for making great wines because of the diversity. It’s a different kind of diversity than what we have here in Sonoma but it is the same nature of extreme diversity of soils and climates, geography and geology. That was how it started.

I went back again I think one more time before apartheid ended and then one more time after 1994. Then we were approached to do a project there. And I feel grateful that I had seen South Africa from the time it was in apartheid to now because I’ve seen this amazing emergence of people.

06-00:43:25
Meeker: Did you also have an interest in indigenous arts there? Is that one of the motivations to go there at that point?

06-00:43:34
Long: Interest in indigenous arts was not a motivation to go there. The first motivation was just Africa, curiosity. And then the return was a serious interest in the area for growing fine wines. The investment took place in ’97, which was post-apartheid. And we wouldn’t have invested if that hadn’t changed.

06-00:44:08
Meeker: Had you tasted any South Africans wines prior to going there? Did you know anything about the industry there?

06-00:44:16
Long: I didn’t. I hadn’t tasted any. And even getting books on South Africa at that time was hard. There were I think only two books that we could find anywhere for sale that talked about South Africa. It was just like a taboo. It just didn’t exist. And I’ll have to say that the people there that I talked to have said that the embargo that was imposed on South Africa, the economic embargo by the United States and other countries, really brought the political system to its knees and that it was an important part of getting the changes that came.

06-00:45:01
Meeker: You had mentioned this winemaker, Sydney Back, asking you what you had thought of South Africa and apartheid. Do you remember how you responded?
I don’t. I don’t remember the details of the conversation but what I remember was his comments. That I felt that he was an individual who was managing in a moral way in an immoral environment.

And that became obvious fairly quickly?

Yeah.

When you went there during this first trip you said that you went to three different winegrowing regions. What were those?

Well, Stellenbosch was one. Then we went into the southern coastal regions, which were fairly new to winegrowing, and then we went back over the mountains to an area, Robertson, that had much less ocean influence. So Stellenbosch was the heart of traditional winemaking at that time. So those were three very different environments.

What were your initial impressions of each of those areas? Perhaps through the lens of their potential.

It’s a challenging question to answer. My impressions were driven at that time by two things. One were the wines themselves and no matter where they came from we tasted enough wines that had the flavor intensity or the balance -for what I consider fine quality attributes that made me think that those kinds of wines could be grown there. We were able to see some of the vineyards and some of the soils so I think we immediately realized that the soils were very different from what we had worked with. And because of the different geography we just realized that there was a great variability in what we would call the terroirs of that area. That was what made it so interesting to us. Quality of wines and really interesting geography and geology.

I guess maybe we could go into each of those areas a little bit more. So quality of wines. I understand at the time, I think it was Chenin Blanc that was the most widely grown grape, red or white. And there were certainly Cabernet and other French varietals but not nearly as widely planted as they are today. What kind of wines were you tasting? What did you like about them?

At the time that we came to South Africa in 1990, we were seeing the people who were the innovators. They were the people that wanted to reach out and get more information. So we were tasting some Chardonnays. But Chardonnay just had started to be developed in the late 1980s. So that was
new for them. Bordeaux varietals were traditional and we were seeing those. And my assessment of the Bordeaux varietals at the time is that they have promise but I didn’t really taste any of them that I thought were fabulous. What I tasted and what I saw in the geography and in the soils made me feel like you could make fantastic wines there. But the wine that really caught our attention was the Sauvignon Blanc because there was a lot of Sauvignon Blanc planted and it was so beautiful, so perfumed, so elegant in a way that I didn’t see in California. It reminded me really of the Sauvignon Blanc of the Loire. Beautiful wines. And that more than anything made us feel that the Cape of South Africa was not a hot climate because you don’t grow those kinds of wines in a hot climate. And that’s what made it interesting.

Meeker: And the soils. The soils, from what I understand, particularly the Stellenbosch area, I don’t know about much of the rest of the country, but unlike California and the rest of the West Coast they’re very ancient soils in Stellenbosch.

Long: They’re very ancient and they’re very different. Decomposed granite is a fairly common soil. Our vineyard is very, very old decomposed sandstone. There’s some decomposed granite vineyards that you go into that you can see actually it’s like granite just fell apart and left little particles. But ours is really almost like a clay that has very tiny stones in it to a different proportion in different parts of the vineyard. So the soil that we have is not like anything we’ve worked with. The decomposed sandstone and granite is not like anything we’ve worked with. In the valley floors there are quite a few sandy soils, which we don’t have, that I’ve seen in Australia.

Meeker: What was it about these soils that seemed interesting or promising as opposed to a potential nightmare?

Long: For Phil, that they were not good soils in a traditional agricultural perspective, but good for wine grapes, because what he wanted to do is to grow small vines. A lot of time in California we spent trying to control vigor, so that the vine is balanced enough so the fruit has enough light and is properly balanced with the leaf structure. He felt in those soils, because they were old and they were really poor soils in a nutritional sense, that you could put close spaced vines in the area that we were working and you wouldn’t have to deal with vigor. And he was right. We did have a closed space vineyard. We do. And the vines don’t need the kind of trimming that we do here in California. But it wasn’t the kind of soil that the South Africans thought was optimal because they wanted more agricultural soils for their vineyards.

Meeker: It’s something that’s interesting. The idea of good soils doesn’t apply for good winegrowing typically. In this book that you recommended that, I read, the
fluvial soils, the riverside soils in Napa, there’s too much vigor, as you said, and doesn’t put enough energy into the grapes themselves. And so it sounds like they were doing this in South Africa, as well.

It’s common. It’s common. When an agricultural area goes from traditional agriculture, fruit or vegetables, into viticulture, they often take that mindset with them. I saw this happen in eastern Washington in the Yakima Valley. And so all of a sudden they’re growing big vigorous vines that have huge canopies, hard to control. All kinds of problems. But once an area develops the viticulture profession they tend to move away from that. But South Africa, which was an old grape growing country, they were growing—some of those wineries have been producing for 300 years consistently. They were still in the mode of better soils are better for vineyards and we’re in the mode of we would like weaker soils for our vineyards.

What was the shape of the actual winemaking facilities on those first visits?

They were primarily old. There wasn’t a lot of investment going on in the wine business at that time because the economic times were difficult. That was during apartheid. So they were very minimal compared to what we would consider an optimum winery.

Can you give me a little more information on what that would look like then?

Well, they didn’t have the best barrels if they were using barrels. They didn’t have the best sanitary conditions. They didn’t have what we would consider good quality pumps. They were just having to economize and cut corners. And also they didn’t have the vision for sort of a modern winery that—even if you’re working in the simplest most natural way you still want to have—whatever it is you’re working with, you want it to be the best. And I mean the best in the way it affects the fruit. So, for example, which they were doing, fermenting Sauvignon Blanc in stainless steel tanks, you want to have temperature control. Well, they did have temperature control but one of the things that were missing was what I would call good quality control analysis. Simple laboratory analysis that we do all the time, we don’t think much of it. But it’s just basic. It didn’t really exist there as basic. So it was relatively primitive compared to what I was used to in California.

Did you come across many winemaking techniques that you felt like were leftover from that 300-year history that perhaps never even took hold in the US?
I don’t know because I never really thought of it like that. I would observe a winery but I wouldn’t think about the history of the technique. There was a considerable amount of brandy production in South Africa, both because they can make really great brandy and because some of the wine production didn’t sell and then it would be distilled into brandy.

One more question. I don’t know much at all about food culture in South Africa. Do you remember what the food culture was like when you first arrived there and the degree to which wine was part of that?

Well, the food culture in South Africa’s really fascinating because there are all of these different cultures. There are the traditional African cultures bringing their food. There are a significant number of people from India, so you have a lot of Indian food and Malaysia. Then you have the Afrikaners who are bringing traditional Dutch type of dishes and the British. It’s a great food culture. Very complex. But it wasn’t as highly developed at that time as it is now for the same reasons. There wasn’t much money in the economy to do anything. But now all of that history that was there, all of those cultural food traditions, existed at that time. But now they’ve been pulled forward and expanded and developed and showcased in a way that’s pretty fantastic.

I would say to me the foods were simple and straightforward. Where we ate, we tended to eat in restaurants. Their fresh food and vegetables are fabulous. Much better fresh food than we have here in the United States. More flavorful. But now even the richness and complexity of the food has developed dramatically and is wonderful.

Was there a wine culture at these restaurants when you ate out?

Yes, there was. Yeah. I think wine, in fact, at that time seemed to be more integrated into their culture than it was in 1970 here in the United States when I started working in wine.
Today is the 12th of December 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long, session number four, tape number seven. So when we wrapped up just a few days ago, on Tuesday, you had told me about your first visits to South Africa and your first really encounter with their wines, with the winemakers, with the terroir. And I want to get into, of course, your decision to get property down there, plant grapes, start your own winemaking operation. But before we do that there was this other project that I want to ask you about that was in Germany that was about the same time that you had already committed to South Africa. But South Africa’s a bigger story so let’s put that on ice for a second. I want to ask about this German project. This was also in partnership with your husband, Phil, and it was to produce a Riesling, correct, in Germany?

Correct, yeah.

What was the impetus to do this project?

I think the big picture impetus is that Phil and I having, in our respective careers, traveled quite a bit of the wine world and worked in Napa and Sonoma. Thought, “Oh, it would be fun to work somewhere else. It’s an adventure. There’s different cultures, different soils, different climates, different varieties.” And I think probably if we were several people we’d work in many different locations, which some people do now. But while I was at Simi I hired a woman to direct our lab operations for several years, Dr. Monika Christmann. And Monika had graduated from Geisenheim University on the Rhine in Germany, which is Germany’s top wine university. And she had what would be the equivalent to a PhD. She’s very sophisticated, very proficient, and at the same time our winemaker was from New Zealand. So it was a fun, really high level group that they led at Simi.

And so Monika and I had always talked about doing a project together. And I had been to Germany many, many years ago and loved Riesling and I thought, “That would be really interesting to make great Riesling,” and Monika had connections in Germany because when she left Simi and went back she became a professor at Geisenheim. Very prestigious position.

What was her field?

Enology. And so Geisenheim is an enology and viticulture university and research station. Obviously other disciplines too but that’s a major one. So we
talked about it. And she had some friends that had a winery in the Nahe and they had several parcels scattered around. And so we spoke with them and they agreed to let us harvest four acres total in three parcels. And it was so interesting because the parcels, each was very distinctive. One of them was that classic very steep hillside where you’re—not probably as steep as Mosel, where you really can’t walk up it. But at least this one you had a tendency to hang on the vineyard post while you’re going up the hill. It was amazing. So we started that partnership. This was Monika and Phil and I and the facilitating winemaker who was not actually a partner but from whom we purchased the grapes and leased the use of his winery.

Meeker: What winery was that?

Long: Landgoed Dr. Hofer, in the Nahe appellation. That’s an important question. The winery was a fairly simple winery, I think as most of the small wineries in Germany are. It was a family run winery. Family managed vineyards. It was such an incredible experience from a technical perspective. We went there early in the year around bloom and looked at the vineyards and Phil made some recommendations about some ways to manage particularly a couple of vineyards. But we didn’t make a lot of changes in the vineyards because we didn’t know them very well.

But what struck me then and still strikes me is the grapes came in at about twenty-one Brix, which is low for here, but it was actually what’s called Auslese level there, which is a very solid level. And with regards to the three sites we worked with, Monika told us in Germany, historically, going back over a hundred years, they taxed parcels of land based on their quality. So the idea is the better quality, the more money you get for the wine, the more tax. So the three parcels we worked with were some of the highest taxed parcels. So they were historically very fine vineyards.

Meeker: Did the vineyards themselves have names?

Long: Yes. [detail added during the editing process] They were Bretzenheimer Pastorie (.9 acre); Winzenheimer Rosenheck (1.25 acre) and Dorsheimer Goldloch (1.75 acre). They each contributed something special: the Bretzenheimer, rich texture and deep structure; the Winzenheimer tight, racy acidity, and the Goldloch, structure and floral/white peach aromas. They were in different locations but all in the Nahe appellation.

So at any rate, one of the other things that I remember is we asked Monika, “When do you think the grapes will be ripe?” because we wanted to be there at harvest. She said, “Well, in that area the hundred-year average for harvest is October 21st.” And if you just stop and think of the historical nature of that
statement. It’s extraordinary. The grapes came in. They were dumped directly into the press, pressed, the juice went into a concrete tank, settled overnight. There was nothing fancy about this. It got racked into some stainless tanks that were in the cave. I believe we added yeast and the fermentation started and they went on until they stopped. So we didn’t try to stop. We didn’t really impose much on this juice. And it just turned out to be so fabulous.

What we had decided strategically, however, which in retrospect was a mistake, was to blend these vineyards because we thought each of them had something to give, which was true. One was particularly aromatic. Another one had a richness but not so much aroma. So they really came together very beautifully. So from a winemaking perspective that was a good decision. From a sales and marketing perspective it was not because you buy German, fine German Riesling, by the vineyard site. So that was one of the strategic decisions we made that impacted our business down the line.

07-00:09:24
Meeker: So it could only be sold as the appellation as opposed to the vineyard designate?

07-00:09:28
Long: Right, yeah. We realized working there that Riesling is so extraordinarily suited to that climate. We were very close to fifty degrees north latitude.

07-00:09:47
Meeker: Yeah. And that’s about the northern reach of grape vines.

07-00:09:49
Long: Right. But we realized as a result what these grapes experienced was a very long sunlit summer and cool temperatures. So that’s an unusual combination. A lot of sun but cool temperatures. And when October 21st—I don’t remember, we probably didn’t pick exactly on that day but it was pretty close—came around, the grapes were ripe in some of our perspective. They were still green in color but they were soft, they had nice flavors. But if those grapes had been translated to California they wouldn’t have been “obviously” ripe. So we harvested and they made this just totally delicious juice and wine.

07-00:10:47
Meeker: Did you ferment dry?

07-00:10:47
Long: We didn’t because we didn’t have any technical means to stop the fermentation. The fermentation stopped itself. And we didn’t really want to interfere with that. And I believe we had about 1.8% residual sugar in that wine, which, as it turned out, was not very appropriate for an Auslese level, too low.
Is that typical for how German Rieslings and Gewürztraminers get made? I guess my presumption would be that the winemaker goes in and says that, “This lot is going to be fermented dry. This lot is going to be a one or a two percent residual sugar.” Or is it just Mother Nature that makes those decisions for you?

