

PROFILE JED STEELE

Fifty years sounds like an eternity; winemaker Jed Steele feels like he's just getting started. In some ways it's because every growing year is different. Even though a winemaker tries to pick his grapes at the same ripeness levels every year, ferments with the same yeast strain, and ages in the same barrels, the finished wine always tastes a little bit different than it did last year. And because the wine is never the best it can be, winemakers like Jed continue to reach for the brass ring.

Born in New York, Jed moved with his family to San Francisco in 1950. In 1961, he received a basketball scholarship to Gonzaga University in Washington State. His first job after college was a cellar position at Napa's Stony Hill Winery. Now hooked on wine production, Jed went back to school at UC Davis and earned his Masters in enology. From 1974 through 1982 he was the winemaker and vineyard manager at Edmeades Winery in Mendocino County's Anderson Valley. During that same period, Jed took on side projects that allowed his winemaking creativity to blossom.

He partnered with legendary retailer Darryl Corti in Sacramento in 1974 to produce a private label Cabernet Sauvignon that used artwork on the wine label. Prior to this, Chateau Mouton Rothschild in Bordeaux was the only winery known to incorporate original artwork on its label.

In 1977, Jed produced the first commercial ice wine in the U.S. at Edmeades. The ice wine was produced naturally, following very strict German winemaking laws. That same year at Edmeades he emulated the Hospice de Beaune in Burgundy by bottling a special Cabernet Sauvignon, the proceeds from which went to support a local health center. This was the first time a California wine was bottled specifically to support a medical facility.

In 1980, Jed produced the first red Rhone blend in California, made from Mendocino Grenache, Petite Sirah and Carignane. He called it Côte De Mendocino. The concept so baffled the legal authorities that they would not approve the label and the wine had to be sold only in California.

And in probably his grandest coup in wine, while working at Kendall-Jackson Winery, Jed developed the concept and style of the Kendall-Jackson Vintners Reserve Chardonnay, still the most popular Chardonnay in the history of California wine.

Jed went on to start his own wine brand in Lower Lake in California's Lake County in 1991. He expanded the business, bought Mt. Konocti Winery in Kelseyville, and moved his production to that facility in 1996.

Jed's vision has always been to make a number of different varietal wines in small lots, using minimally invasive winemaking techniques and allowing the vineyard and grape variety to dictate style. He launched the Steele and Shooting Star brands in 1991, created Stymie in 1999 and Writer's Block (with his son Quincy) in 2002.

Today Jed continues his visionary ways by crushing 16 different varietals and producing 40 different wines, most under 1,000 total cases. Steele Wines owns five vineyards. He also leases three additional vineyards from the Dorn family, original settlers of Lake County, and he buys grapes from families he's worked with for many years, from Santa Barbara County to Washington State.