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PLAYING THE LONG GAME

Zelma Long has played a key role in the rise of Californian wine since the 1970s. So why haven't more people heard of her, asks **JANICE FUHRMAN**

Californian winemaker Zelma Long is an icon of the industry. Before women became a significant force in wine and before winemakers were cloaked in the veneer of celebrity, Long was pushing the industry forward, seriously labouring on such prosaic tasks as superior winemaking techniques and enhanced vine growing. Now 63, her career continues to be a blend of adventure seeking, knowledge honing and expertise sharing in all corners of the globe. The lady is a legend.

Never heard of her? The reason is most likely her nomadic existence - at any point, Long may be in California, where she is winemaker at Napa's Long Vineyards, a half-world away in South Africa, where she is winemaker and co-owner of Vilafonte, a new venture making Bordeaux-style blends, or at any one of the wineries where her consultancies carry her - from the Pacific Northwest, to the Rhône Valley and to Israel, these consultancies include Golan Heights Winery, Property La Verriere, Donum, HdV and Gundlach Bundschu in California and Bookwalter in Washington's Columbia Valley.

Working with these far-flung wineries means spreading her philosophy of respecting wine's origins in the vineyard and making wine as naturally as possible. With her clients, Long says she chooses to 'work with those striving to be the best. My foremost goal is to work with clients both on wine growing and winemaking, focusing on those with their own estates or strong control of their grape sources.'

An early hire at the Robert Mondavi Winery, Long paved the way for other women to be successful in what was a male-dominated field. But she shies away from making too much of her gender. 'I didn't feel constrained as a woman working at Mondavi - only occasionally with people from Australia and France who acted surprised that a woman was making wine. It was more hilarious than anything else,' she explains at her Alexander Valley home, a rustic 1.2 hectares with a neighbour's peacocks and other wildlife roaming the grounds.

'I think I had a lack of consciousness about being a woman, and so I've never had any constraints about hiring women,' she said. Those she hired include Dawnine

Dyer, who headed Napa's Domaine Chandon and now owns Dyer Vineyards; Genevieve Janssens, now winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery; Diane Kenworthy, the first president of the American Society of Enology; and Margaret Davenport, also a president of the ASEV (while at Simi).

Long sees California winemaking as divided into three main periods: a time of exploring winemaking in the 1970s; the decade of wine growing in the 1980s, and the decade connecting those two in the 1990s.

In the 1970s, Long was a leader in the technical aspects of winemaking development, partly because curiosity drove her forward and partly because she had the backing of her employer, Robert Mondavi. 'He was incredibly interested in how you could use resources to improve winemaking. He was always into every new technique and piece of equipment. We were revving up our skills in winemaking at that time.'

'She was knowledgeable, serious, passionate, and communicated so well with Robert,' Margrit Mondavi recalls today. 'I remember our Tuesday morning tastings and the exchange of opinions on the wine, and just a special affection and appreciation between the two.' At the time, Long wrote and spoke widely about technical issues of winemaking.

In the 1980s, Long co-founded with Diane Kenworthy, then a viticulturalist at Simi, the North Coast Viticultural Research Group, which funded research at the University of California at Davis in how what was done in the vineyards affected wine quality. 'We wanted to connect the wine growing and the winemaking. We were trying different rootstocks, planting density, canopy management, plant materials, spacing, row direction... We were able to exert a tremendous amount of influence on the course of wine growing, plus applying it in our own vineyards. By the end of the 1980s we had a much better idea of how to do a good job growing wine grapes.'

Kenworthy, now a director of grower relations for wine behemoth Constellation Wines USA, was in her early 20s at her first job when she encountered Long. 'It was forward-thinking on her part in 1981 to identify the vineyard as having a major effect on the wine. She was very

LONG AT A GLANCE

Birthplace: The Dalles, Oregon

Family: Married to Phillip Freese, viticulture consultant, one stepson, two grandchildren

Education: Oregon State University, UC Davis Dept of Enology and Viticulture, Stanford University

Hobbies: Collecting Buddhist, Tibetan, modern South African and US southwest Indian art; travel

She says: 'People can say they don't like high-alcohol wines but those are the wines that people love because they're lush, and they're rich and full, if well made. It's consumer-driven.'

