

Wine Spectator

COLUMNS

# The Ponzi Legacy



By Tim Fish

Dick Ponzi came to Oregon in a flatbed truck. In the mix were his wife, Nancy, their kids, two cats, a dog, a canoe, a piano and four barrels of homemade wine. He was 36, and it was 1969, a time when many Americans were going “back to the land.”

The Ponzis, however, were anything but a hippy family. Dick was an aerospace engineer who later designed rides for Disney—but after a trip to Burgundy he was committed to making Pinot Noir in Willamette Valley.

Little did Dick and Nancy Ponzi realize at the time but they would be pioneers in establishing the Oregon and particularly Willamette Valley wine industries. This year, they reflect on the past five decades at Ponzi Vineyards, and their accomplishments, their family and the future.

“It doesn’t seem like 50 years,” Dick says. “We had to rely on ourselves a lot and we were naïve about what we were taking on, but we thought it would be kind of fun.”

Wine was part of Dick’s life from the earliest days in his native Michigan. His family was Italian and they were avid home winemakers. “That odor of fermenting juice was in my DNA, apparently,” Dick says.

He was already making wine at home when he moved to California to pursue engineering. One of his earliest projects was helping create the first Ford Mustang, and he designed rockets until he found himself morally opposed to the Vietnam War. He was designing rides for Disney World before he moved to Oregon.

Oregon was a different place in 1970. There were only four wineries in Willamette Valley at that time, while today there are more than 700. Vineyards too were few in that day. The main crops were hazelnuts, cherries and apples, hay and grass seed and other field crops. About 25,000 acres of vines are planted now, mostly in the hills and mountains above the valley, and many of the orchards are now vines.

The Ponzis soon discovered other like-minded “lonely souls,” as Ponzi describes a group of young, neophyte winemakers that included David Lett, Dick Erath and later David Adelsheim. Viticulture experts at University of California, Davis, told them that Oregon was too cold to grow Pinot Noir and other vinifera types. Ponzi and these other pioneers believed otherwise.

“It was the love of Pinot that brought us together,” Dick recalls. “We each brought our individual ideas and put them together. We pretty much had to train ourselves.”

With no experience in viticulture or winemaking, the Ponzis set about planting a 20-acre vineyard in 1970. Located in the flatlands, it wasn't the ideal spot, and the learning curve was often steep. While they waited for the vines to mature Dick taught engineering at Portland Community College.

Dick and Nancy harvested their first vintage in 1974; it was released on the Portland market in 1976. "Dick was the right person at the right time," says friend and winemaker Rollin Soles of Roco Winery. "He brought a level of skill and art to the industry that we'd never seen before."

As the Willamette Valley wine industry matured, the Ponzis were instrumental in establishing two of Oregon's top wine events: the International Pinot Noir Conference, which for 34 years has brought together wine professionals from around the world, and ¡Salud!, which is Oregon's largest Pinot Noir auction and raises money for vineyard worker healthcare.

The Ponzis have mellowed over the years, but it's no secret in the Oregon wine community that they're both strong-willed and opinionated. "Nancy was a force to contend with in the early days," Soles says with a chuckle. "But you know she was usually right."

These days, Dick, 86, and Nancy, 79, have few day-to-day responsibilities at the winery. Nearly 30 years ago they had already started handing over the reins to their three children.

Their son, Michel Ponzi, helped grow the business in the early days and since 2012 has divided his time between his family home in Italy and running the Dundee Bistro, which is located in the heart of Willamette Valley. Luisa Ponzi, who was trained in Burgundy, is the winemaker, while Anna Maria Ponzi is president. The Ponzi Pinot Noirs are as good as ever, which gives Dick and Nancy great satisfaction. It is indeed a legacy worth preserving.

*Senior editor Tim Fish has been with Wine Spectator since 2001.*