

DAVIS

BYNUM

Davis Bynum Biography

When Davis Bynum turned 40, he quit his job in the newspaper business to go into the wine business. It was, as he says, “a dream come true after making wine on my own for the prior fourteen years.”

Bynum opened his winery in 1965 in Albany, CA, under some pretty primitive conditions. The winery was a former plumbing warehouse in Albany not far from the University of California at Berkeley. The early years saw Davis move from Albany to Napa and then, very quickly, to Sonoma County’s Russian River Valley, where he produced and bottled Russian River Valley’s first single vineyard pinot noir, igniting his specialty in that variety and the valley’s soaring success for years to come.

That first label read, “Produced and bottled by Davis Bynum Winery Healdsburg, California. Davis Bynum Pinot Noir is produced from grapes grown in the vineyard of Joseph Rochioli Jr., which overlooks the Russian River some six miles below Healdsburg. Its pronounced character is owing to the cool climate and well-drained soil of the Region 1 setting.”

Bynum acknowledges enormous influence from numerous wine industry luminaries, but most importantly his father, Lindley Bynum. He was a “wine buff” according to Davis. Professionally, he was a California historian. His office was at UCLA, but his principal concern was the Bancroft Library at Berkeley. A wine judge at the State Fair and Los Angeles County Fair for years, the senior Bynum wrote a book called “California Wines and How to Enjoy Them,” and was good friends with Lee Stewart of Souverain Cellars and André Tchelistcheff of Beaulieu Vineyard. Later in life, when he retired, Bynum’s father moved to Napa Valley and bought a vineyard.

As a young man, his father’s friends spurred a passion in Davis that prompted him to pursue winemaking. He recalls a trip in 1951 to an old winery owned by his father’s friend, the then closed Chateau Chevalier in St. Helena, where he and a friend, right then and there decided to try their hand at winemaking. They drove down the road to Charles Krug winery where they met Robert Mondavi, who was accepting grapes during harvest. Davis asked to purchase some grapes and Mondavi agreed; one box of petite sirah weighing in at 50 pounds for an agreed price of \$1.80. Robert asked if there was anything else he could do for the young men, to which Davis said, “How do you make wine?” Mondavi’s reply: “Talk to the truck driver. He’s a home winemaker.” Bynum chuckles at the memory.

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In 1971, Bynum bought his own vineyard, 26 acres in Napa Valley (now Whitehall Lane Vineyards), which was planted to traminer, charbono, petite sirah, and cabernet sauvignon. He crushed grapes at the vineyard and took the most down to Albany on an old '46 Studebaker flatbed truck with a 1,200 gallon stainless tank strapped to the back. When it came time to build his winery, though, the Napa Valley Planning Commission turned down the building permit, requiring an expensive EIR, which was not in the cards.

In 1973, Davis Bynum moved to Russian River Valley, buying an old abandoned hop kiln and 83-acre ranch along the Russian River, about eight miles southwest of Healdsburg. Bynum recalls a good deal of hard work and many wonderful experiences over the years. "It was a more laid-back business in the early days – a handshake was the only contract you needed," he recalls. Davis overflows with compliments for those that helped him along the way. Talk to winemakers of today, though, and you hear more about his influence on them and how generous he was with his time and advice. From Rod Berglund of Joseph Swan Vineyards and Michael Browne of Kosta Browne to Guy Davis of Davis Family Wines and today's Davis Bynum winemaker, Greg Morthole, all will say Davis inspired them. They'll also say that Davis is one of the finest gentlemen they've ever met.

Having sold his brand to Tom Klein of Rodney Strong Wine Estates in 2007, Davis is now retired, but still on the move. He's often spotted walking to lunch in Healdsburg with his wife Virginia and he continues to promote the brand on work trips to New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles and more.