



REX GELERT PHOTOS

Jim Regusci of Regusci Vineyards stands amidst his Stags Leap vineyards.

Vineyard to Vintner and Jim Regusci

Tales from the front lines of the October wildfires

TONY POER

One of Napa Valley's annual signature events is about to turn 20. Last October, it seemed quite possible that this milestone might not even arrive.

Vineyard to Vintner will take place in one week, spread out among a handful of wineries in the shadow of the majestic Stags Leap Palisades. It's the spring celebration created by the Stags Leap Winegrowers Association in 1998 to welcome visitors to the valley's second oldest AVA.

When the event wrapped up last year, after a wet winter and rainy April, no one pictured a stage set for the biggest fire disaster in California's history. And a harrowing tale it was, worthy of Hollywood but — for the deadly reality provoked by Mother Nature — more deserving an episode of "Frontline" or a segment on "60 Minutes."

In the meantime, there is Jim Regusci to recount the story at Regusci Winery to visitors next Saturday morning who should buckle their seatbelts. The third-generation grapegrower is going to tell them about a bumpy night.

One of this year's Vineyard to Vintner hosts, Regusci was thrust onto the actual front line of the October fires that descended upon his neighbors and him from Atlas Peak. The drama was real, with the min-



Jim Regusci will be recounting the story of fighting the October wildfires that threatened his winery and other Stags Leap properties at the upcoming Vineyard to Vintner weekend April 28 and 29.

ute-by-minute memories still vivid for the Napa native only six months later.

"For us, what I guess we'll explain to people and what some of these folks kind of want to hear, is how the whole thing went for us through that night," Regusci said recently. He was giving a preview on a cool, breezy morning of the path that attendees will follow amidst his Cabernet and Zinfandel vines as part of the celebratory weekend. Anticipating questions about the enormous blaze, he has mapped the walk around places on his property that burned, or nearly did. "It was the drama of the fire

and, in addition, how this valley recovered. It's not only our story, it's the story of the valley as a whole."

Except for some blackened oak trees on Regusci Winery's carefully landscaped property and visible on the nearby hillsides that rise steeply up towards the Palisades, visitors might never guess that a terrifying inferno had blasted across Stags Leap District just last fall. The burned-to-the-ground Signorello Estate down the road tells a different story.

The Regusci saga goes back much further than that, of course, both as a winery brand

and a viticultural property. Regusci's Italian-Swiss grandfather, Gaetano, arrived in Napa Valley alone as a teenager in 1896. The graceful, sand-colored stone winery, easily viewed from the Silverado Trail just north of Napa, was already almost 20 years old the first time the young immigrant gazed upon it. When, years later during the Great Depression, he cashed in a \$22,000 life insurance policy to purchase what was known as the Grigsby Ranch, the determined Gaetano laid the groundwork for a family farm that would eventually pass down to his grandson.

Some family determination has filtered down through the generations, as well. An affable, salt-of-the-earth grower with a warm exterior, Regusci also displays plenty of underlying grit and no-nonsense character. He's inseparable from both his land and the concept of Stags Leap District as a distinct grape-growing region within Napa Valley. With more than 75 people expected for the vineyard walk next weekend, it will be an opportunity for him to share some of the Stags Leap insider knowledge he has accumulated during a 30-year career as a grower and vineyard management consultant.

"I would imagine what the

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PLEASE THE PALATE

The future is female

That makes me proud

As I sat down for a seminar at the 2018 Pebble Beach Food & Wine Festival titled "The Future is Female: The Next Generation of American Wine," I was excited to listen to



ALLISON LEVINE

a panel of women discuss taking the reins of their family wineries. As I looked at the panel of women sitting in front of me, I sat up a little straighter as I was so proud and inspired to see

only women sitting there.

