

Wine In The Twilight Zone

by Jerry D. Mead

This is part one of the strangest wine story I've filed in two decades of writing. Part two, by the way, won't appear next week, or even the week after that. I wasn't born in Missouri, but it's going to take a lot of "show me" before I get to the follow up on what you're about to read.

If this were a work of fiction, the theme music from *Twilight Zone* would play as I'm seated at a corner table of a San Francisco restaurant. Seated across from me is a noted scientist in his seventies, wearing a distinctive triangle shaped necklace of African wood, framed in sterling silver, with a large, many-faceted crystal in its center. Also at the table are his bearded colleague, an attractive woman and a chap who looks like a high school coach.

I flashback to a ringing phone a few days earlier, and my explanation to the voice on the other end that my appointment calendar is full for weeks. The voice expresses urgency, promises an exclusive, and promises a story on a new technological breakthrough that may accelerate the aging and enhancing of young wine. A strange feeling came over me, and I somehow found time in a schedule I though inflexible.

The restaurant scene comes back into focus and I'm reaching for my note pad. The woman is Mary Kay Parks and the "coach" is husband Terry. They are owners of Sycamore Creek Vineyards near Morgan Hill. I've known them for years. The former school teachers turned vintners have always seemed, well, normal.

The distinguished septuagenarian scientist is Marcel Vogel and he has impressive credentials. He began his studies by conducting experiments on phosphors. From 1944 to 1957 he owned the Vogel Luminescence Corporation. He then generated nearly 100 patents during 27 years as a research scientist for IBM.

Vogel was the man behind the liquid crystal display (LCD) and was instrumental in inventing the coating that continues to be used on every IBM hard disk.

He retired from IBM in 1984, only to become founder of Psychic Research, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to "the study of the subtle forces and energies that radiate from the body of a living form" and to "quantify and identify these energies and apply them to...purifying water, aging wine and the therapeutic application of crystals and crystal devices." Vogel is involved in the scientific study

of what most of us would call the metaphysical.

Vogel claims to be able to introduce a large, specially cut, specially programmed quartz crystal into a winery's bottling line, and alter the sensory characteristics of a given wine. In other experiments, Vogel claims to have actually altered the pH of water simply by passing it over his crystals.

Vogel kept referring to the programming of his crystals throughout the interview, a concept I had trouble understanding. "How do you program a crystal?" I asked. "Do you hook it up to a computer? Bombard it with some kind of energy waves? What?"

The answer was less than satisfying to my admittedly cynical mind. Vogel claims that the crystals are programmed by a sort of thought transference. Get this! He holds the crystal in his hand for a few seconds and thinks what he wants it to do to the wine, and that's what it does.

Vogel is not without a sense of humor. He smiled and laughed at my jokes and occasional humming of the theme from *Twilight Zone*, much in the way that an understanding minister might smile at a small boy trying to grasp the concept of a higher power.

Vogel admitted that he doesn't completely understand the power of crystals, which is the reason for his research. The fact that you can't see it work or measure its power doesn't matter, he argues. You can see (actually taste) the results and that proves the power is there. It's sort of like the power of gravity, I guess, you can't see it or feel it, but you know it's there.

Terry Parks admitted to the same kind of initial skepticism that I was showing, but says the changes in the wines have convinced him. Mary Kay mostly smiled with satisfaction; it was her idea to get Vogel involved.

Before I get to my tasting notes, let me explain the tasting process. There were two samples of each wine. One had passed over the crystal, the other had not. The wines were supposedly bottled on the same day, from the same tank, with the only difference being the insertion of the crystal into the process. I did not observe the bottling procedure, but a long acquaintance with the Parks gives me no reason to doubt their word. I was not initially told which wine was which.

I can tell you that I observed a noticeable difference in each pair of wines, and in at least three

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instances it was a significant difference. We also offered samples to random diners in the restaurant and they were able to distinguish the differences and describe them in much the same way that I did. The crystal-treated wine was not always preferred.

