

“No Wimpy Wines” is a memoir by Joel Peterson, founder of Ravenswood Winery in Sonoma, California. Recognizable by its iconic label and iconoclastic motto, beloved for unpretentious irreverence, Ravenswood is one of the most popular names in the history of California wine. As the brand most identified with fine zinfandel – the “people’s grape” and so-called mystery grape because of its obscure provenance – the winery followed a tumultuous path from struggling cult label to commercial kingpin to takeover target to abandoned orphan. In the process, Peterson – the candid, Bay Area-raised offspring of gourmet-pioneer parents – gained renown as the “Godfather of Zinfandel” and member of the California Vintners Hall of Fame. Unlike many newly moneyed founders, however, he stayed on as an executive of the company that acquired his business: Constellation Brands, where he reaped the rewards – and suffered the slings and arrows – of corporate management. In short, Constellation blew Ravenswood up and ran it into the ground, eventually selling it as a “low-priced” brand to that

behemoth of bargain wine, E.&J. Gallo. By then, however, Joel had returned to his roots, starting a new one-man winery where he now makes wine by hand as he did at Ravenswood in 1976.

Peterson's tale, told in the first person with characteristic openness, is an odyssey of aspiration, disillusion, and redemption. Puncturing myriad myths about the wine business, it reveals the realities of surviving in that world, with all the logistical and financial acrobatics that it demands. At the same time, it conveys the eccentric spirit and joie-de-vivre that made Ravenswood so popular. A chronicle of a unique company in a widely misperceived industry, "No Wimpy Wines" is at once a hard-won success story and a cautionary tale.

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Joel Peterson grew up in Point Richmond, California, on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. His mother, Frances, worked on the Manhattan Project developing the atomic bomb, and was also an outstanding home cook who tested recipes for Berkeley's groundbreaking Chez Panisse. Her

husband, Walter, was a chemist for the Shell Development Company. As Darrell Corti, the redoubtable wine maven of Sacramento, observed, “In his job he had to make axle grease, but his passion was wine.” By some accounts, Walt was the first person ever to publish a wine newsletter.

The Petersons were part of a dining circle that included many culinary luminaries, including Corti, chef/radio personality Narsai David, and psychiatrist/jazz musician Denny Zeitlin. The group took turns outdoing one another with meals in private homes, replete with printed menus and flights of famous wines. This underground history, encompassing scores of eccentric personalities and preceding the birth of “California Cuisine” – featuring such little-known institutions as the San Francisco Vintners Club, Berkeley Wine and Food Society, First Growth Club, Basque Hotel, and Pot Luck Restaurant – helped spawn the California wine revolution that included Ravenswood.

Following an adventurous childhood, Sixties-suffused adolescence, and early career in cancer immunology, Joel learned hands-on winemaking from Joseph Swan, an ex-airline pilot and legendary producer of great zinfandel. A Europhile by indoctrination, Peterson focused on that grape because, of all the varieties planted in California, it correlated most closely with Old World

growing practices: Many of the vineyards are a century old, limiting their productivity; they're farmed without irrigation, intensifying their flavors; their canopies are pruned as independent bushes, shading the fruit from intense sun; and they're planted in ideal locations, attested by their survival for 100 years.

Joel's first harvest was blessed by a double rainbow and mocked by a pair of ravens (hence the winery name). The wines received accolades from the beginning, but Ravenswood struggled financially, plagued by the lag time between making and selling the product. During the winery's first several years, it moved annually, renting space in other people's buildings and straining to pay bills. To support his family, Peterson held down a job as a hospital lab technician; his business partner Reed Foster, a contrarian Harvard M.B.A., conceived elaborate funding schemes (limited partnerships, voting trusts, convertible debentures) to keep the operation afloat, but when Joel was urged to make white zinfandel – the sweet, sodapop-like rosé that was then taking the commercial industry by storm – he declared that he would make “no wimpy wines.” Foster duly created a sign inscribed with those three words, which became a battle cry for the winery's fans.

Ultimately Peterson agreed to release a lower-priced product called Vintner's Blend, combining red wines made at Ravenswood with others obtained on the bulk market; it morphed into a popular product that could be turned around quickly, buying time for more expensive bottlings to mature.

Ravenswood was put on the map by the all-powerful critic Robert M. Parker, Jr., who, after visiting the winery in the late 1980s, portrayed "the handsome Peterson.... making some of the greatest wines in California." Still, the business didn't turn a profit until the early Nineties, when it finally acquired a permanent home: a picturesque property on the north side of Sonoma, where a captive audience could be corralled free of margin-sapping middlemen. There Foster's commercial instincts achieved full cry: Translated into multiple languages ("No Vinos Sin Huevos," "Nullum Vinem Flacitum," "Kayn Nebbishy Vayn"), the No Wimpy Wines motto was distributed on hats, T-shirts, lapel pins, and bumper stickers, accompanied by the mesmerizing Ravenswood logo. Designed by Berkeley graphic artist David Lance Goines and incorporating influences from M.C. Escher, the yin-yang sign, Japanese family crests, and the flag of the Isle of Man, it served as a Rorschach test for viewers, variously interpreted as everything from a table

setting to a 45-rpm record to (in the view of one indignant female visitor) a vagina. It has been frequently employed by fans of the winery – as well as people who never heard of it – as a tattoo.

