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Berkeley, California

The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

Miljenko Grgich

A CROATIAN-AMERICAN WINEMAKER IN THE NAPA VALLEY

With an Introduction by
Zelma Long

Interviews Conducted by
Ruth Teiser
in 1992

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Introduction by Zelma Long, President and CEO, Simi Winery.

Interviewed in 1992 by Ruth Teiser for the Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series, The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

TABLE OF CONTENTS--Miljenko (Mike) Grgich

PREFACE	i
INTRODUCTION--by Zelma Long	vi
INTERVIEW HISTORY	viii
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	ix
EARLY YEARS IN CROATIA, 1923-1954	1
STUDYING ENOLOGY AND VITICULTURE, 1949-1954	4
WEST GERMANY, 1954-1956	7
CANADA, 1956-1958	8
LEARNING ABOUT CALIFORNIA	9
TO CALIFORNIA, 1958-1977	11
Working for Lee Stewart, 1958	11
Christian Brothers, 1959	13
Beaulieu Vineyard, 1959-1968	15
Advances in Frost Protection	16
Improvements in White Wines	17
Sterile Bottling	17
Induced Malolactic Fermentation	18
Quality Control	18
Robert Mondavi Winery, 1968-1972	19
Experimenting	22
Chateau Montelena, 1972-1977	23
The 1976 Paris Tasting	26
GRGICH HILLS CELLAR, 1977-DATE	28
Making a Beginning	28
Ideals and Implementation	31
"One Cannot Mention Care Too Often"	35
Winery Personnel	38
Business Goals and Methods	39
Pre-Release Club	41
Labels and Vineyard Blends	43
White Riesling	45
More on Improvements in White Wines	47
Financing the Winery	48
Changes	50
Grgich Hills Vineyards	52
CHANGES IN THE CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY SINCE 1958	55
TAPE GUIDE	58
INDEX	59

PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstated as The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed is made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the current chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute; Ruth Teiser, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Winemen
Oral History Series

July 1992
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INTRODUCTION--by Zelma Long

Mike Grgich is truly an American success story. A Croatian immigrant, his California wine work in the 1950s and 1960s built upon his youthful experience and education in winemaking to create a solid foundation for his technical and business success. During the 1970s and 1980s, he grew into one of California's top winemakers, achieving great professional recognition and the personal success of his winery, Grgich Hills. Mike, at 54, was not a young man when he started Grgich Hills, in partnership with Austin Hills, and his success illustrates the American dream of rewards for perseverance, dedication to a goal, and plain hard work!

When I came to work for Mike at Robert Mondavi Winery in 1970, Robert Mondavi was a small winery crushing 1,700 tons of grapes. Mike's own domain, the laboratory, was a tiny room in the winery's renowned tower. At my first meeting with Mike, I found him tasting wine in barrels, stacked in the winery barrel room, a small room that is currently the Oakville facility's office! I worked with Mike in 1970, 1971, and 1972 as an apprentice winemaker and have since followed, with respect and admiration, his career. As I look back, Mike was a special and unusual combination of artist and scientist. He had done pioneer work with malolactic fermentation while working with André Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard and was at home with a microscope, whether he was tracking the behavior of yeast or bacteria. I was fresh out of the University of California, Davis, after several years of studying the various aspects of technical winemaking and found Mike was easy to talk to about technical wine issues such as wine stability and wine composition, although he didn't express himself in the same way a scientist would. Mike always retained his European way of communicating about wine. He seemed to understand wine, not only from an analytical, technical sense but also from an intuitive sense.

Mike was a good teacher. He treated the grapes from each vineyard, and each wine, individually. As we would taste the fermenting wines and then the young wines, Mike would discuss their evolution from the perspective of the whole life of the wine: what he thought the particular personality of the wine was, its strengths and weaknesses, likely behavior, and the approaches to create or coax out a complex and harmonious wine.

At that time, California winemaking, in the modern sense, was just beginning. When I first came to Robert Mondavi, Mike was supervising the bottling of the 1969 Cabernet that became so famous when it won the Los Angeles Times tasting of California wines. Mike had laid his

professional imprint strongly upon this wine. Malolactic fermentation was a new concept in winemaking. The use of stainless steel tanks with temperature control was still a tool that was appreciated and not yet taken for granted. Neither skin contact nor barrel fermentation were part of the winemaking process for Chardonnay; and the use of French oak barrels in the aging of the wine had just begun. In this regard, Mike was a perfect complement to Robert Mondavi, bringing to the winery his own vision of oak aging as essential for fine wines.

As I look back on Mike's winemaking skills in the early 1970s, it's easy to see now that he had an unusually strong base on which to build the success he has achieved. At a time when most winemakers in the business were young and inexperienced, when there were very few older winemakers knowledgeable about fine European winemaking techniques, Mike had acquired through years of education and experience the technical skill and understanding and the artistic approach to winemaking that enabled him to produce refined, balanced, and expressive wines.

In the intervening twenty years, the California wine industry has boomed, expanded. A wine public capable of evaluating and appreciating California's efforts has emerged. California's international reputation for wine had changed. In the 1970s, Europeans viewed California wines as rustic; now they see them as fine, sophisticated, quality wines, important competitors in the world market. Mike's decisions to leave Robert Mondavi Winery for a lead winemaker position at Chateau Montelena, and ultimately to open Grgich Hills Winery in 1977, were timed to take advantage of this growth and development and reflected Mike's determination and personal evolution.