They say: 'She learned so fast from every source - me, other winemakers, books and magazines - that she was soon qualified for not just one job but three positions: winemaker, wine chemist and microbiologist.' [Miljenko 'Mike' Crgich]

Zelma Long is not just based in California, working in places as diverse as the Rhône Valley, Israel and South Africa

clear about the fact that our efforts in the vineyards were always for a wine outcome.'

As Long sees it, the 1990s was the decade of bringing those earlier strides together. 'The cloud in the 1990s was phylloxera, but the silver lining was that when the replanting was done, because of what we had done in the 1980s, people could do a much better job of assessing how the replanting should be done.'

This decade, says Long, is shaping up to be one of globalisation, of competing 'more against the world than your neighbour appellation. With this comes the necessity for young winemakers to develop their knowledge of the world of wine, by study of work overseas, before they settle into their careers.'

Followers of fashion

Long has seen many trends and issues in the wine world come and go. One of those, the current taste for riper, high-alcohol wines, she believes is primarily driven by consumer tastes. 'In my tastings with consumers, I've seen that as long as you have enough fruit, intensity and concentration, the alcohol perception just falls away. But the wines have to be well made and they have to come from really high-quality grapes.' Bordeaux wines, she points out, have been getting riper for the last decade. 'There's always been more of a *perception* of differences between Bordeaux/Burgundy and California than an *actual* difference.'

As a collector of Buddhist, Tibetan and South African art, Long has seen trends and techniques once wildly popular in the art world fall out of favour. 'It's not unreasonable to expect there will always be trends in wine and food taste and that these very rich, ripe-fruit wines that happen to have high alcohols are a trend. What I don't want is to see that these are the only kinds of wines made, because the blessing of wine is its diversity.'

Popularity of riper, higher alcohol wines is also driven by Robert Parker, she believes. 'He's gained a big following because

a lot of people like the wines he loves. I have a lot of respect for him because he's very consistent and straight about what he does. If you are a consumer who has his palate you can really trust his judgment.' Noting that she looks at ratings for movies and opinions about books and music, Long says she doesn't object to Parker's 100-point ratings system because it streamlines thinking about wines for many consumers. But it has its limits. 'For commercial wines produced in large quantities - good quality, at accessible prices - ratings are imperative. For aesthetic wines, made by smaller producers and more individual, the 100-point system is less valuable and you don't want it to drive out those small producers. If you lost the individuality of small producers, you would lose the soul of the wine industry.'

'Looking back as a pioneer winemaker, what's extraordinary to me is the place California has achieved in the world of wine. When I was making wine at Mondavi in the 1970s, California was a sort of amusing curiosity to the rest of the world. Now California is a senior quality wine producer making some of the

'As long as you have enough fruity, intensity and concentration, the alcohol perception just falls away. But the wines have to be well made'

finest wines. You can take any number of varieties from California and go head-to-head with any wines in the world.'

Long is still winemaker at Napa's Long Vineyards, which she founded in the 1970s with ex-husband Bob Long. She also consults for wineries in Sonoma, Napa, Oregon, Washington, Israel and France, having long been intrigued by working in diverse environments. 'You appreciate how much the environment affects the wines. I've heard people say terroir doesn't mean anything (see p48) but I know that the techniques that make the best Sauvignon Blanc in California do not work in South Africa - and vice versa. There is such a thing as terroir and it does affect the grapes, which impacts the winemaking.'

Currently, she is putting most of her energies into Vilafonté Vineyards, in the Paarl region. She co-owns the winery with her husband Philip Freese, a viticulture consultant, and a South African partner, Mike Ratcliffe, son of winemaker Norma Ratcliffe. Vilafonté is the first winery in South Africa to focus on producing wine specifically for the UK and US markets and it is producing two Bordeaux blends, Series C and Series M.

Long first visited South Africa in 1990 and was introduced to the country by the late Sydney Back, of Backsberg Estate, whom she calls 'the Robert Mondavi of South Africa, a very revered man'. Her initiation into South Africa came at a pivotal time - one month before Nelson Mandela was released from prison - and the experience, both cultural and viticultural, made a lasting impression on her. She and Freese tasted wines from throughout South Africa's wine regions and were impressed. 'The South Africa project is the climax of all of the learning I've done about winemaking and wine growing. We have only one site, 30 acres (12ha) divided into 14 blocks, and we study each block to understand how to make the best wine from that site. It's a lot of intense focus and it's very rich because it allows you to go deeply into what you're doing.' **12**

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