

A California grapegrowing legend has died

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Ron Mansfield seen in 2011 at one of his vineyards in Placerville.
Brian Baer/Special to the Chronicle

To the average wine drinker, Ron Mansfield wasn't a household name. But the viticulturist was a quiet force

who shaped California wine in important ways over the last 35 years.

He helped put El Dorado County, and by extension the Sierra foothills, on the map as a wine destination. He was among the first in the state to plant now-beloved grape varieties like Gamay. The fruit that Mansfield grew ended up in bottles made by some of California's most highly respected wine producers, like Arnot-Roberts, Edmunds St. John, Jolie-Laide and Keplinger.

Mansfield died last month at age 76, after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. Since his death, those who knew him have been reflecting on his remarkable legacy. It's a legacy that stretched all the way to the White House, which served the cherries that Mansfield grew — he was as much a stone-fruit farmer as a grape farmer — during every presidential administration from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama.

“It was such an important thing for me to have the chance to work with somebody like Ron,” said Steve Edmunds, the winemaker behind Edmunds St. John. “I felt very lucky to have somebody with Ron's gift for farming interested in what I was doing.”

When Mansfield began farming, in the 1980s, El Dorado County was in a transitional moment. The region's pears, then the cornerstone of its agricultural industry, had been

infected with blight. It was clear that farmers would need to shift to a new crop.

Mansfield had just come into some money thanks to a winning race horse named Loyal Lad, and in 1980 he bought a plot of land. He grew cherries, peaches, nectarines and plums, calling the operation Goldbud Farms. The Goldbud cherries soon gained renown; they're what caught the attention of White House chief usher Gary Walters. The Chronicle devoted an entire article to Mansfield's cherries in 1991, quoting one of his retail customers: "The cherries are the biggest, darkest, best-tasting I have ever had."

Soon Mansfield took over the farming at neighbor Al Fenaughty's property, where he tended to a small section of Gewurztraminer and Syrah grapevines.

The Syrah grapes initially went to home winemakers, but in the late '80s Edmunds came calling. He was looking for Syrah and bought the entire Fenaughty Vineyard crop, which he estimates was about one barrel's worth. "The wine was really intriguing and quite lovely," said Edmunds. He shared some with Amador County winemaker Bill Easton, and the two agreed that it smelled like the legendary French Syrah Cote Rotie.

From then on, Mansfield and Edmunds became inextricably linked. Many other vineyard owners throughout El Dorado began hiring Mansfield to farm their vineyards, and whenever he had the chance to plant

something new, he'd consult Edmunds about which grape varieties might do well. He was willing to take chances on obscure, unproven cultivars like Vermentino and Grenache Blanc. Eventually, word got out among winemakers in Napa and Sonoma that Mansfield oversaw a treasure trove of these types of grapes, which tend to be scarce in Cabernet- and Chardonnay-dominant Wine Country.

"It was just slow, steady, organic growth," said Mansfield's son, Chuck Mansfield. Once Mansfield started working with a winemaker, "if they wanted some variety, and even if it was a bit of an outlier like Arneis or Negroamaro, we'd put in a little block for them."

Gamay may have been the ultimate coup. The signature red grape of France's Beaujolais region has never been a major commercial success, always doomed to command lower prices and less respect than a somewhat similar-tasting grape, Pinot Noir. Yet wine geeks, especially those that prize subtler wines, adore Gamay.

"I felt like I had tricked Ron into planting it," Edmunds said. In the 1990s, when Mansfield began cultivating Gamay in the granite-packed soils of the Barsotti Vineyard, Edmunds said, "what anybody in California knew about Gamay was virtually nothing." Mansfield later planted it at additional sites, too, including the Witters Vineyard, and winemakers now line up for the chance to buy it.

Along the way, Mansfield supported the burgeoning wine industry in his community. "So many people I didn't realize he'd worked with have come to me and said, 'your dad

helped me so much, getting my irrigation lines set up or choosing the grape varieties,” said Chuck Mansfield, now Goldbud’s general manager.

“Mansfield is known in the community as someone who sticks his neck out but who knows what he is doing,” wrote Sibella Kraus in that 1991 Chronicle article.

He never lost his passion for horse racing, and he remained an active competitive bowler through his later years. In 2022, while fighting Parkinson’s symptoms, he competed in his 50th consecutive U.S. Bowling Conference National Open Championship in Las Vegas. He earned a standing ovation, Chuck Mansfield said. And through the end, Mansfield remained just as committed to his other crops, like the cherries, as to wine grapes. In fact, when asked which fruit his father favored, Chuck Mansfield returned a surprising answer.

“I think he really loved Fuji apples,” Chuck Mansfield said. “They’re not the most profitable. We don’t get the most attention or notoriety for those. But the satisfaction on his face when he was eating one of those Fuji apples — it was the same look on his face as when he and Steve were having a wine that really spoke to them.”