Well, in this case it was definitely Mother Nature.

Interesting.

I would suspect that any large winery in Germany would be more directive. And I also suspect that the small wineries are pretty much set up the way this one was. Very simple. And of all the places I’ve been and wines I’ve made, that came the closest to totally hands-off winemaking. It was just bring the grapes in, squeeze the juice out of the grapes, let some of the grape solids settle, and then let nature take its course. And it was beautiful.

The process of working with vineyards, the observations we made about the terroir, the quality of the wines was just such a rich experience for us. But then we ran into some other things, like marketing strategy. The other thing that I still remember, and I shake my head about, is, well, two things. One is that when the juice comes in you have from a regulatory perspective, you have to take it into a government lab and they tell you what the Brix level is and therefore what the designated level is. So the level of our juice, three juices, were all Auslese. So I of course thought you could label the wine Auslese, right. Wrong. [laughter] Turns out that in every part of Germany there’s a little local group that tastes the wine and decides if it’s really, in our case, Auslese. And I think ours slipped up because it wasn’t sweet enough.

Well, I’ve heard about this. There’s some pretty famous recent cases in Bordeaux where wine becomes declassified from very well-known appellations because one of these panels decides that it is not a typical representation of what the wine from that region should be like, even if all of the typical processes are followed and the grapes are coming from the same place. And so you were subjected to that as well?

Yes. And I’ve seen that in several places. It’s often the case when there’s an evolution in wine style or a change. So you have an older body with older criteria meeting new thinking. But we were Kabinett was our wine. So that was one lesson. The second lesson was labeling. We named the wine Sybil and we’d named it after a woman who was called the Sybil of the Rhine and she lived in the twelfth century and was a very powerful woman. She established monasteries. She wrote music. She started health regimes with
food and so we called the wine Sybil. Her name was St. Hildegard of Bingen, (1098 to 1179 A.D.). And then on the back label we wrote something about “this is why we are calling it Sybil” and it was relevant to the area and I don’t remember what else we said. And so it went through the approval process. It was approved. There’s a regulatory individual in each little section of the wine country. So after the label was approved the regulatory person moved to another area and a new person came in. Two days before we were going to bottle and label the wine the new regulatory person comes to the winery and says, “If you put that label on that bottle I will close down your winery.”

07-00:16:06
Meeker: Was a reason given?

07-00:16:10
Long: The label was improper because it’s only supposed to talk about the wine and it was talking about this Sybil of the Rhine. Of course, it had already been approved but then it was disapproved. Fortunately Monika is well placed in the German wine structure so we had a meeting subsequently when we were over there. So Monika and myself and this individual who had denied the label, the individual who had originally approved it, both of their supervisors and then the next level up, I think we got up to the top of the regulatory structure in this meeting. And, of course, there were eight or ten people around the table. They were all speaking German. I didn’t really have a clue what was going on. But the end result was that they let us use the label, the sort of use up system. They let us use the label that year and then we had to change the back label. So those are basically two cultural things that we didn’t anticipate.

07-00:17:31
Meeker: Did you get a sense that it had something to do with you being foreigners coming in and perhaps they were trying to guard against an American influence in the area?

07-00:17:46
Long: I never had that sense. The German wine law is highly regulated and very detailed and I think it was one person made one kind of interpretation and another person made another kind of interpretation.

07-00:18:07
Meeker: And it’s probably the case that most German winemakers would just know to not do something like that.

07-00:18:15
Long: Oh, yes. Just like here. We have a lot of regulations. As you work as a professional you know those things. But we don’t have, for example, a group that approves our wine style in California, thank goodness.

[break in recording]
Well, I was talking about the labeling issue and you had asked me if I thought it was related to being an American and I was saying, “No, regulations are different.” I’m ready to go on and just talk about what happened with that project.

07-00:19:09
Meeker: What was the production level?

07-00:19:12
Long: It was tiny. A thousand cases. Yeah. Four acres you don’t make a lot of wine.

07-00:19:17
Meeker: Did you need to make a pretty substantial investment? Were you putting your finances on the line to a certain extent in a project like this?

07-00:19:29
Long: It was an important investment. In fact, it was a huge investment because we were buying the grapes and leasing the winery and our labor for both of us was not compensated. What ultimately killed the project and what was expensive was marketing. I look back and think I should have known better than to do this project. But the wine was destined for the United States. I was the person to market it. And as we have experienced also with South Africa, when you’re paying an importer, distributor, retailer indirectly, you’re not making a big margin. And Riesling isn’t a high priced varietal. So there wasn’t enough margin to really support the kind of marketing that it took to establish Sybil. If I had had a larger winery and other products so it would just piggyback onto it, it would have been different. But it was not practical to do that. So we made three vintages and then shut the project down. So it was disappointing.

07-00:20:57
Meeker: Well, I imagine marketing for a small operation like that, you said a thousand cases, has got to be difficult because I imagine retailers like BevMo!, for instance, aren’t going to be interested in something that’s so small because they’re about moving units. Or Trader Joe’s, for that matter, right? The only other option then would be higher-end retailers who are going to be less interested probably in taking a risk on something new, even if it has a good imprimatur.

07-00:21:44
Long: Even if you have retailers you have to get to them. And we started a direct mail program which ended up being more expensive than the wines we were able to sell through that.

07-00:22:03
Meeker: What was the price point?

07-00:22:07
Long: You know, that’s a very good question. I think it was maybe thirty-five dollars. It wasn’t cheap.
Meeker: There are trends in different varietals that come up, particularly around red grapes. Obviously the 1970s and eighties Cabernet was huge. I remember a time in the early nineties that Merlot was the next big thing. And then Pinot Noir, right. This is at the sort of meta level, right. This is not the level necessarily of people who know wine really well but this is a much broader public. There’s always been this kind of love of Riesling by people who know a lot about wine and it seems like there’s this anticipation that Riesling will be the next big thing at some point in time but it never really gets there. Did you think that Riesling had the potential of being a much broader appeal grape?

Long: Not necessarily. What I thought was that by making a very high quality Riesling and with Monika’s knowledge of Germany and able to access grapes and my knowledge of the US market, that we could sell a small amount profitably. And it was really the cost of marketing. Just simple stuff. Traveling. Any kind of travel. It’s the same problem actually that South Africans have in the United States. Because in that case, because of the rate of exchange, it’s very expensive for them to market here.

Back to the subject of Rieslings. I think the thing that fascinated me was that the Riesling made in Germany, it’s really unique. So there’s some very nice Riesling made in Australia, some lovely Riesling made in Washington. We made some wonderful Riesling at Long Vineyard. So there’s Canadian Riesling. But Germany just has that combination of sunlight and temperature and soils, I think, that produces incredible floral character that I don’t see anywhere else in the world. Other Rieslings I love and I enjoy but German Riesling is really special. And I’ve been doing winemaking for forty-five years and I haven’t seen any move—just as you’ve said. I haven’t seen any big move toward Riesling being the popular grape.

Meeker: Were you not able to sell all the wine that you produced or did that—

Long: We were able to sell it. It just cost more to sell it than we got in revenue.

Meeker: Okay. Is there anything else you want to say about that particular project? I guess one of the things that I read about it was one of the reasons you did it was you wanted to learn about how to work with the same variety in a couple of different very distinct location or terroir. What did you learn about that?

Long: Well, I had worked with Riesling for years in Napa Valley and I pretty much have detailed what I learned. But that German microclimate there is really a unique climate. And that those grapes are uniquely adapted to that climate. So in the short growing season, but the long sunlight and the cool temperatures,
they’re actually able to ripen the grapes in conditions I think many other grape varieties would not be able to ripen.

Meeker: This book that I’ve been reading, I think that you recommended I read, it’s *The Winemaker’s Dance*, it’s about the terroir of Napa Valley. It’s a really interesting book. The description of geology is very well done and quite interesting. But still I feel like there’s this inability of the authors basically to closely and with good evidence link the geology, soils, the terroir to how it actually impacts wine. And it’s still hypothetical, I think. Do you feel like that project, where you’re working a couple of very distinct sites that resulted in different kinds of wines, did you get a sense of how the different terroir were actually influencing the wines in different ways?

Long: You’re posing a question is how would I read it, how was it happening? What I’ve seen hundreds of times through my winemaking life is that there is a distinct difference. I don’t know exactly why that happens. We know that the sites are very different. But even in our vineyards in Vilafonté we have one hectare blocks that we harvest and vinify and age separately of the same grape planted at the same time. Same clone, same root stock, right next to each other. They make different wines. Year after year the personality of those blocks is different. So you know that that has to be the soil. And we’re talking about an area that has a slight slope. I have heard people say there’s no such thing as terroir. I know there’s an enormous impact of terroir on the expression of the grape.

And I don’t know if we talked about it before but when I was at Simi we did a research project at Phelps with Cabernet Franc. We weren’t looking at different terroirs, we were looking at different management techniques. And in this case it was just application of water in different ways. We made totally different wines. And I’m sure all of our food stuffs are really sensitive to their environment. How that works remains to be known.

Meeker: So we have evidence but we don’t necessarily have the equation.

Long: The mechanism. At Simi we had two quite different sites. One up at the top of the hill had red soils, which are very old soils, quite deep. And not rich but not poor. Somewhere in between. The vines there were pretty good sized. In other words, the soils combined with the rainfall had the ability to give a lot of canopy growth in the spring. And if the summer wasn’t too hot there was enough water in the soil to carry the vines clear through the season. On the same site but lower down on the hill was a very rocky area where there wasn’t enough dirt to have enough water holding capacity to carry the vines through the summer. And so they had smaller canopies. Now, just a difference in canopy density and character can dramatically influence the flavor, color, and
expression of the grapes. So a lot of what we try to do is, say, in a vineyard that’s more vigorous, is to manage the canopy to provide more light in the canopy for the grapes. But you can imagine that absence of that management, just the soil water holding capacity would make a difference in the canopy, which will make a difference in the grapes and the flavor in the wine. So that’s a small example but it’s a known fact, a researched fact.

Meeker: Have you ever developed a methodology whereby all these factors are considered? Almost like a program where you would plug in these different factors to come up with a particular solution to a problem?

Long: I always wanted to be able to do an algorithm for harvest decisions that would take into consideration all the different things that we look at when we make a harvest decision, which I think is possible and maybe somewhere down the line some of these high tech people—I know they’re already coming into the industry and they want to have programs that tell you what to do. It’s not that simple. But with time and data it’s possible to construct. But getting the data, just being able to define the differences in the terroir, because there’s a huge number of different components of terroir that you have to look at. So being able to look at those scientifically to create data around those and then to integrate them into some algorithm is not a simple thing. But very possibly it might happen someday.

Meeker: I could imagine that one would be able to come up with a list of data points, thousands, perhaps. I can’t imagine that it would really ever be possible to learn how to weigh those data points. Which ones are the most important, which ones are the least important, and how to sort of put that into the algorithm?

Long: Well, it’s a very good point because what I’ve seen at harvest is we have several things that we’re looking for in the grape to come together and in a perfect harvest they would all come together at the same time. So you’d have a lot of flavor expressions, soft skins, good tannin ripeness, so on and so forth. But typically they don’t all come together at the same time, so you have to make a decision about what’s the most important. And that can be different from year to year. And when I say a decision about what’s most important what I mean is the ways that these ideals intersect or don’t can be different every year. So you’re always faced with essentially a new or slightly different decision-making structure.

Meeker: In your own approach to this have you developed a consistent way of approaching those different scenarios?
Well, at Simi we followed every vineyard and we did all the basic Brix, acid, and pH. We also looked at sugar per berry. We looked at color. We looked at skin characteristics, thick or thin. We looked at the pulp character, whether it was starting to break down. We looked at seed release, we looked at seed color. So we had quite a list which we’ve continued to refine and add to at Vilafonté.

How then do you determine which of those different data points or factors, in essence, are more important than others?

That’s the question, isn’t it?

It is.

That’s what experience does for you. Because what you have to do, and this is what winegrowing is, is you have to link whatever it is you’ve done, to the outcome. And you learn over time for a particular site what the important criteria are based on the resulting wine. And that’s one of the things that made Phil a winegrower, because when he was at Robert Mondavi he not only was making decisions in the vineyards, he was tasting the wines. Anyone that hasn’t made that linkage I don’t think has the body of knowledge to make a decision. In my work, in Performance there’s something called embodied knowledge and it’s not knowledge that’s written in a text. It’s knowledge that you’ve learned, that you’ve observed, that someone has taught you. It’s a part of you that comes out instinctively and can’t be analyzed. But it’s very different than the classic textual knowledge. And that’s what you develop. That’s what we call experience.

The other thing is that you have different styles. So I mentioned working with the Sangiacomo Chardonnay, where a half-a-dozen winemakers made wine from the same vineyard. And there you have a winemaker making what I would call harvest decisions based on the kind of style they want to make from those grapes.

Well, let’s move on to South Africa. So you had already visited a few times. What compelled you to decide to buy land there? Napa’s pretty packed, Sonoma’s getting even more crowded but there’s still a lot of land in California that’s good winegrowing land. Why go to the other side of the world?

Well, South Africa’s definitely the other side of the world. It’s a sense of adventure. It’s a sense of curiosity. And it was an opportunity. We’d been
there, we’d seen the wines, we’d seen the environment, the physical environment, and so we were confident that we could produce some great wines there. And then there was the opportunity, someone approaching us and saying, “Let’s partner and do it.”

Meeker: Can you tell me about that?

Long: And it was also context, timing. And it was a time when I was winding down my work at Simi and I knew that it was going to take six years until we could get, at the earliest, to releasing a wine. So it was a good time to be looking at buying land and planting a vineyard somewhere. So when people ask why you chose South Africa I say South Africa chose us.

Meeker: Okay. Well, who was this person who initially approached you and what was the proposal?

Long: The person was Michael Back and it was his father that originally approached us to come to South Africa in 1990 and it was his father who we very much admired and enjoyed and respected. And we knew Michael less well but he was carrying on the family tradition and he was interested in partnering. And he had found a couple of sites that were possible. So we just went for it.

Meeker: Can you tell me more about this process?

Long: What specifically are you asking?

