

The Hanzell Story

An Interview with Jean Arnold Sessions,
President, Hanzell Vineyards

EDITORS' NOTE Jean Sessions assumed her current post in 2002. She has served the wine industry since 1979 with executive positions at Chateau Montelena, Jordan and "J," Chalk Hill Estate, Williams Selyem, and Jackson Family Farms.



Jean Arnold Sessions

COMPANY BRIEF In 1948, Ambassador James D. Zellerbach acquired 200 acres in the Mayacamas Mountains of northwestern California to create a small vineyard and winery dedicated to pinot noir and chardonnay. The Zellerbachs planted six acres in 1953 and created the first vintage in 1957. They named their winery Hanzell (www.hanzell.com), a contraction of Hana Zellerbach's name. The Zellerbachs' legacy was passed to the Day family in 1965, and in 1975, the de Brie family acquired the estate. The vineyard has grown to 42 acres today, allowing Hanzell to produce 6,000 cases annually, of which approximately three quarters are chardonnay and one quarter is pinot noir.

Are you happy with Hanzell Vineyards' brand recognition in the marketplace?

Our story is out, but it's not at the level I want it to be. We were the first "cult winery"—a small hidden gem, making world-class chardonnay and pinot noir. Our brand awareness has increased, and we've been telling our story. I would like to continue to tell that story and to enhance the understanding of what aging does for wine and of the joy of collecting and drinking wines that have matured. I think that art is being lost, and it's crucial to our brand and our story.

Can you highlight your production levels and the new products you're bringing to market?

When we do a new release, it's often a release of the older vintages. We've been producing chardonnay and pinot noir that are very distinctive to our 200 acres of land. We planted an additional five acres recently, so we hope to bring a bit more to the market. We are at 6,000 cases right now — about 4,000 chardonnay and 2,000 pinot noir — and over the next 10 years, we will grow to about 8,000 cases — 5,000 chardonnay and 3,000 pinot noir.

In 2006, we released a 2003 pinot noir from Ambassador Zellerbach's 1953 vineyard.



It is our first single-vineyard designation. We're 100 percent estate-bottled. We use only our own grapes, and we produce the wine at our winery. So instead of highlighting the young vineyards, we highlighted a vineyard that was planted in 1953. It's the oldest pinot noir planting in the new world, and we bottled four barrels of this wine. We will release our second one in May — a 2005 chardonnay from the Ambassador's 1953 vineyard. Again, it's the oldest continuously producing chardonnay vineyard in the new world. We bottled four barrels of that wine, from vines that are more than 50 years old. It's quite historic.

Your wines are difficult to come by. Is that by design, or is it a result of limited production?

My philosophy is that about 60 percent of our wine should be distributed directly to our customers, and the other 40 percent will go through a three-tier distribution system to top restaurants and fine wine shops. With restaurants, you build your image. I prefer for chefs and sommeliers to understand our wine, and talk to their customers at the table about our wine and tell our story. We also like to be in the top wine shops, where vendors can tell our story. We all work hard for our money these days, and we want people to understand what they're investing in. We hope they first understand the quality of our wine and then understand the story of how the wine came about — the hard work and the people involved.

Do you belong to the school of thought that believes certain wines should be paired with only a certain type food? Is there a right and wrong way to drink wine, or is it about personal taste?

It's about what works for you, but there are some guidelines that can be helpful. There are reasons why they say white wine goes with fish and fowl and red wine goes with beef and lamb. It has to do with the way wine interacts with your palate. If you have a lighter dish, white wines, which generally have less tannin,

are really good. It's about flavor and which wine will clear your palate for the next bite. But there are no rules; you should drink what you like with what you want to eat. I would take a cue from Chef John Ash, who suggests looking at the flavor of the sauce, the complexity of the protein, and how full-bodied the wine is. If the food is subtly spiced, look for subtlety in the wine. If it's a bold dish, look for boldness in the wine. So while there are guidelines, there are not rules.

Are Hanzell's wines generally ready to drink, or should they be allowed to age?

I have a distinct philosophy on this. Great wine, when it's released, is not usually at its peak. If a wine is crafted to age well as a hallmark of its greatness, it's pretty tightly wound when young. Great white Burgundy, for instance, takes about 5 to 8 years to start showing well, and pinot noirs take 8 to 10 years. So it's about cellaring, but I will also drink young great wine, if I can decant it first.

Even with the number of years you've been in this business, you still seem to be passionate about it. Is it that much fun for you?

The evolution of the vineyard and the public's interest in wine and collecting are very exciting. It's lovely to mentor young people about wine. I don't like much about the distribution battles. The industry is consolidating, and so is distribution. We need to find ways to be important to our wholesale partners — companies that bring in millions — and that's hard for a small winery to do. But it's always balanced with something that is just amazing — opening a glorious bottle of chardonnay. That puts it all into perspective.

Do you often drink your competitors' wines? Is it important to see what's in the market?

Absolutely. I happily taste great wine all the time. To be world class, you need to know what's out there in the world. ●

The Hanzell Vineyards cave