

Special
Edition
Summer 2026



THE WINE PRESS

WINE COMPETITION
1977
FIRST ANNUAL

Cheers
to our
JUDGES

SPECIAL EDITION





The Gift of the Orange County Wine Society

BY FRAN GITSHAM
OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition Chair

More often than not when I think of gifts, my thoughts turn to gifts of the heart and, having had the honor of knowing, and being mentored by some of the founding members of the Orange County Wine Society, I know just what a gift their passions and foresight have given us to this day.

I had the privilege over the years of having had many conversations with Jim Graver, an Orange County Wine Society founding member who spearheaded the home wine group for 38 years and was the first president of the organization.

The ultimate gift was conceived by a small group of people who, for their love of wine, created OCWS in the late 1970s. This amazing organization of, on average, 1,000 members began with a small band of like-minded people in 1976. A group of about 16 would meet on the first Friday of each month in the back room of Brant's Wine Rack, a wine and beer supply store on Tustin Avenue in Orange, where the store's

owner advised the group on winemaking. Soon friends wanted to sample the wines and the wine drinkers, as today, began to outnumber the winemakers.

Early in 1976 the group, out of necessity and wanting to be able to invite more people to share their passion, discussed ways to expand. Brant Horton suggested getting a booth at the OC Fair and offered his business as the sponsor. He went to fair management and, it just so happened that the OC Fair general manager, Ken Falk, had previously managed the Indiana State Fair, where fruit wines were made and an amateur wine competition was held.

Jerry Mead, who went on to become a renowned wine writer, and Brant Horton suggested the creation of a commercial wine competition. Thankfully, for us, the OC Fair loved the idea so much they gave the group a 10-foot booth at the fair that year. The fair suggested a home wine competition and hence, the forefathers of the current OC Fair wine competitions were born.

At that time, the run of the fair was a grand total of one week, which found the newly created home wine competition

with 49 entries and the Commercial Wine Competition with a whopping two varietals entered to be judged for a total of 82 individual wines (59 Chenin Blancs, 23 Gamay Beaujolais).

With interest having been generated from the exposure at the fair, the Friday meeting quickly outgrew the back of a store. Coupled with the love of creating home wines by the original founders and the OC Fair wanting to continue as a commercial wine group, the Orange County Wine Society was formed in late 1977 and incorporated as a non-profit educational organization in 1978. The organization subsequently rented an office on the OC fairgrounds in 1980, which has been called home ever since.

Who could have imagined that what was started by a small band of wine lovers would evolve into the OCWS as it is today? I, for one, am grateful to these people for laying the foundation of an incredibly amazing organization. I thank the OC Fair for giving us a home and bringing us to our golden anniversary this year and I thank those who came first for gifting us with their vision and commitment to their passions.

The Ultimate Commitment to Judging

BY FRAN GITSHAM
OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition Chair

The title of wine judge conjures up an image of a triumphant taster proudly awarding a gold medal and brandishing a winning bottle. However, this statement couldn't be further from the truth.

After a long day of judging hundreds of wines, with their tongues blackened by too much tannin and their teeth tingling from the acidity in the wine, ask any one of them and they will tell you that judging is not a glorious endeavor. But their pas-

sion has them looking forward to the next day and, subsequently at the end of each competition, the next year.

What sets the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition apart from and above the rest are the 90-plus experienced judges each year who are qualified winemakers or winery principals. This group is a combination of elite seasoned professionals representing almost every AVA in California and the most qualified to fairly evaluate wines of diverse characteristics.

The competition is for wines produced from California grapes

see JUDGING, page 5

OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition Judges



BY JANE GOODNIGHT, *Original OC Fair Wine Committee member*
AND KEVIN COY, *Director of Judges*

In 1977, the first annual OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition was held through a joint effort between the Orange County Wine Society (formerly called the Orange County Wine Guild) and the Orange County Fair. Orange County wine writer Jerry Mead was in charge of the judges. A total of 82 individual wines were judged by 18 judges (see list at right).

By the next year, 1978, the Commercial Competition had grown to include seven different, popular wine classifications including Chenin Blanc (both dry and sweet), Gamay Beaujolais, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Red Port. A total of 377 wines were judged.

Wine samples used in the judging were either procured directly from the producing wineries or their local distribution outlets or purchased off the shelf at nearby retail outlets. Every wine commercially available in the local market in the classifications being judged were included in the competition.

All tastings were done by professionals—vintners, winemakers or winery marketing and/or production wine representatives. Judges traveled to Orange County for the competition at their own expense. All judging was conducted on a “blind” basis wherein the judging panel had no knowledge of the individual labels being tasted. Scoring was done by the industry-approved 20-point Davis modified rating system. To aid consumers in comparing the results, each wine was judged in one of three price classifications: inexpensive, moderate and premium.

The judging took place under rigidly controlled conditions on June 25-26, 1978 at the South Coast Plaza Hotel in Costa Mesa. The event was possible through the efforts of OCWS volunteers under the supervision of the Orange County Wine Competition Committee.

