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Grape expectations

Raising a glass to Napa's Jewish vintners

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There's something unique about winemakers slipping into synagogue for High Holy Days.

The holidays mean fall has arrived, and in Napa Valley, that means harvest time. The grapes are at their peak and must be picked and crushed to begin the winemaking process.

"It's hard to sit in shul during harvest," notes Ernie Weir, owner of the Hagafen winery.

Michelle Edwards, winemaker of Cliff Lede Vineyards, concurs. Edwards says she's always exhausted during the High Holy Days, and there have been years when she arrives at synagogue in her "overalls, with red hands, having worked all day. And you know you're not alone. [This] time of year is challenging but cleansing on so many levels."

The name Hagafen is so obviously Jewish it needs no explanation. And no one would be surprised to learn that Weir, a Jew, is behind the only kosher winery in Napa. But look behind Napa Valley's other labels, and though their names wouldn't give it away, there are quite a number that have Jewish connections.

For example, who would know that the founder of Clos Pegase Winery in Calistoga is actually a Columbian-born Jew whose parents are of Lebanese Jewish descent?

Or that Emilio's Terrace Vineyard in Oakville is named after its Mexican-born manager, Emilio Perez, but that its owner is venture capitalist Phil Schlein?

Or that behind Bighorn Cellars of Napa is real estate developer and investor Richard Wollack?

Matthiasson Winery of Napa is named after a man with that name, but is co-owned by his wife, Jill Klein, who attributes her interest in wine to coming upon an ancient vineyard when she was on a teen trip to Israel.

And Leslie Rudd, owner of Rudd Vineyards and Winery, as well as gourmet haven Dean & Deluca, is Jewish.

Even some Jewish winemakers themselves had no idea so many of their colleagues were Jews.

"I always thought that I was the only Jewish winemaker," says Rich Frank, proprietor of Frank Family Vineyards in Calistoga. "I was shocked at how many people are Jewish and involved."

Not too long ago, Frank participated in an event highlighting the Jewish vintners of Napa Valley, and couldn't believe there were more than 30 wineries participating.

It was a common sentiment.

Art Finkelstein, considered one of the old-timer Jewish vintners in Napa Valley, said that even he had no idea so many Jews were involved in the wine industry.

"My first thought was, 'Where the hell have these people been?'"

He guessed that it was probably because many of them do not go to synagogue (Napa Valley has one synagogue, Reform Congregation Beth Sholom in Napa), and some of them live elsewhere while maintaining a second home — and a wine label — in the valley.

Finkelstein, of Judd's Hill Vineyards, says he'd always shared a certain camaraderie with a handful of Jewish winemakers, but had no idea there were so many. At the event he recently attended, there was one winemaker Finkelstein had known for years but had never suspected was Jewish.

"By and large, these were absolutely new acquaintances I made. These people snuck in when I wasn't looking. Where did they come from? I don't know."

The Napa Valley Vintners group counts almost 400 wineries in Napa, from the smallest that produce less than 200 cases annually, to the largest that produce cases in the thousands.

As many of 40 of them have Jews involved, either on the winemaking end or the financial end.

“Our local synagogue has more winemakers than doctors, which cannot be said about many other places,” says Weir of Hagafen Cellars.

Because Hagafen is the only kosher winery in Napa, Weir is probably the most identifiable Jew in the valley. He also notes that he serves as the unofficial Israeli consul there because of his Israeli-born wife, Irit.

Even though Weir makes a kosher product and he hires Sabbath-observing Jews to handle the wine, he is a mostly secular Jew.

Napa’s Jewish history was well-documented in the 2003 book “Under the Vine and the Fig Tree: The Jews of Napa Valley” by Lin Weber. According to that volume, the first Jews to settle there came around the time of the Gold Rush. While they helped develop the valley, most moved on, and for a while, Napa was fertile ground for the Ku Klux Klan to recruit members and stage rallies.

Some German Jews fleeing World War II came in the 1940s but still had to deal with laws forbidding certain land purchases to “non-whites” — including Jews — and other forms of subtle and not-so-subtle anti-Semitism.

Things steadily improved, and some Jews drawn to the vineyard life started moving there in the 1960s to make wine.

But even then, as reported in the book, when Michael Bernstein of Mount Veeder tried joining the Napa Valley Vintners Association, he was told that “the membership isn’t really open” to people like him — the handful of Jews making wine.

Finkelstein, however, tells a different story. He was an architect in Los Angeles, and started making wine as a hobby. In 1979, he and his wife, Bunnie, moved to St. Helena and started Whitehall Vineyards, later selling it and founding Judd’s Hill, named after their son, Judd.

Finkelstein says that when he joined the vintner’s association in 1980 or ’81, he experienced no anti-Jewish sentiments. Furthermore, while he does remember feeling like the lone Jew in town (he says Judd was the only “out” Jew in the entire St. Helena school district when they first arrived in 1979), rather than anti-Semitism, the family only experienced a lot of curiosity.