Meeker: Well, there’s a lot of different dimensions here. There’s the selection of the land and then the decision of what to do with it. There’s the business arrangement. How was that determined? There’s the decision about what grapes and root stocks.

Meeker: Okay. Well, starting with the selection of the land. We didn’t want to build a winery. Too expensive. And—

Meeker: You mean a physical winery—

Long: Physical winery, yeah. Michael had a facility, he had room for grapes, and he also had staff. He made a very good partner for us; we could come in with some investment and some technical expertise. So it also made sense to work in his area. And like I said, he identified some properties. Phil went to look at
the properties, looked at the soil. And we were interested in doing Bordeaux varietals for the following reasons. Pinotage is the specific grape of South Africa but we had no experience with it and we were not confident that we could do a good job with it. We had seen good Bordeaux varietals in South Africa and we brought a lot of experience. And Phil saw this site and felt it would be very suitable for those grape varieties. So that was the site choice.

The business arrangement, it was a 50/50 investment. And that was relatively straightforward. I believe I said before if we had gone over 50 percent ownership it would have been more complex. We hired an attorney and drew up a contract and made an agreement to start planting. So we started planting in ’98. Phil and I looked at the available plant material and made the decisions of what root stock, primarily his decision, what clone, both of us, percentages of variety, more toward my side because I’m thinking about the wine. And the varieties. Cabernet, Merlot and Cabernet Franc were fairly straightforward decisions. But the Malbec. I had worked with Malbec in Argentina because I had some consulting for Chandon and they had a beautiful hundred year old large vineyard of Malbec and I thought it was really a wonderful grape. But we just put in one-hectare of that. So that was that. Those were the decisions.

Meeker: Why was that particular piece of land deemed to be suitable for Bordeaux varietals?

Long: Soils. Soils. The soils are very, very old and they’re decomposed sandstone and clay and rocks and Merlot and Cabernet Franc work particularly well in soils that have a higher percent of clay and Cabernet works particularly well in soils that have a higher percentage of rocks, more drainage. And the piece of land was a hundred acres. It was pretty much a square. It had a slight bowl-shaped aspect so that there were different aspects on different parts of it, which lends to complexity. It had some different soils, which lend to complexity. It didn’t have any buildings on it except a tractor shed, which means we weren’t paying for something we didn’t want or wouldn’t use. If you’re buying a property that has a farm or a house on it, for example. So we were just buying land. And it hadn’t been planted. So the soils were suitable. The site was suitable from a weather perspective. In that area there’s a big mountain called Simonsberg and one side is the Stellenbosch appellation, on the other side is the Paarl appellation. And as you come down off the mountain there’s an area that’s a long bench, then drops down into the city of Paarl, which is known to be a very warm area. This was on the bench land, which we expected would be a classically good area from a weather perspective. So it just had a lot of good characteristics.

Meeker: So it’s above the town of Paarl?
Above and across the Berg River from Paarl

Okay. Is that an appellation in and of itself?

No. It goes back to the question of appellation reductions. But it’s a different terroir.

Then say a Stellenbosch would be?

Then Stellenbosch? Stellenbosch is on the other side of the mountain and closer to the ocean. So there’s a lot of differences throughout the whole wine country.

At that point in time was there a lot of open arable land to choose from in that area?

I would say my experience is there’s never a lot of choice because your choice is constrained by soil, by size, by some of the characteristics, general location and what your needs are, availability, price. There are always so many variables that impact whether something is just right. But this seemed really well suited for us in many different ways. And what we’re looking for is a complex wine and I think that has proven to be something that that site produces. Even though if you look at it, it looks fairly simple. It’s not. And in general both California and South Africa have much more complicated terroirs and soil structures, for example, then Burgundy or Bordeaux just because of their geological history.

So this property is the property that ended up becoming the property of Vilafonté.

Right.

At this point in time, with that partner, it was originally going to be a different project, correct? Is this the Simunye?

No. From the beginning we named the vineyard business Vilafonté.

Okay. So from the beginning that was the intention, was that name?
That name, those grapes.

Okay. Where did the name come from?

It’s one of the soils of the vineyard.

Oh, it is?

Yeah.

I didn’t know that. Okay. While you were waiting for the grapes to mature, to be harvestable—

Waiting for the vineyard to mature.

The vineyard, yes, I’m sorry. It’s, what, four or five years before you can get a harvest?

Yes. We planted in ’98 and ’99 and 2003 was the first time that we looked at the vineyard and said, “The vines are well-established. They look healthy at a harvest. They’re relatively uniform.” So it was the first year for making Vilafonté wines. Because we were harvesting starting in 2000. So I harvested 2000, 2001, and 2002 and made wines from each block in our partner’s facility. And that was extremely valuable because it allowed me to learn some of the characteristics of those blocks and helped drive the decision about strategically what wines we were going to produce out of them. So that wasn’t wasted time. It was really essential time to learn the vineyard. But we just would sell off the wine in bulk. It also wasn’t a high revenue time. It was waiting. So 2003 was the first year and we made some fabulous wines. It was a really good vintage and the wines are beautiful now. It’s very satisfying.

So eleven years on they’re perhaps entering into the phase that they’re ideal to drink?

Complex, delicious, still fresh.

There was a project, the Simunye project. Can you tell me what that was and how it related to Vilafonté?
When we came to South Africa originally we were very impressed with the Sauvignon Blanc that was produced and I believe I mentioned that it was the clue that told us that South Africa was not in fact, or the Cape was not in fact a hot climate because the aromatic characters of the wine and the elegance of the palate. So we thought during this period while we’re waiting for the vineyard to develop, let’s make and sell some Sauvignon Blanc. So the Simunye was the Sauvignon Blanc project. It didn’t work out particularly for a couple of reasons. That was our first experience about importing into the US and we discovered that at—the Sauvignon price point in the US was not terribly high and we only got about a third of it, so that was hardly worth the work. Secondly, the grapes we were using were from another vineyard and the owner of the vineyard, who is our partner now, but was not at that time, wanted to start a Sauvignon Blanc wine of their own. So the grapes disappeared. There is a lot to be said for owning your own grapes, especially if you want to make really outstanding wines. So it fell by the wayside as our red wines came into production.

And also your partnership with Michael Back also ended, correct?

Yes. Phil and I came to the realization that—this is a fairly standard thing in business partnerships—if you don’t have the same vision it’s not going to work out. Our vision was for a very high-end product. Very high-end wine. Michael felt the same but when it came to implementing what needed to be done it didn’t always correlate with what we felt needed to be done for a high quality project.

The other thing that happened was we were going to outgrow his winery. So he suggested that we invest in the winery to expand it and we didn’t think that was a good business idea because it would be very difficult to disentangle from that. And that’s when we went and made our wine at Tokara, which was a new winery that had been built under the oversight of Giles Webb, a very lovely individual and successful winemaker in South Africa who became Phil’s client.

So before we get to Tokara can you give me some examples of where your vision, or not necessarily your vision, but the path to implement that vision diverged with your other investor? Like what are some of the points of difference? I’m curious.

Well, he wasn’t making really high quality wines in his own facility. The facility we were using wasn't as clean as I thought it should be.

What do you mean by clean?
The facility?

Yeah. That seems sort of obvious, right, but maybe explain that for somebody who doesn’t know much about hygiene and winemaking. How was it not clean and why was that important?

Well, I would start out by saying that the idea of what’s properly clean is kind of an individual one because I’ve been in wineries in Australia that are basically dirt floors and dusty and make incredible wines. But from the standpoint of making wines that are very fresh and very expressive with great clarity of aroma you have to have good sanitation in everything that the wine touches. Now, you can have good sanitation in that way and still have bad sanitation in the rest of the winery but they don’t usually go together. In other words, someone who’s inclined to keep A clean is also inclined to keep B clean. I’m trying to think how to put this. The vision for the way the winery should be was different for our partner and for ourselves. And you also have to realize that Michael Back inherited the winery from his father. He hadn’t ever worked in any other winery. He didn’t have the kind of context that Phil and I had.

Our subsequent partner, Mike Ratcliffe, his mother Norma established their winery and it was a smaller winery. Michael Back had real success financially but Warwick had success financially and with regards to quality. So she established a very high quality standards in the wines. Mike, our partner, grew up in an environment that was more consistent with our vision and I would say probably Michael Back grew up in an environment that was less consistent with our vision.

How was it that you connected with Michael Ratcliffe initially?

Well, when we decided to split up with Michael Back it was a challenging situation because we couldn’t afford to buy him out. He wasn’t willing to establish a price that he would buy from us. So it was a little bit of a stalemate and he made some initiatives to try to help but they weren’t anything that we could agree to. So while we were waiting around to try to come to a decision we thought, “Well, if somehow we were able to develop a partnership to buy out Michael Back, there would be an interim need to manage the vineyard.”

So at that time we ran into Michael Ratcliffe, who by this time was managing his family’s property, and said—and was maybe ten minutes from our vineyards—“In this intermediate period, while we’re deciding where the business is going to go, could you manage the vineyard for us?” And he said, “Yes, I can. And, in fact, I’d like to buy out Michael Back and become your partner.” So that’s how it happened.
Meeker: What year was this?

Long: It was November 2003 that we actually wrote our partnership agreement.

Meeker: So that would have been the year after the first vintage?

Long: Right.

Meeker: But the wine had probably not yet been released, I’m guessing.

Long: No, it hadn’t been blended. It was at Tokara. Because in the meantime, when Michael Back’s winery became full and we couldn’t use it, Phil was able to set up an agreement with Giles Webb, who was managing Tokara, to let us make wine there while their vineyards grew into production. So in the future they wouldn’t have room. So we were able to make our wines, our first four vintages, at Tokara before we moved into our own facility.

Meeker: So none of the Vilafonté label releases were ever produced at Michael Back’s?

Long: That’s correct.

Audio File 8

Meeker: This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long. Today is the 12th of December 2014, session four, tape number eight. You’re bringing all these names up, Michael Back, Michael Ratcliffe, Giles Webb. These are all people who were born in South Africa? Is that correct?

Long: That’s correct.

Meeker: And here you and Phil are, coming from the United States, the other side of the world. How did you present yourself to, in essence, the wine establishment in South Africa?

Long: You have to remember that we were invited to South Africa in 1990 and we gave a full day technical presentation to a good major section of the industry. So we were introduced as technical experts from outside. And this was all under the aegis of Sydney Back, Michael’s father. Sydney Back was a revered
individual in South Africa. So that was probably the most important. And that
time we also visited different areas, talked to the winemakers, tasted their
wines. So we were very fortunate in the sense that in three weeks we got to
see a substantial part of the wine country and the leading people. And then I
returned several times to do judgings. So by the time we started our project we
had accumulated friendships, professional relationships. Phil had started
consulting for several wineries. We slid into the industry.

08-00:02:07
Meeker: And it happens at a time that the country is opening up, as well.

08-00:02:09

08-00:02:14
Meeker: How did you experience that? What was your observation of it? How did it
change?

08-00:02:19
Long: Experience specifically?

08-00:02:21
Meeker: Well, as outsiders who had arrived kind of at the tail end of apartheid and that
ends, it disintegrates. A new republic is basically formed, there’s a new
president.

08-00:02:39
Long: So your question is how did we experience the end of apartheid?

08-00:02:42
Meeker: Yeah.

08-00:02:43
Long: Okay. First thing I’d say is that I felt grateful that we had been there before
the end of apartheid because we were able to see the environment at that time,
which was pretty quiet. South Africa was under severe economic constraints,
although we weren’t super knowledgeable about that at the time. But in
contrast to today. Today South Africa is a bustling economy. And you can see
it. You can see the buildings going up, you can see the truckloads of
everything being shipped around. You can see the cars, you can see the
people. It’s obvious that it’s very different. We wouldn’t have invested in
South Africa if it had continued their apartheid tradition because it was
horrible. The Cape, however, in comparison to the rest of the country, has
always been more liberal and so the people we met—we didn’t see them as
severe racists. We didn’t see that. Which I think was one of the things that
helped make us consider working there. And by the time ’97 rolled around the
environment was very different.
Some people had some trepidation that freedom would have been a big challenge, as well. The political transformation, it could have gone very sour. That would have brought a different kind of element of risk to an investment. Did you ever have any concern about that?

We did. I think South Africa was lucky to have two things. One, of course, was Nelson Mandela, who was such an icon considering what he went through. And Nelson Mandela said publicly, “Don’t rebel. Make this country a great place for your grandchildren.” The other thing was the black community followed his advice. It would have been easy for them to turn on the white community, which was a much smaller part of the population, but they didn’t. Those are the two things that made South Africa be what it is today. And I have great respect for both of those.

Okay. When you arrived there, in particular when Phil was doing consulting work, was the arrangement similar, do you think, as when in the early part of the California wine industry there were French consultants coming to the United States?

Certainly we were early into South Africa, into the wine business there. Even in 1997 it was still a risk but we felt the potential there was so fantastic for wines. And the evolution socially was positive. Our desire was to do something adventurous and interesting and stimulating and hopefully creative. That we would take a chance and do it. We were careful about the amount of money we committed because we felt if something happened we could still manage.

Did you go there with a particular agenda for what you thought South African wines could and should be?

We went there with a particular agenda of what we felt our wines could and should be. It’s really hard to speak on behalf of a country. But what I saw in Napa Valley, and I also saw this in Oregon with Pinot Noir. The French came in, they used the same grapes, they made a better wine. So they brought a palate and not so much winemaking techniques, not in the case of Napa Valley, but more palate in blending that really changed things. And I felt we could do the same thing in South Africa. The viticulture practices there were really behind the times. And the winemaking practices were to a certain extent but winemaking changes really quickly and as soon as apartheid ended the young winemakers started traveling around the world and working in different places and continued to do that. So the winemaking sophistication moved much faster than the viticulture sophistication and we felt that we could make
real contributions, partly by just demonstrating what we could do and partly through Phil’s consulting.

Meeker: Can you give me some examples of how viticulture practices were behind the times?

Long: Well, we did a close spaced vineyard, which hadn’t been done. [brief passage deleted] We put drainage in our vineyard. And Phil had a hard time finding someone who could put drainage in because it wasn’t done. And a drainage person that classically did various kinds of drainage wouldn’t do it because it “shouldn’t be done”. So we had a young engineer right out of university who learned about drainage and was interested. So he installed the drainage, which has been very successful.