Over the years, the number of judges has increased to 90 for each competition. Many of the OCWS judges have participated for 30 or more years. The standards are still the same. All wine varieties and blends are judged double-blind (bagged and unknown other than the varietal) on price categories for the benefit of the consumer. Now, with the internet, all wines are commercially available in Orange County. The judges are all wine professionals – winemakers or winery principals. Today, the 100-point scale is used along with medal recommendations. The results are listed at WineCompetition.com for non-members and members to view.

The relationship between our judges and the OCWS has continued to grow over the years. Many have presented their wines at our winery program presentations. Several judges have participated in the Featured Winery Program at The Courtyard during the OC Fair, supported our scholarship program or have hosted us when we have visited their wineries individually or as a group. Most become lifelong friends of our organization and its members.

ORIGINAL JUDGES

Richard Atwood, Chateau St. Jean
Ken Burnap, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard
Al Cribari, Cribari Vineyards, Inc.
Richard Elwood, Llords & Elwood Winery
Ed Friedrich, San Martin Vineyards
William Fuller, Tualatin Vineyards
Ray Krause, California House Wine Co.
Jerry Lohr, J. Lohr Winery
Steve Mirassou, Mirassou Vineyards
Steve O'Donnell, Callaway Vineyard & Winery
Angelo Parducci, Parducci Winery
Phyllis Pedrizzetti, Pedrizzetti Winery
Robert Rife, Italian Swiss Colony
Don Sebastiani, Sebastiani Vineyards
Mike Stone, Sterling Vineyards
Rodney Strong, Rodney Strong Vineyards
Warren Winiarski, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars

1978 JUDGING PANEL

Richard Atwood, Chateau St. Jean, Kenwood
David Bennion, Ridge Vineyards, Cupertino
Ken Burnap, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, Santa Cruz
Albert Cribari, B. Cribari & Sons, San Francisco
Richard Elwood, Llords & Elwood Winery, Fremont
Tom Ferrell, Inglenook Vineyards, Rutherford
Mary Ann Graf, Simi Winery, Healdsburg
John Hoffman, The Christian Brothers, Napa
Bob Kozlowski, Kenwood Vineyards, San Jose
Ray Krause, California Wine House Co., Madera
Steve Mirassou, Mirassou Vineyards, San Jose
Tim Mondavi, Robert Mondavi Winery, Oakville
Myon Nightingale, Beringer Vineyards, St Helena
Steve O'Donnell, Callaway Vineyard & Winery, Temecula
Angelo Papagni, Papagni Vineyards, Madera
John Parducci, Parducci Winery, Ukiah
Phyllis Pedrizzetti, Pedrizzetti Winery, Morgan Hill
Robert Rife, Italian Swiss Colony, San Francisco
Don Sebastiani, Sebastiani Vineyards, Sonoma
Dee Sindt, Lytton Springs Winery, Healdsburg
Peter Stern, Turgeon & Lohr Winery, San Jose
Mike Stone, Sterling Vineyards, Calistoga
Rodney Strong, Rodney Strong Vineyards, Windsor
Frank Woods, Clos Du Bois, Healdsburg

2026 Commercial Competition Committee

Fran Gitsham
Chair

Kevin Coy
Director of Judges

Rochelle Randel
Administrative Services/Judges Liaison

Teri and John Lane
Cataloging/Wine Administration

Liz and Lloyd Corbett
Cataloging Consultants

Dave Stancil
Data Entry Supervisor

Bill Redding
Facilities Coordinator

Marcy Ott
Judges' Scoring Coordinator

John Kienstra
Bagging Coordinator

George Ott
Moving Coordinator

Greg Hagadorn
Sorting Coordinator

Robyn and Dean Strom
Volunteer Coordinators

Stacey Taylor
Computer System Administration

Sam Puzzo and Carol Frank
Label & Bottle Competition

Carolyn Christian
Marketing

Sue England
Contributing Photographer

Cathy and Greg Risling
The Wine Press Editors



Behind the Scenes

BY FRAN GITSHAM
OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition Chair

The OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition is now celebrating its golden anniversary. From the outside, the competition seems to run flawlessly, however, it is the workings behind the scenes that makes the competition a reality year after year. Unless you've volunteered for this amazingly, professionally run and labor-intensive event, you could have no idea what it takes.

The fact that everything is done by volunteers is truly mindboggling and somewhat unbelievable.

The competition, which is the cornerstone of our organization and traditionally held the weekend following Memorial Day each year, is not technically completed until the last bottles are sorted and the award medals are mailed to winners toward the end of June. Initial planning actually begins for a competition three years prior with the hotel contract being negotiated and executed but, just barely two months after one year's competition has been completed, the committee is in full swing for the next year.

The Commercial Competition Committee is comprised of 20 volunteers— from the Chairperson, who heads the committee to the Director of Judges, who contacts and coordinates 90-plus professional winemakers and winery principals to judge the competition, to the Facilities Coordinator who handles the rooms, meals and everything else hotel related, to the

Tech and Data Entry Supervisor, who oversees data entry and equipment, to the Volunteer Coordinators, who schedule and direct almost 300 volunteers to the Judges Scoring Coordinator, and so on and so on. Amazed yet? No? Just keep reading.

