

101 North

Born Again

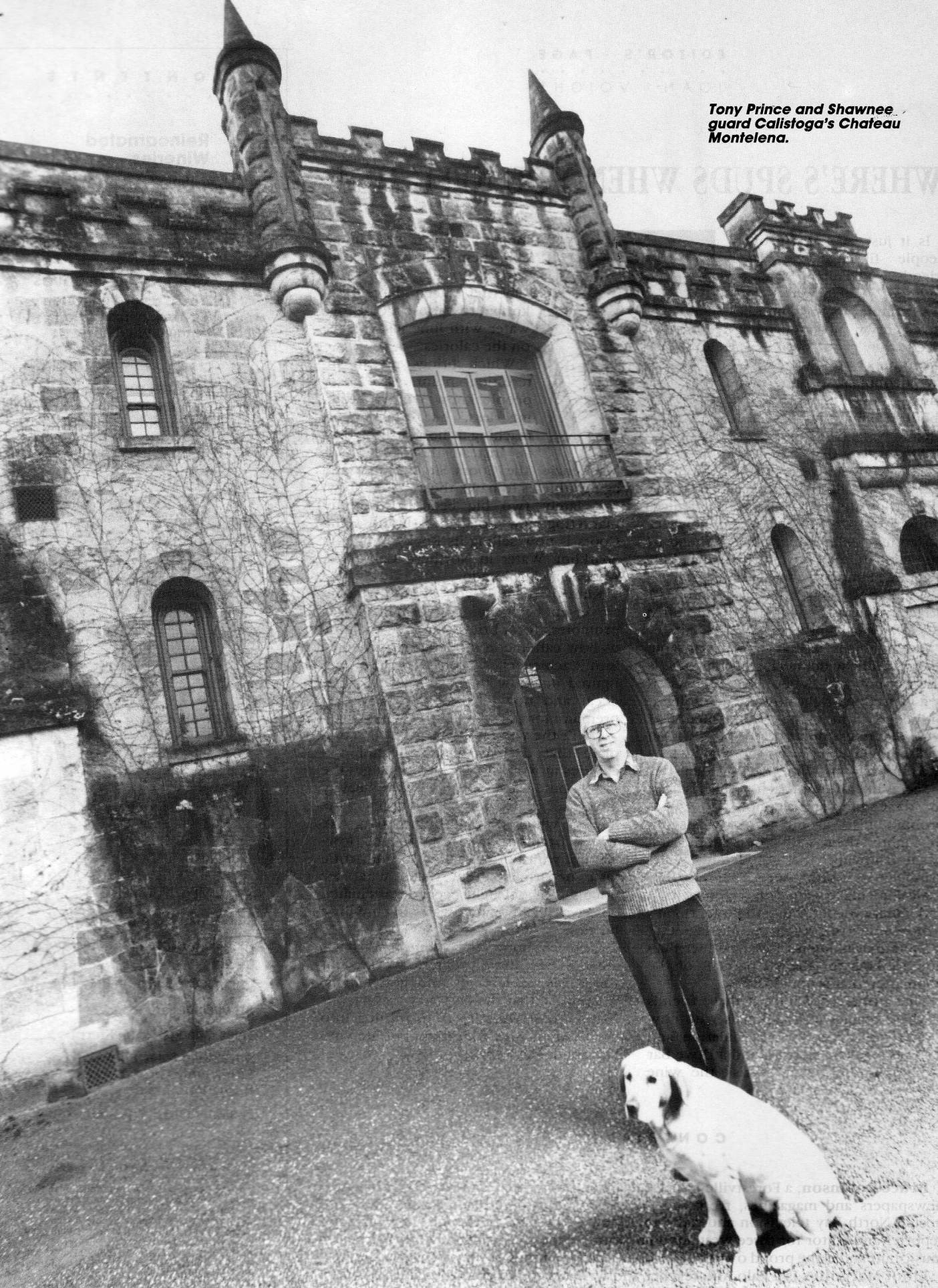
Napa's
Ghost
Wineries

Old Tunes Are
The Best Tunes

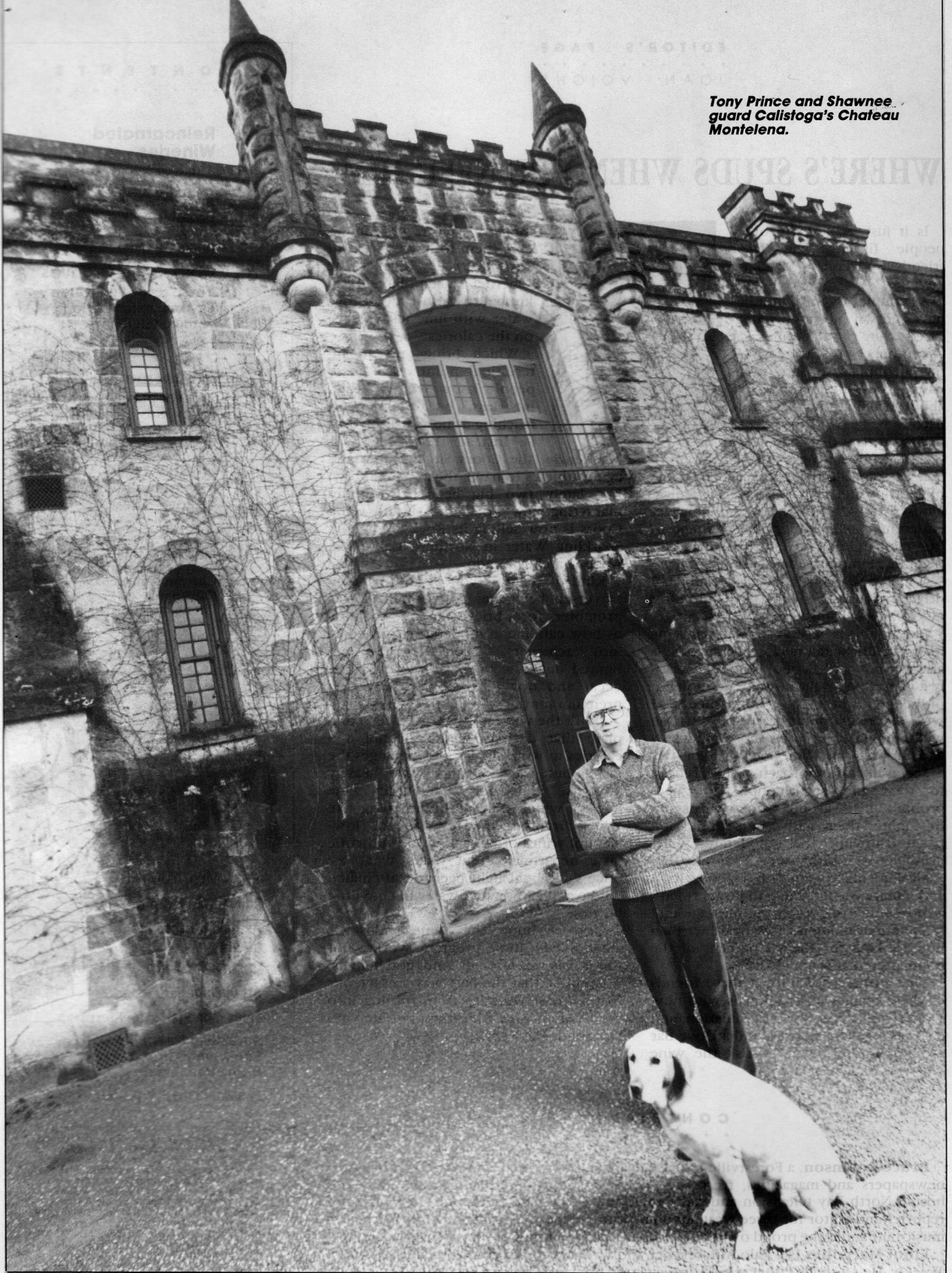
Strange Games
For Crafty Kids

BOY ARE NOT

**Tony Prince and Shawnee,
guard Calistoga's Chateau
Montelena.**



Tony Prince and Shawnee guard Calistoga's Chateau Montelena.



REINCARNATED WINERIES

A trio of Napa ghosts in a quest for lost glory.