Zinfandel's popularity soared in the Nineties. The organization ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates and Producers), of which Peterson was an officer, annually staged the world's biggest wine tasting in San Francisco, and Ravenswood rode the wave, producing almost half a million cases by the end of the decade. This ushered in a period of "chaos" as the winery scrambled to keep up with demand – a frenetic juggling act orchestrated by Peter Mathes, a brilliant, self-taught engineer with a talent for manipulating systems and people. His crew included such characters as Ian McQueathy, an anarchist-artist who initiated the Red Rat Award – an actual rodent carcass preserved in plasticene, bestowed each year on that worker who most frequently endangered his or her own life – and Foster Grant White, nicknamed for the shades he wore to conceal the effect of controlled substances. (A self-proclaimed master of homemade foie gras, White was ultimately fired when he fell asleep on top of a filling tank.) As operations manager, Mathes – whose employees posted a "dickometer" on his office door, gauging his daily

moods – was frequently at odds with Callie Kono, the fearsome controller of the company purse strings. “I’m not good at sugarcoating,” Kono explained. “I would never *start* anything, but I was very happy to finish it. If people yelled at me, I would yell at them. And I remembered who yelled at me and who didn’t, so the ones who worked with me got paid faster.”

As this indicates, Ravenswood’s financial strain persisted in spite of the winery’s success. As so many growing businesses have found, expansion requires money, which requires more expansion. The annual increases in Vintner’s Blend necessitated its outsourcing, eventually resulting in a state-of-the-art facility south of Sonoma – which (surprise!) necessitated yet more production to be cost-effective. The upshot was a decision to go public – a move that few wineries have made, as the product’s return on investment seldom meets Wall Street standards. The stock market is more disposed toward beer and spirits, which can be produced throughout the year, free of the vicissitudes of climate and geography.

In 1999, Ravenswood offered a million shares on the NASDAQ via an “open I.P.O.” – the Dutch-auction brainchild of Bill Hambrecht, the investment banker who helped fund the startups of Apple, Amazon, and

Google. The stock price it fetched – \$10.50 – was decidedly underwhelming, attracting many “affinity shareholders” who enjoyed owning a piece of the winery. Ravenswood’s aging original investors were anxious to liquidate their holdings, but in the years following the I.P.O., the company’s stock value remained stagnant. This worried the board of directors (a feature of public ownership), who were inclined to “to get off the merry-go-round, cash out, and let someone else – specifically a bigger wine company that understood our worth – worry about financing.”

Thus did it come to pass that, in 2001, Ravenswood was sold to Constellation, a half-century-old company based in upstate New York, which began life in the 1940s as a purveyor of fortified sweet wine (“Richard’s Wild Irish Rose”) but grew into a sprawling enterprise that was now getting into the fine-wine market. At the time, the price it paid for Ravenswood – \$148 million – was the highest ever for a Sonoma County winery, making Peterson an instant multimillionaire. But part of the deal he cut with Constellation was to maintain control of Ravenswood winemaking, and Richard Sands – the company C.E.O. and son of its founder – offered him the additional perk of a corporate vice presidency.



Perceived as not only a talented winemaker but a savvy marketer, Joel was put forward as the face of the brand, and Constellation dispatched him around the world to promote it. The company concocted such dubious schemes as a Ravenswood-for-Halloween campaign (a nod to “The Raven” author Edgar Allan Poe), partnering of the winery with NASCAR and Harley Davidson (intended to convey unwimpiness), and a sales contest to “Win Joel’s Red Pickup Truck!” (despite the fact that he didn’t own one). All the while, Constellation pumped up Vintner’s Blend – which, it became evident, had constituted the company’s main interest in acquiring Ravenswood. It was less invested in the high-end wines responsible for the winery’s reputation, more in the bulk-wine-based bargain products that could be increased exponentially.

After Constellation – to great fanfare – bought the Robert Mondavi Winery for \$1.4 billion, dwarfing the amount it had paid for Ravenswood, the latter was consigned to a bargain-wine division of the company. Although its high-end bottlings continued to win praise, Joel was demoted from vice president to consultant. In the meantime, thanks to the advancement of DNA profiling, zinfandel was discovered to have originated in Croatia, where it

once enjoyed an aristocratic role in the Venetian wine trade. Indeed, it's now considered one of 13 "founder" grapes from which all modern fine-wine varieties are descended.

In the course of all this, Joel's son Morgan became a distinguished Master of Wine and started his own ballyhooed brand: Bedrock Wine Company, named for a 100-year-old vineyard that Peterson purchased in Sonoma Valley. In 2012, father and son collaborated on a wine called Papa's All-Blacks (referring to the mixed-varietal "field blends" that represent California's 19<sup>th</sup>-century heritage), affording Joel a window into the 21st-century way of starting a small label. Unlike the birth of Ravenswood, which had been dependent on the three-tier wholesale system, the Internet enables direct-to-consumer sales, so small wineries are no longer at the mercy of large distributors. Instead of using their (greater) revenue as equity for expansion, profits can be invested back into the winery – a much more supportive scenario than the grow-or-die dictum that steered the fate of Ravenswood.

The result is Once and Future, the 3,000-case label where Peterson now makes wine on the scale that he did at the start of his career. Post-corporate-

management, he has reconnected with many of the vineyards and relationships that built his reputation, as well as new ones. Unsurprisingly, today he maintains that public ownership is inappropriate for fine wineries – the product is simply too time-and-labor-intensive, climatically unpredictable, and limited in quantity by necessity. “I don’t mean that big organizations are incapable of making decent-tasting wine,” he writes. “They can turn out enormous amounts of inexpensive, lip-smacking stuff. But it isn’t something with angles, nuances, history, structure, and a sense of place. If you want to invest in those things, your payback will be in prestige, not in dollars. Fine wine will always be a reliable source of income – but not a growing source of income.”

Not many of us have the chance to restart our careers with knowledge and experience gained over the course of four decades. In that way, Peterson’s story offers testimony that it’s possible not only to find but to recover one’s calling. “No Wimpy Wines” is a frank account of the will to succeed – and to protect one’s passion – in a deceptively alluring, surprisingly grueling, perpetually stimulating profession.