How about a most vital role as Head of Cataloging who oversees upwards of 2,500 wine entries? That is not 2,500 bottles. It can be up to 15,000 bottles, as each entry consists of three to six bottles each. Then take into consideration the Bagging Coordinator, as the competition is a blind tasting, so the entries to be tasted must be bagged and labeled for pouring at the competition. Then everything that is done must be undone. No sooner does the competition end than a Steering Committee of five compiles all the information and confirms the awards results. This is followed by each and every entry being photographed for publication on our results website (WineCompetition.com) and mailing notifications to the award-winning wineries followed by the medals.

The above does not even take into consideration the Judges' Liaison, Sorting Coordinator, Label & Bottle Competition Coordinators, Computer System Admin, Photography Coordinator and Marketing Coordinator, as well as more statistics and positions.

The bottom line is that all of this is accomplished at the hands of dedicated volunteers whom without the Commercial Wine Competition and the OCWS overall would not be what it is today. Truly amazing!



2026 Home Wine Competition Committee

- Kevin Donnelly**
Chairperson
- Ed Reyes**
Assistant Chairperson,
Head of Winemakers Group
- John Lane**
Head of Judges
- Cheryl Knapp**
Head of Volunteers
- Carolyn Christian**
Marketing
- Craig Peterson**
Cooks' Caucus Liaison
- Stacey Taylor**
Database
- Wendy Taylor**
Head of Label Competition
- John Kienstra**
Awards and Scoresheet Mailing
- Fran Gitsham**
OC Fair Liaison
- Teri Lane**
Scoring
- Stephanie Djang**
Scoring
- Kim Guerin**
BOS Judging
- Jerry Guerin**
Instructor, Judges' Seminar

OC Fair Home Wine Competition

BY KEVIN DONNELLY

Home Wine Competition Chair

AND FRAN GITSHAM

Home Wine Competition OCFEC Liason

Founded by amateur home winemakers with a love of wine and a zest for life in 1976, the winemakers of the Orange County Wine Society, a dedicated group within the larger organization, today boasts upward of 100 winemakers who not only share time, stories and their passion for wine, but also coordinate and run the OC Fair Home Wine Competition, the largest competition of California-only amateur wines.

This founding competition, along with the organization itself and the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Last year found the competition with 603 entries, comprised of wines entered from 110 cities, with the farthest north being Crescent City, down to the southernmost

city of El Centro.

On any given year, about 90 judges evaluate wines in 45 distinct categories. The judging is double blind and the scoring is based on a modified UC Davis 20-point scale. To ensure continuity in the valuation and scoring of the wines, the winemakers hold judging workshops prior to each year's competition.

Coordinated by a committee of 14 members, the Home Wine Competition takes place on June 6 this year at the OC Fairgrounds and, based on entries at this writing, looks to surpass those of last year. It is a labor-intensive day and a labor of love run by an average of 190 OCWS volunteers. The organization's own cooking group, the Cook's Caucus, provides both breakfast and lunch for the judges and volunteers.

What started as a dream of just a few passionate people has grown into a renowned competition in the world of amateur winemaking and one in which its popularity continues to grow year after year.

JUDGING, from page 2

and is the largest of its kind in the world and the second largest competition overall in California. In the 47 years of competition, there has been over 460 judges for a combined total of 3,326 years of experience.

It is the renowned list of judges and their associated wineries that has made, and keeps, the competition at the top of its game and the most widely revered competition of California wines anywhere.

We are proud that our competition, thanks to these committed professionals, continues the high standard of judging today led by a current list of elite judges such

as Fred Weibel (35 years), Joseph S. Franzia (30 years) and Steve Lohr (15 years).

Just this year alone, four judges are seeing their 20th year with us; seven judges are reaching the 13-year point; six newer judges are seeing their third year; and there are any number of judges with years in between. Additionally, in working toward securing the future of the competition, we find seven guest judges this year with just their first year under their belts being mentored by the seasoned veterans.

The OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition would not be what it is without the entries to judge from wineries throughout

the state; however, the quality and reputation of the competition itself is due in great part to the high standards set by the judges and their commitment year after year to supporting the OCWS' efforts.

"Thanks" is a small word to express our appreciation to the judges for continuing to gather year after year and keeping the competition elevated above the rest.

Judges, if you are reading this, please know that our heartfelt appreciation always goes out to you with our admiration for your expertise and our pride in you being a most integral part of the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition.



GOLDEN Opportunities

BY GREG RISLING
The Wine Press Editor

The OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition has long been a cornerstone of the Orange County Wine Society. What started out as a humble endeavor to feature California’s burgeoning wine industry has blossomed into one of the most revered competitions in the nation – due in no small part to the steady stream of volunteers who make each edition a success.

Now in its 50th year, the competition is more than winemakers anxiously waiting to see if their beloved handiwork will be rewarded with a medal. It’s a festive, yearly gathering of OCWS members that culminates with the big event the first weekend of June.