On one end of the table was Esther Mobley, the wine, beer and spirits writer for the San Francisco Chronicle. After graduating from Smith College, Esther worked harvests at two wineries, worked in retail and at a restaurant and then followed the path of a writer, working at Wine Enthusiast, Wine Spectator and now the San Francisco Chronicle. On the other end of the table was Christie Dufault, a former sommelier at top restaurants who today is the associate professor of wine and beverage studies at The Culinary Institute of America. In between these two formidable presences were four women who are taking over their family wineries.

Louisa Ponzi

Ponzi Vineyards was started in the late 1960s when Dick and Nancy Ponzi moved to the Willamette Valley. Louisa was 2 years old at the time and grew up on the vineyard. As she grew up in the industry with her family winery, the industry also developed around her. They were one of only three wineries when they started, and today there are more than 700 in the Willamette Valley.

Louisa worked alongside her

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WINE TO SAKE

An insider's view of the World Spirits Competition

Have you ever wondered what goes behind the scenes as the medals awarded to your favorite or soon-to-be favorite bottle?

The San Francisco World



EDUARDO DINGLER

Spirits Competition took place last weekend. Nearing its 20th anniversary, this legendary gathering is without a doubt one of the highlights of the year.

Amongst a number of beverage professionals, I had the pleasure of returning as part of the team of judges. More than 2,500 spirits produced around the globe were entered to be judged by a group of historians, educators, renowned mixologist and writers.

There are simply not many spirit competitions in the world that reach this level of prestige, integrity and following. The products entered reach up to thousands of dollars a bottle retail. There is nothing more humbling than tasting in a completely blind setting, without being carried away by packaging or the name of the spirit.

This event requires an army of enthusiasts that receive, categorize and present the submissions in a blind setting and, it's worth mentioning that they do it with impeccable precision. Last year, I had the pleasure of being part of a panel with David Wondrich, a celebrated cocktail historian, mixologist and prolific writer.

The judges are split into

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'André' a captivating tribute

TIM CARL

Ten years in the making, "André—The Voice of Wine," premiered April 7 at the Lincoln Theater in Yountville to a packed house of nearly 1,100. The documentary chronicles the life of André Tchelistcheff, one of the Napa Valley's most revered 20th-century winemakers.

"I wanted to premiere the story of my great-uncle right here in the Napa Valley because he held it so dear in his heart," said Mark Tchelistcheff, the director. "His life story is like a novel, and for me growing up he was such an inspiration — he was charming, mischievous and full of life. So for the last 10 years I have dropped everything else and focused on making this film. My hope is that I've given an honest voice to his legacy."

The often touching, dramatic and occasionally funny film documents how a demure man, standing only 4 feet 11 inches tall and with a quiet voice, rolled up his shirtsleeves and transformed the craft of winemaking.

Actor Ralph Fiennes narrates,



TIM CARL PHOTOGRAPHY

A sold-out crowd gathered at the Lincoln Theater in Yountville for the premiere of "André—The Voice of Wine."

and other voices in the film include legendary vintners such as Francis Ford Coppola, Miljenko Grgich, Warren Winiarski, Michael Silacci, Greg Lafollette, Michel Lafarge, Christian Moueix, Richard Peterson, MaryAnn Graf and Marchese Ludovico Antinori, among oth-

ers. "(The film) is an extraordinary and beautifully told tribute to a man whose uncompromising dedication, unparalleled talent and willingness to share his knowledge helped make the Napa Valley one of the world's premier wine destinations," said Angela

Jackson, director of media relations for Visit Napa Valley. "It's a must-see film for anyone who enjoys wine, history and a captivating, well-told story."

A lovely tribute

From ghostly black-and-white images of the horrors of the Russian Revolution to dramatic aerial clips that slip over the Napa Valley's bucolic landscape, the immersive documentary feels primarily like a tribute to a loved man, but it doesn't shy away from the challenges he encountered.

"His early life set the tone of his future success," Mark said. "I was interested in the terroir that produced him. The environment shaped the man, as the soil shapes the wine."

