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The Story of Clone 6 and Bell Wine Cellars

When I joined Beaulieu Vineyard as Assistant Winemaker and Viticulturist in February of 1979, I was one of the few Napa Valley winery employees with Viticulturist in their job title. The Napa Valley wine industry was dominated by several large wineries, and there were a few emerging “boutique” wineries – small wineries focused on limited production, high-end wines. The famous Paris tasting in May of 1976 had placed California and Napa Valley on the global wine map and there was an increasing awareness of the local industry.

The vineyards in Napa could be divided into two camps – those recently planted during the boom era of the early 1970’s and those older, diseased vineyards remaining from the post-prohibition plantings. Wine quality was on the upswing, as a new generation of winemakers, freshly graduated and schooled in the finer points of wine production, fermentation science and winery sanitation from UC Davis had begun to make their imprint on the industry. Varietal wines were replacing generic wines, although at Beaulieu we continued to use proprietary names (Beaurose, Beauclair, Beautour, Beauvelours, Beaumont) for many of the wines we produced. Virus-free, heat treated grape vines were being hailed as the long lived replacement for vineyards suffering from Eutypa, corky bark, leaf roll, grape fanleaf virus, and a myriad of other vine diseases. New Federal regulations had defined wine labeling laws, estate bottling was closely defined, and American Viticultural Areas (AVA’s) were beginning to be developed. We were about to embark on a great evolution in our industry, and as Beaulieu’s viticulturist, I was an eager participant.

Shortly after I joined Beaulieu Vineyard, I became involved in several projects that would, in retrospect, create my legacy at Beaulieu – Fan leaf virus disease; estate bottled regulations; creation of the Carneros AVA; Cabernet clonal research, and the association of wine with food; and, combined with my international experience, would ultimately lead to the development of Bell.

Many of the older Cabernet sauvignon vineyards in Napa Valley had been planted with budwood imported by some of the early industry pioneers, including Georges de Latour, the founder of Beaulieu Vineyard. By the time Georges de Latour established Beaulieu Vineyard in 1900, Napa Valley grape acreage had dwindled to only 2,000 acres due to the Phylloxera devastation. He began to import St. George rootstock, and both noble and common varieties from France. By 1909 he had built a nursery business that was supplying a half million grafted vines a year to California vineyards. This played a major role in rebuilding the California wine grape industry, particularly in Napa Valley. De Latour's nursery stock was described by industry sources as¹ superior in quality, true to name, well rooted and vigorous in growth. His own interest, however, was in cultivating the classic varieties from the premier wine regions of Europe, in particular France. Most of the clones were introduced in the early 1930's. Andre Tchelistcheff² recalled that De Latour obtained virtually all of the wood from the Solomon Nursery in Tomerry, France. This nursery had contacts in all of the major viticultural regions of France. Numerous varieties were imported, amongst them Cabernet sauvignon, Sauvignon blanc, Pinot noir, Chardonnay, Melon de Bourgogne, Muscat de Frontignan and Mondeuse de Savoy.

Older Napa Cabernet vineyards were infected with a debilitating virus disease, known as Grape Fanleaf Virus Disease (GLV). Transmitted by a soil nematode (small earthworm) this virus gradually killed the grapevine, affecting wine quality during the years of decline. In Napa, Christian Brothers Winery, Beaulieu Vineyard, and others were collaborating with Dr. Austin Goheen of the US Department of Agriculture, undertaking field studies to measure vine decline, and the resulting fruit and wine quality impact, seeking a rootstock resistant to the nematode. Goheen and I spent many hours together, evaluating the effect of GLV on Beaulieu's BV#1 vineyard, often discussing the evolving wine grape industry. Our discussions ultimately led to scientific questions about both Clone 7, the workhorse Cabernet sauvignon selection propagated for sale by most nurseries, and AxR#1, the rootstock used almost universally in California. I found it puzzling that the California wine-grape industry used the rootstock so extensively, without apparent disease risk.

¹ Personal communications with Austin Goheen.