“It’s really very satisfying to see it all come together,” said Leslie Brown, who has served on the competition committee for 15 years. “I’ve never seen volunteers anywhere who have the devotion like ours do. It’s really enjoyable to be with all those people come competition weekend.”

The amount of time spent to successfully pull off the competition truly is a Herculean effort. Leslie estimates roughly 6,000 volunteer hours are needed from a couple of hun-

dred volunteers along the way, beginning in the late summer/early fall when preparations begin for the next competition.

It wasn’t always that way. Only two varietals were judged at the first competition: Chenin Blanc and Gamay Beaujolais. At the time, the competition was created to mirror what was being done at the Los Angeles County Fair.

But while other competitions have wilted away, the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition has navigated its way through hardships, including a global pandemic, to continue to serve as a shining beacon in the world of winemaking.

“No one dreamed of this in the beginning,” said Jane Goodnight, a longtime OCWS member who has been on the competition’s steering committee that is primarily responsible for tallying the judges’ scores and determining if a wine receives a medal. “It’s amazing to me that it’s still here. It has survived and thrived.”

In planning any big event, details are crucial. For the competition, updating the computer program for data entry was a monumental task but has been tremendously beneficial. Swapping out traditional wine glasses with Austrian crystal several years ago clarified the scores of good wines going up and bad wines going down.

“Good wines showed better and we started seeing more Double Golds,” Leslie said.

Beside the camaraderie, one of the biggest benefits is getting to take home recently opened bottles of wine to taste. As Brown puts it, “People really work hard for a third to a half bottle of wine.”

“It’s like you get a sneak peek of what’s going to be poured at the fair,” said Ms. Courtney, who has been a steward at the competition over the past five to six years. “At the end of each day of the competition, it’s like a treasure hunt during the bottle grab.”

Jane suggests members who haven’t yet experienced competition weekend give it a try because you not only are rewarded with free wine and the opportunity to rub shoulders with winemakers but you can create new friendships.

“I always recommend doing it because the organization was put together to run this competition,” she said. “It’s fun, it’s work and you may be tired because you were on your feet most of the day but if you are really interested in wine, you become more interested after talking to people.”

A Legacy of Giving Back: The OCWS Scholarship Program

BY CAROLYN CHRISTIAN
Secretary

Since its founding in 1976, the Orange County Wine Society has remained deeply committed to supporting the future of the wine and culinary industries. That commitment took shape in 1981 with the launch of the OCWS Scholarship Program—an initiative that has grown from modest beginnings into one of the organization’s most impactful contributions.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, LASTING IMPACT

The program began by awarding two \$500 scholarships to students studying enology and viticulture at University of California, Davis, and California State University, Fresno. As both the organization and the program gained momentum, scholarship amounts steadily increased—rising to \$750 in 1984 and \$1,000 by 1986.

Over time, the program expanded to include additional institutions and areas of study, reflecting the evolving needs of the wine and hospitality industries:

- 1991–1992: California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, added for Wine Marketing and later Enology and Viticulture
- 1992: California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, added for Hotel and Restaurant Hospitality and later Enology and Viticulture
- 1992: Orange Coast College added for Culinary Arts
- 1999: Allan Hancock College added for Enology and Viticulture
- 2020: Sonoma State University added for Wine Business

Today, OCWS proudly supports eight colleges and universities. All offer enology and viticulture programs, except for Orange Coast College, which continues to be recognized for its culinary arts program.

GROWING SUPPORT, EXPANDING REACH

What began as a \$2,000 annual contribution in the early years has grown into a program distributing more than \$50,000 annually in 2026. This spring, the OCWS Scholarship Program surpassed a remarkable milestone—over \$1 million donated to students pursuing careers in wine, viticulture and culinary arts.

POWERED BY COMMUNITY

The success of the OCWS Scholarship Program is driven by the generosity and engagement of the membership. Funding comes from multiple sources, including:

- Donations collected at the OC Fair Wine Courtyard (in lieu of tips)
- The Featured Winery Program, launched in 2018 by Liz and Lloyd Corbett
- Contributions from OCWS members
- Donations from judges’ stipends at the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition

In a unique and meaningful tradition, each year one of the institutions we support is selected to receive the full allocation of judges’ stipend donations from the previous year’s competition—creating a direct connection between industry professionals and the next generation. This tradition was started by Jerry Lohr of J.Lohr Winery, who was one of the competition’s original judges in 1977 and continued to judge through the 1980s.

see **SCHOLARSHIPS**, page 11

Notable Alumni

Giancarlo Bettinelli
Bettinelli Vineyards, Accendo Estate

Robert Cabral
De Loach Vineyards, Kunde Family Winery, Alderbrook Winery, Hartford Court Winery, Williams Selyem Winery, Three Sticks Wines

Michael Costello
Professor of Viticulture at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

James Dodson
Jackson Family Wines UK

Heath Dolan
Truett-Hurst

Brett Escalera
Santa Barbara Winery, Byron Winery, Fess Parker Winery, Sanger Family of Wines

