



Q & A

Helen Bacigalupi

Although she's not a winemaker, 89-year-old Helen Bacigalupi has been committed for more than six decades to making the most out of the grapes her family farms in the heart of Sonoma County's Russian River Valley.

It's a story that began when Helen met Charles Bacigalupi, a Sonoma County native whose grandfather had a winery on Chiquita Road outside of Healdsburg. The couple married and settled in Healdsburg, where Charles established a long career as a dentist and Helen worked a short stint as a pharmacist before becoming the family's official ranch keeper and accountant in 1956, when the Bacigalupis purchased the old Goddard Ranch on Westside Road, southwest of Healdsburg.

The hillside property had 16 acres of vineyards planted to a classic field blend of zinfandel, alicante bouschet, golden chasselas, muscat and mission. But at the time, the more lucrative crops on the property were orchard fruits and walnuts.

Sonoma County winegrowing family matriarch looks backward and forward

BY CHRISTOPHER SAWYER

The family's focus shifted to grapegrowing in 1964, when a 14-acre parcel was planted to chardonnay and the first pinot noir vines to go in the ground on Westside Road.

Once the new vineyard blocks were established, the Bacigalupis began selling grapes to Rodney Strong and the Foppiano and Seghesio families. In 1973, Helen sold 14 tons of chardonnay to Napa Valley's Chateau Montelena, which became 40% of the blend in the wine that bested the French in the famed 1976 "Judgment of Paris" tasting.

At the end of the 1970s, the

Bacigalupis partnered with Peter Friedman of Belvedere Winery to bottle their first vineyard-designated chardonnay as part of Belvedere's Grapemaker Series. A few years later, the 1982 vintage won the Sonoma Harvest Fair Sweepstakes and was eventually served at the White House. But the Bacigalupis later ended their partnership with Belvedere's parent company, Healdsburg Wine Growers Inc., and the last chardonnay bottling from the vineyard was in 1987.

As the demand for premium grapes expanded, the family began developing vineyards on newly pur-

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chased properties, including the Bloom Ranch adjacent to the original Bacigalupi property in 1973; a 15-acre parcel on Lytton Station Road in Alexander Valley in 1983; and the Frost Ranch farther south on Westside Road in 1993.

Over the past two decades, most of the chardonnay, pinot noir, zinfandel and petite sirah grapes grown on the properties have been sold to boutique producers including Williams Selyem, Fantesca Estate & Winery, Rudd Oakville Estate, Arista Winery and many others. Today, a portion of the fruit is used by winemaker Ashley Herzberg, hired by the family in 2011 to create a new series of Bacigalupi Vineyards wines that is primarily sold to high-end restaurants and at the new tasting room at the base of the Goddard property on Westside Road.

We caught up with Helen to discuss the past, present and future of

her family's legacy and the renaissance of the Bacigalupi wine brand.

Vineyard & Winery Management [V&WM] *What inspired you to plant the first blocks of chardonnay and pinot noir grapes at the Goddard Ranch in 1964?*

Helen Bacigalupi [HB] At the time, Charles' patient, Bob Sisson, was the county viticulture farm advisor, so we asked his advice on which grapes to plant. By this point the heat summation system had been developed, and he said Russian River Valley would be an ideal place to plant pinot noir and chardonnay. I remember saying that I never heard of those grapes. So Sisson told us to talk to Karl Wente at Wente Vineyards. Then, after Charles secured budwood from the Wentes and the St. George rootstock from Bill Wallace's nursery down the road, the original 14 acres of vines were budded by Joe



Chardonnay fruit from Goddard Ranch was included in Chateau Montelena's winning wine in the 1976 Paris Tasting.

Rochioli Jr., who became an expert in grafting the vines in the region.

[V&WM] *Who did you sell your grapes to in the early days?*

[HB] When we first started, there weren't many people to sell to locally. The only wineries were Foppiano, Pedroncelli, Seghesio and Gallo. That was about it. Rod Strong was the first to offer us a contract. It was very significant because until then, you couldn't negotiate a price. You took what they gave you.

[V&WM] *As the new vineyards developed, what were the strengths of your investments through the years?*

[HB] We knew that our son, John, was going to take over when we couldn't do it anymore. We naturally wanted a bigger pie to cut, so we needed to expand. But I do think you can get too big, and end up trying to manage more than you can handle. We're happy to say we are still at a size where our son can manage the whole thing and just

hire a small amount of help when needed. To make it easier, we also work with grape varieties that don't all ripen at the same time. Even clones that don't come in at the same time are good. This helps spread out the harvest, which is what you want to do if you want to manage estate vineyards and bring in the fruit at peak condition.