BY JANET HERRING-SHERMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN L. BARTL

It was summer in Napa Valley. The year was 1899, and the children of San Francisco newspaper publisher Frederick Hess played on the grape-pressing log outside Hess's Howell Mountain winery, La Jota. Down the mountain, at Chateau Montelena winery in Calistoga, women in bustles and men in bowlers arrived by horse and buggy to attend a posh party hosted by winery owner Alfred Tubbs, a Yankee trader and San Francisco ship merchant.

Napa Valley was the place to chase fortunes during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Sam Brannan, one of California's richest men, founded the town of Calistoga and opened its first hotel with fireworks and pageantry. Scottish-born novelist Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife took up residence in a mountain retreat nearby. Winery owner Tubbs and U.S. Senator Leland Stanford considered building Stanford University in Calistoga instead of Palo Alto. The valley and its hillsides became a tapestry of vineyards and wineries.

"The wine boom (in the Napa Valley) of the 1880s has not been equalled, even by the recent one," says wine historian William Heintz of Sonoma. In the 10-year period from 1880 to 1890, about 117 wineries started in the valley. The following century it took 20 years, from 1968 to 1988, for 175 new wineries to open.

Prohibition, however, became the kiss of death for most of the flourishing nineteenth century wineries. Many were abandoned, their wine left to turn to vinegar. A few, maybe a third, says Heintz, were allowed to continue making wine for religious and medicinal purposes.

By the time Prohibition was repealed in 1933, some of the forgotten wineries had burned to the ground. A handful had been converted into homes. A few were revived, carried on bravely for a short time, then closed again. Most fell into disrepair.

But through it all, many of these ghost wineries still stand. These are three of the survivors.

CHATEAU MONTELENA: REBIRTH OF A JEWEL

Since America began its second love affair with wine in 1968, several ghost wineries have been called into action again. Ornate Chateau Montelena in Calistoga takes its name from Mount St. Helena. Built by trader Alfred Tubbs in 1882, it was one of Napa Valley's nineteenth-century jewels.

"Tubbs was a lover of all things French," says Tony Prince, Chateau Montelena's hospitality manager. And Tubbs managed to create a slice of France on his 500 acres in the Napa Valley. He

studied French vineyard practices, hired a French winemaker and fashioned his wine-aging facility after the splendid chateaux on the vineyard estates of France, complete with a facade of authentic French stone. Legend has it that the dark gray limestone came from France as ballast on a whaling ship, says Prince.

Like its contemporaries, Chateau Montelena was quieted by Prohibition. The chateau remained in the Tubbs family until 1959 when it was purchased by a local couple who turned it into their retirement home. They added a small lake, which now sports swans and other waterfowl.

In 1968, Jim Barrett, an attorney from Palos Verdes, purchased the chateau and surrounding 150 acres and turned the wine cellar into a winery. Chateau Montelena has remained structurally sound, a web of original cross-bracing apparently making it earthquake-safe. The winery now produces 30,000 cases a year, including zinfandel, chardonnays, cabernet and Johannisberg riesling.

The chateau's vineyards encompass 95 of the original 500 acres. "We've pretty much planted where they did back then," says Prince.

Some of Chateau Montelena's glorious past can be reconstructed from the Tubbs' family correspondence. In August of 1890, for example, Tubbs' son William wrote to Chateau Montelena's

COULD IT POSSIBLY HAPPEN AGAIN?

In the 1990s it may seem ludicrous to imagine the North Bay "Wine Country" without working vineyards and wineries. Almost as ridiculous as folks in the 1890s trying to envision the Napa Valley without wine.

But that didn't stop Prohibition.

Today increasingly vocal consumer groups fighting alcoholism and drunk driving are working to reduce alcohol consumption, not through laws prohibiting booze, but through methods such as taxation, advertising restrictions, tougher labeling requirements and the influence of public sentiment.

This "neo-prohibition" movement apparently has some teeth. Nationwide, wine sales were down 6 percent, and per capita consumption was down 7 percent in 1989, according to estimates by Gomberg-Fredrickson and Associates, San Francisco-based wine consultants. The drop in wine consumption during the past four years marks the longest decline since Prohibition. Wine sales are expected to decline another 5 percent in 1990, according to forecasts by Gomberg-Fredrickson.

