

The Sarah Jane English Newsletter: 68th Edition

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JIM CONCANNON Visits Austin: Third generation Irish winemaker Jim Concannon visited Austin to autograph bottles of his popular premium wines at several super markets and wine shops. We dined at the Four Seasons and tasted his wines with our various courses. What a delicious evening it was indeed!

Jim's great-grandfather, James Concannon, was born on St. Patrick's Day in 1847. Although he had the luck of the Irish, a strong character and perseverance brought him success in life.

At 17, he left Ireland for Boston. Like thousands before and after him, signs greeted him saying "Irish Need Not Apply." Undeterred, he found a job as a bellboy in Maine. Here he met and married Ellen Rowe, formerly of County Kilkenny.

In 1874, James, his wife and the first of their ten children, traveled via covered wagon to Oregon. He briefly managed a sheep ranch in Oregon before moving to San Francisco where he sold books. Later, James made his fortune selling rubber stamps in a territory that stretched from British Columbia to Mexico.

James' work ethic, intelligence and flair for language made him a highly respected businessman by 32 years. Having made his fortune as a relatively young man, he pursued a new venture in California, where he discovered the Livermore Valley. He enrolled in the University of California to learn everything about viticulture. He traveled to France and Spain for the perfect root stock to start a new wine business.

In 1883, he planted his first 40 acres with premium Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon grapevine cuttings from France's legendary Chateau Y'Quem. He later imported the first cuttings from the hybrid Petite Sirah vine developed in 1880 by French viticulturist Francois Durif. James Concannon became the first Irish immigrant to make wine in America. His first wines were stored in his cellar in 1884. In his lifetime, James traveled to France to learn about winemaking, to Mexico to introduce viticulture, and to his beloved Ireland five times.

During Prohibition (1925-1933) Concannon continued producing a full line of sacramental wines under special dispensation from Archbishop Alemany. When Prohibition ended in 1933, Concannon Vineyard was ready to fill the void. Grandson Jim Concannon (his grandfather's namesake) remembers when trucks were backed up the length of Concannon's driveway with the first post-Prohibition production.

Following James Concannon's death in 1911, the family continued the wine business with James' son Joseph as manager. He replaced original vines that were lost to phylloxera, increased the acreage, and planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel. Joseph eventually purchased the interests of his siblings and he and his wife Nina became sole owners. After surviving Prohibition and the Great Depression, Joe Sr. passed away in 1965 and the next generation of Concannons continued to run the winery. Grandson Joe oversaw the vineyards and grandson Jim headed up the winemaking.

In 1964, the Concannon brothers released the industry's first varietal Petite Sirah from the 1961 vintage. Concannon's Petite Sirah won numerous prestigious awards in the following decades and is now the brand's best-known wine. Joe Concannon, Jr. passed away in 1978, leaving his brother Jim to carry on. Today, Concannon Vineyard is run from offices in James Concannon's original home, just steps from the cellar doors. Grandson Jim Concannon has stayed on at the winery, continuing the family's legacy. He works from his office in the historical landmark built by his grandfather, surrounded by a century of wine and family memorabilia.

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