² Personal communication with Andre Tchelistcheff

As an undergraduate studying Viticulture and Enology at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, we had been lectured extensively on the global understanding regarding the unsuitability of AxR#1 as a phylloxera resistant rootstock. In South Africa, and elsewhere, we were matching rootstocks to soil types and vine vigor, but in California, the industry planted almost exclusively to AxR#1 rootstock throughout the state³. Secondly, in South Africa we would improve the quality of our vineyard by grafting over to promising field selections (using budwood from an existing vine possessing highly desirable qualities we wanted to propagate). In California, we were following a more “high tech” course, using the newly developed, virus-free plant material from FPMS/UC Davis. These new vines, freed of limiting virus diseases, were proving to be large canopied, vigorous vines, capable of producing heavy yields of large clustered grapes. With vines still either head-pruned or trained to the ubiquitous California T-trellis, canopy management was virtually unheard of and we certainly were not positioning ourselves to produce high quality wines. Against this backdrop, our discussions eventually led to a proposal to undertake what became known as the Beaulieu Vineyard Clone Trial.

A. Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernet sauvignon Clone Trial

In 1980, I was in a unique position to undertake, in collaboration with Austin Goheen, the most ambitious research undertaken globally, at that time, with respect to grapevine clones. Our plan was to answer two questions: (a) Is there such a thing as clonal variation in grapevines; and (b) what Cabernet selection(s) should Beaulieu plant as it prepared for its second century of operations?

Fourteen Cabernet sauvignon clones, representing selections from around the world, as well as the probable “family tree” of Cabernet in California, were planted in BV#4 vineyard, now known as the Beckstoffer Tokalon Vineyard, in Oakville. With the help of Austin Goheen, one of these selections was plucked from an abandoned experimental station at Jackson, Amador County, California,⁴ located in the northern Sacramento River Valley. Goheen used an old parcel map from the Davis archives to track down the agricultural field station, formally closed in 1903, where he found the vines, overgrown and

³ Lucie T Morton. The Myth of the Universal Rootstock. *Wines and Vines*, June 1994.

⁴ Jane Suzanne King. Jackson Clone Produces Lushly Textured Fruit. *Vine Times*, March 2002.

wild⁵. He brought back several vine cuttings, including one thought to have been originally imported from Bordeaux by either the Masson or Wentz families in the 1880's.

These are the names and descriptions of the Cabernet selections used in the trial:

Comparison of Fourteen Selections of Cabernet Sauvignon⁸

<u>Selection</u>	<u>Cluster Shape</u>	<u>Berry Size</u>	<u>Crop Level</u>	<u>Yield</u>
Old Wentz	Cylindrical, shouldered	Large	Medium	6.00
Old BV/Draper		Medium	Medium	5.21
UCD 1A		Large	Large	6.23
UCD 02/Oakville	Conical, shouldered	Medium	Medium	5.38
UCD 04/Argentina	Cylindrical, winged	Large	Large	6.90
UCD 06/Jackson	Conical, shouldered	Medium	Very light	4.40
UCD 08/Concannon	Amorphous, winged	Large	Large	6.14
UCD 10/Germany	Cylindrical, winged	Medium	Medium	5.52
Chile/Cachopal	Conical, shouldered	Large	Medium	5.76
Australia/CSIRO126	Cylindrical, winged	Medium	Medium	5.36
Australia/Seppelts	Cylindrical	Small	Very light	3.63
France/INRA 5197	Conical, winged	Medium	Very Light	3.28
France/INRA 5325	Cylindrical	Large	Medium	5.45
Italy	Cylindrical, winged	Medium	Medium	4.75

In conjunction with Andre's son, Dimitri Tschelistcheff, Beaulieu Vineyard's consulting winemaker during most of the 80's, experimental wines were made annually and tasted by the Beaulieu winemaking team, in a series of blind tastings. Over a period of years a clear consensus developed among the panel at Beaulieu - one of the selections exhibited lushly textured fruit, finesse, and exceptional concentration. This selection, color-coded "green" in our trial, proved to be the re-discovered Clone 6.

⁵ Lynn Alley. Retrospective on California grapevine materials. *Wines & Vines*, November 2000.