Meeker: What kind of drainage?

Long: For rain. Underground. It’s classic vineyard drainage. It’s underground. There’s various constructions but they’re usually ditches done and then pipes laid with gravel over them. Pipes with holes in them. And then they drain down into an area. And in our vineyard we have a low corner. The drainage system drains down into that corner, which eventually could be a water storage area, but it’s not now.

So concern about virus was something different. It was appalling. We saw people plant young vineyards and the second year they were virused. And the plant people were saying—because they had mealybug, which we have now. “Oh, the mealybug carries the virus from one to another.” It doesn’t happen that fast. So there wasn’t a real commitment to clean plant material. Labor. A lot of the techniques that we use in pruning and canopy management, irrigation management, none of those were being done. It was a very frustrating situation for Phil because in those first few years we hired crews to come in and do the vineyard work and he would have the experience of telling people what he wanted and how to do it and then have them not do it that way. And when questioned they would say, “If we did it that way with anyone else they would fire us.” It was amazing. But that led obviously to the conclusion that we needed to have our own vineyard manager. So we still do things very differently. We’re very specific on all parts, from planting clear through the management and harvest.

Meeker: Have you been able to tell any influence that your operation has had more broadly on other winemakers in the region?
That would be a good question to ask Phil but there’s no question that there is an influence because, for example, Phil consulted with Giles Webb. He turned Giles’s vineyard around in terms of productivity. Giles was having trouble getting the grapes to set. And then Phil at that time was working with Giles’s young viticulturalist. So he would pick up information from Phil. So it gets spread around. Still, let me say this. And it’s the same way with winemaking. You can talk as much as you want about this technique, that technique, that technique, but it’s the way that they’re put together in a certain situation. So it’s those detailed decisions that go on every day that really make something what it is, whether it’s a vineyard or a wine.

Well, there are those everyday decisions but then there’s also, in essence, setting up in advance so that you can make those decisions later on. What I’m referring to is the New York Times article that was about you guys. And that was I think in ’98, ’99. No, no, I think it was later. It was when your first vintage came out. But they were talking about when the vineyard was laid out in ’98, ’99. And it said that you used GPS to help establish location and orientation of the vines. There was something called the normalized differentiated vegetative index. I don’t know what that is. Can you describe the process by which you took this piece of land that I imagine was maybe grazing or something, hadn’t been planted with grapes, and then turned it into your dream winery, your dream vineyard?

Well, we started obviously by deciding to purchase that property because it had never been planted to grapevines. We then did a lot of soil work, which means we brought in a backhoe, dug meter deep holes, and did soil studies. And there were very good consultants who were doing that in South Africa. They knew the technique, they knew the system, they knew how to characterize soils and so on and so forth. So that was fantastic. Then based on those soil studies we came up with kind of a general map of the vineyard and then Phil and I sat down and did a map of what we wanted to plant and where in kind of a general sense and then that went to someone, I don’t remember who, who turned it into a working document. We put in the drainage. We had to develop the water system. An important part of that vineyard site was that it had water rights to the local river but we didn’t have a connection. But our neighbors had a big pond. They were connected. So what we ended up doing is we give them the right to our water year round and then when we want it we take what we need whenever we want it. Because our water use, if you graphed it, it would go something like this, where this increase in need would be close to harvest. Similar to California when the ground has dried out and the vines need water. Well, our water rights didn’t provide enough water to meet this demand all at once. But the neighbor’s pond, where we put our water, provided enough water to meet this seasonal demand. So it’s worked out to be a really good mutual benefit. But establishing the water access and hooking it up with the drainage. Setting up the vineyard, putting in the posts,
putting in the drip hose, making the decisions about the plant material. There is a lot of detail and everything is important.

Meeker: So you got the plant material from nurseries?

Long: Local nurseries, yeah.

Meeker: Did you feel like they had the kind of quality that you were looking for?

Long: To some extent but not completely. We got some Cabernet Franc material that was quite virused so we ended up several years later pulling out the section of the vineyard that had been the Cabernet Franc.

Meeker: How did that impact the growth of the vines?

Long: Well, I’m talking about the condition where the leaves turned from green to that really pretty red color in the fall. Without chlorophyll the vine doesn’t really manufacture what the grapes need to get ripe. So I saw the same thing. Napa Valley had a lot of virus when I started working there. And so you end up with a very long ripening season. You don’t get the kind of ripeness that you would with a healthy plant. And the chemistry is usually a little bit out of balance. I’ve seen good wines made from virused grapes but it’s hard.

Meeker: What sort of clones did you select and what was your selection criteria? Maybe start with Cabernet.

Long: [Detail added during editing.] The Cabernet clones were 163c and 341a; Cabernet Franc was 623 and 214; Merlot is 348 and 343. Malbec is 71 and 46. ENTAV clones, originally from France. But they were clones that Phil was familiar with. Europe was the source of plant material for South Africa, although I think there might have been some plant material from Australia. But he was the one that knew the clones and was comfortable with their characteristics.

Meeker: And these were clones that were familiar to you?

Long: Yes.

Meeker: And to him?
Okay. What is the normalized differentiated vegetative index?

When Phil was at Mondavi he was responsible for technical viticulture and he also was the grape buyer. This was in the nineties. He could see the vineyards were going down to phylloxera and he was very concerned that they be able to forward plan their grape acquisition based on knowledge of what phylloxera was going to do. So he did a cold call into NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] to see if there was any way he could partner with them to develop high altitude flights that could differentiate the essential health of the vine through reading certain light spectrums. He was able to develop that system with NASA and they provided the high flights. So they were able to predict, or let’s say they were able to see an early course of phylloxera development in the vineyards and that became the NDVI and ultimately underwent a technology transfer. There are people that regularly do this kind of work and it’s now a normal way of looking at vineyards.

So the NDVI was developed with a purpose of being able to predict the rate of phylloxera decline in vineyards ahead of seeing it visually but then it’s subsequently been used to better assess the differences within a vineyard because we’ve come around to the position that the more even the vineyard is the more even the ripening will be, the more clarity of fruit expression you will have. So it’s now a standard tool.

So you planted cab, Merlot, cab franc, and Malbec and it sounds like this was the agenda that you came with, was planting those four varietals.

We didn’t come to South Africa originally obviously to plant those four varietals. But after we saw the lay of the land, the particular site, that’s what we felt should be done.

Do you have any ideas looking to the future? Do you think all of those four are working well? Are there other varietals that you are interested in in that context?

We’ve been really satisfied with our choices. We’re now into our third tranche of planting. So looking at the results of the first planting, what we saw was the Malbec really added to the mix because our Cabernet and Merlot, especially those that go into our Cabernet style wines that you already see are quite structured and the Merlot is quite fleshy. I’m sorry, the Malbec is quite fleshy. So the Malbec really rounds out the palate. And particularly for a Series M,
which was a Merlot based, and because we planted more Malbec we
developed into a Merlot Malbec base, which has really enhanced the Series M.
So that was the first lesson. So the first planting was all four. The second
planting was Malbec and Merlot. The third planting is Cabernet Sauvignon
and Cabernet Franc, so we’re kind of expanding those varietals.

08-00:22:53
Meeker: You said fleshy. What does that mean around Malbec?

08-00:23:00
Long: Well, to simplify it, I think about wine’s palate as kind of structural or fleshy.
Structural means it has more tannin backbone and sometimes more acid
presence. Fleshy means it has more supple roundness. And the ideal wines to
me have both. So the structure, if it’s not too much, will carry a wine for a
long time, which is particularly desirable for Bordeaux varietals. Flesh is what
gives them the roundness and fullness in the mouth. And then, of course,
you’re blending the different varieties to give aromatic and flavor differences,
complexity.

08-00:23:51
Meeker: So you had mentioned you decided basically to create two blends, the C
blend, which was a Cabernet based or dominant, and the M blend, which was
a Merlot dominant blend. How did you come to this decision?

08-00:24:08
Long: I came to that decision from making the wines from the vineyard. And I
mentioned that I had worked in 2000, 2001, and 2002 for three vintages,
making wine from each of the blocks and tasting the wines and seeing what
their personality or character was. And I saw with both Cabernet and Merlot
there were two styles coming out of that vineyard. So one was structured, one
was fleshy in those varieties. So I said to the partners, because we originally
thought we’d do the traditional Bordeaux approach, which is first and second
wine. I also felt there was the potential for first wine in every part of that
vineyard. Probably not every year but I didn’t like the idea of setting up a
second wine mindset. So what I said is two things. Let’s do two wine styles. One is more fleshy and one is more
structured. So the one with the more structured is the Series C, Cabernet
based, more fleshy is the Series M, Merlot, Malbec based. But some Malbec
also with Cabernet. So we actually use all of the varieties in each of those but
from different blocks and in different proportions, so we’re making wines that
are quite different.

08-00:25:41
Meeker: So you said that you’re actually getting some fleshy Cabernet out of the
vineyard. Is that because it’s a different site, a different orientation, exposure,
all of the above?
To say it’s fleshy is probably a little extreme because Cabernet doesn’t tend to be fleshy but it’s definitely softer. Some more structured and some less structured. And yeah, it’s because of soil location.

Okay. So this is what you’ve determined influences the kind of grape you’re getting?

Yeah.

Interesting.

Fascinating. Fascinating.

Yeah. Well, how did people respond to these different series? Maybe how is it that you communicate this idea and then perhaps market it?

Let me first make one more comment, and that was part of the original strategy, was that we weren’t committed to put all of the wine in our two Series wines. So the idea of having two top first wines was we would make them from the wines in the vineyard that met that quality criteria and everything we didn’t use we would just sell out. And we’ve done that for quite a period of time, just selling it, bottling it for other people. So we’ve only really produced our two Vilafonté wines, Series C and Series M.

People have responded very well. The first blending I did of the 2003, it was difficult because you’re creating a template for the future. But it was successful and it also gives people choices. People like different wines and different characters. So we’re offering two different choices. But in quality terms and in terms of intensity of flavors, clarity of fruit, freshness, complexity, length, both of those wines have those characters, have those quality criteria and that’s what’s important. And then they have different personalities. So people have responded well to them.

Could I actually go back? Did you ever have a discussion about planting white wine grapes and making white varietals?

Our strategy, and the three of us, Mike, Phil, and myself, have always agreed on this, is to have a very focused project. The vineyard isn’t a big vineyard. We wanted to make a great wine. And my experience in working at Mondavi and Simi and seeing many other wineries is that you can only be proficient in so much. You can make a lot of good wine from many varieties in a winery
but the ability to really work in a very focused way with a site you know, you own, you farm every year, you see the wines every year, you learn how best to work with each block from both a farming and a winemaking perspective. That gives you a kind of power and range of ability to make decisions that you don’t have if you’re trying to do too many things. So no white wine.

Meeker: How did you bring the wines to market? And this is kind of a big question because it involves marketing and it involves designing a label. It involves pricing. It involves where are you going to sell the wines? Are you going to have a tasting room or something along those lines? I imagine you must have had meetings with Phil and Mike, coming up with a strategy. What was the strategy about bringing the wines to market?

Long: Okay. Well, first I need to say that the way that we agreed to have the partnership operate is that each of us has an area of expertise that we manage and control. My area is the winemaking, Phil’s is the winegrowing, Mike’s is the wine marketing and sales. And Mike loves marketing and he’s very good at it. So each of us led discussions in our particular area, strategic things that needed to be shared with partners. And, of course, we started with Mike. We started with the label and the name. The name was a long project. And we eventually came around to using the soil for a name and that’s worked very well because our focus is these are our vineyards. We farm these vineyards. So to have the name of one of the soils on the label and the label design is also structured around the estate. We never sell grapes, we never buy grapes. That was a clear vision that was taken.

And then Mike oversaw the label design. So Phil and I didn’t really participate except to say we think this is great or we don’t care for that. Whatever it is we do we have to all three support but someone takes the lead. And Mike took the lead in the label design, in the packaging. He’s done a fantastic job. We have beautiful packages. Very distinctive and very representative of the quality that we’re talking about.

Similarly he setup the marketing. He was already marketing his family wines so he already had his fingers into a lot of the sales and distribution networks around the world. He selected the ones that he thought would be appropriate for what we’re doing and he developed the contacts and he recommended pricing to us based on what he felt was a reasonable stretch but doable from a cash flow perspective. So Mike’s really the marketing guy.

Meeker: When you say a reasonable stretch, what does that mean?

Long: Well, when you’re making really fine wines you need to price them as a really fine wine but you don’t necessarily want to overprice them. We’ve seen, both
in California and South Africa. [break in audio] Usually in a good economic environment people are confident that they can just make a wine and sell it for anything. It doesn’t last. It could be possible for a short period of time but it doesn’t last. People really have to feel that the wines, whatever it is they’re paying, provide value for that.

08-00:33:44
Meeker: And so your prices have remained relatively consistent in the ten-plus years that you’ve been—

08-00:33:50
Long: No. We’ve pushed the prices up because we don’t make a lot of wine. And typically a winery of our size needs to have about a 60 percent margin, in a very general sense, sixty to seventy percent margin to be profitable. Profitable in a way that’s relatively successful. Not wildly profitable and not marginally profitable but a good business.

08-00:34:21
Meeker: Did you ever have discussions about who you thought your competitors would be?

08-00:34:28
Long: I actually don’t remember discussing that. At the time that we were making our wines we saw maybe one or two competitors. There were a lot of Cabernets being made in South Africa but not any that we felt were serious competitors.

08-00:34:47
Meeker: Did you ever compare what you were doing or hoped to do to any American winemakers?

08-00:34:53
Long: Well, from time to time we do taste our wine with other wines. They could be from France, they could be from the United States, they could be from South Africa. But wines that are well-regarded in one way or the other. But it’s not a focus. It’s something I think is important and we do maybe every other year.

08-00:35:25
Meeker: How did you get your wines in front of people whose opinions matter?

08-00:35:31
Long: Mike.

08-00:35:32
Meeker: Mike. He did all of that?

08-00:35:34
Long: Yeah. It certainly helped that I have been a national/international winemaking figure. Phil is well respected in his field. So wine people are naturally curious
about what we’re doing. So that’s been beneficial. But Mike’s the guy. He’s the social network guy.

