

The *Decanter* interview

# Agustin Huneeus Sr

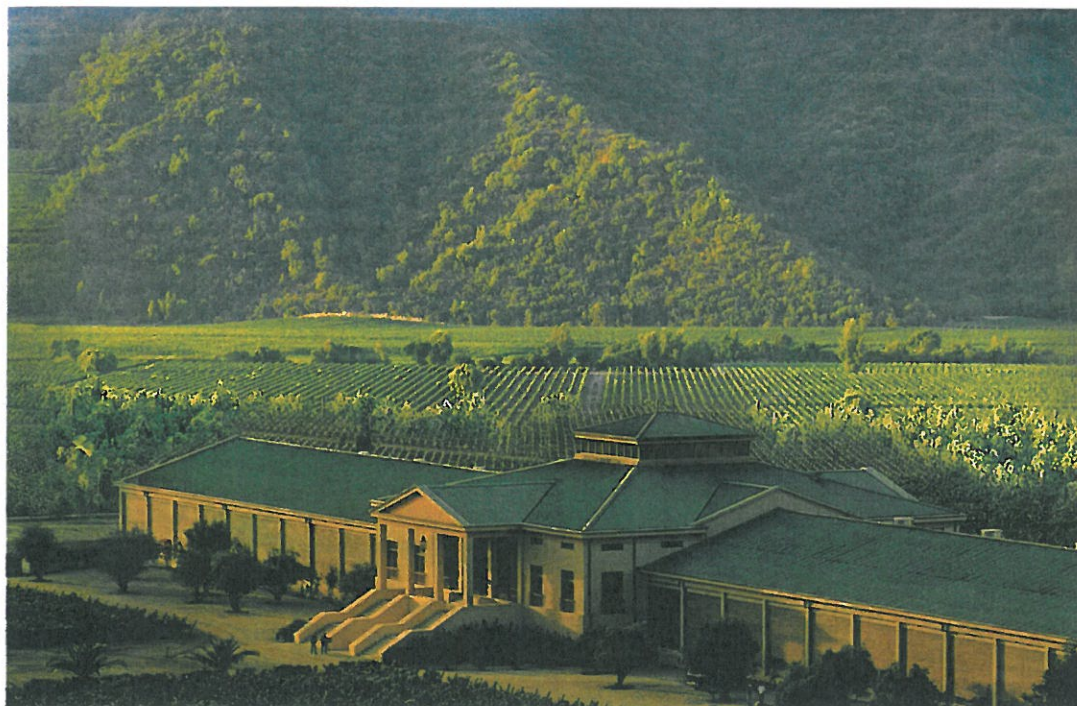
This Chilean-born Californian entrepreneur has made his mark on the wines of both wine regions after being involved at every level, from bulk wine

RECENTLY I SPENT an afternoon with Agustin Huneeus at his home in San Francisco. Huneeus may not enjoy the high profile of some California wine veterans. But he has played his part in shaping today's New World wine scene, with a long career in both South and North America.

Respected in California's wine world for his energy and business acumen, Huneeus was first connected to wine on the West Coast – while still living in New York – as president of Seagram-owned Paul Masson.

Since making his decision, in 1977, to leave Seagram and live in California, his involvement has included everything from Central Valley bulk wine production (Noble Vineyards) to the ownership and management of small wineries as varied as Concannon in Livermore Valley; Mount Veeder, on Mount Veeder; Flower Estate, on the edge of the Sonoma Coast; and Franciscan Estate in Oakville.





**Above: Augustin Huneus' Veramonte estate in Casablanca helped put that region – and Chile – on the world wine map**

limited-production cuvées, small-vineyard production, and as proprietor, with his wife Valeria, of Quintessa, a large estate in Rutherford. Recently, he has become involved in the Washington State production of Pirouette, a Bordeaux blend made as part of Alan Shoup's Long Shadows venture.

Since the late 1980s, Huneus has also played an important role in the revival of Chilean viticulture and in its success on the world stage. In particular, he was instrumental in the development of the Casablanca Valley, where he and Valeria created the Veramonte estate and winery. In recognition of his contribution to Chile's viticulture (and economy), in 2010 he received a knighthood in the Order for Meritorious Service to the Republic.

