

Stanley Hoffman

BY TIM FISH

The cork was not cooperating with Stanley Hoffman, but then the wine was a 1976 Pinot Noir, so the bottle wasn't exactly a youngster. "I think I have one more bottle of this," Hoffman, 84, says as he coaxes the bottle open and pours two glasses.

To those who know the history of winemaking along California's Central Coast, the Hoffman Mountain Ranch wines are something of a legend. To sit with Hoffman and share the second-to-last bottle of the '76 Pinot—his favorite—is not a moment to be hurried.

With a delicate aroma of cherry and rose petals, the wine is a faded beauty, revealing last vestiges of a charming youth. "This wine put Paso [Robles] on the map," Hoffman says. "We entered it in a blind tasting in Europe in the late '70s and it beat Romanée-Conti. People from all over the world started coming to see us."

Hoffman is considered the godfather of the modern Central Coast wine industry, laying the groundwork for generations of winemakers. "Stan is the quintessential 'man ahead of his time,'" says Mat Garretson of Garretson Wine Co.

Paso Robles Pioneer	
1961	Acquires 1,200 acres northwest of Paso Robles
1963	Plants first vineyards; pioneering modern Central Coast wine industry
1972	Hoffman Mountain Ranch produces first wine
1981	Forced to sell winery; continues cardiology practice
1996	Retires

Indeed, Hoffman had many firsts. The vineyards he planted in the early '60s were arguably Central Coast's first to grow Bordeaux and Burgundy varieties. He was the first to plant vines on Paso Robles' west side, which at the time was considered unsuitable for wine grapes

but is now a popular winegrowing area. He believed in yields of 2 or 3 tons per acre when fellow local growers considered that financial suicide. He also built a high-tech winery and hired winemaking icon André Tchelistcheff as a consultant.

"That Paso Robles enjoys great attention from today's wine consumer is due in no small measure to Stan's vision and efforts," says Garretson, who is based in Paso Robles.

Hoffman came to winemaking in a roundabout way. Born and raised in Terre Haute, Ind., Hoffman was a successful cardiologist in Beverly Hills, Calif., in the early 1960s when he went looking for a ranch, a place to kick back. He and his wife, Terry, swapped 10 acres of land in what is now downtown Thousand Oaks for 1,200 acres near Paso Robles.

"We fell in love with the place," Hoffman recalls. The family stayed weekends and summers on the ranch until Hoffman moved his medical practice to Paso Robles in 1973, a year after



Stanley Hoffman and his wife, Terry (above, circa 1975), put California's Central Coast on the international wine map with their 1976 Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot Noir.

he produced his first wines. Two years later, he built a winery.

Hoffman's biggest regret was relying on investors to grow the business. "We just got in bed with the wrong people. We had different goals than they did," Hoffman says of his partners, who forced him out in 1981. "It was not a friendly parting."

Not long after Hoffman's departure, the winery failed and the property was divided. Today, some of Hoffman's original vineyards are used by Adelaida Cellars, while the winery is home to the Hidden Mountain Ranch label.

Hoffman remained out of the wine business, focusing instead on his cardiology practice. Though he retired eight years ago, he still consults on a few medical cases to keep his mind in the game. "Cardiology," he says, "is my love."

Hoffman and his wife now live in a modest gated community in Paso Robles; his son and former winemaker, David, has become a veterinarian. Asked about his legacy, Hoffman laughs. "Nobody knows they're being a pioneer at the time," he says. "For me, it was all about the recognition of the capabilities of the area for growing fine grapes."

That, and a groundbreaking 1976 Pinot Noir.

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