



A Life of Wine & Firefighting

Using winegrowing-related activities to benefit the fire service in Northern California

OFF DUTY
by Fred Peterson

Firefighting and winemaking don't sound like two career paths that would go hand in hand or complement one another; however, I have been incredibly fortunate to be able to engage in both endeavors in my life, ultimately using my passion for winegrowing to benefit the fire service in the Sonoma County region of Northern California, known to many as wine country.

Firefighting roots

My father served as a firefighter, initially joining the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) in 1947, and subsequently transferred to the South San Francisco Fire Department. It was here in "South City," where I grew up, that I would visit the firehouse and hang out. But as a child, I never really considered a career as a firefighter.

After high school, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy and did a four-year stint as a radio operator in the Western Pacific and Vietnam. During my enlistment, I took a shipboard firefighting course at Treasure Island Naval Station in San Francisco.

Although I grew up near San Francisco, from an early age, I knew I didn't want to work and live in a big city. A post-Navy road trip with a buddy to his family farm in Iowa before starting at the University of California (UC) Santa Cruz opened my eyes to the idea of farming, with all of its challenges and rewards. But it wasn't until I took advantage of an offer to work on a college friend's family vineyard in Mendocino County, CA, that I really set my career path in motion.

Besides working in the vineyard, I took vineyard and agriculture classes at

Mendocino Junior College. That experience, combined with the fact I loved good wine, got me focused on grape-growing and winemaking. Later, I was fortunate to be accepted at UC Davis, with its renowned viticulture and enology program, and to have GI Bill education benefits to help pay my tuition.

I started my career in Monterey County, then transferred to a small vineyard/winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains. In 1983, I was given the opportunity to move to Dry Creek Valley in northern Sonoma to find and develop vineyard properties as a partner in a vineyard management company.

I built my house near the top of Bradford Mountain in the coast range just west of the Geyserville Township. Being in a high-risk area for wildfires, I got to know the local California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) members as well as some of the firefighters in Geyserville. Interacting with CAL FIRE and the Geyserville firefighters reconnected me to the possibility of becoming a firefighter.

Combining two passions

By 1987, I was managing over 650 acres of vineyard in Dry Creek, Alexander, Anderson and Russian River valleys and beginning to make a little wine as Peterson Winery (petersonwinery.com). It was also the year that

I became a firefighter with the Geyserville Volunteer Fire Department. That decision was rooted in both the desire to give back to my community and my need to do something totally different from winegrowing. Today, I serve as an engineer/driver as well as a director for what is now the Geyserville Fire Protection District.

In winegrowing, you are trying to understand and control nature and fermentation, when possible, to end up with something that tastes good. I get enormous satisfaction from both growing grapes and making wine. Every year is different, with unique weather and varied growing conditions and harvests. The particular charac-



Three special edition wines produced by Peterson Winery to support various fire service activities and efforts.

During my time in Davis, I spent two summers working as a squad leader on a U.S. Forest Service hand crew. This firefighting experience—coupled with my family connection to firefighting—showed me how crucial effective teamwork is if you want to successfully deal with fires and emergencies, and how rewarding it is personally when you "take care of business."

Eye on wine

After graduating from UC Davis with a degree in viticulture and enology, I went to work growing grapes and making wine.

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ter of the grapes from that year produce wines reflecting the particular vintage. It is a wonderful combination of nature and nurture. By contrast, as a firefighter, you confront situations where making timely and good decisions can mitigate someone's emergency and make things better. When the pager goes off and you're dispatched to a call, you never really know what you will find at the scene. You must quickly and accurately sort out the situation, prioritize the threats, come up with a plan and put it into action, adjusting as necessary.

For me, firefighting and winegrowing are yin and yang—very different endeavors that really complemented each other in my life.

Wine benefits

In 2015, Geyserville Fire celebrated its centennial under the banner, "Protecting Wine Country Over 100 Years." The summer "Fireman's Ball"—which apparently started in 1962 when the community finished the cinder block firehouse that supplemented the original "firehouse" (a bay in the blacksmith shop)—has since given way to "Wine Country to the Rescue," an extravaganza held in conjunction with our neighbors, the Healdsburg and Cloverdale fire departments, to raise money for equipment and supplemental training to benefit our mutual efforts to provide higher levels of service to northern Sonoma County.