Michael Sones
Ridge Vineyards, Bonny Doon Vineyard, David Bruce Winery, Bargetto Family Winery, Sones Cellars

Eric Stern
Landmark Vineyards

Phillip Steinschriber
Napa Creek Winery, Diamond Creek Vineyards, WaterMark Wine

Vickie Wahlstrom
Husch Vineyards, ConeTech/Advanced Beverage Technologies, VA Filtration

2026-2027 Scholarship Donations

Institution	Program	Amount
Allan Hancock College	Enology and Viticulture	\$6,000
Cal Poly Pomona	Enology and Viticulture	\$5,805
Cal Poly San Luis Obispo	Enology and Viticulture	\$5,805
CSU Fresno	Enology and Viticulture	\$5,805
CSU Sonoma	Wine Business	\$5,805
Napa Valley College	Enology and Viticulture	\$9,405*
OCC	Culinary Arts	\$5,845
UC Davis	Enology and Viticulture	\$5,905

TOTAL: **\$50,375**

* Includes \$3,600 from 2025 Judges’ Stipends from OC Fair Wine Competition

Meet Some of our Judges

BY FRAN GITSHAM

OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition Chair

Gary Eberle: The Greatest Proponent

Gary Eberle's impact on the wine industry is profound and there is no higher praise than that of such a wine icon. The OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition had the honor of Gary's expertise as a judge for the competition for 24 years until he retired in 2023. His winemaker, Chris Eberle (no relation), took the reins from Gary and is now in his seventh year of judging.



In August 2024, I had the opportunity to interview Gary in his natural habitat, sitting outside of his namesake winery in Paso Robles, a glass of 2021 Eberle Cabernet Sauvignon in hand accompanied by his faithful, loving companions, two standard poodles named after grapes—Barbera and Viognier.

Gary's unsolicited praise of the competition and encouragement to all wineries to enter came as the greatest accolade the competition could receive. Knowing the competition so well, Gary talked about the use of wine entries into the competition, from bottles poured for judging to the OCWS introducing the award-winning wines to the public at the OC Fair.

Gary touted the competition as the largest California-only wine competition not only in the states, but in the world. He went on to talk about the judges, as commercial wine makers and winery principals, and how they are tougher on judging the wine as they're first looking for flaws.

He went on to say, "If I ever dropped a competition that we joined, and we join about eight, Orange County would be the last."

With a gleam in his eyes and a chuckle, he concluded with: "There is no reason as a California winery, not to enter the competition unless your wines are never going to win a medal. That's the only reason not to join. And if you can't win a medal at Orange County, maybe you should open a gas station."

Marty Spate: Mighty Fer-mentor

Marty Spate, winemaker at Riboli Family Wines, has spent many years judging at the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition.

"The first year I judged at the competition was 2004," Marty said. "At the time I was working at a very small family-owned winery, which was a bit like being out on an island. There was not a lot of interaction with other wineries."

The winery entered wines and Dennis Esslinger, the Head of Judges for the competition at the time, reached out to the owners of the winery.

"I had already done the Jerry Mead New World International and interacted with folks who had experience and thought this would be a way to create some networking and camaraderie and continue to build and hone my skills at tasting," Marty said. "Judging at the OC Fair competition gave me the opportunity to broaden my tasting skills and talk shop with the most famous (or infamous) winemakers like Jim Prager, Jerry Lohr, Don Galleano, Gary Eberle and Joseph S. Franzia."

Marty said the first couple of years judging were just figuring out who he was as a winemaker and gleaned info from those who became friends and mentors.

"I just wanted to come back and see my friends year after year," Marty said. "The competition became a very concentrated two-to-three-day annual reunion where the judges were intimate in sharing knowledge. Not an opportunity to be had elsewhere."

Part of his job as a winemaker and his continuing education allows Marty to interact with people.

"I see myself as a mentor at this stage in my life," Marty said. "Having the brevity to say I don't know something, but I know someone who does, is great."



John Prager: Purveyor of Ports

Described as the perfect prescription for port lovers since 1979, Prager Port Works in Napa has been family owned and operated for three generations.

Of the third generation, John Prager, along with six siblings, comes from a legacy of not only fine port purveyors but longtime supporters of the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition. John's father, James Prager, was one of the original judges of the competition for 25 years and John, now following in his father's footsteps, has been one of our judges for 15 years.

When asked about what he would tell wineries about entering the commercial competition, John was quick to say, "Enter your wines, Californians. Enter it. It is inexpensive, as the cost to enter is just six bottles of wine. It's one of the oldest competitions in the state judging your wines. Before the San Francisco Chronicle and all the others, they were the original. Come on in. You won't regret it."

Reminding John that this year is our 50th anniversary, he emphatically reassured me that he has all intentions of continuing to judge the most prestigious competition of California wines.

"I love that the competition keeps making changes as needed and looks to the judges for advice and input," John says. "There are nice changes in the tasting and things are always run professionally and kept current."

John shared the best aspects of the wine business.