He had celebrated his 81st birthday the day before I sat down with him. His son, also Augustin, 47, began taking over his father's business responsibilities a few years ago, yet Huneus Sr is still as lithe, sharp and busy as a man half his age. As we talked, we retraced the path that had brought him from his native Chile to California.

## Happenstance

Born in Santiago into a well-established family (both grandfathers had been senators), Huneus had had no connection with wine when a friend, an import-export broker, invited him, in 1960, to join with a few others in a business venture. 'I was 26 and Concha y Toro, now a flourishing company, was thoroughly run-down,' he recalled. 'It was the only Chilean wine company traded on the Santiago stock exchange, yet its shares had sunk well below the valuation even of the wine stocks it was holding. Selling most of its production cheaply, in bulk, to bodegas where customers brought their own containers to be filled, the company was losing money. My friend proposed that we bought a

controlling interest to see what could be salvaged.'

'I knew nothing of wine, the wine trade or vineyards, but the job of managing the company fell to me. But spending your time in a winery and walking daily through the vines does something to you. I discovered, as I took a closer interest in what was going on, that much of the wine we produced was more than quite good. Yet no one cared because quality was not Concha y Toro's business and everything went into the blending vats.

'I saw potential for the company if it could change direction. I pushed for higher standards and batch selection. The best wines, separated from the rest, were bottled for sale under the name Casillero del Diablo. The label took off and within a few years I was exporting it, too. Within a decade, the company had regained its reputation and was profitable. Our lives are often governed by happenstance and that was the happenstance that led me into wine.'

Distribution of the wine in Colombia and Venezuela through Seagram distributors put him in touch with the corporation's chairman, Edgar Bronfman, with whom he developed a good relationship. It was Bronfman who, when Huneus was looking to broaden his horizons in 1971, first offered him a job running a major Seagram subsidiary in Argentina. And when that proved successful, invited him, in 1974, to New York to take on a newly created position of international vice-president of the corporation, with responsibility for all Seagram's wine companies, ➤

