

# WINE

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THOMAS SKEEN / WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

International winemaker and consultant Zelma Long, left, chats with Buty Winery co-owners Caleb Foster and Nina Buty Foster. Long, who has more than 30 years of winemaking experience, has been a mentor to the Fosters.

## Vintners taking the Long way to success

More state winemakers are turning to meticulous, highly-credentialed expert Zelma Long for advice

BY THOMAS P. SKEEN  
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

The table between Zelma Long and Caleb and Nina Buty Foster is strewn with glasses of white wines and red blends from every vintage the Walla Walla couple has made.

They taste. They talk.

Long samples a 2002 chardonnay and asks Caleb Foster what day he picked the grapes, what their acid and sugar levels were at the time, what sensory things he liked about the berries that went into his decision to harvest.

He responds thoughtfully, occasionally glancing at notes and records he's learned to keep in meticulous detail for Long's visits.

At Buty Winery, school is in session. The Fosters, even with Caleb's 10 years of experience in making wine in New Zealand, South Africa and Washington, are eager students.

Long — bespectacled, her auburn hair pulled into a bun atop her head, a laptop computer to her left and probing questions on her lips — is their mentor, one with more than 30 years of experience growing and making wines around the world.

A similar session will play out again the next day in Richland, when Long pays a call to the Bookwalter Winery. It will also happen elsewhere as vintners who want an edge in a tough, competitive global wine market call for Long's expertise.

"The beauty of Zelma and other people like her, for established wineries and also for new startup wineries, is it's impossible to know all your options," says Washington Wine Commission Executive Director Steve Burns. "I think it's a credit for established wineries to reach out of the box like that. We often get so busy with doing, we sometimes never stop to ask, 'Why is it we're doing that?'"

### Advice that counts

Buty Winery — a small enterprise with an annual production of about 1,700 cases — has already gained solid footing among high-quality premium Washington

wines with its chardonnays and red blends.

But the Fosters say they want to take it further, not only by refining their growing and winemaking styles but also by increasing their volume. Enter Long, whom they've been working with since 2000.

"You go to the doctor for your health checkup once a year; you go to the bank to check your financial lines," says Caleb, 35. "With Zelma, it's, 'I'm here to tell you what you don't want to hear, that you need to do these things.'"

"I've seen a lot of winemaking around the world," he adds. "I've realized there is so much depth in the history of wine, and when I think of really profound wines, it goes back to Old World behavior patterns: the right field, right grape and right local process.

"We wanted to pull all these things together in a meaningful way, and we thought (her) experience would help us. We couldn't go to school, so we brought school to us."

Few modern American vintners have Long's credentials. Her own mentors decades ago were people like California winemaking legends Mike Grgich and Robert Mondavi and his son Michael. Then came her efforts building a Napa Valley estate winery with her first husband and still business partner Bob Long, followed by her executive leadership of Simi Winery and Chandon Estates.

In more recent years, there has been the development with her current husband, viticulturist Phillip Freese, of Zelphi Wines, their venture in South Africa and Germany.

Since 2000, seasoned growers and vintners — from the West Coast to the Israeli Golan Heights — have sought her advice.

"As a winemaker I have seen that God is in the details," Long says over dinner after finishing her session with the Fosters. "So I understand a little change can make a big differ-

ence. People making great wines look deeply into the process."

### A well-honed résumé

At least 20 pages of Internet hits on the search engine Google deal with information about Zelma Long. Her entry to the wine industry began when she felt few took heed of her advice in her initial career as a nutritionist.

She was born in The Dalles, Ore., in 1943, and graduated from Oregon State University in 1965 with a science degree. She interned at the University of California, San Francisco's medical center, then worked as a dietitian across the bay in Oakland. But she grew disillusioned about her prospects in the field at the time.

"Nobody believed (thinking about) food was that important," she says. "I was a nutritionist and promoting good health, and it wasn't on anybody's radar screen then."

Nor was wine much in the American public's collective conscience in the 1960s. But that was about to change, and Long would play a big part in the boom that would transform quiet California country towns like Napa and Sonoma into U.S. wine meccas.

The transformation began in 1965, the year Robert Mondavi opened the winery that gave a new generation of wine drinkers a taste of varietal craftsmanship rarely found outside of Europe.

Long's professional transformation began a year later, when Bob Long's father bought Napa County acreage and planted wine grapes.

The couple soon began helping out in the vineyard, and eventually moved to the valley.

"It was the right place at the right time, and we really enjoyed it," she says.

She returned to college from 1968 to 1970 to work on a master's degree from the University of California, Davis' viticulture and enology school. Only the second woman to be admitted to the school, she went to work in 1970 as a laboratory technician for Grgich, who at the time was Mondavi's winemaker.

"And I never went back to school," she says. Soon she was elevated to assistant winemaker, and when Grgich left in 1972 to start his own winery, Long became Mondavi's chief enologist.

Five years later, in 1977, she and Bob Long established Long Vineyards in St. Helena, growing it from 800 cases a year to its current production of 4,000 cases of single-vineyard, single-varietal wines.

She then left Mondavi in 1979 to become vice president and winemaker for Simi Winery, rising to chief executive of the century-old Sonoma County winery in 1990. A year later, she returned to the Napa Valley to become executive vice president of Chandon Estates, and eventually retired from corporate life in 1999 to devote her time to Zelphi Wines.

PLEASE SEE **Long** ON C 7



## Bookwalter was first client

**LONG**

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She started consulting after a chance encounter with Jerry Bookwalter, who founded his Washington winery 20 years ago near the Columbia River town in which Long was born.

Often invited to speak at wine industry functions around the world, Long said she had never given much thought to being a paid consultant. But Bookwalter and son John, who was entering the family business to make its red wines, sought her out in 1999

after hearing her speak.

"The magic word was 'Eastern Washington,'" she says. "And I thought, 'Wouldn't that be fun.'"

She signed on as the Bookwalters' consultant, the first of a growing international client list that also includes Buty and several others in Washington.

"The first harvest I worked with (Bookwalter) on, I was really impressed with the grapes," she says. "The fruit quality here is extraordinary. And Washington has just scratched the surface of its potential."

But what growers and vintners

have scratched so far can still be improved, which what Long says she essentially tries to show her clients.

"What I want them to do is understand what harvest was like, what the issues were, what the challenges were, what went well, as well as find out what they are excited about," she says. "I help people know in what direction they want to go. How long it takes for them to get there is very individual."

John Bookwalter, however, says that the more he knows, the more he knows he needs to learn more.

"The subject of wine itself is so vast," he says. "For us to think

we know all there is to know would be a vast overstatement of our knowledge."

What started Bookwalter's work with Long was a desire to grow better fruit and bring more "sophistication and elegance" to

wines he called "big and bulky in the past."

It has since expanded into tapping her business and marketing savvy. That has included redesigning bottle labels and freshening up the winery's Web site.

With Long, Bookwalter says, the question isn't what she's brought to Bookwalter. "It's what *hasn't* she brought."

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Thomas P. Skeen: 509-525-3300 or [tskeen@ubnet.com](mailto:tskeen@ubnet.com)