I should also mention that current releases of Sycamore Creek wines have been treated with the crystals. The untreated control wines are in the winery's library for research and comparison.

In each of the tasting notes to follow, I will review and score the crystal-treated, commercially available wine, followed by comments about the control sample. For more information on these limited production wines contact: Sycamore Creek Vineyards, 12775 Uvas Road, Morgan Hill, CA 95037 (408) 779-4738.

Sycamore Creek 1987 "Central Coast" Sauvignon Blanc (\$8) Rich, soft, and a definite awareness of some residual sweetness. The softness and roundness of the wine made it appear to be older than an '87. I didn't care for it (75/75)

This was one instance where I preferred the untreated wine. It was crisper, fresher and there was less awareness of residual sugar. The sweetness level was supposed to be identical. I would have scored this version at least 10 points higher. Vogel explained that he had been the one to program the crystal for this wine and, because he prefers wines to be soft, that explains the end result.

Sycamore Creek 1987 "Santa Clara" Chardonnay (\$14) Wonderful fruit, crisp and appley, superbly balanced, and oak a definite added complexity. This commercial release seemed more mature, developed and complex. (89/84).

The untreated wine was more youthful, simpler, with fruit more forward and one-dimensional oak flavors. I liked both versions, but favored the treated one.

Sycamore Creek 1985 "Santa Clara" Cabernet Sauvignon (\$14) The best wine in the line; a real knockout Cabernet. Gorgeous, ripe, cassis flavors, with earthy, truffle-like complexities. Substantial, but round and inoffensive tannins. Great intensity; harmonious mouth feel; very long finish. (92/84)

The untreated wine was nice, but lacked the harmony, the fruit was more youthful and the tannins were significantly harder.

Sycamore Creek 1987 Gamay Blanc (\$5.50) Not my favorite "Blush" wine in either version. Fruit flavors brighter, here, better overall balance and less cloying sweetness. Cherry-like flavors. (79/80)

The no-crystal wine showed less fruit, was really clumsy and sweet.

Sycamore Creek 1987 "Santa Barbara" Johannisberg Riesling (\$8) Nice, tasty, low-alcohol Riesling with ripe fruit flavors leaning to apple and honey (82/80)

No significant difference between the treated and untreated wines.

Sycamore Creek 1987 "Late Harvest" Johannisberg Riesling (\$15 the half bottle) A special proprietary bottling, this wine is also labeled "Romeo and Juliet—Lover's Nectar," and has a special artwork label. This was also the wine to show the most dramatic difference in the two bottlings. Sugar (and it is sweet), acid and complex late harvest flavors are in perfect harmony. Honey qualities emphasized, with apricot and peach more in the background. No hint of bitterness. Very long finish. (92/84)

The non-crystal wine seemed years younger, apricot flavors predominated, and there was an apricot pit bitterness in the finish. It seemed out of balance with the sugar and acid fighting in the mouth, causing me to pucker and shudder.

A couple of closing notes. I learned that Master Sommelier Fred Dame of the Sardine Factory in Monterey had also tasted the wines. Dame, too, had found noticeable differences and when we compared tasting notes found we were in almost total agreement.

When I proposed various additional experiments, Vogel welcomed carrying them out. Aside from wanting to observe the process myself and take away samples on the day of bottling to assure that nothing else is happening, I proposed such things as having the crystals programmed by more than one person and comparing the results.

I would also like to see the process tried at other wineries, on already finished wines from my own cellar, and would like to see a laboratory analysis of treated and untreated wines to determine any actual physical changes. Vogel agreed to cooperate with any and all such experiments.

Has Marcel Vogel actually discovered the long sought after process for accelerating the aging, maturing and enhancing of wine? I hope to have a more definitive answer in a few weeks or months. Stay tuned...and don't touch that dial!

Jerry D. Mead is a syndicated columnist, a consultant to wine and Hospitality Industries, a festival organizer and a lecturer-publisher. This article appeared in 34 California Newspapers, 7 magazines and several other publications during the week ending September 4, 1988.