“When we moved up here, the people we hung out with did not know from Jewish,” recalls Finkelstein, who sent Judd to Sunday school and Hebrew school.

When the Finkelsteins tried to give their son the usual teenage rite of passage, a bar mitzvah, it turned into something much greater.

In addition to his religious-school classmates, Judd invited about 30 of his friends from school, none of whom were Jewish. To the Finkelsteins' surprise, the parents of those kids all wanted to come, too — to the service, not the party.

“I said ‘absolutely,’” Finkelstein recalls. “They came because they didn’t know anything about it. They had heard the term but didn’t know what it was. Our rabbi at the time was good at explaining things, and it became the cultural event of the year, Jewish-wise.”

Judd’s Hill is a family affair, with Judd working as a winemaker alongside his parents, and his wife, Holly, working the business end.

Judd is also a ukulele player with a love for tiki bars, and Holly is a hula dancer. They are often seen in Hawaiian-themed clothing, she with a flower tucked behind her ear, performing as the Maikai Gents Featuring the Mysterious Miss Mauna Loa.

Al Brounstein, the founder of Diamond Creek Vineyards, was considered among the Jewish winemaking pioneers. Brounstein, who died earlier this year, first worked in the pharmaceutical business, with wine as a hobby. The money he made in pharmaceuticals allowed him to buy his own vineyard.

Similarly, Jan Shrem of Clos Pegase also entered winemaking after success in a different career. The Columbian-born Shrem, whose parents are of Lebanese Jewish descent, made his fortune in the Japanese publishing industry, and it was his Japanese wife who introduced him to wine. His winery in Calistoga is home to a Michael Graves-designed temple to wine and art.

Brounstein and Shrem are somewhat typical of the Jewish vintners of Napa Valley — and most vintners, for that matter. Most considered wine a hobby at first. Only later did they use their money to buy land, team up with a winemaker and produce wine.

While Diamond Creek Vineyards is not open to the public and has no tasting room, Brounstein did open it up once a year to the synagogue, to hold “Shavuot in the Vineyards” services. At the last one, by that time extremely ill from Parkinson’s disease, he was called to the Torah as a bar mitzvah at age 86.

Many of Napa’s winemaking Jews are more culturally Jewish than religious, like Tony Cartlidge, co-owner of Cartlidge & Browne in American Canyon. Wearing a button that said “Jew-ish” in a Hebrew-style font, he explains, “I’m not Jewish until something is anti-Semitic, and then I’m Jewish.”

Cartlidge was born in Great Britain to a non-Jewish father and Jewish mother who escaped Berlin in 1938.

“When I look at the makeup of our congregation, probably half of the people are not born Jewish,” says Finkelstein. “To my knowledge, in my kid’s age group [30s], they’re the only couple who are both Jewish.”

The recognition of Napa's secular Jewish culture is spurring the creation of a new cultural center for Napa's Jews.

The center's Web site says it will "celebrate the rich tradition of Judaism and wine; connect others to the agricultural heritage of the Jews and the cultural and spiritual link between the Jewish people and the land and the special role in Judaism played by the fruit of the vine."

As described by Ona Marks, one of those behind the center, there will be cultural exhibits highlighting Jewish authors or artists as well as an exhibit showing the Jewish history of Napa. "But the key element is the actual return to the roots in winemaking and farming, which is still in existence in Israel," she says. "That's going to be the stronghold of the organization."

As some of those vintners attest, winemaking has become a huge part of their Jewish identity, precisely because of its ancient roots.

Take, for example, Michelle Edwards, head winemaker at Cliff Lede Vineyards. Edwards wasn't born Jewish, but when she was 19, she wrote a paper for an anthropology class looking at wine use in Orthodox Jewish ritual. That foreshadowed several changes to come in her life.

Edwards, 30, is considered a rising star in the wine industry. She has gotten quite a bit of attention — not only for the winning Cabernets she produces or for her youth, but because she is a woman in a male-dominated field.

"You have to do a lot of grunt work in the beginning," she says, "and prove yourself on a physical level."

When Edwards was 20, she realized she did not want to study medicine, and took a break from college to travel. In Italy, she discovered a real love for wine and realized she wanted to learn about it, not just drink it. That led to a job in a tasting room, and then to working several harvests, both here and in Australia.

Often finding herself drawn to Jewish men, she grew more and more curious about Judaism, and began considering conversion. She met Dan Fischl, who grew up Orthodox in Sydney, Australia, when they were both in the viticulture program at U.C. Davis. For Edwards, it seemed like the next step; she and Fischl will be married next year, after she converts. (He works for the company that manages the vineyard where Edwards works.)

While Edwards appreciates all the references to and uses of wine in Judaism, she says her interest in it goes way beyond that. She also appreciates the community around it.

"I'd like to raise my [future] children in accordance with that, since I never had it myself," she says.