A tumultuous start: 1901-1937

The cinematic journey follows André through three broad periods in his life: Russia, Beaulieu

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Regusci

From C1

narrative will be on this is getting people out and explaining to them so they understand, you know, what Stags Leap is," he said, stopping along a gravel path to point out some neighboring vineyards in the District. "It's a Bordeaux wine grape area, no question. We're fortunate that this little AVA exists, the smallest out of all of them. It was early to jump on when the AVA system started. No one, I don't think, understood what it meant to get the AVAs...and then you look back on it, and it really makes sense."

He noted that, having about 60 winery clients, he feels fortunate to drink from a wide range of Napa Valley wines and several other AVAs. But in the end, he said he believes that Stags Leap District is "one of the areas that you can approach these wines younger, but there's also a common thread that runs through all of them [and] if you sit down and really taste through them, Stags Leap seems to always rise to the top."

The he laughed and confessed, "I might be biased."

The Stags Leap Palisades, Soda Canyon, and nearby Atlas Peak combine to form a rocky and wild section of southeast Napa Valley. They're the picturesque backdrop for one of the Valley's more tucked-away AVAs. "What's nice about getting folks out here, pretty much from here you can see a good amount of what Stags Leap is," Regusci paused again to motion toward the hills. "And then on the other side of the ranch you can understand with this mountain range how it ties in and how it's so different."

Ironically, Stags Leap District's striking geography contributed to its near-decimation last Oct. 8, when the Atlas fire started and was propelled by high winds down through Soda Canyon on a direct path toward wineries like Signorello, Darioush, James Cole and Regusci.

"What we're going to do is we're going to take them on a walk



REX GELERT PHOTOS

Jim Regusci sits with his father Angelo Regusci, the second-generation owner of Regusci Ranch who was responsible for transitioning this property to wine grapes during the 1960s and '70s. He passed away in 2013.

through the property," he continued, on the move again up a slope as the gravel crunched heavily under his boots. "We'll head out to the hill and go through a few of our blocks on the way. Just do a nice walk around. We're going to have coffee and pastries and that type of thing. And then they'll go on and start their day on the open houses and different winery visits."

What visitors won't realize until they follow Regusci on his walk is that, in between the morning coffee and afternoon Cabernet, they will go to hell and back with him.

Nancy Bialek, executive director of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association, can take some credit and/or blame for this unique agenda. Since the fires, the veteran marketing executive has had plenty to think about in the lead-up to this year's Vineyard to Vintner weekend.

"Because of the fires still being within that year of grief, if you will,

we have so many customers who are obviously interested at a caring level and just fundamentally interested in vineyards and grapegrowing and what was affected," Bialek said by phone at her Marin County office.

"We went to Jim specifically because he was right there on the front lines. The idea was for him to kind of share what went down in Stags Leap District. I don't know how revealing he's planning to be with the 'fear factor,' but it was obviously pretty [serious]. We really want to talk about, in that context, what happened to the vineyards and where we are now."

Though Bialek has the artisan Ohm Coffee Roasters of Napa scheduled to serve coffee to Regusci's visitors, the "what happened" at Regusci Winery on Oct. 8 and 9, as he plans to tell it, should provide more than enough of a jolt.

Concluding his preview walk, he led the way back into one of the ghost winery's barrel storage



Jim Regusci, a third-generation grapegrower in Napa Valley, found himself on the front line as the October 2017 wildfires swept down through the eastern hills toward his and other wineries in Stags Leap.

rooms that doubles as an event space. He sat down on a couch and described the hectic scene that began around 10 p.m. on the Sunday night the fires broke out around Napa Valley. He recalled that they'd had a 200-person event that day at the winery, and the Safeway Open PGA golf tournament had just concluded at Silverado Resort.

"All that stuff was going on at the same time," he explained. "Then the fire started on Atlas Peak, so it came over the top of Atlas Peak and it burned straight through Soda Canyon behind us, then it came at us from every direction. It just came over the mountain."

"What happened was, when the fire came across, it made the same pattern — I'm 51 and I've seen it burn three times — it took the same path. I mean it came straight up, came straight over the top, and once it burned up Soda Canyon, then it came over this way. Though, this was different than most because it had all of the bells and whistles: it had wind, it had heat, it had everything. You hear the term 'perfect storm' once in a while. It holds true on this one."