B. Bell Wine Cellars and Clone 6

Following a disastrous harvest in 1979 at Baritelle Vineyard, I had begun to work on an aggressive vine trellis and canopy management program with grower John Baritelle. This professional relationship developed into a personal relationship, which was to lead, in later years, to the original 1991 Bell Wine Cellars partnership. In the early 1980's, Baritelle had begun to undertake research on his vineyard in an attempt to understand why certain vines were dying. Having exhausted numerous consultant's advice, a peer of Baritelle's at UC Riverside, Dr. Jeffrey Granett, theorized that the described symptoms were typical of phylloxera. During a weekend excursion to Napa Valley, Dr. Granett dug up roots of the afflicted vines and begun his investigation into what is today known as Phylloxera Biotype B. Over a period of almost two years, initially in clandestine fashion, and gradually evolving into an industry project, we began to elucidate the development and damage of phylloxera biotype B.

Following the determination of the presence of new strain of phylloxera, Baritelle had to replant his vineyard, and the first question was: To what rootstock? California was in it's infancy regarding rootstocks, and compounding the issue, Grapevine Fanleaf Virus (GFV) was also a concern.

Fortunately, the many years Beaulieu and others had spent working with Goheen on GFV had yielded some promising results. At Christian Brothers, a rootstock trial in a GFV infected vineyard had shown two rootstocks with resistance to the virus disease. Rich Kunde of Sonoma Grapevines propagated one, known as 039-16, and vines were grafted for planting in a trial on the Baritelle Vineyard. Initially considered to be possibly susceptible to phylloxera because part of the parentage was *Vitis vinifera* (highly susceptible to phylloxera), the 039-16 proved resistant to phylloxera. Baritelle then embarked upon a program of gradually replanting the entire vineyard. In 1985, I convinced Baritelle to plant 10 acres of their property to the "green" Cabernet clone selection, so promising in the BV clonal trial. It was from this block, that in 1991, Bell Wine Cellars began to produce its signature Clone 6 Cabernet sauvignon. When we released our first wine, uncertain as to the marketability of a numerically labeled clonal wine, we elected to call this wine Jackson

Clone, in recognition of the vine's role in the history of Cabernet in California.

Subsequently, in 1999, we altered our label to recognize the growing awareness of Clone 6 in the marketplace. It was the first single vineyard, single clone Cabernet wine in the United States, reintroducing to wine lovers a Cabernet selection so popular in Europe over one hundred years ago, that it was brought to California.

C. Bell Cabernet sauvignon program

At Bell Wine Cellars our focus is cabernet sauvignon – Clone 6 Cabernet from Rutherford and our Napa Cabernet sauvignon, a blend of various Napa Valley terroirs, appellations and clones.

The style of the Bell Cabernet Sauvignon, Clone 6 is sort of like its name. It has a long finish. It also has a unique balance of concentrated flavors and finesse. Made from 100% Clone 6 cabernet sauvignon, the wine is aged two years in barrel prior to bottling and then given two years of bottle age prior to release. Its firm yet fine tannins on the finish indicate that special quality of tasting good in its youth while retaining the capability to improve with age. The earthy flavors and distinctive varietal flavors of Clone 6 ensure that the wine offers a flavor alternative to the typical Napa Valley Cabernet.

We hold Clone 6 in such high esteem that we have used its special qualities to complement our other red wines. Our proprietary wine, Talianna, is a Bordeaux blend of Clone 6 Cabernet sauvignon, plus select barrel lots of Clones 4, 7 and 337; along with Petite verdot, Cabernet franc and Merlot. Clone 6, comprising around 4 - 6% of our Yountville Merlot blend, and a similar amount in the Napa Valley Merlot blend, adds backbone and structure, and brings a depth to the wine uncommon in many merlots. And finally, the age worthiness of our Napa cabernet can be ascribed to the presence of a good deal of Clone 6 Cabernet sauvignon.

Our Napa Cabernet is a blend of four different cabernet sauvignon clones, grown in six sub-appellations of Napa Valley (Carneros, Atlas Peak, Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford and Diamond Mountain), and often contains various combinations of Merlot grown in Yountville, Cabernet franc and Petite verdot. The result is very similar to a fine Bordeaux from St. Julien.