

Pioneer vintner Stare retires

Operation of Dry Creek Vineyard handed to daughter, son-in-law

By KEVIN MCCALLUM
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Dry Creek Vineyard founder David Stare, one of the pioneers of Sonoma County's modern wine industry, announced his retirement Monday.

Stare, 66, handed control of the winery he founded in 1972 over to his daughter, Kim, and her husband, Don Wallace, both of whom have been involved with the operations for years.

"The two of them have got almost as much experience combined as I do, so I think they are ready," said Stare.

He will become chairman of the board and will continue to consult for the winery.

The evolution of Dry Creek Vineyard from a run-down 70-acre prune farm into a 140,000-case winery with a reputation for excellence has mirrored the rapid growth of the Dry Creek Valley area west of Healdsburg into one of the nation's pre-eminent winemaking regions.

"In 1972, the Dry Creek Valley had 1,000 acres of grape vines and 6,000 acres of prune orchards," Stare said. "Now Dry Creek has 8,000 acres of vineyards and no prune orchards."

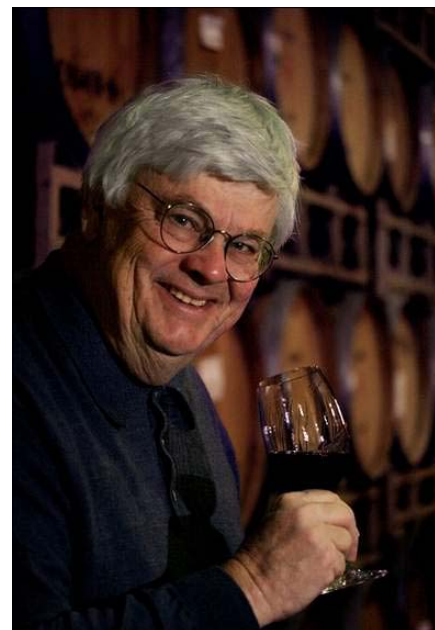
Stare took a circuitous route to winemaking. Born and raised in Boston, his first job was as a railroad engineer in Baltimore in the 1960s. It was there he first became intrigued with the winemaking process after striking up a friendship with Philip Wagner, a Baltimore newspaperman who owned Boordy Winery.

Later, after a stint working for a German steel company along the banks of the Rhine River, Stare's fascination with wine deepened. On a trip with his wife to France in 1970, Stare said he got the "scatterbrained" idea that his life's passion was to return to France to open his own winery.

"Luckily for me and for France, that never occurred," he said.

Instead, he read a story in the Wall Street Journal about California's up-and-coming wine industry, and he headed west. While taking winemaking classes at UC Davis, he scoured the North Coast for vineyard land and settled on the prune orchard in the heart of the Dry Creek Valley.

He made his first batch of wine, 1,300 cases, at a friend's Napa winery in 1972, and in 1973 produced 6,000 cases at his newly completed winery.



MARK ARONOFF / PD

Sonoma County wine pioneer David Stare, who founded Dry Creek Vineyard in 1972, is taking the newly created position of chairman of the board.

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The building was the first new winery built in Dry Creek Valley since the end of Prohibition, he said.

While he was one of the first, he would certainly not be the last.

In his first year of operation, Stare was visited by brothers Ernest and Julio Gallo, who pulled up to his humble winery in a burgundy-colored limousine. They thought the region had potential, too, and a short time later purchased the nearby Frei Brothers Ranch. Today Gallo operates one of the region's largest wineries on the property.

The massive Gallo winery occasionally reminds Stare of what might have been if things had gone differently for him in the wine business.

"I think the biggest mistake I've made in this business is not being aggressive enough 20 years ago in buying property," he said.

Today, the winery owns about 200 acres of vineyards and controls another 250.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Stare was instrumental in putting Sonoma County on the map through his tireless travels around the nation promoting both Dry Creek Valley and Sonoma County wines, said friend and fellow winemaker Hank Wetzel, owner of Alexander Valley Vineyards.

"The thing I admired about him most was his willingness to hit the road and travel and work hard telling his story over and over and over again," Wetzel said.

Stare was instrumental in getting Dry Creek Valley designated an American Viticultural Area in 1983.

Sonoma County needed individual vintners to aggressively promote the region's wines, but for years Napa always seemed to be one step ahead, Stare said.

"Napa has always had a more organized, coherent marketing effort behind their wine, whereas Sonoma's was more laid-back, I guess," he said.

Nevertheless, Stare's efforts paid off. As the winery grew, it expanded beyond fume blanc, its signature wine, into zinfandel, chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

Today the 16-mile long Dry Creek Valley has over 9,100 acres planted in vineyards and more than 50 wineries.

Son-in-law Don Wallace, who joined the business in 1990, will now serve as president, while his wife Kim will be vice-president.

Wallace said they have worked hard over the years to demonstrate to Stare that they were capable enough to handle the operation on their own. It's an idea that has taken some getting used to for Stare.

"This place is his heart and soul," Wallace said. "Dry Creek Vineyard is his identity."

The management transition does not change the family's ownership of the winery, which will gradually be transferred to the younger generation of the Stare family over several years.

Stare said he looks forward to sailing, traveling in Europe and painting.