

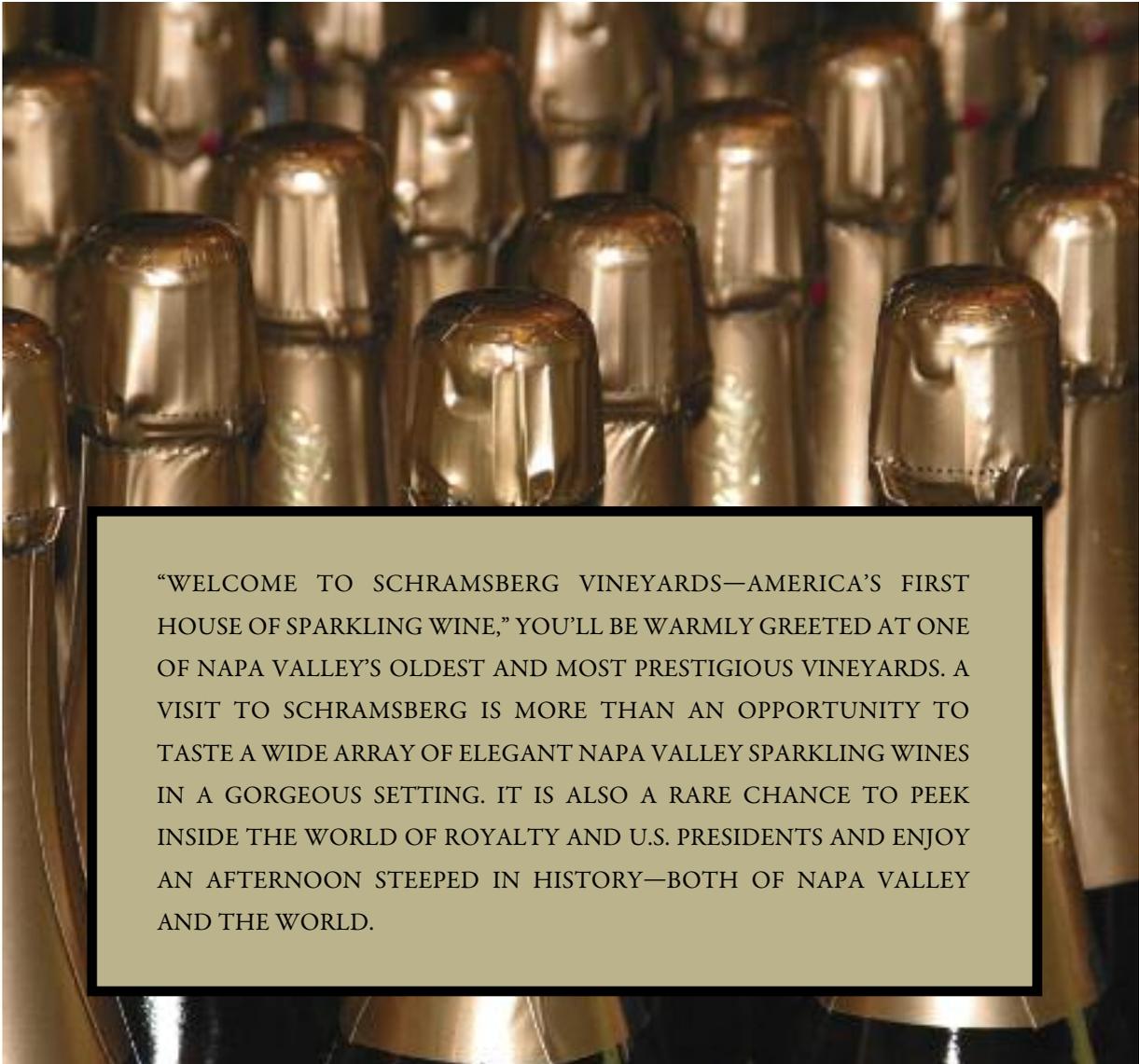




The Making of a
Great American
WINERY

A Visit to Calistoga's Historic Schramsberg Vineyards

Written by Robyn Roehm Cannon
Photography by Schramsberg Vineyards



“WELCOME TO SCHRAMSBERG VINEYARDS—AMERICA’S FIRST HOUSE OF SPARKLING WINE,” YOU’LL BE WARMLY GREETED AT ONE OF NAPA VALLEY’S OLDEST AND MOST PRESTIGIOUS VINEYARDS. A VISIT TO SCHRAMSBERG IS MORE THAN AN OPPORTUNITY TO TASTE A WIDE ARRAY OF ELEGANT NAPA VALLEY SPARKLING WINES IN A GORGEOUS SETTING. IT IS ALSO A RARE CHANCE TO PEEK INSIDE THE WORLD OF ROYALTY AND U.S. PRESIDENTS AND ENJOY AN AFTERNOON STEEPED IN HISTORY—BOTH OF NAPA VALLEY AND THE WORLD.

