

Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian Roots



Winemaker, Fred Abruzzini with Clark Gable in front of the famous carved Beringer cask.



The map from 1939 with a delightful one-day trip from the Bay Area.



Zinfandel grapes are ripe.

Photos Cynthia Brian

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My paternal grandfather, Fred Abruzzini, was the son of Italian immigrants who emigrated to America via Canada at the turn of the century. As a boy, he began working with my great uncle at Cribari Winery in Madrone where he became the winemaker.

Between Prohibition and the Great Depression, many California wineries closed. Beringer Brothers was faltering. Federal agents suggested to Bertha Beringer that she hire someone with integrity and knowledge, someone like Fred Abruzzini. He motored up to St. Helena and when he saw the caves, he believed that he could make some excellent wine. In 1932 at the age of 28, in exchange for free rein, he was hired to be Beringer's manager, winemaker, and chief promoter. He gambled that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would be elected President and end prohibition, so he began crushing more grapes, making wine and port.

Prohibition ended in 1933 and in 1934 Grandpa had the innovative idea to open the cellars to the public for tours, and on special occasions, free tastings. For the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, a World's Fair held at Treasure Island, he created the first colorful map of "one of California's most delightful one-day trips" where all roads led to Beringer.

He, my grandmother, father, and uncles would drive the 60 miles every evening to hand out maps. The tourists came. He sent boxes of wine to Hollywood celebrities inviting them to stop over and made certain that local and national newspapers reported these events with photos in front of the carved cask. Clark Gable, Carol Lombard, Charles Laughton, Tom Mix, Ginger Rogers, Roy Rogers, Abbott and Costello, Max Baer, Rudy Vallee, and a bevy of other luminaries visited often and became friends. Fred became a legend in Napa Valley with his publicity for the wine industry and put it on the map.

As children, we rode horses, barbecued, roamed the caves, and played at the winery. For many years, the grapes from our vineyards were crushed into Beringer wines. Grandpa was killed in 1988 when a gigantic elm tree toppled on him while he mowed his lawn. He would be proud to know that the roots he planted as the first person to offer tours and tastings to the public have grown into Napa Valley being the beautiful and renowned wine destination it is today.

Cuttings from those first grape canes planted by my grandfather are rooted and thriving in my garden. His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have continued his legacy.

Roots. Yes, they are the basis of our physical life.