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OTHER WINEMAKERS TO WATCH THE FETZER CLAN

A family that sold its name retains its essence

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In 1992, 11 Fetzer siblings sold the Fetzer Vineyards brand to Brown- Forman for a reported \$80 million. As part of the agreement, all 11 were prohibited from making any kind of beverage for sale -- from wine to apple juice -- for eight years.

"And we could never use our name again," says John Fetzer, 57, the oldest son of matriarch Kathleen, 83.

There's a tragic literary feel to selling one's own name, particularly when the whole family pitched in to make that name well-known worldwide.

"I worked out in the vineyards. I picked grapes," says Patti Fetzer Burke, 51. "As soon as you were old enough to reach the vines you were out there."

The Fetzer wine brand was launched in 1968, but the family was never into monoculture.

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"We had orchards and alfalfa and pigs and sheep and chickens," says Jim Fetzer, 53. "It was biodynamic before we knew what that was."

In 1981, shortly after their father Barney bought another vineyard, near Hopland, to help expand the brand, he died suddenly of heart failure.

"We owed (Bank of America) a lot of money. We were scared," says John. "We buckled down as a group, full throttle. Jimmy was on the road selling the wine. Patti was in charge of all the packaging and marketing. Dan was designing all the buildings."

While feuds among Napa Valley's elite wine families are common, the Fetzers say they never suffered such strife.

"Our family differs in that we are not the second generation," says John. "We are the ones who built the company."

Jim recalls, "Our father said the best way to keep the family together is to stay deep in debt."

The Brown-Forman offer, made when the Fetzer brand exceeded 2 million cases a year, took care of that. Four Fetzers launched their own wineries soon after the non-competition agreement expired.

The largest is Jim's Ceago Vinegarden, which makes about 7,000 cases a year of Bordeaux varietals. The 2003 Ceago Vinegarden Kathleen's Vineyard Mendocino County Sauvignon Blanc (\$16) made The Chronicle's Top 100 Wines of 2004 list.

Patti also made the Top 100 with the 2003 Patianna Mendocino County Sauvignon Blanc (\$16). Patianna makes about 4,000 cases a year of Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah.

John's Saracina winery makes 1,500 cases a year of Sauvignon Blanc and a red blend, while Dan Fetzer, youngest of the clan at 41, produces about 5,000 cases per year of seven different varietals under the name Jeriko Estates.

The family's commitment to biodynamic farming makes the Fetzers a positive force. . Their organic legacy continues at Fetzer Vineyards today, although the Fetzers have nothing to do with the brand.

"Some of our biggest fear is we don't want to be associated with Fetzer (Vineyards)," says John. "We worked hard at not saying who we are. We don't say Fetzer. Our labels don't say Fetzer. We have not sold it as Fetzer. We've sold it on what's in the bottle."