

Walter Schug

Walter Schug, Winemaker

A native of Germany's Rhein River valley, Walter Schug was raised in Assmannshausen, on the region's largest Pinot Noir estate. He marked his first harvest in 1954, apprenticing at all nine of the famed wine estates of Hessen, in the Rheingau region of Germany.

In 1959, after finishing his studies with a diploma in Viticulture and Enology at the prestigious German wine institute of Geisenheim, Walter left for California. He spent a year expanding his knowledge while working at a winery and taking extension courses at UC Davis. Two years later, he returned to California for good, with his wife Gertrud, to work as the Assistant Superintendent at California Grape Products Corporation. In 1966 Julio Gallo asked him to be the family's Head of Grower Relations and Quality Control for Northern California. Gallo's involvement on the North Coast led Walter to become acquainted with over 600 independent growers and several thousand acres of prime vineyards in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino County.

By 1973, Walter's experience was sought out by Joseph Phelps to establish Joseph Phelps Vineyards in Napa Valley, and that year began his 10 vintages as Vice President and Winemaker for the new enterprise. Among Walter's many contributions to the Napa Valley's newly emerging fame were:

- California's first proprietary Bordeaux-Style blend (Insignia).
- Legendary vineyard designated wines (Backus and Eisele Vineyards).
- The first varietal Syrah in the US.
- Pioneering late harvest dessert wines (Gewurztraminer, Riesling, Scheurebe).

By 1980, however, there was little market in California for Pinot Noir, and Phelps ceased production of the varietal. Reluctant to stop working with the grape of his childhood home and firmly believing in its future, Walter came to an arrangement with Joseph Phelps that he would continue his regular work at the winery, yet produce Pinot Noir under his own private label.

Three years later, Walter's private project had grown to such an extent that he made the decision to leave Phelps and concentrate on the Schug brand. Walter, Gertrud and their children were proud to continue the family tradition together. For over 20 years Gertrud managed the winery finances, because she also came from a winemaking family her contributions were invaluable. Today the winery is run by the third generation of Schug's with Axel running day to day operations, Claudia importing and distributing the wines in Europe and Andrea providing financial advice.

Since then the winery has grown from a 2,000 case production to approximately 45,000 cases a year. On October 3rd 2010, Walter celebrated his 57th harvest on his 75th birthday -- an achievement which very few in California can claim.

Although now retired, Walter continues to consult with his winemaker Michael Cox to continue his tradition of winemaking excellence. Today at Schug Pinot Noir is still our main focus while we also produce Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