Generally it has been the sale of low-cost wines produced in other regions that have been affected, but the sale of super-premium wines selling for \$7 to \$14 a bottle have slowed from a 20 percent increase in 1987 to a 6 percent increase in 1988, Gomberg-Fredrickson reports. Most of those premium wines are produced in North Bay wine regions.

"Neo-prohibition probably won't affect wineries the way Prohibition did originally, but the movement is proposing measures that could be damaging, whether it's taxation, federal interference or (release of) negative information," says Sam Folsom of the San Francisco-based Wine Institute.

"Severe taxation is prohibition of a form," says Bill Smith, owner of La Jota Vineyard Co. in Angwin. If the new alcohol tax law that taxes each drink five cents goes on the ballot in November and passes, "It will make it a little more difficult to sell wine, but it won't kill anything," he says.

Wine industry officials are adamant that wine is different from beer and hard spirits, saying that wine-consumers drink wine to enhance food, not to get drunk. And the Wine Institute recently launched a \$1 million public relations campaign focusing on the good side of wine.



Recently discovered ruins of the 1878 Grigsby winery near Napa.

winemaker, Jerome Bardot: "As most of the other cellars have sold out '87 and '88 wines, we are practically the only ones having a cellar of good old wines, well-maintained and well-handled. Therefore they ought to command a good price — should think 25 cents a gallon or more would not be asking too much. Of course no wines in the valley have been sold at any such figure, but reminder that we have better wine than any others . . ."

Chateau Montelena is very much as it was when founded, except that its sturdy stone walls, witness to the painstaking wine-storing procedures used a century ago, now echo the hum of computers and high-tech wine-making equipment.

GRIGSBY: A NEWFOUND SPIRIT

More than 120 ghost wineries were documented by 1980. Since then, still more have been discovered. The most recent is the Grigsby winery along the Silverado Trail near the city of Napa. Located on land owned by Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Grigsby faces Stag's Leap's Nathan Fay vineyard where the first cabernet vines in Napa Valley were planted in 1961, according to Kasia Winiarski Amparano, of Stag's Leap Cellars.

Draped in brambles and blackberry vines, the Grigsby winery is flanked by a barbed wire fence bent with age. All that remains of the two-story wood structure is a 16-foot by 16-foot patch of dirt encased by a hillside and moss-covered stone walls. A wooden door lies in the center of the patch where it last fell open, and two green bottles caked with mud and cobwebs rest on a ledge. Limbs from the oak trees on the hill reach into the space where the second story once was.

Barbara and Warren Winiarski, former Chicagoans and owners of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, hope to restore the Grigsby ghost to its original form within a year. "It's possible we may have to rip it down and start from scratch," says Amparano, their daughter. The family hopes to salvage as much of the original stone as possible and may even try to save the lichen covering those stones.

It will be restored as a historical monument, not as a tourist attraction nor as a modern wine-making operation, Amparano adds.

Heintz's research uncovered that the winery was built in 1878 or 1879 by the Terrell Grigsby family and that the local school district assessed adjacent acreage as vineyards in 1889.

LA JOTA: NEW LIFE ON HOWELL MOUNTAIN

Plain-looking La Jota winery was built in 1898 by publisher Frederick Hess, a Swiss native. Enveloped in quiet, it stands in a clearing at the edge of Los Posadas State Forest atop Howell Mountain, about two miles southeast of Angwin.

La Jota's red wines won medals at the 1900 Paris Exposition, and during the turn of the century, Howell Mountain enjoyed a reputation as the birthplace of the state's finest cabernets. The mountain was then crisscrossed with nearly 1,000 acres of grapes. But today there are only about 450 acres of vineyard on Howell Mountain, according to Bill Smith, La Jota's present owner, less than half what there were 90 years ago.

Following Prohibition, La Jota winery remained in the Hess family for generations, standing idle long after Repeal. The Hesses continued to visit Pine Crest, the



The tufa stone walls of La Jota once watched over 1,000 acres of grapes.

family home at La Jota, and they enjoyed the La Jota wines they had cleverly spirited away before Prohibition hit.