"It's not a bad lifestyle to make alcohol and pair food with it and make a living at it," John says. "That's fun in itself. People just love the camaraderie and I get to meet people from all over the world. I never get tired of it. After 46 years, it's always interesting and everything comes easier today because I've been doing it for such a long time, as long as my dad was doing it. It's what I know."



DECADE OF *Excellence*

BY GREG RISLING
The Wine Press Editor

When winemaker Richard Krumwiede opened up the email from the Sunset Magazine International Wine Competition, he thought it was a joke.

He was informed that his 2017 Grenache had taken the top prize in the competition, beating out 2,700 other entries.

Not bad for the recently retired landscape architect whose humble beginnings as a home winemaker winning gold medals at the Orange County Home Wine Competition has budded into running a commercial wine operation that is well regarded among those familiar with Krumwiede's operation.

Krumwiede owns Sycamore Ranch Vineyard and Winery in Crestline, nestled in the San Bernardino Mountains, just outside Lake Arrowhead. Last year marked the winery's 10th anniversary. Krumwiede admits the accolades that have followed have been somewhat stunning but appreciated.

"It's been a flight path steadily gaining altitude on confidence," he said over a glass of wine in his Crestline tasting room. "I think the vintages have improved over the years. No one has been more surprised than my wife and me."

Long gone are the days when Krumwiede's knowledge of wine amounted to drinking Boone's Farm. His introduction to wine came at the hands of his father-in-law who taught wine appreciation classes at Ambassador College in Pasadena.

Krumwiede and his wife, Elizabeth, began going on trips to Santa Barbara wine county; his interest only grew from there.

"I really started to become kind of infatuated with how all these flavors could come from just the grape," he said. "It was really interesting to me."

After moving to Crestline, he later bought a 3½ acre lot that was home to 100-year-old apple orchards. He began making cider but saw the potential of planting vineyards on the property – albeit at 4,576 feet above altitude.

He planted 60 vines each of Zinfandel and Syrah and the first vintage was marginal at best (since then his co-fermented red blend aptly named Altitude 4576 is one of the winery's higher priced wines).

After a chance encounter meeting with Ted Plemons and Steve Cass, owners of Cass Winery in Paso Robles, at a wine pairing dinner in Lake Arrowhead, Krumwiede learned from the pair that co-opting wine might be a good way to broaden his horizon.

Between 2012 and 2014, Krumwiede purchased grapes from Cass and Sculpterra Winery and that sought-after affirmation winemakers seek began trickling in. He received gold medals from the OCWS Home Wine Competition.

He then thought about turning his hobby into a business but knew he needed his wife's approval.

"I talked to Elizabeth about going commercial and she said, 'Sure why not?'" he quipped. "She told me later she thought I would fail and that I would make terrible wine and that's why she said OK."

The goal has always remained the same: to make the best wine possible, and Krumwiede continues to knock it out of the park.



Richard Krumwiede with wife Elizabeth in Sycamore Ranch's production facility.

Besides earning the "Best of the Best" by Sunset Magazine, his 2019 Mourvedre received the highest score ever – 99 points – at the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition.

Nearly all of the grapes – save the on-property Zin and Syrah – are from the Santa Ynez Valley, known for its exceptional Rhone varietals. Krumwiede initially made 400 cases of wine and about 100 cases of cider. The 2024 vintage will mean 1,000 cases of wine and 500 cases of cider for release this year.

"I don't want to get this winery over 2,500 cases a year of wine and cider," he said. "I want to continue to stay ultra-focused on making the best wine we can versus mass consumer appeal."

Mother Nature always poses a challenge for winemakers but Krumwiede has a little more to worry about given his location. Frost at the beginning of bud break and freezing temperatures toward the end of harvest in early November are usually the main culprits but there can be unforeseen circumstances.

"Animal control is a big one," Krumwiede said. "Ten years ago, the bears discovered the vineyards and came bulldozing through the fence every night and ate all the grapes so we put an electrified fence around the two vineyards."

All of which is to say that his two biggest lessons he's learned when making wine are having patience and trust.

"Patience in not overreacting when you think you have a problem," Krumwiede added. "Trusting that time will be on your side if you treat the grapes right."

Most of his wines can be found in the bottle shops, grocery stores and restaurants in the mountain communities. However, he's hoping to make a dent in similar locations in Southern California and finding a home in taprooms with his cider.

Krumwiede appreciates the recognition his wines have received both from the public and competitions he enters.

"I like the fact that, and most winemakers will tell you whether it's merited or not, for whatever reason you get treated a little bit like a rock star by the people who come to drink wine and it's a bit of a mystery to them about the whole process and how you do it," Krumwiede said. "I've looked at this as a pleasurable business because people coming to drink wine are generally celebrating or with friends. They are there to have a nice time."