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## Huneus at a glance

**Born** 4 August 1933  
in Chile

**Family** wife Valeria,  
four children,  
14 grandchildren

### Current interests

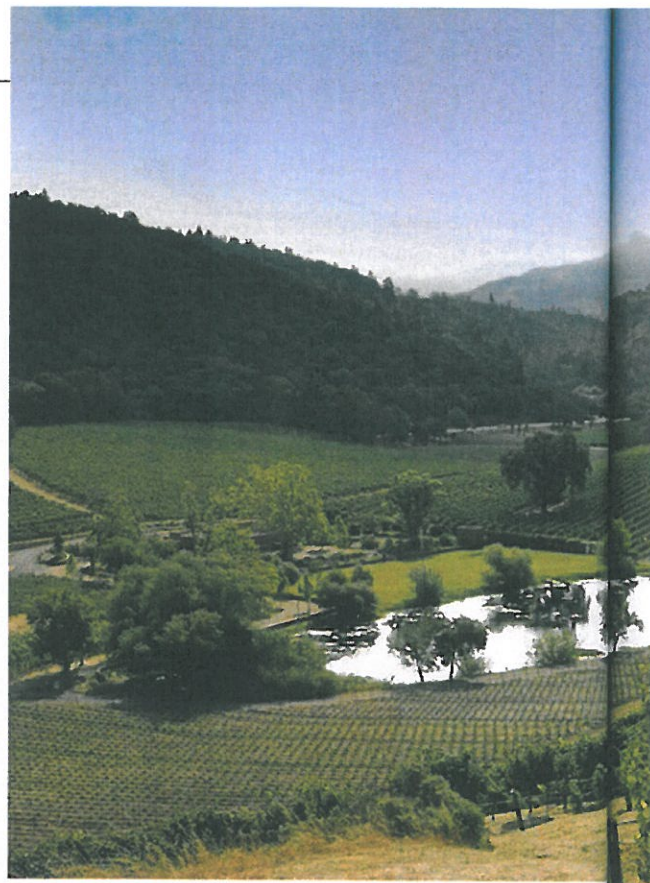
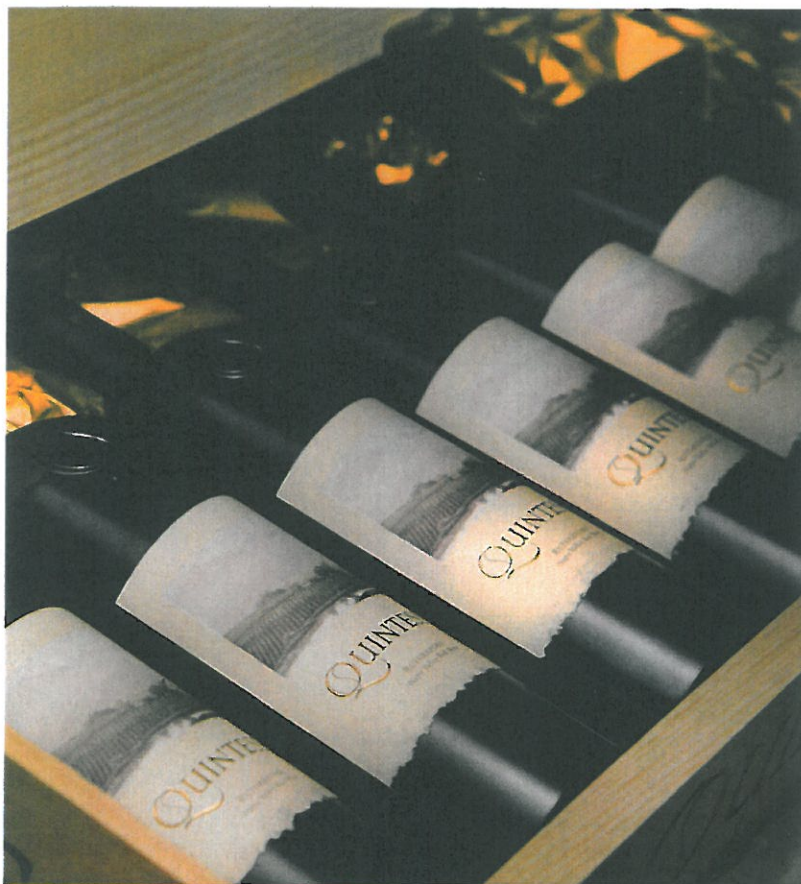
Quintessa (1990-) and  
Veramonte (1990-) and  
Huneus Vintners  
(1999-)

### Previous wine career

Concha y Toro,  
1960-1971; Seagram  
Argentina 1971-1974;  
Seagram International  
1974-1977; Noble  
Vineyards 1977-1984;  
Concannon Vineyards  
1981-1985; Franciscan  
Estate 1985-1999

**Hobbies** music (he is  
an accomplished  
cellist), horse riding,  
flying, reading





**Above: Huneeus and his viticulturist wife Valeria bought Quintessa Vineyard in 1990 as 'raw land', planting it with Bordeaux varieties; the wine (left) is now regarded as one of the most consistent in the Rutherford AVA**

from Paul Masson in California to Mumm Champagne and Barton & Guestier in France and Montana in New Zealand, among more than a dozen others. For the next four years Huneeus was constantly in the air to or from somewhere. He found it exhilarating (and exhausting), and learned more than he could have imagined.

## People and passion

'Spending time in such dissimilar wine regions, I soon saw how the differences among their wines sprang directly from the basic connection between a wine and a place,' he said. 'Not just in the sense of French versus Italian, but in the way the character of a wine is always rooted in its place of origin.'

'I was also struck by the extent to which a wine's quality – something hard to articulate, but easy enough to recognise on the palate – was usually an expression of the passion of whoever was responsible for making it. If the company's original owner was still in charge of the winery, that passion was palpable. He knew his vineyards and understood instinctively how to respond to every changed circumstance – even when he must take risks to get the result he wanted.'