Though Cal Fire and the local departments were stretched too thin to help fight the fires in Regusci Winery's immediate vicinity, Regusci praises their efforts.

"The fire department did a great job that night. If anybody complains about it, the only thing they're complaining about is losing

property. Forty thousand acres lit up in an hour or two, OK? Their job was to get people out. Who cares what burns?"

With the extraordinary help of his immediate circle of friends, colleagues, and family — not least from his wife, Laura — Regusci and his team managed to fend off the flames that burned almost to the fuel tanks in his winery work shop. His account of those intense and stressful days last October is too long to retell here. Perhaps a Hollywood movie would be a way to convey the drama. The Regusci family's and winery's efforts seem, in any case, to have become part of the post-fire lore in Napa Valley.

"I don't to use the word 'hero' loosely," Nancy Bialek said. "But, you know, there are some people who feel that Jim was obviously just invaluable in saving their property and saving his own."

Ticking off a few of the what-ifs before heading down to the winery tasting room to greet some visitors Laura had lined up for him, Regusci laughed to himself as he considered what he would have done if the fire had destroyed his entire property.

"Put it this way," he said, "I have a very large farming company. If that completely went to hell in a handbag, all I'd need is a backhoe and a truck, and I'd start over."

"Hey, I started with a pickup and a house trailer. So, what the heck, we've been there before."

Levine

From C1

parents for her first 20 years. She moved to Burgundy to get her degree in the early 1990s. In 1993, she took over the wine-making at Ponzi, along with her sister Anna Maria who is president. As a young winemaker, Louisa returned from Burgundy and, like many young wine-makers, aspired to make big, extracted wines that garnered high scores. Over time she went back to father's style and today makes more restrained wines that profile the soils and climate. As Louisa explained, "I enjoy my wines more." As much as she loved Pinot Noir, she was more infatuated with white Burgundy. Oregon was not making great Chardonnay at the time, but Louisa got the right plant materials and 20 years later, Ponzi is making world-class Chardonnay.

Noting that she had never been on a panel with all women before, Louisa was asked about the women who have inspired her. Naturally, her mother is number one, as well as her older sister. She also learned from winemaker Lynn Penner-Ash who taught Louisa to speak her mind. "You have to speak your mind and be present and you have to know your industry and be better than men." Louisa also noted that there are so many unsung female heroes in the wine business. Many women worked tirelessly by their husbands' sides, while raising kids, without getting due credit.

Cleo Pahlmeyer

Pahlmeyer was started in 1986 by Cleo's father, Jayson Pahlmeyer, whose first love was Bordeaux wines. Aspiring to make a "California Mountain," Pahlmeyer made its name



ALLISON LEVINE PHOTO

From left, Esther Mobley, Louisa Ponzi, Cleo Pahlmeyer, Shannon Staglin, Carissa Mondavi and Christie Dufault were the panel at Pebble Beach Food & Wine.

with high scores on the 1986 Pahlmeyer Proprietary Red. In 1998, at the urging of Helen Turley who was the winemaker at the time, Jayson purchased the Wayfarer estate on the Sonoma Coast where Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were planted.

Cleo joined the team in 2008, adding new energy to the family winery. Recognizing the uniqueness of the Wayfarer Estate, which is located less than five miles from the coast and protected by two ridgelines, Cleo created the Wayfarer Estate label in 2012. As part of the team, Cleo says that the goal is "to stay true to our roots, to a sense of place and balance." But she also noted that "the future is about putting my taste on the wine, making sure the wine is fully developed but balanced overall."

The women who have inspired Cleo are her mother, as well as other women winemakers, such as Helen Turley and Ann Colgin. "I look at examples of women in other industries, knowing they have succeeded and what they have done provides inspiration."

As for future generations, Cleo said, "it is about having examples. Seeing more and more women will continue to inspire others to follow and do the same things."