[V&WM] *How did the introduction of irrigation techniques help the ripening process?*

[HB] The old-timers used to get

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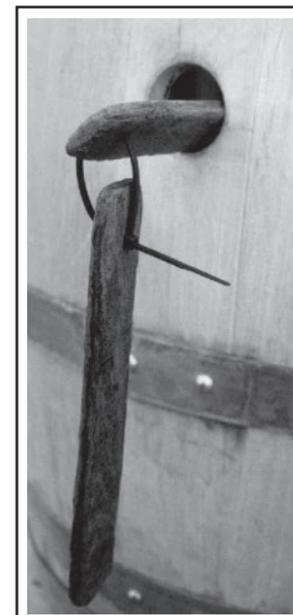
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sugar by dehydrating the grapes when the leaves would fall off the vines. If there's no moisture coming into the vine, then you're going to get shrinkage. Consequently, the acid would go to hell and the wines were no good. So in order to make a good wine, you've got to keep the leaves on the vine and you want to pick when the acid and the ripeness are at their peak. That's the secret to the whole thing. It's all about balance.

In those days you didn't think about irrigating the vineyard because nobody did. They didn't have drip hoses so everything was dry-farmed. Of course, St. George has a deep root, so the grapevines could survive. But when drip irrigation became available, we developed a man-made lake to store rainwater and runoff from the higher parts of the property. This innovation was fantastic because our bench is a combo of red volcanic soil with red oxidized iron, and this

change allowed us to keep the soil and vines healthy through the harvest. I really think that's what gives the grapes their flavor.

[V&WM] *What is the advantage of working with the Wente clones on your property?*

[HB] We've kept with the Wente clones because we believe they allow us to grow superior pinot noir and chardonnay grapes. In the early days, nobody even knew what a clone was. But finally the farmers began to realize there was a difference. The Wente chardonnay clones, or "chicks and hens," can have small berries – some of which don't even have a seed in them. How it affects the flavor profile, nobody knows. But I think there's something to that. After years of people raving about the wine, there must be something different.

[V&WM] *From the 1980s to now, how has your view of the wine grape marketplace changed?*

[HB] In the old days, most

grapegrowers would sell everything they had to one winery. But if you put all your eggs in one basket and the winery goes bankrupt, then you're really hanging out there. For that reason, my theory is to diversify like you would in the stock market. Of course, we've had a number of people who have stiffed us on paying. Just a couple months ago, we got a letter from one man who went into bankruptcy, and we will never get that money, of course. But if you're not out for more than 5 tons, then you're not going to go down the tubes.

I do think that a lot of growers don't know how to sell their grapes. Instead, they take what somebody offers and they stick with that winery. Wineries try to get you to sign long-term contracts. That's in their favor because they can always cut you off. For that reason, we don't do any long-term contracts. It's year-to-year for everybody. We do a new contract each year to protect

HELEN BACIGALUPI'S RESUME

- + **Birthplace:** Parkton, Wyo.
- + **Professional Background:** Bacigalupi was a pharmacist for five years in Healdsburg, Calif., before joining the family farming business.
- + **Education:** Degree from University of California San Francisco Medical Center.
- + **Personal:** She enjoys clothing design, including sewing, knitting and crochet.

ourselves in case a winery changes hands or gets bought out. Sometimes you don't know who's coming and who's going, so you want to keep things as fluid as possible.

[V&WM] *Do you personally evaluate the wines made from your fruit?*

[HB] I've never turned anyone down for using the Bacigalupi Vine-

yard trademark. You know, I'm not going to say this wine is a little bit better than that one. If winemakers think it's good and I don't find that it's a horrible wine, then we're on the same page. In the end, it's a matter of interpretation by the consumers who purchase the finished products.

[V&WM] *How did you come to sell the chardonnay to Chateau Montelena in 1973?*

[HB] Truthfully, I have no idea how Mike Grgich (Chateau Montelena's winemaker in 1973) found out about our chardonnay. But when he called me up and said he'd like to buy some of our grapes, I said OK and we agreed on the price. Leading up to harvest, Grgich would visit the vineyard and often say they were the best grapes he'd ever tasted and how beautiful they were.

That year I sold the winery nearly 15 tons. It took me six trips to the winery (in Calistoga) and I

hauled the grapes with my little Volkswagen pickup and a custom-made trailer.

[V&WM] *How did the 1976 Paris Tasting affect your business?*

[HB] The impact of the Paris Tasting took several years – it definitely wasn't right away. Today it's still impacting the wines made in Northern California, but I don't think that people here understood how important the award was at the time. On the other hand, the French felt the impact immediately!

[V&WM] *How does the recent release of the new Bacigalupi wines make you feel?*

[HB] Truthfully, it makes me feel wonderful. I'm just glad Charles lived long enough (until October 2013) to see it was going to happen.

[V&WM] *Your twin granddaughters, Katey and Nicole, are now running the sales and marketing side of the business. How do you feel about their involvement?*

[HB] I'm thrilled. It's fabulous to have our family name being represented by the next generations and have them help bring the family brand name back to life.

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Christopher Sawyer is a sommelier, wine educator and critic who travels around the globe following wine trends and judging wine in international competitions.

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