Past Director of Judges**Jerry Mead**

Director of the Panel of Judges
1977-1992

John Hardman

Director of Judges
1993-2000

Sam Puzzo

Director of Judges
2001

Dennis Esslinger

Director of Judges
2001-2017

Kevin Coy

Director of Judges
2018-2026

**Past Chairperson
of the Commercial
Competition****Larry Graham**

1991

John Hardman

1992

Jan Beale

1993-94

Bob Prill

1995

Dennis Esslinger

1996

Larry Graham

1997-somewhere in early 2000

Dave Hirstein

Somewhere in early 2000-2011

Leslie Brown

2012-2020

Fran Gitsham

2021-2026

Big Shoes to Fill

BY KEVIN COY

Director of Judges

I recently took the opportunity to read through a collection of Orange County Wine Society historical notes put together by one of our members and past president, Larry Graham. Larry, I apologize. I should have read these notes when you first provided the opportunity several years ago. I guess I was too busy with life and OCWS business and I didn't take the time to read through all of the important history of this outstanding organization.

As director of judges for the Orange County Fair Commercial Wine Competition, I follow some huge footsteps of many long-standing members and retired members. Several members too, who unfortunately, have passed on and are probably in heaven toasting to the good ol' days of the OCWS.

I was completely astonished to see so many of the names of OCWS members who have held critical positions in the growth and development of the OC Fair Commercial Competition.

Of course, there are the historical members, Brant Horton and Jerry Mead who started the original Orange County Wine Guild in 1976 with a small group of home winemakers and wine enthusiasts. The two approached the OC Fair Administration and arranged to host both a commercial and a home wine competition for the OC Fair. After gaining approval, OCWS was created to support this new and large endeavor.

Then I saw names such as Jim Graver, first OCWS president and long-time Home Wine coordinator Chris Cunningham, second OCWS president and longtime OCWS member and event coordinator. May God bless their souls.

Then, I read about longtime members Judi Brady and Jane (McGrath) Goodnight who are both founding members. I joined OCWS somewhere around 1994 and I met all of these people, have worked with them and have shared many glasses of wine with them, but had no idea they had done so much to advance the organization and the commercial competition.

Then there are those whom I did not have the blessed opportunity to meet. Jerry Mead and Grant Horton are two who developed the OCWS long before I was a member. John Hardman, another icon was before my time. I hear he is living in Sonoma, enjoying great wine and enjoying a well-deserved retirement. Sam Puzzo is still with us volunteering his time and drinking great wine. Unfortunately, Dennis Esslinger, my mentor and friend, has since passed and is in heaven, enjoying a wonderful glass of wine while watching over his lovely wife and everyday OCWS activities. They each have left huge shoes to fill for their outstanding and longstanding contributions to our organization.

Of course, we must not forget those who have given their heart and soul as Commercial Competition Chairpersons. These are the folks who develop and lead the event. They are the ones who are sometimes herding cats and at other times, basking in the glory of a well-run machine, with a committee of like-minded, outstanding individuals. The history here is a bit sketchy and I may be wrong, but it looks like Jerry Mead led both the judges and chaired the competition during his tenure as "Director of the Panel of Judges." Many kudos to Jerry for his many years of developing the commercial competition. Other amazing people who stepped up and led the charge to develop and put on one of the largest wine competitions in California:

I have shared a glass of wine, or two, or six with most of these outstanding leaders. I have been mentored by them as well...and yes, I have been counseled by them too. I have worked alongside many of them and have been led by them. I have shared many wonderful times with each of them and I'm happy to call them my friends. More importantly, I am quite humbled by their drive, energy and commitment to OCWS and the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition. My hat is tipped to you all. You all leave BIG shoes to fill!

Lastly, I am humbled by our winemaker judges, many of whom have judged our competition for over 10 years, some over 20 years, some over 30 years. Whether it's your first-year judging for us or your 38th year, you are all rock stars in my book. On my behalf and the Commercial Wine Competition Committee, we thank each and every one of you for your many years of judging our competition and for being our friends. We are a success because of you and we couldn't do it without you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Now.... go out there and keep making great wine!

Special thanks to Larry Graham, Jane Goodnight and Leslie Brown for their assistance in providing the history of the OCWS and OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition.

Label & Bottle Competition

BY SAM PUZZO & CAROL FRANK

Label Competition Coordinators

This year marks the 50th annual OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition and the 25th Competition Label and Bottle Competition. The Label Competition was added to the wine competition in 2002 when Charlie Owen used wine labels submitted with all entries for displays at the Orange County Fair and inspired a formal Label Competition.

The following year Marjorie and Bob Trout became chairpersons of the competition and formed a committee of people with notable artistic talents, in particular, Karl Tani and Carolo Miura.

The first-year judging consisted of 15 categories. The goal was to recognize achievements in label design for each category. They are one of the key reasons why customers selected one wine over another. This led to exceptional use of graphics, photographic effects and humor in labels.

The number of categories increased to 16 in 2003 then to 17 in 2006 with the addition of a bottle display for bottles that are etched, screen printed or otherwise having a label that could not reasonably be removed.

The committee reviewed all labels and a final selection of the 12 best was made in each category. During the competition winemakers and OCWS members vote their favorite in each category. The top three voter



Submissions for an early label competition (top photo) and winning wines.

selections received Gold, Silver and Bronze medals based on the number of votes. The label with the most overall votes became Best of Show.

The label competition continued this way with the only changes being a revision of categories and showing more award-winning labels in the award book. In 2015, Sam Puzzo took over administering the Label Competition and Carol Frank was added a few years later.

