

The Almaden Vineyards in 1891. Buildings marked #1 (the original cellars) and #3 (the 1876 cellar) still stand.

HISTORICAL FOOTNOTES OF SANTA CLARA VALLEY

By Jack Douglas

THE HISTORIC ALMADEN WINERY

Recent newspaper articles decry the loss of the Paul Masson Winery and a possible end to the 20 year tradition of "Music in the Vineyards." Very little has been written, however, about the departure of the Almaden Winery to San Benito County in 1987.

Historically the Masson operation pales in comparison to that of the Almaden Winery, located at 1530 Blossom Hill Road, which can claim the distinction of being the oldest in northern California.

Almaden Vineyards can trace its beginning back to the gold rush when Etienne Thé, a Bordeaux farmer, settled in the Santa Clara Valley. After some success at making wine from his vineyard of indigenous "mission" grapes, he went into partnership with Charles Le Franc, a tailor from Passy, France whom he met in the expanding French community of San Jose. Unhappy with the quality of the wine made from local grapes, Le Franc was the first winemaker in northern California to import European stock (*vitis vinifera*) to produce the varietal wines familiar today. These early cuttings, Pinot, Sauvignon, Semillon, Cabernet and Grenache, were grafted onto the mission root stock.

Le Franc married Thé's daughter Marie Adele in 1857 and became the proprietor of the Almaden "Sweet Grape Vineyard." He soon added to his holdings by purchasing an adjacent vineyard for \$250. A shrewd businessman, Le Franc realized that there was a growing market for quality wines and brandies in California, and he set in motion a company that would eventually be the third largest producer of varietal wines in the nation. By 1862 the Almaden Vineyard consisted of 75 acres producing approximately 100,000 gallons of varietal wine which was winning prizes at county fairs and competitions. Le Franc represented the county at the first California Wine Convention in San Francisco in 1862.

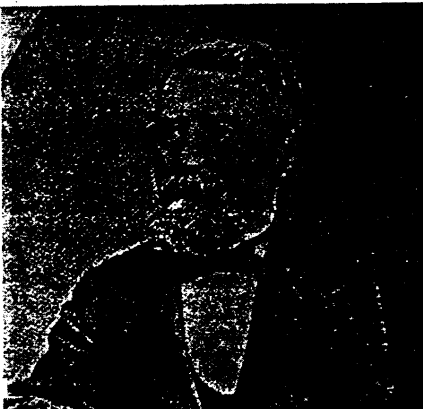
In 1869 Le Franc added some German varietals to his stock by transplanting Johannesburg Riesling and Traminer vines from a vineyard owned by Frank Stock which had been located at Eighth and William Streets. Le Franc used innovative viticultural practices such as setting vines on close centers to increase the intensity of the flavors. His ports and algeicas were known for their longevity, and his Malbec vines were the only large acreage of fine Bordeaux vines in the West.

During the depression of the 1870's the Almaden Winery thrived while others in the Valley went broke. 1876 saw the expansion of the winery and the addition of the substantial sandstone winery building. Le Franc sent a ten foot high carved cask of his wine (capacity 3,447 gallons) to the nation's centennial in Philadelphia that year. (The same barrel returned for the bi-centennial of 1976.)

The devastating epidemic of phylloxera in France was advantageous to Le Franc, for not

only did it diminish imports of French wine thereby opening new markets for the California product, but it convinced a young Frenchman named Paul Masson to seek his fortune in San Jose.

Masson, who originally came to San Jose to study business at the University of the Pacific, became friends with Le Franc and his family which included the three children Henry, Louise and Marie. Masson returned to France briefly before returning to help market Almaden Wines for Le Franc. It was while working for Almaden that the young Masson began experimenting with sparkling wines, eventually setting up his champagne cellars. Masson first worked out of Almaden's business outlet at 163-169 West Santa Clara Street (the building which is now occupied by the D.B. Cooper Saloon) until he established his own outlet on East Santa Clara Street.



Charles LeFranc

Charles Le Franc continued to be a leader in the California wine industry until his tragic death in October, 1887 when he was trampled while attempting to stop a team of runaway horses. His son Henry quickly assumed control of the business. Paul Masson, shortly afterward married Louise Le Franc and became part of the family. Masson, absorbed in his own champagne operation, probably did not guess that someday he would control the combined family fortune, but that is just what happened when Henry Le Franc and his wife Louise Delmas Le Franc were killed when an inter-urban trolley smashed into their car on a county road. Their daughter Nelly, thrown from the car, survived.

Masson managed both enterprises right up to and into Prohibition. While most wineries went out of business during this period, the crafty Masson sold his grapes for juice and also became certified to produce sacramental and medicinal wines. The aging winemaker sold the operation to the Almaden Vineyard Corporation, headed by Charles M. Jones, in 1930.

When Prohibition was lifted in 1933, Jones, who had a large inventory of wine stockpiled by Masson, was ready for full production. As one might guess, a whole lot of inferior wine was quickly produced by start-up wineries. Jones, as a founder and first director of the Wine Institute, did much to establish standards to improve the quality of California wines.

After Jones's death in 1940 the Almaden winery was purchased by Louis Benoist and Brayton Wilbur. These San Francisco businessmen revitalized much of the vineyard stock and began

purchasing vineyards beyond Santa Clara County. Benoist, who appreciated Almaden's traditions, had the old Le Franc ranch house restored in a French Victorian manner. He hired the former Novitiate brother and winemaker Oliver Goulet to create many distinguished wines. Goulet's Grenache Rose, with clever marketing, changed the nation's drinking habits.

Another important member of the new team was Frank Schoonmaker, a connoisseur and wine author. Schoonmaker enlisted the viticulturists of the University of California in experimenting with grape varieties in areas of Monterey and San Benito counties. Almaden started the movement that led to the area becoming one of the largest wine producing regions of the world. During the 1940's and 50's Almaden won top awards for many of its wines and helped to make California wines serious competitors to the European imports.

In 1967, at the height of its success, Louis Benoist sold the winery to National Distillers. During their stewardship Almaden rose to become the third largest wine producer in the U.S., and by 1980 the largest producer of premium varietal wines. Thus, Charles Le Franc's vision of making good, inexpensive, varietal wines available to all was fulfilled.

During this last period the management turned the historic property into a showplace. They built a lavish chateau-style structure to house their offices, and they installed a helicopter pad to facilitate quick trips to the airport and San Francisco. A magnificent rose garden, named for Louis Benoist, was planted and the original 1850 winery building was remodeled for wine tasting and sales. Unfortunately the original Le Franc ranch house burned to the ground in the mid-1970's.

All of this interest in the historic property ceased when National Distillers became part of the giant Heublein liquor cartel. Heublein chose to consolidate their interests by moving the winemaking and bottling operations closer to the source of their grapes. While this made good economic sense, it sounded the death knell to the last of Santa Clara County's great agricultural traditions.

Plans for turning the winery and vineyards into an expensive housing development are well under way. Most of the equipment has been moved or sold, but the fate of the historic 1850 and 1875 winery buildings is under some dispute. The site is a State Historic Landmark, and the winery buildings are clearly eligible for the National Register, but local homeowners do not want the area turned into an historic park. They are interested in keeping only the new administration building as a possible community center.

It remains for the Historic Landmark Commission, the Planning Department and the City Council to assure that this premier historic site is integrated into the development plans. The contributions of pioneers like Charles Le Franc should not be forgotten in our rush into the future.

ARGONAUT MEETING

March 30th
7:00 P.M.
Firehouse
Guest Speaker: Leonard McKay
Association Members welcome!