Since the birth of Grgich Hills Winery, Mike has not attempted to cast his net widely in activities; he has focused his time and effort on his wines and winery. His greatest reputation rests with his Chardonnay, a wine widely respected by both the wine trade and the consumer. It is one of the most popular Chardonnays of California, despite a relatively high bottle price for this varietal. His winery is solid, thoughtfully designed, well located, but not flashy. His vineyards surround his home and the home of this partner, Austin Hills. A prominent wine publication, The Wine Spectator, recently acknowledged Mike as one of California's premier winemakers, appreciated not only for his Chardonnay but his Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Sauvignon Blanc. He has a master's touch, and his success has been well earned and well deserved.

Zelma Long
President, Simi Winery

May 1992
Healdsburg, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Miljenko (Mike) Grgich

The interview with Miljenko (Mike) Grgich was held in two sessions, the first the afternoon of March 3, 1992, the second the following morning, March 4, both at his home near Yountville. The gracious house, built in 1885, with high ceilings and tall windows, is flanked by vines and an attractively landscaped garden where he often entertains.

The interviewer, who knew Mr. Grgich by reputation and through articles in the press, had met him earlier in 1992 on a shuttle bus ride en route to a preview of the Opus One winery in Oakville. Cheerful and outgoing, he responded to my inquiries, giving in effect a brief preview of his interview. As the interview itself attests, he proved to be an informative narrator, cooperative in speaking about the subjects suggested in advance, and in adding relevant information.

He was similarly responsive in reading over the interview transcript. Both he and his daughter, Violet Grgich, made some changes. Although he speaks English very expressively, Mr. Grgich's conversation is still reminiscent of the fact that his native language is Croatian. Some of his untraditional English expressions were reworded by his daughter, still retaining their meaning. He himself clarified other statements by replacing words and phrases with more exact ones. There were no extensive changes.

The frontispiece photograph of Mr. Grgich is through the courtesy of The Wine Spectator. The rest of the photographs were chosen from an assortment very kindly supplied by Violet Grgich.

Thanks are due to Zelma Long, who contributed the informative and appreciative introduction to this interview with her fellow winemaker.

Ruth Teiser,
Interviewer/Editor

July 1992
Regional Oral History Office
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EARLY YEARS IN CROATIA, 1923-1954

[Interview 1: March 3, 1992]##¹

Teiser: When were you were born?

Grgich: April 1, 1923.

Teiser: And you were born at Desne in Croatia?

Grgich: Yes, it's a village of about a thousand people. My father was a farmer and was growing grapes and making wine. He was growing wheat, corn, and lots of vegetables, and he had sheep and cows. It was a little farm.

Teiser: You grew up on the farm?

Grgich: Yes, very luckily, because as a child I started to learn about life, working on the farm. I was a shepherd when I was six years old, taking care of sheep, and I was stomping grapes when I was two or three years old. I remember that stomping grapes was the first job I had. When it was the harvest, everybody works, even children, and the children learn skills little by little every year. When you start at two or three years old, by ten years old you know everything your father knows; not that you have physical power, but you have experience.

Unfortunately, in the towns in civilized countries, children go to school and go to school, and they have no experience. They study something, but they don't have a real touch with Mother Nature or with real facts, with life, or with the climate--rain,

¹This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes refer to the page following this transcript.

wind, snow--the horses, the cows, the sheep, vegetables, the river and the floods, the mountains, lakes, fish. So I was fortunate to live among these things. It was a great experience.

Teiser: What kind of area was it?

Grgich: It was a coastal region, about five miles from the coast. At the same time, there was a river and a lake pretty close. My house was about five hundred yards above the lake, where we fished. And there was a river we fished in, and we fished in the ocean. Fishing, fishing, fishing! [laughs]

Teiser: Did you have any special interests as a kid?

Grgich: I was always interested in doing a good job. Even if I was a kid of six years old, I had an interest in my sheep coming home full. Every day I would find someplace where I could fill their tummies, so when I got them home I knew they had the best that I could give them. So from the very beginning, it was my urge to do the best.

Teiser: Did your father make you think that way?

Grgich: Yes, my father always said, "Don't worry if you're not rich, and don't worry if you have no college degree. As long as you do what you are doing today better than yesterday and a little better tomorrow and every day forward in one year, in 365 days you will acquire a noticeable amount of improvement, knowledge which will keep you going toward success."

Teiser: How did your father make a living? Did he sell his products on the open market?

Grgich: He made a living mainly by producing food that he needed and then selling wine. He would drink half and sell half--drink the best and sell the rest. He was very smart. In our country, you give the best product to your family and friends, and then you sell the rest. When I came abroad, I found the opposite; they sell the best, and they eat the rest. What a different philosophy between the countries. [laughs]

Teiser: The political climate in Croatia when you were young--

Grgich: It was Yugoslavia then.

Teiser: When you were growing up there, was it an open, free market?

Grgich: It was a semi-free market. It was still a kind of dictatorship by the Serbian king. We did suffer under the dictatorship of the Serbian king. Yugoslavia was established in 1918 as the Kingdom