Meeker: Well, not everybody gets a New York Times profile.

Long: Well, I’ve had a great deal of press throughout the years and so I think people expect that whatever it is I’m doing, it’s probably of interest.

Meeker: But there’s always an unknown. You can trust your palate, you can do everything you can in the vineyard but there’s always an unknown about how people are going to respond to the wine when it’s released.

Long: Yeah, absolutely.

Meeker: What was your thought on people’s opinions of it and maybe by people I mean wine writers and magazines and such?

Long: With the 2003 vintage, we released that in 2006, and the three of us did a little tour on the east coast and tasted with our importer, Bartholomew Broadbent’s distributors. And one of the things, which I think is different now, but one of the things that was clear was that the distributor sales people around the table said, “Your wine is better than any South Africa wine we’ve tasted and different.” And I think the emphasis is on the different. We understood that because a lot of the wines, the South Africa Bordeaux blends we had tasted in South Africa—again, they’re coming out of virus vineyards. They didn’t quite have the clarity of fruit and they weren’t quite in the style of what American consumers were looking for. But that wasn’t so much an issue. We didn’t want to make an American style. We wanted to make something that reflected our vineyard. Period. But it was clear that our wine brought something different and good. So from the start we had a positive reaction to our wines and we’ve been so fanatical about making, retaining our quality goal that I think people have come to trust our wines.

But when you release a wine the first time people are always—maybe skeptical is the right word. But you don't have a track record. This is the first wine. And it was a young vineyard. The fact that it’s really a fabulous wine is fantastic. But it’s not the first time we’ve seen a young vineyard produce a fabulous wine.

But it’s not until you’ve done something for three, four, five, seven, ten years. You can talk all you want. But if you can’t produce it people don’t have that sense and confidence and trust. And when you’re dealing with sales people it takes them a lot of work to establish a brand of wine. And so they’re not so
excited about doing that work until they’re confident that there’s going to be continuity, there’s going to be quality, it’s going to be properly priced. And certainly the fact that I was associated with it would give some of that confidence. But Mike and his family also had a good reputation. So we brought together a lot of reputation and a lot of expertise on a relatively small project.

08-00:39:47
Meeker: What do you suppose the reputation of the wine is at this point in time?

08-00:39:56
Long: Where?

08-00:40:00
Meeker: Well, why don’t we say South Africa.

08-00:40:02
Long: Very high. South Africa has what’s called a Platter Guide that’s a list of all of the wineries and all the wines produced. When we started it was about ¼ inch thick. Now it’s about 2 inches thick. And they do tastings. Our 2011 Series C just was given five stars, which is their highest rating, which goes to something like thirty wines out of seven thousand.

08-00:40:33
Meeker: What about internationally?

08-00:40:37
Long: We did a vertical tasting of ten vintages this year in London for the press and trade and got very positive reviews. The wine is less known in the United States because we haven’t made a big push to sell it here.

08-00:40:55
Meeker: Well, this is the other thing that I wanted to ask you about. I read at some point that one of the original ideas was that this wine was primarily going to be made for export to the international market and in particular the US market. As it’s turned out, the vast majority of the wine is purchased in South Africa and probably consumed in South Africa. How did that come about? How did that transition come about?

08-00:41:22
Long: Well, there were two things. I think what you just described was Mike’s vision and Mike was already doing a lot of exporting. One, especially with regards to the US, was that it’s the least profitable market for us. So, again, I’ve talked about all these layers of people that the distribution system, to take, to slice. And we were left with maybe 30 percent. So if the wine was selling for $30 a bottle we got nine. It’s not exciting. [laughter] It’s not exciting. So I have always been very leery of putting a lot of emphasis on the US market. I knew how difficult it was. Mike didn’t really know. So it’s his responsibility. We needed to test it out.
The other issue for marketing in the US is that it’s expensive. So the South African currency exchange is weaker versus the dollar—so you have two things going against you. You have to spend a lot of Rand to be over here and do the typical marketing stuff. And you have much less margin than you do anywhere else. So it’s like, “Hmm.” We do sell in Europe.

One of the things I think that pushed us into more South African distribution was the Great Recession. So our first release was in 2006. Second release was in 2007, where things started to go downhill. And we just stopped getting a lot of orders. We used to get a fifty-case order, now we got a five-case order because these people all around the world, they didn’t know, the buyers for our wines, didn’t know who was going to buy the wine from them. It was such a difficult period for three or four years. So we developed more local business. And South Africa has a very significant number of wine lovers, of people who are very financially sound and those were the people that we targeted. We also developed a direct sales program. So it’s not any different than in California. If you’re a small business it’s much more profitable to sell direct.

Meeker: Did you ever establish a tasting room or anything like that?
Long: A tasting room is too expensive for us. We’re tiny. A tasting room you have to staff it.
Meeker: You have to produce enough wine to pour it every day.
Long: Exactly. We can’t do that. Our wines are too valuable. So we have tastings for people or groups that come through and make an appointment. But no tasting room.
Meeker: Do you have like a prerelease club or anything like that?
Long: We do. We do.
Meeker: And so those are the people you host your events for?
Meeker: Okay. I know that this is on the marketing side. But when you have an event for your wines, how do you like to do those? What are the things you think are appropriate and what are the things that other wineries do that you might think would be inappropriate for your wines?
Well, we don’t have a lot of events. Mike travels to Johannesburg and Durban and a few other cities during the release period and he will host dinners for whoever appropriate people are. And that is the way that we get the wines out in front of the people that we think would be interested in buying them. But in terms of what we think of in Napa and Sonoma, which is big event place, events are expensive. We would prefer to sell our wine with a much lower marketing expense and so far it’s worked pretty well.

Let me ask you a little bit more detail about particularly your C series. And I think it was maybe in our first interview session that you said that that was the closest red wine that you’ve made that comes to what your ideal red wine would be. And I’d like to try to get your sense of how was this done. Maybe kind of walk me through some decisions that you made and the vintage that you’re most happy with.

I have to say the obvious, which is I couldn’t make the wine I want to make without great grapes. So all of the decisions that we’ve made along the way in terms of establishing the vineyards and all the decisions that Phil oversees—he’s in contact with our vineyard manager, Edward Pieterson, almost every week. The fact that we have our own vineyard manager who’s been trained to Phil’s way of doing things and that we have a crew of people that the vineyard manager has hired. These are all black people, the manager and the workers. But so many places they weren’t trained. They were just sort of turned loose and then yelled at if they didn’t do the right thing. So we have a really clear commitment to good human resource management and we have a vineyard manager who’s really good with what he calls his E team. E stands for excellent. And the majority of them are women. And many of the women were seamstresses so they’re very used to detailed work. And no matter where you are in the world, vineyards, to make top wine are like gardens. There is a lot of work that goes into maintaining the vines. So that’s the first thing.

Then there is the decision to harvest. From a winemaking perspective, for me there are four key points. One is harvest timing. One is what I call perfecting the grape. One is fermentation management, and aging. So because of the individual differences in each block, each hectare block, the grapes obviously don’t—even the same variety don’t ripen at the same time. So we would, except in unusual circumstances, just harvest one block a day and the blocks produce, depending on the year, anywhere in the variety from four-to eight tons per hectare, which is a low production. The grapes are harvested into small boxes. They’re brought into the winery. We rent a refrigerated container. They go into the container that night and they’re chilled down. So we start up in the morning sorting them. So what I call perfecting the grapes is the sorting system.
And the sorting system I first encountered in Tokara in South Africa and it was a South African design and it was the first sorting system I’d seen in the wine industry anywhere in the world. So I think South Africa was rather interestingly ahead in that. And the sorting is two steps. Cluster sorting and the de-stemming process and then the berry sorting. And what you have, which is so fantastic, is you stand at the end of the sorting line and you look at the berries that come off. It’s not like putting clusters into a crusher or clusters into a press. You see all the berries. And our berries look like blueberries. They’re small and they’re a very dark color and they’re so even. It’s beautiful. We check for the evenness in the vineyard. We have a system that allows us to check the standard deviation of ripeness in the vineyard just so that we know that we’re getting a pretty consistent ripening profile in the grapes. And if we don’t then we can actually help that through the sorting period by taking out the less ripe and the more ripe grapes. But that’s all based on visual.

Meeker: How do you de-stem?

Long: Go through a de-stemmer. So after berry sorting the grapes then are moved into the fermenters. They’re not pumped. They’re just dumped into the fermenters. We have both oak and stainless and which grapes go into which depends on whether we think they’re going to go into a Series M or Series C, something to do about the character of the vineyards. The fermentation is managing the biological process during fermentation and the extraction process. Biological process, of course, is the yeast, whether you’re using natural yeast or you’re adding yeast and we’ve done both. But making sure those yeast are happy, that they do regular fermentation, that they finish and it’s very easy for me to say that but it’s not always easy to accomplish that. The extraction is making sure that you get the color and the right phenolic compounds out of the grape without extracting too much of the smaller more bitter compounds from the seeds. The fermentation process is huge in terms of the nuance, the differences in the grapes every year, and how you respond to those differences. And if you’re both lucky and smart you come out at the end with a wine that’s really well balanced and very pretty and for us we just put it in barrels and age it. We use French oak barrels. The cooper choices were made initially by me based on the cooperers that I’ve worked with successfully. Taransaud and Francois Freres, who were both not only producing high quality barrels but very consistent and dependable as opposed to cooperers I’ve seen that can produce high quality one-year but maybe not the next. Barrels are expensive so it’s an important choice. The Series M is aged for a little bit shorter period of time, maybe eighteen months in barrels, and the Series C for around twenty-two-months.

Meeker: How do you determine whether you’re going to stick with native yeast or add yeast?
Long: Well, I’m not so sure it’s so important for red wines. I think native yeast, in terms of their impact on texture in white wines have been really wonderful and successful. Red wines are so much more complex because you’re dealing with all these characters you’re extracting. I’ve used native yeast quite a bit in the Vilafonté wines. I can’t really say that I’ve been able to conclude that the native yeast are much better than the yeast that we would choose to use for fermentation.

Meeker: Some people take great pride in using native yeast. It’s like a point. It’s like saying it’s organic or something. Do you have a thought on that particular approach?

Long: Like I said, I think native yeast for white wines work quite well and I think native yeast for Pinot Noir, which is a much more delicate wine, work well. We have a lot of things going on in our wines. When it comes to yeast you’re looking again for two different things. You want the yeast to behave itself. So a nice steady fermentation that finishes and doesn’t produce off-characters. And, again, that sounds straightforward but when you all of a sudden have a fermentation that’s not like that, which most winemakers have experienced, it’s not so much fun. Then the other thing are the textures and the aromas, and they do differ with the yeast. We have done some yeast experiments with barrel fermentations and we do find that we like some yeast better than others. But in the big picture of Bordeaux varietals and all of the complexity I don’t think it’s quite as important as for with some others. So I have no objection to native fermentations. I’m happy to have them go on. I used them here in Sonoma County, in Mendocino County with my client. But I’m not fanatical about them.

Meeker: When in the process do you decide if you’re going to inoculate with adding yeast?

Long: We usually decide ahead of times. But sometimes we do quite a long cold soak and we’ve had fermentation start-up and just let them move along.

Meeker: So the fermentations start-up. I guess what I’m trying to ask is is there a—this is from a point of ignorance around winemaking. But like if a fermentations not going as planned, is that a point at which you can actually add a different yeast to try to get it back into shape? Have you had to deal with winemaking in those kinds of circumstances? Or once it starts is it you can’t stop it, it’s already going?
Working with yeast is all of those things. It’s complex. It’s a complex biological process. Every winemaker has experienced fermentations that weren’t going as they should. We’ve had some situations where, if we had reason to think that we might have a problem finishing, like if we had a natural fermentation didn’t seem like it’s going quite that well, we would add a strong yeast in the middle of fermentation. Your fermentations usually start to turn a corner at about six Brix. And you’re starting out at twenty-four Brix, let’s say. At six Brix you’ve reached a time when you have enough alcohol so it’s really impacting the yeast. So adding yeast after that can be done but it’s not as effective. And ultimately, if you have a red wine that doesn’t finish and it’s slightly sweet and you have to go back and restart it, it’s difficult and it’s not ideal from a quality perspective.

Meeker: Does that happen often?

Long: Doesn’t happen often to us but it happens frequently. Yeah. It’s not unusual in our business.

Meeker: What processes have you developed to try to minimize those kinds of fermentation problems from happening?


Meeker: What about use of sulfites?

Long: Let me just say one more thing. And that is through the years there’s been a lot of research and information that’s come out about yeast behavior. And let me just give you an example. I just was reading something recently. This isn’t a new idea. But if you have too strong a fermentation at the beginning you run the risk that the yeast, they’re so strong, right, that they’re going to use up a lot of the nutrients. So a strong beginning that’s too strong can jeopardize your ability to finish fermentation. And the yeast consume nitrogen down to about the middle of fermentation and then after that point it’s not particularly beneficial to add it. I’m not being really specific but I just want to say that there are a lot of clues and techniques and ways of working with yeast that you learn as a technical part of the winemaking process. But it’s one thing and then the other interaction.
This is Martin Meeker interviewing Zelma Long. Today is the 12th of December 2014, session number four. We’re on tape number nine. So we’re again talking about really the cellar process, the winemaking process. You talked a good amount about the fermentation, the yeast, some of the issues along with that. Sulfur and use of sulfur in the cellars. Another issue that people typically try to reduce of use of it. What is the way in which you approach that? What do you think the appropriate use of it is?

We use a little bit of sulfur prior to fermentation. Maybe forty or fifty parts. And just to address any microorganisms that might come in from the vineyard that we don’t want, which we rarely see but have seen. If you use a lot of sulfur prior to fermentation it has a negative effect on the wine going through malolactic. And it tends to get metabolized also. So you will lose some through the fermentation. So a small amount added during the fermentation doesn’t have a big impact on your final amount.

It doesn’t impact the yeast? It doesn’t like kill the native yeast or something like that?

No. The sulfur gets tied up really quickly. It can get tied up by organic materials. And you’ve got the organic materials in the must. It’s not a big amount of SO2. Then we don’t add any until after malolactic. And one of the challenges that we have is with a yeast called Brettanomyces, which is common in actually a lot of countries. California, Europe, so on. There are a lot of different strains of Brettanomyces. But when it acts on the wine it lives on some of the residual sugars in the wine. Not those that have sweetness but those that can act as food for the yeast. And it tends to produce characters that have been described as barnyard aromas and flavors. It tends to produce a gritty palate and it tends to destroy the fruit clarity. I really do not like those effects on my wine.