At this time paper labels are no longer required to enter wine into the competition and digital entries have become the primary source of labels. We now have 11 categories including the Bottle Competition. The number of labels was reduced to the best eight labels except for Thematic and Bottles which vary depending on the quality of entries.

Cataloging volunteers submit photographs of labels as they are cataloging and forward them to the label committee. They are reviewed along with other digital and paper labels by the label committee. The semifinalists are asked to submit paper labels if available or PDF files.

We try to obtain from the finalist wineries all original labels for the competition. Gold, Silver and Bronze are still awarded based on the number of votes. Best of Show changed to a vote by the label Steering Committee of all Gold medal winners. The medal winners are displayed at the fair then again at the following year's competition.

SCHOLARSHIPS, from page 7

FROM SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS TO INDUSTRY LEADERS

Over the decades, the OCWS Scholarship Program has helped launch the careers of many individuals who have gone on to make significant contributions to the wine industry.

Among them is long-time OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition judge Ondine Chattan, former winemaker for Geysers Peak and current winemaker for Share a Splash Wine Company, who was one of the first scholarship recipients at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in 1992.

"As an early-years student in the Cal Poly wine program, receiving the OCWS scholarship was meaningful to me both for the generous financial assistance it pro-

vided as well as for the recognition of our blossoming program," Chattan said. "OCWS has long recognized the diversity of schools for wine and viticulture-focused education and its recognition and generosity helped bolster my confidence in pursuing a career in winemaking."

LOOKING AHEAD

As OCWS celebrates its 50th anniversary, the Scholarship Program stands as a testament to what a passionate community can achieve over time. With more than four decades of giving—and over \$1 million invested in education—the program continues to cultivate talent, opportunity and excellence for generations to come.

THANK YOU BELL-CARTER FOODS FOR SUPPORTING OC FAIR WINE COMPETITION

Bell-Carter Foods, one of the largest table olive producers in the U.S. hasn't been around for 100 years just due to their terrific products. It's their heart that also keeps consumers loyal to their brands. The OC Fair wine competitions are the fortunate recipients of their generosity in donating the favorite palette cleanser among judges – Lindsay Crafted Medium Green Ripe Pitted Olives. They're the best!





FROM
Home Winemaker
TO
BEST OF CLASS

UYS VINEYARDS



BIG NOSE WINERY



DECOUPAGE CELLARS



BY FRAN GITSHAM

OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition Chair

For most of us the pleasure of tasting and learning about wine is enough, but for that handful of people who want more, savoring the drink is just not enough.

For the brave who venture into the corners of their kitchens, garages, backyards and even bathrooms to experiment with the process of making wine, it becomes an obsession and ultimately a goal to create a taste of heaven in a glass. Amateur winemakers, better known to the OCWS as home winemakers, toil year after year to create wines with hopes of garnering medals and accolades for their entries into the OC Fair Home Wine Competition.

In the case of a rare few who eventually become commercial winemakers, their journeys, more often than not, began with success at the OC Fair Home Wine Competition, giving them the confidence to pursue their dreams. This is the case with a handful of microwineries in Temecula that together are working to prove the quality of fruit and wine from the region dispels any negative myths.

They are among the limited production wineries, producing just 500 to 1,000 cases a year, each one creating small-batch clean and simple handcrafted wines with no additives and minimal sulfites. Each of them now are garnering numerous Double Gold awards at the OC Fair Commercial Wine Competition, and just this year taking top honors as Best in Class.

Big Nose Winery, owned and operated by Roger and Janice Mattar, who to this day remain dedicated OCWS members, initially learned their trade as OCWS home winemakers and eventually went commercial, now with any number of varietals being served in their welcoming tasting room in the historic Temecula Hotel in Old Towne Temecula.

This year they entered 13 wines, all of which received medals, with one of their Double Gold, Jan's Sparkling Rose, taking the highest honor as Best of Class.

Roger Mattar credits the OCWS for their humble beginnings.

"We were mentored by OCWS home winemakers before going commercial," Roger Mattar said. "We love the process and, as a winery with heart, it doesn't seem like work when your passions are in it. We are always evolving and we embrace our challenges. Our motto is, 'Never let good enough be good enough.'"

Mirroring the Mattars' enthusiasm and passion for winemaking sits both Laura and Mike Wieters of DeCoupage Cellars and Dirk and Michelle Uys (pronounced ACE) of Uys Garagiste Vineyard & Winery, who both boast about their beginnings as home winemakers and proudly display their OCWS home wine medals right alongside their OCWS commercial competition awards, including numerous Double Gold plaques.

The Uys began making home wines in 2012 and, by 2021, they say they were making too much. Going commercial was just an organic, natural progression. "It just happened," said Dirk Uys.

"Everyone's idea of going commercial is different," said Dirk Uys. "Looking to make money is not ever a reason because, if you're lucky, you break even. You go commercial for the love of it and that's just what we did. Simple as that."

Mike Weeters said they went commercial to dispel any old notions about wine from Temecula.