Shannon Staglin

Shannon Staglin's parents, Garen and Shari, met on a blind date in the 1960s while students at UCLA. Business school at Stanford took them to Northern California where they discovered Napa Valley and began dreaming about owning property in the area. Their dream was realized in 1985 when they purchased 60 acres at the base of Mount St. John in the Mayacamas Range, on the Rutherford Bench, and started Staglin Family Vineyard.

Shannon and her brother, Brandon, grew up on the property. After graduating from UCLA, she worked as a harvest intern and then in the office before receiving her MBA from UC Davis. After gaining experience working outside of the wine industry, Shannon returned to Staglin Family Vineyard in 2011

and today oversees all aspects of the business.

"We are trying to make site-driven wines from our estate. Each year is different, it is a reflection of the climate, not the people," Shannon said. The Staglin's began sustainable practices in the 1990s and became Certified Organic in 2005 all with the idea of investing in the future.

Shannon has been inspired by her mom, Shari, who has been both a professional and personal mentor. Shari has historically run the day-to-day of the winery and is tireless. She loves everything about the business — the wine, the people, the travel, and working in the market keeps her young. Shannon also notes all of the role models in the Napa Valley, including Cathy Corison, who worked at Staglin in the late 1980s, Celia Welch, who worked at Staglin in the 1990s, and Beth Novak of Spottswoode Winery.

Carissa Mondavi

Carissa was born into a wine-making family that has

not missed a harvest since 1919. Her father, Tim, gained a global perspective on wine after wine-making experiences in Italy, Chile, Australia and France. After the Robert Mondavi name was sold, Tim, at the age of 53, started over. With his family, Tim created Continuum, a wine that focuses on one estate, one family and one purpose. Carissa, a fourth-generation family member, is a spokesperson for the Continuum Estate. She is proud to share her family's story. As she explained, "I am not taking over; we are starting over." Continuum is now on its 10th vintage and the focus is to make terroir-driven wines.

Carissa's inspirations were the women in her family who were always ready to entertain guests, whether expected or unexpected. Carissa also admires the Baroness Philippine de Rothschild who she described as a woman with so much energy and little care for decorum.

For each of these women, family is first. But, it was not lost on me that this second generation is all women. More and more women are running wineries, making wine, selling wine, educating about wine and more. As Christie best explained, "it does not take much to look around to find women in the wine industry."

But no matter how many women are in the business, it is a rare sight to see an exclusively female panel, and it was an inspiration to see one at this seminar at Pebble Beach Food & Wine.

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WEDDING ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Hax

From C3

least they're droning about themselves instead of Jan in Accounting;

■ Letting them drone for an hour because it's an hour and it's not often;

■ Replacing "don't see often" with "rarely see" ... and telling yourself it's not estrangement, it's mindful allocation of life;

■ Going low-filter. "I'm sure Jan from Accounting is lovely, but I want to hear about you." You'd be surprised at what smiles can

smooth over.

■ Or no-filter: "I have things to share too. Are you interested?"

■ Sorting out whether you just want your turn to talk ("We have interesting things to share") or to achieve conversation — two different goals;

■ And so on.

You have so many options because this is more nuisance than problem. A few boring relatives? Pah.

And I'm noting your options because when you deal with a nuisance mindfully, in keeping with your general values, you can ac-

tually solve a few problems or keep from creating some new ones.

Take your motermouths (please!): If you choose, say, to see them less, then that likely won't affect you much.

But if you default to that when someone's conversation style frustrates you, then you could find yourself isolated as your decisions to step back start to mount. Likewise if you opt to let them drone till the staff brings the check. Just a few decisions like this can pack your schedule with obligations you dread.

So my advice is to resist the pull to deal with this only on the margins. Instead, pick the people who really matter to you, figure out why they matter so much, ask yourself what kind of relationship with them is realistic, then invest your heart and purpose in them — such that "busy" and "far away" no longer suffice as excuses to be out of touch.

About the rest, be honest with yourself: They're peripheral because they're not really your people — and there's nothing wrong with that.