'It wasn't obvious to me what advantage we brought with our extra layer of corporate management, and I could sometimes feel the frustration in former owners when they felt themselves losing autonomy and becoming corporate cogs. But if the owner left, the passion went with him and the result was predictable.'

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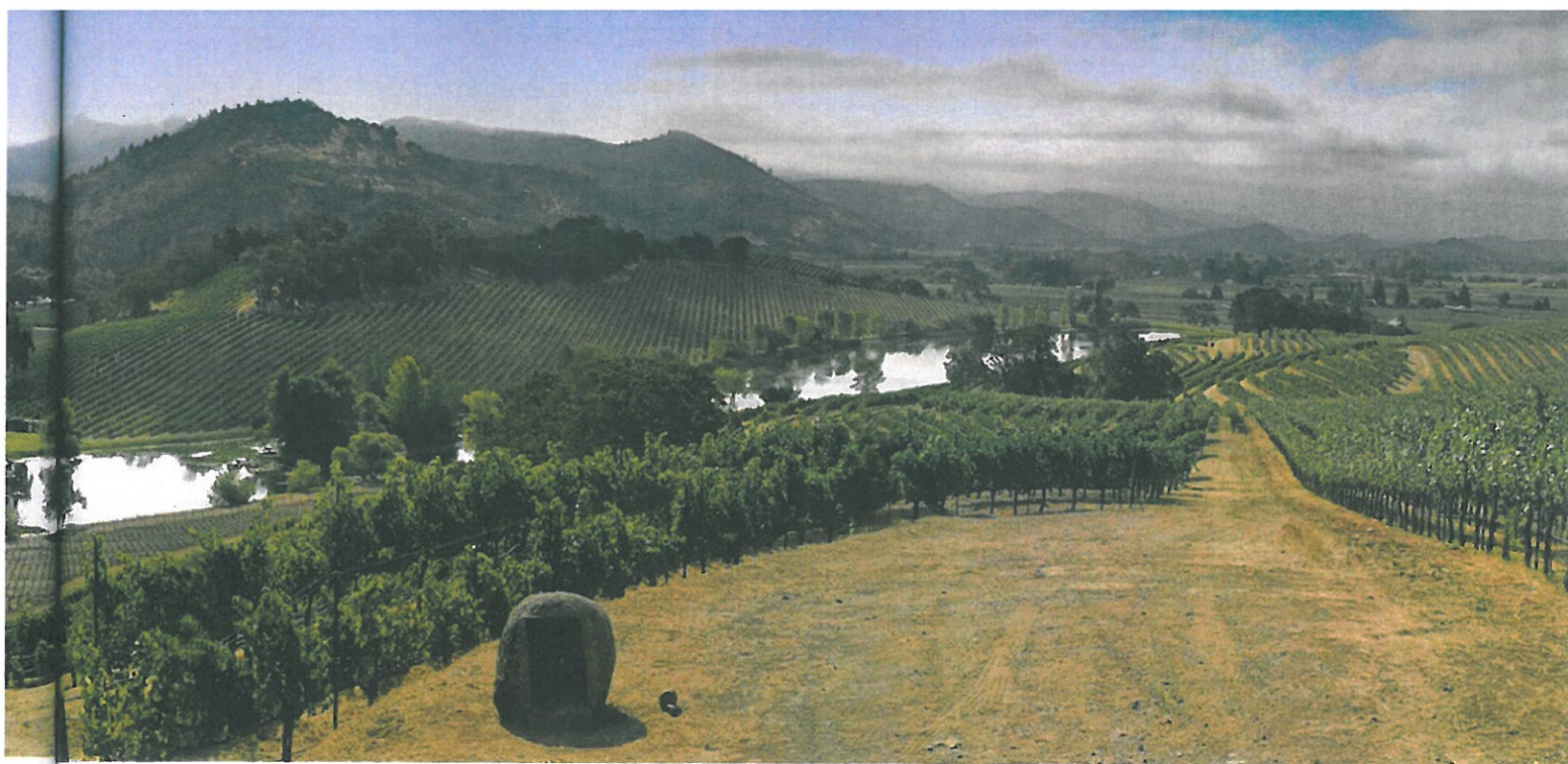
management might be in its involvement in the products it sells, essentially its concerns are the next quarter's results. Corporate executives are not paid to take risks, and the last thing a corporation wants in its executives is passion. I learned all this and a great deal more.'