To fully appreciate the legacy that Schramsberg represents, let’s explore its past. In 1862, just a year after the beginning of the Civil War, a young German immigrant named Jacob Schram purchased 200 acres of property on Mount Diamond and began to develop his first Napa hillside vineyards.

Schram’s journey to that point was a long one. Twenty years earlier, he’d come to America from his small town of Pfeddersheim, Germany, from a winemaking family. But he settled in New York and spent a decade working as a barber before sailing across the Caribbean in 1852, and after crossing the Isthmus of Panama, arrived in San Francisco aboard the steamer *Yankee Blade*.

Although he was joining a group of immigrants who had come to Napa to make wine, Schram didn’t give up his day job as a barber while he cleared the wooded and wild land, built a rustic cabin to survive the elements, and planted European vine stock. By 1870, Schramsberg had 30,000

vines, and he hired Chinese laborers, who landed in San Francisco to complete the Transcontinental Railroad, to help him hand-dig Napa’s first hillside caves for fine wine aging and storage—a magnificent accomplishment that took until 1888 to complete in two phases.

Meanwhile, he constructed a lavish Victorian mansion on the property, and the shipbuilder he hired to fulfill the job used small wooden pegs in place of the more modern nail. The stately mansion was completed in 1875; lived in by Schram, his wife, and son; and remains a residence on the property to this day, surrounded by beautiful gardens.

By 1879, Schramsberg was producing 5,500 cases of wine, in varietals from Zinfandel to Sauvignon Vert, Sauternes, and Riesling. Ten years later, production was nearly 30,000 cases, and the wines began their illustrious history of being served at State dinners, with Benjamin Harrison being the first president to enjoy Schramsberg, at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco in 1891.



Although Jacob Schram died at 75 in 1905, the winery prospered until the onset of Prohibition in 1920. The next year, Schram’s son Herman sold the estate to a sea captain as a summer home, and when Prohibition ended 13 years later, it landed in the hands of investment speculators.

It wasn’t until 1940 that the winery began producing sparkling wines under the California Champagne Company label owned by John Gargano. The Schramsberg name was history until the property was sold again, this time to Douglas Pringle, who revived the label and began producing both sparkling and still wines in 1951. During his ownership, the California Historical Society declared the estate a historical monument. In 1960, Pringle died, and once again, the winery was abandoned for five years, until the 200-acre parcel was purchased by Los Angeles business executive Jack Davies and his wife, Jamie.

The Davieses were determined to seek out a simpler lifestyle and looked for more than a year for property to acquire in Napa Valley. When they finally decided to “make their escape,” according to son Hugh, they were inspired by the challenge of returning Schramsberg to its stately past and embraced the restoration with gusto. They replanted the decrepit vineyards and began to engage the world with the Schramsberg story.

With an aspiration to produce a complex sparkler fermented in the authentic *méthode champenoise* that would be “America’s most prestigious, select, and admired sparkling wine,” the couple knew that they would have to change the ingrained mindsets of many Americans, who

saw sparkling wine as “just bubbles,” not granting it the respect of the Burgundy and Bordeaux wines of France.

They persevered, and in 1965 produced a Blanc de Blanc—the first commercial use of Chardonnay in American sparkling wine. In 1967, they followed with Blanc de Noirs, utilizing Pinot Noir grapes in the classic style. A Reserve, aged four years, quickly became accepted as the finest sparkling wine made in America, and the Cremant Demi-Sec, first made in 1973, became a White House favorite. Finally, their top-flight J. Schram was first released in 1992 and still represents only three percent of the winery’s annual production.

Seven U.S. presidents have served Schramsberg wines at more than 75 official celebrations and dinners since 1972. Today, winery guests are treated to a gallery of photographs, menus, and official correspondence documenting this participation. A new tasting room overlooking the estate has been added, where seated tastings of the beautifully crafted wines are presented in a quietly formal yet relaxed setting.

Today, the winery is presided over by the Davieses’ youngest son, Hugh, who speaks with great affection of his parents’ accomplishments and takes the responsibility of carrying the legacy forward with pride, leading an effort to fine-tune winemaking and grape growing techniques for the eight to ten sparkling blends produced each year.

“Forty-three years later, there is still an opportunity for us to grow,” says the exuberant Hugh. “What are we trying to produce? Wines of the absolute highest quality. It’s constantly a balancing act, but a very exciting one, and I hope that I can pass the baton to the next generation.” 