If we have that in our wines at bottling we have to filter because if it’s resident in the wine at bottling, chances are fairly good, very good, that it will go through this process of changing the nature of the wine. So what we try to do is to prevent it from getting a foothold. So after the wine has finished malolactic fermentation we’re adding SO2 to a significant level in terms of what these yeast can survive. Say thirty parts free. And good sanitation keeps it under control. So that’s been successful for us. But that is important.
Meeker: What happens when you taste a wine that has a lot of Brett in it or has some residual Brett in it? Have you ever had that, that it is pleasurable in some ways or is it immediately something that goes down the drain?

Long: I’ve had some in the First Growths. Not recently but in my years at Mondavi when we were tasting a lot of First Growths, I had some that had Brett characters. I’m a winemaker. I want my grapes to speak clearly. And Brett takes away the ability for them to do it. It’s like having too much oak. Only oak to me smells good. It doesn’t smell like a barnyard. But I want the fruit to come through. And Brettanomyces infection destroys the fruit characters. Maybe it produces a character that someone out there likes because I’ve heard people say that. “Oh, I don’t mind it. It adds complexity.” Doesn’t do anything for my wines.

Meeker: You maybe see it as analogous to like a corked bottle?

Long: Corked bottle or Acetobacter who produced too much volatile acidity. Things that really I consider defects.

Meeker: Okay, interesting. Blending. You talked about developing these two basically first growths. Like you were going to have a Bordeaux model. You have the C and the M. Can you describe how it is that you came to—

Long: Well, remember, the basis of our thinking and implementing is that each hectare block is an individual and needs to be farmed as an individual. It needs to be harvested at the right time for it, needs to be fermented, sorted and fermented in the right way for who it is this year. And then it’s aged in barrels that are appropriate for that block. I’m always there for harvest. But then we come back in the U.S. summer. So harvest in South Africa’s in February and March. Then we come back in July. In July I would taste—I have a winemaker, Martin Smith, working with me—the two of us would taste all the wines. And at that point we would separate anything out that we know won’t go into the Series wines. Typically heavy press. Most of the light press. And if there’s anything else that is, for one reason or another, is not suitable.

And then in January, the next month when I’m there, we will be blending the 2014 vintage, which means we lay out all of the wines. Say if I have ten barrels from one block, there might be two different or three different kinds of barrels. So the sample for that block would be one sample from each type of barrel. So we end up with a lot of samples.

Meeker: Do you know roughly how many samples?
Oh, could be thirty, forty. It’s not thirty. It’s more like forty. So we have a long conference table there, the wines set up along the conference table. We both taste through them and write up our opinions, and then we let the wines in glasses that are covered sit overnight and then come back and taste them the next day. We do that more when we’re blending. But the way the wine responds to air is a little bit of a tip-off as to how concentrated the fruit is, how well it’s going to do long-term. So that’s kind of the initial first sort.

Then when we work in January it’ll take us about two weeks to do the blending. And fortunately by now we’ve got ten years of criteria or benchmarks that we have internalized for Series C and Series M. And we blend only to taste. In other words, the percent of new oak, the varietal percent we discover after the blend is done.

Meeker: So you don’t have a formula?

Long: We don’t have a formula. And our percentage blends vary from like 52 percent Cabernet to 86 percent Cabernet. There’s a big range. But the goal is not the percentage. It’s the palate. So we’ll line all those wines up again. And typically what we do is each of us identify which wines we think will be appropriate for the Series M and the Series C and then we let it sit overnight again and come back and look at it and then we start to put together blends. So each of us put together blends. We may have five or six blends of each from the first go-around. So then we’ll come back and taste those and we’ll let those sit overnight and see what happens. Then we’ll do a new blend. Usually takes us three or four blending steps to get to what we want and that happens over a period of two weeks with this process that we go through.

Meeker: How do you keep track of it? Like how do you actually then have the sample blend that you want and keep track of the different percentages and do it on a large basis?

Long: Well, I don’t think about the percentages.

Meeker: You don’t?

Long: See, that’s the thing. I don’t think about the percentages when I’m tasting. I’m thinking about the wine. So I just taste based on style. As I said, the percentages are an outcome. The way I physically do it is I use a computer. I use an Excel spreadsheet. All the inventory is on that spreadsheet. Every barrel is noted. And I make comments and then I say, okay, the character of the wine and what I think it might be useful for. Series C, Series M, question
mark, sell is typically the—and then after I’ve gone through all those and tasted them the next day I’ll begin to put together some blends just based on my experience and how they’ve tasted. The next worksheet is for like Series C and maybe A, B, C, D blends and this is how much goes in each one. And then Series M and it rolls on from there. I don’t know if that is clear.

Meeker: No, that’s exactly what I was kind of wondering about. So actually even before you get to the blending, you talked a little bit about filtering that you feel like you need to do if you get some Brett problems.

Long: That would be just at bottling and it’s something that I never want to do. I just want to emphasize that Brett is a problem to me and it’s something I don’t think under any circumstances is appropriate for the wine. So the biggest thing to do is prevention. I started to discuss it because of SO2 and maintaining a decent level of SO2 in the wine is the one thing that helps. But the most important thing is keeping it out of the winery.

Meeker: Particularly in really large winemaking operations, I’m thinking probably like Freddy Franzia or the Gallos or people like that, they’re using all sorts of technologies and chemical innovations and Mega Purple and all this kind of stuff. Clearly making a fine wine you’re never going to use oak chips and Mega Purple. But what about other technological equipment or innovations? Are there things that you’ve found to be useful? Are there other things that you think you would never use? It’s going too far, it’s handling the wine too much.

Long: The biggest technical innovation to me in our process was the sorting table. That to me has given a huge quality benefit for us and then for the industry in general. I think it’s been pretty revolutionary.

Meeker: Well, sorting table. Can you describe what that is, first of all?

Long: The first table we have these boxes. We dump on that shaker table. We have about four or five people there. The shaking moves the grapes along the table. And then they pull out leaves and they would pull out any clusters that were a problem. We never have mold but sometimes we have raisins. Then it goes up into a de-stemmer. The stems are taken out. The grapes drop onto a moving belt and there’s eight people along that belt. And at the end there’s a tub that the grapes drop into and that gets dumped into a fermenter. We train the people and supervise them so it’s a good process. There’s a lot more sophisticated sorting now. The equipment manufacturers have developed a lot of different systems to sort out grapes such that you would identify up front ‘this is the criteria’. But that equipment is so expensive. We could never
afford it. And I don’t think they would do any better. I’m very happy with the system we have.

Meeker: Yeah. To me that sounds mostly like a mechanical innovation that actually kind of uses a time honored human touch and feel and see approach of getting the best berries possible. But then there are other technological things. I mean, centrifuges and bladder presses and things like that. What is your thought on latest technology, employing them in your winemaking process?

Long: Well, we don’t use a lot of technology. Just to mention the press. We have a bladder press but we don’t use a lot of pressed wine in our wines.

Meeker: Really?

Long: Yeah. Most everything used is from the drain wine. Pressed wines are—

Meeker: —whole berry fermentation? You don’t—

Long: At the end of the sorting table there’s a little roller crusher. It’s just about this big with two rollers. And we set the roller. We want the roller to break the berry but not to crush it. So it looks whole but it’s actually cracked open. It’s ideal and simple.

Meeker: And so then you don’t end up pressing that typically once it’s fermented?

Long: We will press it but we won’t use the pressed wine for the Series wines. We use the drained wine.

Meeker: —the drained wine?

Long: Yeah.

Meeker: And you don’t use press wine because it’s too tannic or too dark?

Long: Typically. It’s not a color issue, it’s a palate issue. And it’s frustrating because the pressed wines can be really beautiful and aromatic. But if you’ve done a good job with extraction your pressed wines should not be darker than your drained wines. But typically it is more phenolic so it has a—and I’ve tried fining—it has this hardness in the back palate that’s very difficult to get rid of.
And so we always try because there are a lot of beneficial things that can be found in pressed wine but we hardly ever use it just because it doesn’t work.

Meeker: It makes it very difficult to pair that wine with food, I always think. Wines that are really tannic like that in the back.

Long: Yeah, yeah.

Meeker: You had briefly referred to aging and racking. Is there anything else you want to add about that process?

Long: We use nitrogen pressure to rack from barrel to barrel. We minimize pumping.

Meeker: Interesting. So the nitrogen pressure is basically going to push rather than use like a suction pump or something?

Long: Yeah. We fill by gravity into barrels from our fermenters because the fermenters are raised above the floor. We don’t do a lot of racking just because the wines—in the earlier stages of winemaking, in the seventies and eighties we did a lot of rack and aeration because the wines were harder. We weren’t as good at growing the grapes. We were not as good at managing the phenolics or the tannins. And so racking and aeration were important. We don’t do a lot of racking. The wines get racked out of barrels about halfway through the year for blending and then back into barrels. The one thing we do do that I haven’t mentioned during fermentation is we add oxygen to the fermentation. That’s for both yeast and it’s also to help pull together the color and the tannin compounds to make more complex compounds.

Meeker: How is oxygen added?

Long: We bubble it into the fermenter when we’re pumping it over.

Meeker: What about selection of bottles? This is something that’s never really talked about but I think there’s a lot of thought that must go into it.

Long: Well, again, Mike’s role as marketing is to establish the look of the wine “package” in all its aspects, which would include bottles. So he was the guy that selected the bottle.

Meeker: I would think that the winemaker would want to be involved in that.
Well, we were. I could have always said, “I don’t like that.”

But you don’t think the bottle or its weight or anything like that has much impact on the wine itself?

Not if it’s a good bottle. Shouldn’t have any impact on the wine. But the weight is another question. There is this whole trend to really heavy bottles which you can use as a weapon when they’re empty. But we never got that far. There was one time that Mike was like, “Well, let’s look at—” I said, “No, no, no. We’re talking sustainability and proper materials,” blah, blah, blah. So we have kind of a normal handsome Bordeaux style bottle. It’s nothing fancy. Doesn’t have any glass crest on it. It’s just good looking.

Yeah. There are some bottles that it’s clear that the bottle itself is a statement, the heft of it.

Yes. Actually, I don’t like those super heavy bottles. For me, they’re not comfortable to pour from. If the bottle’s too fat it’s hard to hold. And then I have this whole thing about wasted resources and cost of transportation and all of that stuff. It’s the wine to me that counts. I want a handsome look but I don’t think you have to have a big heavy bottle to achieve it.

What about selection of cork material?

Selection of cork is critical. We buy cork from a company called Amorim. It’s one of the largest cork producers in the world. The cork quality control has improved immeasurably since I was first making wine. The cork producers now do their own testing for TCA and they will provide you with lots that have a tested TCA level. That doesn’t mean, however, that every cork is that. But the cork companies are coming to the point that they’re going to be able to guarantee corks on a cork by cork basis. They’ve been working a lot on their systems.

Have you ever experimented with cork alternatives?

No.

No interest?
Meeker: Why is that?

Long: Well, I have looked at the studies. If I were making a Riesling, several other fresh fruity white wines I would probably use a screw cap. Even a screw cap has some challenges in the cap itself and the fact that you have a much bigger headspace. Headspace represents oxygen. So unless you have a bottling system that takes the oxygen out of there you can have more bottle variation from that.

Meeker: Wow, interesting.

Long: Cork is still the most efficient natural material in terms of its internal structure. I like the fact that it’s a natural material.

Meeker: It’s biodegradable.

Long: Yeah. And with the work that the cork companies have done and our own understanding of those issues, I think the reliability of corks has improved dramatically and will continue to improve. But we actually do independent testing. We take the manufacturers corks for what they say they are and then we do some independent testing.

Meeker: Where are your corks grown? Do you know?

Long: The supplier is in Portugal so they would be grown either in Portugal or Spain.

Meeker: There’s probably a lot more that we can talk about but I think I’d like to move on to some wrapping up things. And the first thing I want to ask you about, I’d like you to tell me a little bit about some of these accolades that you’ve received. And there’s just many of them. And you can choose which ones you want to talk about. The Wine Spectator Foundation in 1993 named you a California Wine Pioneer. You were the Woman of the Year for the Roundtable for Women in Food Service in ’94. You got an international award from Masi. What’s that?

Long: That’s an Italian winery located outside of Verona.

Meeker: Okay. And that was in 1994. Women of the Year for Women in Wine Sense, 1995, and this is an organization that you participated in. Two James Beard
Awards. One James Beard Hall of Fame in '96 and then James Beard Wine and Spirits Professional of the year in 1997. Oregon State Alumni Award. I know that you gave an address at UC Davis. It was like an honorary address. Then also recognition from the American Society of Enology and Viticulture Merit Award, and you were named to the Vintners Hall of Fame for the Culinary Institute of America.

One, it must be incredibly gratifying to be recognized so widely and particularly amongst your peers. So can you tell me about your recognition from the American Society of Enology and Viticulture and what that said to you?

Long: Well, first let me just say that I’m honored to have been so honored. I think there’s probably several reasons for it. Certainly being one of the first women in the industry was one of them. Being a good spokesperson for the wine business was one of them. And just general accomplishments. But I’d like to start just by addressing the Wine Spectator Pioneer because that was really what led me to my first oral history, which is fantastic, and I was so thrilled to be able to participate in that, and to continue it today.

The James Beard Awards were really tremendous because that’s a national organization, more of a food oriented organization than wine, but food and wine and spirits. And I was first included in their Hall of Fame and then was awarded their Wine and Spirits Professional of the Year. There’s a lot of winemakers. So I was very honored with that.

Meeker: Did they say what it was about your contributions that inspired them to give that award to you?

Long: The way they do the awards now, because I am one of the judges, having been a past recipient, is to send out a list of nominees. There’s usually four or five nominees for each position. Where those nominees come from and how they come I actually don’t know how that was—I don’t know how my name came up in that. But I was active at that time, traveling a lot, seeing a lot of people and so it happened. And I was thrilled. The American Society of Enology and Viticulture Merit Award probably is one of the awards I’m particularly honored by because it’s my professional society. You have several thousand members around the United States and each year they honor one member. And for me to have been that person from all of these incredibly competent serious professionals in all parts of our business, it was a huge honor.