Two former Geyserville firefighters who are still very active in the department provided us with some of our Zinfandel grapes. I had the idea to bottle some of this wine with a special label to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Geyserville Fire and use the profits to restore one of our old fire engines. These 130 cases of wine netted over \$15,000, which was ultimately used to restore our 1958 V-12 open-cab Seagrave that was purchased from the SFFD in the mid-1970s and in service with our department until 2000.

Later that summer, our neighbors in Lake County suffered through many fires, including the horrific Valley Fire, which burned into our fire district in the Geysers geothermal area on our eastern boundary. Many of our brother and sister CAL FIRE firefighters in Lake County lost their homes and a helitack crew were burned over and injured.

Peterson Winery produces an "old-vine" Zinfandel from a small vineyard in Alexander Valley, and I decided to partner with the CAL FIRE Sonoma-Lake-Napa Forestry Crab Feed 501(c)(3) to help raise funds by donating the profits from this wine, which was labeled "Fire Storm Red," as well as hosting a silent auction at our tasting room. The wine and silent auction raised over \$20,000 for this cause.

In 2017, the Healdsburg and Geyserville fire departments jointly hosted the California State Firefighters' Association (CSFA) Annual Conference. Geyserville Fire Captain Joe Stewart, a CSFA director for Northern California, asked me if I would consider doing a special label wine to raise money for CSFA Historical Society, which funds the pipes and drums, the CSFA steamer and their scholarship fund. I agreed to provide 100 cases of 2014 Zinfandel from my estate vineyard on Bradford Mountain that received a label commemorating the conference.

What wasn't sold at the conference quickly sold out when only a month later Sonoma County was hit by the massive Tubbs, Nuns and Pocket Ranch fires, with 22 fatalities and over 7,000 homes lost. Many in the firefighting community across the country contacted us, sending thoughts and prayers, as well as buying the wine to show their support.

Firestorm response

On the night of Oct. 8, 2017, 18 significant fires ignited in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Strong down-slope winds drove the flames from the wildland through rural residential areas and into city neighborhoods. The majority of our first-out engines were sent to the Tubbs Fire racing through the northern part of the city of Santa Rosa. I was not on the first-out engines/water tender response, but myself and another firefighter staffed the Geyserville station to cover other calls for service.

When the Pocket Fire in the hills east of Geyserville and the Youngs Fire in lower Alexander Valley broke, there were no more resources available to send as immediate need mutual aid. We were on our own, with very limited resources for the first 48 hours. The priorities were getting people out of harm's way and working to keep the fires from burning into

residential areas and toward the towns of Geyserville and Healdsburg.

Though the Pocket Fire ended up burning over 18,000 acres, a combination of aggressive dozer work, effective use of the limited resources available, and some good luck kept losses to a minimum. We experienced no fatalities or serious injuries, and lost three residences and a few outbuildings.

On the third day of the fire, out-of-state strike teams began arriving, and we were able to get some air attack help, including a couple of passes from the 747 air tanker. We were finally able to begin to get a handle on the fire, always knowing that if the winds started up again, all bets were off.

Our area was very fortunate, but in addition to experiencing the overwhelming force and destructiveness of these fires, we all had family and friends who lost their homes and had barely escaped with their lives.

Though fires like this have happened before and were predicted, we realized that our community, along with our entire region, was not adequately prepared to deal with what happened. Under the leadership of our chief, with support from the board of directors, we are committed to work closely with our citizens to be prepared, as best we can, for future fires and other natural disasters. We realized that preventing/mitigating the emergency before it happens is more important than the best response when the emergency occurs.

Giving back

Firefighting, at its core, is about helping people deal with their emergencies. It embodies a selflessness that makes it possible to put oneself in harm's way to help others. For me it was very satisfying to give back to fellow firefighters, fire organizations and our community by raising money from the sale of our wines, not just when I respond to an emergency. Fire departments across America have a long history of connecting and giving back to their communities. In these increasingly disconnected times, I believe the personal and professional benefits of helping others is well worth the efforts. ■