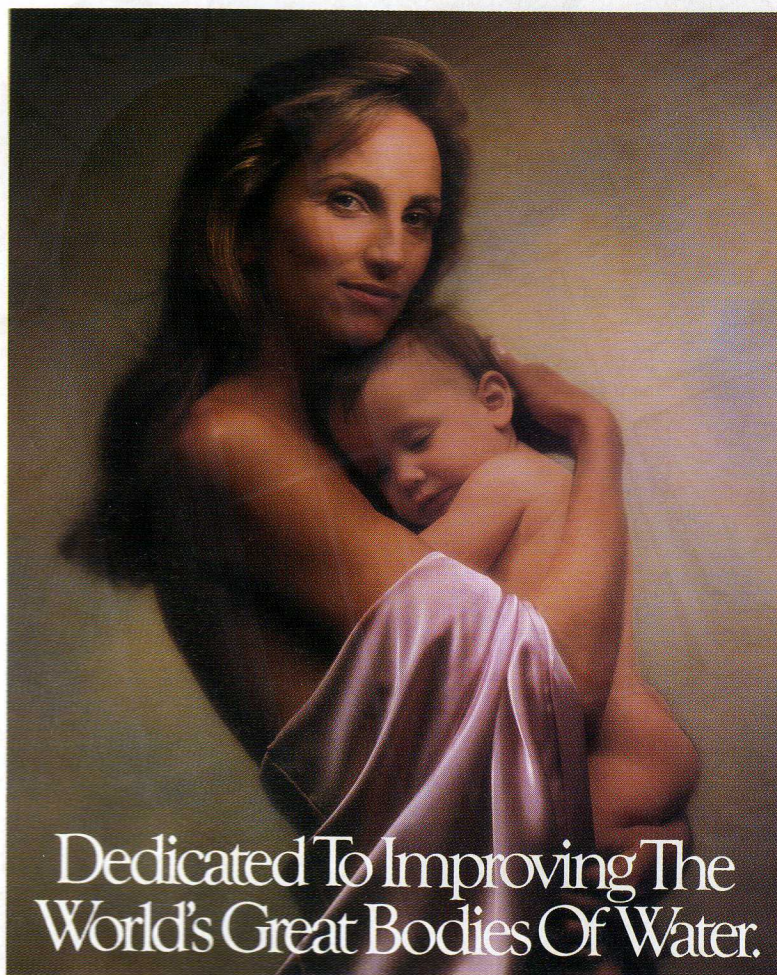
Hess's grandson Fred Hess recollected in a 1982 letter: "On a foggy morning in San Francisco's Richmond District, I well remember a large flatbed truck arriving at our house, laden with demijohns, barrels, half barrels, puncheons, kegs of wine. The date was 1918, I believe a few days before Prohibition took effect.

"It was up to me to bottle that wine, and it took me quite a few years to get the job done, especially since on our visits every two or three weeks to 'The Ranch,' (Pine Crest), we always came back with a demijohn or two covered, prudently, with a lap robe. It was hush, hush!

"... Dad ripped out the vineyard a few years, as I recall, after Prohibition."



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HOW OLD IS OLD?

"A winery is as old as the first wine made on the site, regardless if the original building is still there or how many owners there have been," explains North Bay historian William Heintz, who has been researching wineries for 20 years.

A true ghost winery, he says, "is a winery with some public reference to wine having been made on the site and in the structure, along with some evidence of that structure being part of the structure that is there today . . . There are probably another 25 (ghosts) in the hills, and no one understands what they are."

The vineyard land had long since been reclaimed by the woods when Smith, an oil-lease specialist from Palo Alto, purchased La Jota in 1974. Since then, he and his wife, Joan, have breathed new life into the old ghost.

The reborn La Jota was bonded as La Jota Vineyard Co. in 1982 and its first vintage released in 1985. Little had to be done to make the winery usable, say the Smiths. The electrical wiring was augmented, and new barrels and tanks were purchased. Physically the two-story winery was quite sound. Constructed from tufa, a buff-colored stone quarried nearby, it withstood both the 1906 and 1989 earthquakes with nary a crack, says Smith.

Some 28 acres of vineyard have been replanted on the slopes around La Jota, and each year Smith makes 12,000 gallons of zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon, and viognier, an unusual white wine. □