The Vintner Hall of Fame emanates from the Culinary Institute of America in Saint Helena. So it tends to focus on the California vintners, although not
exclusively. It has also recognized people who are writers. So it’s a valuable and interesting approach. But, again, I was really gratified to be tapped for that honor.

09-00:30:01
Meeker: You mentioned being a past winner of the James Beard Awards you are allowed to vote. And it could be that you’re doing this for other awards, as well, or other institutions. I don’t know. But let’s say I’m the James Beard Award. What kind of qualities would you look at, say, in a wine and spirits professional as being deserving of recognition in this way?

09-00:30:40
Long: I think it would be similar to what I would look for in a chef, in the sense of at least a regional presence, which would mean accolades and respect from peers in that region. And usually it’s also people that are bringing or have brought something new to the business. And I’ve seen this particularly with chefs. There’s also a sense of honoring people that have been in the business a long time and have a long string of success. So there’s different reasons for honoring people.

09-00:31:37
Meeker: Sometimes it seems to me that that doesn’t happen as much as it needs to. That sometimes what gets honored and recognized are sort of maybe new people on the scene that kind of shake things up a little bit. Like there’s always like the chef of the year or something like that and those are—

09-00:32:02
Long: Yeah. Because, yeah, a Vintner’s award is more focused on people who have made a contribution in one way or the other and have that track record for the contribution. The James Beard Awards for chefs I think often tend to highlight both, someone who’s new and exciting and someone who’s been a long-term success.

09-00:32:30
Meeker: What was the Oregon State Alumni Award? How did that come about? Do you know?

09-00:32:39
Long: These are all good questions but every year they select some alumni to honor and I never asked them why they selected me.

09-00:32:53
Meeker: Yeah, yeah. But you were on their radar.

09-00:32:56
Long: Yeah, I’m definitely on their radar. Yeah.

09-00:32:59
Meeker: Okay. Are you a supporter of them?
Long: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Meeker: Okay. Are there any other, say, causes that you’re actively supporting that are important to you in that way?

Long: Well, both Oregon State and UC Davis are very important to me. I’ve had a very long relationship with UC Davis and enology and viticulture that’s continued. Knowing the professors, providing input, providing support, providing ideas. Now, of course, I’m in a different part of the university at Performance Studies so I just feel like I have a serious long-term relationship with UC Davis. I’ve served in a lot of different capacities.

Meeker: Well, let’s talk about the performance studies a little bit. And in our previous conversation you had mentioned that your interest in the arts really goes back to some travel you did to Tibet in the 1990s. Can you tell me a little bit about what inspired you to go there and what impact the trip had on you?

Long: Well, I’ve mentioned that Phil and I are both adventurous. In the nineties we met an individual who was the chief curator and the general manager of the Pacific Asian Museum in Pasadena and we met him through a friend. I had gone to Stanford Executive School a couple of years before. The friend had gone. His kids were interested in China and Asia. So he and his wife actually were the people who met this individual and they said to him, “Oh, we’ve always wanted to go to Tibet.” This was back before Tibet was very open. And he said, “Well, you know, I’m going. Why don’t you come with me and bring some friends.” So they invited us. There were six of us. That couple, Phil and I, and this Asian arts specialist and a friend of his. And we visited. It was not what people think of Tibet, mountain climbing and so on. We were there for the Tibetan culture, so we primarily spent our time visiting monasteries. And he had been there before. He was one of the first people to go in with the US government people, to be allowed into Tibet in years previous. And it was so spectacular. The monasteries were repositories of hundreds of years of Buddhist worship and that was expressed in art and sculpture and fabric. I learned a lot about Buddhist culture, which has been really wonderful. And the art was amazing. Because there were so many things that have so much history, not just from Tibet but from China because China and Tibet had been linked and delinked in many ways through the centuries. Part of the process was just learning about where Buddhism came from, how it came into Tibet, how it came into China. So anyway, it was very exciting and Tibet was the most incredible experience. So we actually returned four times during the 1990s. It was almost like being called to go there. I’ve never been anywhere else that I felt so motivated or compelled to return to. It was a very special part of my life.
We then became interested in Buddhist art. When we were in China, actually, we were able to buy some of the Buddhist Thangkas. So we had a small collection of Buddhist art. And that started my interest in general in art. So then I’ve continued. When Phil and I go to South Africa we started to collect South African art, both from some of the black and colored artists and from some of the modern artists. We have a small flat, about 900 square feet. We don’t have a lot of wall space but we’ve had a lot of fun looking at art and I think in both a Tibetan example which expanded into Asian art in general, especially Chinese and Tibetan. Both in those cultures and in South Africa, art becomes a way to understand the culture and to know the culture.

So it deepened my interest in art and I decided ultimately that if I wanted to know art more in the way I know wine, that I wanted to go back to school and study it, even though I really didn’t have any background, I didn’t have any educational background in art. My background was in science. So I was fortunate enough to meet a very inspiring professor, Dr. Lynette Hunter, who headed up the Performance Studies program at UC Davis. And performance studies is a relatively new discipline and it really looks at the world in terms of people performing what they do.

[break in audio]

Meeker: Okay. You were talking about the professor who brought you into the field of performance studies.

Long: So I conceived the idea of going back to university and studying art. Davis was a good place for me to pursue that. And she suggested that I come into the university through the Performance Studies Institute. Because of this idea of performance as what we all do, we have a role, we perform a role, I was interested and I saw an opportunity to study the performance of art. Because I enjoy art as an object but I’m fascinated by artists and where does art come from. Here’s this wonderful work. How did that happen? How did it transpire? And so the question in the performance studies approach would be let’s study the performance of this artist, which is what I’m really doing for my dissertation. And I am also interested in artists in families. And I discovered an art exhibit in Prescott, Arizona in 2011 that featured twelve families of artists. So one of the projects I’m doing now is to put together a video that I took of the art exhibit and the interviews I did of the artists’ families into a two-hour documentary.

Meeker: Is that in essence going to be the dissertation?

Long: No. [laughter]
Meeker: [laughter] They still want you to write something, right?

Long:

Oh, yes. Yeah. The video is-something that I need to do in order to complete my qualified exams. It’s in essence one of the three qualified exams. It’s just the work and the presentation and the analysis of this project.

Meeker:

A lot of people do dissertations with a particular end goal in mind. Do you have anything that you’re hoping to achieve with this?

Long:

No. Honestly, the big picture I had of education, art was a focus but the bigger picture was—I was trained in science at Oregon State and I’ve used science very successfully as part of winemaking to kind of be the other part of the creativity that goes into that. So I wanted to develop that other part of me that was more humanistic. So science and humanities, a great combination, and I wanted to develop the humanities side which I’m in the process of doing.

Meeker:

Good. Well, very good. In relation to this, kind of bringing some of these things together is this conceptual art project I came across. That you partnered with an artist, Anya Gallaccio.

Long:

Gallaccio.

Meeker:

Anya Gallaccio. Called “After the Gold Rush.” It was in 2006. Well, why don’t you tell me about it?

Long:

Well, Anya is one of a group that was called the YBA, the Young British Artists. I was introduced to her by a woman in San Francisco who ran a contemporary art organization. And Anya had come over. She had previously done several projects with food. For example, she had painted a whole room in London with chocolate. [laughter] But she was interested in doing something with wine and so I was introduced to her and we started to talk. I said, “I’m willing to help you.” Ultimately the project was about making Zinfandel in old vineyards in Sonoma County. So I helped her locate the vineyards, access a ton of grapes from each of them, and with the help of Barbara Lindblom, a woman I’ve worked with for a long time, setup the winemaking process, the barrel fermentations, and then the bottling. So Anya then had bottles of Zinfandel from six different old vineyards when she designed the labels, the case, the concept. And so I went from a wine perspective of making wine and packaging it and selling it to the art perspective. It was making an artwork using wine as the medium.
In some ways it’s kind of like a metaphor, I think, for wine and the question is “is it an art or is it a science?” They’re kind of using art to weigh in on that question.

Yeah, yeah. Winemaking, from my standpoint, is incredibly creative because it’s agriculture. Through our discussions we’ve identified that grapes are sensitive fruits and they are very responsive to their environments and their output into wine can be very different. So you have to learn all those things that are agriculturally based and then there’s all the winemaking. And the end and probably the most important thing ultimately is the palate and the palate’s ability to distinguish all the tastes and flavors and come out with a food work of art, so to speak.

What did you think of the artfulness of the wine that was produced?

Of the what?

The artfulness of the wine that was produced.

It’s a really interesting question because it’s very hard for me. I’m so much a part of the wine industry that looking at a package with wine in it, I’m thinking “Wine” and she’s thinking “Art.”

Art.

So it’s coming from two very different visions. And I can come into art from many different ways but the coming into wine from that view is a little difficult. It’s a little bit like going into a room coated with chocolate and thinking of it as an art piece. [laughter] But that’s what a lot of this modern art is about and contemporary art. It’s really fun.

It’s conceptual. It’s experiential.

Yeah, absolutely.

I read some review of it and it seemed like part of what they’re talking about is questioning the attributes of technology. Is technology good or bad for us. And I’m not sure I understood. I’ve have to see the art to understand the connection to that. And what impact should technology have on creativity in some ways?
Well, the technology in that project was absolutely minimal.

Was it?

Yeah. It was very simple. It was to the best of her ability. It was simply an expression of the vineyard and it was real interesting, again, because of the age of the vines and the characteristics of the vineyards and the flavors in the wines. But it was meant to showcase or express the particular vineyards.

Was the wine meant to be drunk?

That’s a good question. Do you drink an art piece?

Do you eat the walls of the chocolate exhibit?

Well, it was made to be drunk. We wouldn’t make wine and have it be undrinkable.

I made wine and it was pretty undrinkable. [laughter] That wasn’t my intention.

Yeah. I have the wines here still. And I have an intention to put together a dinner and celebrate that project and open the wines but we haven’t quite accomplished it yet. It was a great project. Working with an artist, it’s just amazing.

I think that we should probably wrap-up this phase of it, at least. Of course there’s opportunity to revisit some issues later on if, after reviewing the transcript, you feel like that there’s some holes. But with that said, do you have any final thoughts? Anything that you would like to add at this point? You don’t have pressure. [laughter]

It’s a very good question. If I had to summarize my experience in wine I would say that it’s been an incredibly rich experience that I feel deeply grateful to have stumbled across and been able to participate over many years, to see it evolve, to use winemaking as a creative expression. I love agriculture. To have a career that involves being out in the field and understanding plants and how they behave and what the challenges are. It’s just been extraordinary.

[End of Interview]
This is the group that carried the wines to Steven Spurrier for the now celebrated 1976 France California tasting:

Louis and Liz Martini, Louis Martini Winery, organizers

**Trip administrative leader:** Joanne Dickerson (travel agent in Napa)

**Trip wine leader,** André Tchelistcheff, wine guru

Bill Sorenson, winemaker for Burgess Cellars

Mary Ann Graf, winemaker for Simi Winery

Zelma Long, chief enologist for Robert Mondavi Winery

Andy and Betty Beckstoffer, Napa Valley grape grower and leader

Morgan Ruddick, and wife, vineyard manager for Andy Beckstoffer’s vineyards in Ukiah, Mendocino County

Jim and Laura Barrett, owners of Chateau Montelena, the winery whose Chardonnay won the 1976 tasting

Bern Laxer, restaurant owner in northern Florida

Christopher Brix, wine collector from Los Angeles

Katie Spann, friend of the Martini’s, marketing guru

Rene di Rosa, owner of a Carneros Pinot Noir vineyard

Veronica McDonald, artist friend of Rene di Rosa

Ernie and Virginia Van Asperen, wine retailers

Arthur Hailey, author, and his wife

Bob and Nonni (Elinor) Travers, owners, Mayacamas Winery

Norbert Mirassou, Mirassou Winery
Making Wine in the New Millenium, circa 2015

Zelma Long, Winemaking Partner, Vilafonte

My visits to other winemakers have been full of my questions, seeking an understanding as to how they coax their grapes, in their growing and vinification, to reach their highest potential. I have asked these questions in Germany, the Loire, New Zealand, California, Provence, Washington, Virginia, essentially all wine places I have visited around the world. Most winemakers enjoy engaging in these discussions because the education generally goes both ways; and we all love to talk about what we do, and why.

I have been equally curious about how great wines were made in the past. When I arrived at Simi Winery in 1980, I was offered a taste of the Simi 1935 Cabernet. It was a great wine; it maintained its composure and interest over the two decades I was at Simi, but how was it made? No one knows, sadly.

Therefore, for future curious winemakers, I am inserting a description of how, right now, my Vilafonte Bordeaux blends, Series C and Series M, are being grown and made. I would say first, they are made by a team. The team leaders who set philosophy, quality, and style for the vines and wines, are myself, the Winemaking Partner, and my husband, Dr. Phillip Freese, the Winegrowing Partner, who oversaw the planting of our vines and their annual care. With us, is Martin Smith, the ‘hands on’ winemaker, and Edward Pieterson, who manages the vines.

The caveat, as all winemakers know, is that the process is ever evolving, reacting to the grapes, the vintage, past experience, new approaches. There is never a formula, only guidelines and the philosophy that underpins the work.

Our approach

Our vineyard was sited and planted to make “world class” wines. To be more definitive, I want to achieve great flavor intensity and length of flavor on the palate; harmony between aromatics and palate; and balance of the alcohol, acidity, and phenolics. Harmony, balance, concentration, and complexity of flavors, and expression of site… we grow and vinify our wines to come as close to this perfection that the site, our skills, and Mother Nature allow.

The grapes – we grow our wines

We grow Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Malbec. We make our wines only from our vineyard, a site that we selected and that we planted. At this moment we have 50 acres that were planted in 3 tranches, in 1998, 2006, and 2014. The site is planted in 1 hectare blocks to be able to manage and enhance vine uniformity of growth in each block.

