

50 Years in Wine

Robert Haas, An American Icon

STORY & PHOTOS BY JEFF MORGAN

“Sometimes I wonder what I would be doing now if I hadn’t started a winery,” Robert Haas muses. Then he shrugs his shoulders, gazes off at the hills that frame Tablas Creek and smiles broadly. “It’s kept me young.”

Approaching his eighth decade, Robert Haas remains energetic and vibrant. He continues to be a guiding force



in shaping Americans’ appreciation of fine wine through his work as a retailer, importer, broker and – most recently – a winemaker in California. He founded Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles in 1989.

Haas entered the wine trade in 1950, after graduating from Yale, and went to work in his father’s midtown store in Manhattan. The young Brooklyn-born wine clerk spoke little French and knew even less about wine. The shop was founded by his father’s uncle, Morris Lehmann, who emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1870. Lehmann sold groceries, not wines. When he became too ill to run the store in the mid-1920s, Haas’s father, Sydney, took over. Sydney saw the end of Prohibition on the horizon and was ready to broaden his retail opportunities. On the first day of Repeal in 1933, M. Lehmann obtained the twelfth New York State liquor license to be issued.

“My dad was a bit of a maverick,” Haas says. “He figured he would try to buy his French wines direct and began working with an agent in France named Raymond Baudoin.” Unfortunately, Baudoin died suddenly from heat stroke in

1953. A year later, Haas the elder sent his 27-year-old son to Europe to look for a replacement. It was the younger Haas’s first trip to France.

“It took me two or three weeks to realize there was no way to replace Baudoin,” Haas remembers. “Almost no one in France worked on a national level. There were only local agents.”

But the French lifestyle had quickly seduced the young importer. “I discovered I didn’t want to replace Baudoin,” he admits. “I wanted his job.”

Haas followed the path paved by Baudoin and took over a core group of 10 French wineries. He slowly expanded his client base and eventually transformed M. Lehmann from a liquor store that sold wine on the side to a bona fide fine wine shop. He also began selling the wines he imported to other retailers around the United States. In 1961, his father sold M. Lehmann to Joseph Stricks, the floor manager for another Manhattan wine shop, Sherry Wine and Spirits. Stricks merged the two stores three years later to become Sherry-Lehmann, which remains a benchmark wine shop in New York today.

Working retail wasn’t nearly as satisfying to young Robert as his import activities. The sale of his father’s store prompted him to quit M. Lehmann and open a wholesale/import business of his own with his father as a partner. But in 1967, Sydney wanted to retire. Robert couldn’t afford to buy him out and sold the business to Barton Distilling Company (now Barton Brands, an affiliate of Constellation Brands). He remained on to run the Barton wine division as an employee for three years.

Haas became a wine broker, moving his business to Vermont. In 1973, he had enough capital to shed his brokering moniker and became a full-blown importer with purchasing power. He called his new company Vineyard Brands. Today Vineyard Brands does \$65 million in annual sales and imports 40,000 cases of wine each year from Burgundy alone. Eighty percent of the Vineyard Brands portfolio is European, with half the wines coming from France. Ironically, Vineyard Brands represents no California wineries, with the exception of Tablas Creek.

During his years trekking to cellars throughout Europe and the New World, Haas developed many longstanding friendships with winemakers who eventually instilled in him a desire to make his own wine. The seeds of his Tablas Creek investment began around the time he left New York and started representing the wines of the highly esteemed Château de Beaucastel, located in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. By the time Beaucastel patriarch Jacques Perrin died of spinal cancer in 1977, he and Haas had become close friends as well as business associates. In fact, Haas was considered an extended member of the Perrin family and was equally close to Perrin’s sons, Jean-Pierre and François. On occasion, Jean-Pierre would accompany Haas on business trips to California.

“Jean-Pierre was always surprised that there wasn’t much out there [in the vineyards] but Cabernet Sauvignon and

Chardonnay,” Haas says. “We both thought that California looked more like the Rhône than Bordeaux or Burgundy. And we were looking for a way to prolong our family relationship into the future. So we decided to plant a California vineyard.”

The two families searched extensively throughout the state of California looking for growing conditions that closely matched those of Château de Beaucastel. Limestone soils and a maritime climate were key conditions that were met in the hills west of Paso Robles. In 1989, the partners purchased 120 acres 12 miles from the Pacific Ocean and called their new domain Tablas Creek, after a small creek that runs through the property. They decided to plant the same grapes as those grown at Château de Beaucastel, which included such varieties

as Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah, Counoise, Roussanne, Viognier and Marsanne. In a confluence of simultaneous destinies, other Central Coast vintners like Bob Lindquist, John Alban, Randall Grahm and Gary Eberle were also establishing their identities as “Rhône Rangers,” testing the viticultural waters with a new commitment to Rhône varieties. The arrival of Haas and the Perrin family reinforced the local vintners’ belief in the region’s potential and encouraged further development.

The Haas and Perrin families each own 37 percent of the Tablas Creek vineyard and winery. Other shares are owned by limited partners. At first, the vintners wanted to plant vines from Beaucastel cuttings. But to do it legally required USDA approval that the vines were virus-free – a process that took three years. To offset the mandated USDA waiting period for planting French vine cuttings, some scion material was sourced from already existing California vineyards. Even so, five years were needed to establish a reasonable commercial crop, now farmed organically. The first vintage wines were produced in 1994. Eventually, about 100 acres will be planted at the vineyard.

In keeping with the Châteauneuf tradition of blended wines, Haas originally refused to consider varietal labeling, preferring to call his wines Tablas Creek Rouge

and Tablas Creek Blanc. But after 12 years, he has finally begun to acquiesce to the American varietal preference. Roussanne from the 2002 vintage was the



first varietal released from his winery.

Ultimately, the Tablas Creek nursery has propagated some 1.5 million buds and cuttings that have been sold to other California wineries or used at Tablas Creek. As a result, Haas has helped create California’s genetic profile for Rhône varieties. Of course all this takes time. The fact that Haas was already in his early 60s when he embarked on the Tablas Creek project is a testament to his optimism and staying power.

In 2002, Haas officially retired from Vineyard Brands. The company’s corporate headquarters are now in Alabama. His son, Daniel, lives in Washington, DC and manages the mid-Atlantic sales group for the company. Two other children work for Tablas Creek. A daughter, Rebecca, lives in New York and works at sales and marketing for the winery when not plying her other trade as a jewelry designer. Another son, Jason, is director of marketing for Tablas Creek and lives in Paso Robles, with an office at the winery.

What were the odds that a Jewish boy from Brooklyn would make such a strong statement in American wine? Pretty slim. But for more than half a century, Robert Haas has brought his passion to his business. In doing so, he has raised the bar for both consumers and the wine trade alike.