When Huneeus resigned from Seagram in 1977, the move to California seemed the obvious next step. Valeria was an experienced viticulturist with a PhD in microbiology, and they both wanted to get back to a direct, personal involvement with vineyards and winemaking. He had an opportunity to acquire, with partners, Noble Vineyards in California's Central Valley, with about 1,010 hectares. It was the era of California jug wines. Every winery at that time, even in Napa, had to offer a basic, low-cost wine as a door opener. Noble Vineyards made a more than decent white that suited the purpose admirably.

By 1985, Huneeus had sold his share of Noble Vineyards to his partners, and had acquired and built up Concannon, before selling it to a British company looking to get into California. It was at this point that he had a call from Peter Sichel in New York, asking whether he could help the Eckes family, friends in Germany. The Eckes had acquired the Franciscan estate and winery in Napa and were unhappy with what was happening there. Sichel asked him if he could take a look and offer advice.

'Franciscan was failing despite sterling assets,' said Huneeus. 'The winery, in the heart of Napa, was backed by a splendid 97ha Oakville estate of





Mondavi's renowned To Kalon vineyard. It owned yet more vines in Alexander Valley. The family was managing the winery from Germany through its winemaker. When I got there, I discovered that the best wines, from their own estate vines, were being sold in bulk to Silver Oak, among others. Improbably, Franciscan was then buying cheap wines from elsewhere to sell at low prices. It was the opposite of what they should have been doing. Inevitably, despite its location, it was perceived as a low-end brand – a variation of what I had seen at Concha y Toro.'

### Starting from scratch

Huneus joined Franciscan Estate as the Eckes' partner and, over time, the changes he made restored its name as a quality brand. But during the years he was busy at Franciscan, an hour's drive north of the family home in San Francisco, Valeria was managing a small vineyard near Gilroy, more than an hour's drive south. In 1990, they decided to sell the Gilroy vineyard and look for one in Napa.

'We wanted raw land if possible, so we could start from scratch. Valeria heard of a substantial lot available in Rutherford near the Silverado Trail. The pair saw the possibilities in its steep slopes, varied exposures, and jumble of soils and they bought the property in 1990, calling it Quintessa. They set about planting it with Bordeaux varieties.

'By then I'd already learned enough about Napa to understand why the particular character and quality of its wine – especially when based on Cabernet Sauvignon – places it among the leading wine regions of the world.

'I'd learned that any fine wine always reflects its origin. I now know that origin is interpreted by the variety used. In musical terms, it's the instrument by which the score of a place – its soil, its exposure, its climate – is expressed. So the variety must be the right instrument to do it. Then the place, the variety, and the wine are one. Isn't that true of



Meursault, or Pauillac, or Chinon? It has taken California a long time and much trial and error to find the right compatibilities. In Napa it is undoubtedly Cabernet Sauvignon. In Russian River and on the Sonoma Coast, it is Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The Zinfandels of the Sierra foothills are both distinctive and unrivalled. It is this growing awareness of doing what is necessary to define the character and quality of each region of California that is leading it to world prominence.

'Chile, too, is discovering its own diversity and the varieties that will define it. What started in California in the 1960s and '70s did not get under way in Chile until the '90s. It is more tradition-bound than California, and has moved more slowly, but Chile is already producing exciting, terroir-driven wines that are establishing regional characteristics we can all recognise and appreciate.' ■

**Above: in 2010 former Chilean president Sebastian Pinera awarded Agustin with a knighthood in the Order for Meritorious Service to the Republic**

*Gerald Asher was wine editor for Gourmet magazine in the US for more than 30 years. His latest volume of his columns is A Carafe of Red (University of California Press, 2012)*