When we plant, we have our wines in mind. The many soil preparation and planting decisions include: matching vines to soils; row and vine spacing; choice of trellising system; plant material – root stock, cultivar, and clones; consideration of aspect; water availability and management;
management of rooting depth and soil nutrition – all predicated on producing very fine and complex red wines. We want to grow small vines, not too vigorous, that are numerous (i.e. more vines/acre) but carry only a small amount of fruit each, with a cluster morphology that permits good air circulation for even ripening; the ability to get small sized grapes for good flavor concentration, plus enough shoot length so the leaves can adequately feed the clusters on their shoots (one or two clusters per shoot). The soils are very old, with little nutrition, and not very productive… perfect for fine winegrowing. Needless to say, the site was chosen to facilitate these outcomes – that it could relatively naturally produce the fruit we wanted.

Our winegrowing design and management entails the level of attention close to that of a garden; it is intellectual work to react to constantly changing conditions of vine age and weather conditions, and a serious amount of hand-work with each vine through the growing season. We gather data to help with our decisions.

We do not sell our grapes; we do not buy grapes. With 15 vintages from this site, I know well each 1 hectare block and its unique personality, the range of style each tends to produce; I know that some are quite consistent and others less so; and can do a reasonable job of predicting the wine behavior in a given vintage, from the site, and grapes, which are managed by my winegrowing partner and his seasoned winegrowing vine manager.

Before harvest we gather data to better understand the character of each block, this vintage, for this harvest. Berry size (weight) tends to be a good predictor of color and concentration: larger berries generally mean less color thus less intensity. Our Cabernet grapes average about 1 gram per berry but can range plus/minus 15% from year to year. Standard deviation is tracked for several weeks before harvest, for each block. This tells me how variable (in Brix) the grapes within each block will be at harvest, and is a major characteristic of the vintage. The berry size and variability impact both harvesting timing and vinification decisions. For the greatest wine concentration, low variability is most desirable and we manage the vineyard to facilitate this outcome.

We also track grape chemistry for about 4-5 weeks before harvest: Brix, acidity (as titratable acidity), pH, and phenolics. It is basic data (like the pulse, blood pressure, and blood sugar for humans) and it becomes part of the history of each block as it approaches harvest. The first three tell of the potential “balance” of the wine – the future interrelationship of acidity, and alcohol. Total phenolics gives indication of color and tannin concentration, which varies from vintage to vintage and is impacted by berry size, mentioned above. We also watch all data for indications of a normal development (good) or an unusual condition (needs to be checked and considered). Our last phenolic sample before harvest becomes our baseline for our color and tannin extraction during vinification.

Harvest

Harvest is driven by our assessment of flavor development, balance, phenolic ripeness, the ripeness of the vine. Five weeks before harvest we taste and walk each block once a week. Close to harvest, when we are fine tuning the exact time to harvest, we may visit a block three times a week, chewing the grapes, looking at skin thickness, seed ripeness (change of green color to
brown color), and ease of removal from the pedicel; color of the slight bit of fruit left on the pedicel, cluster stem color, softness of the grape berry, brown coloring of the vine shoots indicating vine maturity, canopy condition, and weather. Perhaps one day an algorithm will be developed to quantify and balance all these factors. For the time being it is our human integration of them, our judgment and our personal experience with each individual block, and the vision for wine we hope will come from it, that results in the harvest decision. I consider the ‘optimum harvest window’ to be 3 days for each 1 hectare vineyard block.

Our vineyard is small, and with varied soils and varieties the ripeness of each block naturally spreads itself out. So we harvest just one hectare (2 ½ acres) each day, as each block ripens, and not necessarily every day. We start in the morning, at first light. Our harvest crew is primarily our permanent vineyard crew. We harvest into small containers, with slotted sides for air penetration, holding 30 pounds of grapes; the containers stack on top of each other and come to the winery on a flatbed truck, a twenty minute drive. At the winery, the boxes of grapes, which have been stacked onto pallets, are forklifted into a refrigerated container. Their temperature from the vineyard will reflect the vineyard morning temperatures which range from cool to warm (15C to 20C, for example). The side slots in the boxes of grapes, stacked in the container, allow effective chilling. We will start to sort and destem the grapes at 8 am the next morning, and they will be cold, intact, healthy clusters, around 12C.

Before I continue I need to state some specifics we consider and want to achieve with our winemaking: (1) We want to handle the grapes gently, thus avoiding pumping them into their fermenters; (2) we want to achieve the desired wine character and balance in the grapes, and avoid using various “enhancements” in the winemaking process; (3) we want to extract from the grapes what they have to offer us, keep the wines healthy, and handle them gently; (4) we have elected to keep each vineyard block separate through the first year of aging. Their management in the winery needs to be attuned to the block personality and thus each is held and made uniquely.

**Sorting, and preparation for fermentation**

Our first step in the winery is to unload each box slowly and sequentially onto a moving belt, with 4 people to remove leaves and any undesirable clusters (e.g. shriveled berries). The clusters then go up a conveyor, into the top of a destemmer, and drop down, stemless, onto another moving belt, with eight people sorting. Their job is to remove any less than perfect berries (i.e. shriveled grapes, green color grapes, lighter color grapes, pieces of stem, or plant materials like parts of leaves). When the grapes fall off the end of the sorting belt into the crusher, they actually look like perfect blueberries, beautiful. The word ‘crush’ inadequately describes what happens. The grapes drop through a set of rollers adjusted so that they just barely break the skin of each grape as it rolls through and drops into a bin below. Here we add a small amount of SO2 (30-50 ppm) and some pectic enzyme designed to help break down the skin cells to release their color and tannins.

The bin of grapes is then lifted by forklift and drained into the top of its assigned fermenter, which can hold 3-7 tons of grapes (we have various sizes) but one vineyard block will always go only into one fermenter. The grapes are still cool from their overnight chilling, and they will be further chilled while sitting in the fermenter, because we now do what is generally called a “cold
soak,” further chilling them in-place in the tank; and keeping them cold for 3-5 days, until the juice is very dark. Because our site tends to produce structured tannins, we want to extract the available color by mid fermentation, before the wine alcohol starts to extract the tannin from seeds, which can be bitter. The fermenters are stainless steel (to enhance freshness and fruit expression), traditional European oak tanks (to enhance richness on the palate), and 225 liter oak barrels. Malbec is fermented in the stainless tanks; Merlot in both oak tanks and stainless tanks, Cabernet in oak tanks, and Cabernet Franc in barrels. Many winemakers now are doing fermentation in barrels but we have found more desirable wine qualities (fruit expression and wine balance & harmony) using small tank fermentations.

**Fermentation**

Harvest is the first of 4 critical decisions in winemaking. Extraction during fermentation is the second critical decision point for red wine. In the fermentation process there are several actions that can be taken to facilitate extraction. My desire is to extract all of the “extractable anthocyanins” (versus total anthocyanins) by mid fermentation, say 10 -12 Brix, and then use gentle methods to coax out enough but not too many tannins. The phenolic compounds in the grape skin have developed through the growing year. They include color, various tannins, and aromatic and flavor compounds. Some of the tannins give structure, richness and texture, and some, particularly the smaller seed tannins, can give bitterness and astringency, which we work to avoid.

The processes that affect extraction are fermentation temperature, mixing of the cap and wine (including technique, frequency and length), total time for the wine to be on its skins, and the decision about timing of pressing. For us, to achieve the wine aromatics and palate that we want from our grapes, we do the following: (a) Once fermentation has started, warm to 30C for 24 hours to aid extraction; (b) the balance of the time ferment at 25-28C; (c) once fermentation is going well, do a delastage (also called rack and return) 3 times before 10 – 12 brix; (d) at mid fermentation check color and tannins; work to approach a 100% extraction of extractable anthocyanins, and check the tannin levels and total phenolics.

We have developed our own internal standards for what tannin level we want in each Cabernet, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Malbec, for each plays a different role in blending. If the tannins are low after mid fermentation we will coax them out with short, gentle pumpovers using a sprinkler over the cap. When they hit our target, and the wine tastes full and balanced, we will drain the fermenter, and press into separate containers for the drain and the press wine. This press timing may be anywhere from 6 Brix to completely dry. We rarely use the press wine in our Series C and Series M blends. With good extraction procedures the press wine may be lighter than the drain, but it is always astringent, although we only do a light press.

Success does not depend on the quantity of wine pressed out; it depends on the quality of the wine. After pressing, the wine goes quickly into barrels that have been specifically selected for each fermenter with its unique vineyard block/variety.
Managing the microbes – yeast

During the fermentation, the winemaker must manage two parallel processes: one is extraction, the other is yeast activity. We want to be sure our yeast are properly prepared so they are robust on addition to the juice and have sufficient, but not excessive, nutrients (both nitrogen and micronutrients) to complete fermentation. This statement is the ‘umbrella’ over a wide variety of tactics and choices. At this point in the new millennium, and for some time, selection of specific yeasts is considered critical. From my standpoint it is critical for the yeast to do a complete, and clean fermentation, not too fast. Many other winemakers are concerned with the nuances of aromas and flavors. In our blended and barrel aged wines, in barrel and bottle 3 years before release, the subtle differences between the various yeasts tend to be muted or subsumed over time.

That said, I have used “wild”/natural (no added yeast) fermentations with good success. Yeast selection is an area of a great diversity of opinion and of numerous available yeast strains from external suppliers. The yeast choices are influenced by the grape variety being fermented; its growing conditions… the nutrients it encapsulates; its chemistry; its sanitary condition; and the wine goals of each individual winemaker. For our Bordeaux grape varieties, which have great intensity, a complete fermentation at a reasonable rate in a reasonable length of time, reflecting the fruit’s flavors and aromatics and with no off odors, is my idea of success.

Managing the microbes – malo-lactic bacteria

In our vineyard, Malbec seems to go through malo-lactic fermentation (after alcoholic fermentation) reluctantly. In this case we do add commercial bacteria and sometimes nutrient, but most of the wines, right after fermentation when they are in barrel and still somewhat warm, will use the native winery flora to complete transformation of the wine’s malic acid to lactic acid.

Barrels and barrel aging

We are making two different Bordeaux style blends: Series C, a very concentrated wine, is predominately Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and our most structured Merlot; Series M is usually around two thirds Malbec and Merlot, to provide fruit and flesh, with Cabernet for backbone/structure. They are grown and blended for long aging. However we want the fruit and flesh to shine through the Series M, thus we use less new oak (usually say, 20% new oak) and the balance in barrels that have been used 2 or 3 times. The intensity of the Cabernet and the structure we want needs the balance of new oak; the intense Cabernet soaks up new oak like a sponge; in time the oak is completely integrated, having added mid palate weight, and various flavors and aromas.

The new barrels are chosen with the individual blocks in mind; we buy barrels for each block, not as a percent of the whole blend. Most of the Cabernet (but not all) blocks and one very intense Merlot are aged in new oak. Malbec and Cabernet Franc do not see new oak, and Merlot sees some. Grapes from young vines do not see new oak until they are 7 or 8 years old – and
depending on how they react to the oak choices we make as we are learning about these younger vineyards.

Added to this matching of each block to new, second or third use French oak, which we have arrived at by experimentation, is the selection of the barrel cooper… and extremely important. Each cooper has his own style of barrel and we tried many before settling on Taransaud and Francois Frere as our two major suppliers, and Mercury and Darnajou to add spice and complexity.

These barrel-related choices are the third critical intervention for the wines. Again by experimentation we have found that the Series M wine reaches the character we are seeking (complex, juicy, fresh) at about 18 months in barrels while 24 months better suits the intensity of Vilafonte Series C.

Blending – the 4th critical area of decisions

We set up our blending trials about a year after the wine has gone to barrel. We taste not only each block, but all the barrel types within that block. I taste with our winemaker, and we taste to reach a consensus on each blend, out of respect for each other’s palates. I made the original 2003 blends; their style has evolved to some degree, but we always refer to the previous wines when blending. We want to achieve a sense of continuity of style for the Series M and C, while reflecting the current vintage and “elevating” the wine by our choices. Specifically, we do not blend to a certain % of each variety (or new oak) in each wine. Rather, we taste

all wines as described below, and then put them together in a way that best reflects the style, site, and vintage, then we “discover” the varietal %’s that result. Thus an analysis of our historical blends by % grape variety would show a strong degree of variability; yet tasting them would reveal a strong style thread within each Series wine.

Each block and variation within that block is lined up down the middle of a very long table, with glasses on each side of each wine. Each sample is a composite of all barrels in a particular lot (for example, all the new Taransaud barrels in Block D).

I taste all lots and note (on a computer spreadsheet) a suggested blend destination, Series M, Series C, or neither. Then we compare notes and discuss. The glasses are covered and left overnight. The next morning we taste them again. Has the character and intensity held up overnight in the glass or has it faded? This observation will inform the blending. That second morning we each construct, on paper, several blends, usually 3 or 4 each, of Series C blends and Series M blends. These trial blends are made that day or first thing the next morning.

From that point we do a series of tastings. The first is the 6-8 blends for each Series wine; we each choose a favorite, noting its strengths and weaknesses, and each then makes some new blends for the next tasting, with the goal of moving them toward our ideal. We may come to an end point in 2 or 3 sessions; sometimes it takes longer. If we have wines that seem equally good,
we do the “let sit in the glass overnight and see how well the wine holds up” process, and we may remake the blends for re-tasting.

Our goals for each wine: It fits its intended wine style; its palate is consistent in weight and length; the tannins are ripe and fine; the wine has correct aromatics; it is aromatically expressive; it is complex. When we both agree on both wines, we are done. We usually allot 2 weeks to this process. Slow but sure. With the final blends identified, the wines in the cellar are blended, to create these two wines, then sent back to barrels for another year (Series C) or 8 months (Series M), and then bottled. In its time in barrels the wine becomes stable, the flavors integrate, and it clarifies; we come through the whole vinification process with no filtration. In this age of high technology, we prefer a personal, hands-on, low-tech approach, where we consider each block of grapes, and its wine, as a personality that needs thoughtful individual attention.

**Summary**

For all I have said, each decision can be made differently depending on the fruit and the vintage and our past experiences and new ideas. This presentation could easily be many times longer if I discussed each specific decision along the way with all the aspects of that decision that we consider. We choose what works best for our grapes, our site, our varieties, this vintage, and our style, out of the thousands of nuances and options in the winemaking process. That complexity is what makes growing wine fun, intellectually challenging, and aesthetically pleasing: an art, in addition to a science.

_Zelma Long_

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