

EDITORIAL

BY JOEL B. PAYNE

Much has been said and written about Ernest Gallo since his death on March the 6th at the age of 97. With his near contemporary Robert Mondavi, he was certainly one of the 20th century's quintessential figures. While Mondavi embodied the notion of democratising production by making world-class wines in places with little tradition, Gallo, as a marketeer, was more interested in democratising consumption. Mondavi offered consumers a glimpse of the fine wine on which regions like Bordeaux and Burgundy had built their prestige; Gallo, who famously declared that he wanted his firm to be the Campbell's Soup of wine, focused instead on giving them what they liked to drink at a price they were willing to pay.

This included not only higher strength beverages such as Thunderbird or Night Train, which he happily sold to those who had neither the money nor inclination to seek out anything better, but also more conventional efforts such as Hearty Burgundy and White Chablis, which provided millions of Americans - who before drank little other than whisky - with their first taste of wine. While Mondavi and his Napa neighbours were making the Cabernet Sauvignons that would rival French wines, the Gallos, after a dismal launch in 1974, didn't even release a serious red with a cork finish until 1983 - and even that was done in an Italian style and subjected to ageing in large wooden casks.

That unfashionable winemaking decision, and the subsequent forays into launching a French wine brand precisely when Americans had switched to eating their burgers with 'Freedom Fries', illustrates both the Gallos' tendency to march to the beat of their own drum and, perhaps more importantly, the liberty family ownership gave their company. Shareholders are less tolerant, as the Mondavis learned by painful experience.

Nonetheless, as America's tastes changed, so did Gallo's range of wines. Ernest Gallo's ability to reinvent himself was trumped only by his keen understanding of marketing, sales and distribution - and his insatiable ambition. His initiatives did not all prove successful, but persistence generally paid off. Gallo is more successful than Mondavi ever was, even when the latter was under family control. History may claim that Robert Mondavi put California on the international map, but it was Ernest and Julio Gallo (1910-1993) who, although not always popular in the industry, made wine popular with Americans. Ernest's death closes a chapter in history. It is fortunate that the business remains in family hands for it is unlikely that a publicly traded wine company would ever have been so inventive or so successful over a similar same period of time.

