

She Vinified, Testified And Changed the Law

By Ellen Crosby
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When Juanita Swedenburg died in her sleep at her home in Middleburg on June 9, it tore a large hole in the heart of Virginia wine country. Though she was 82, no one thought she would be gone so soon. You figured the reason she didn't answer the phone -- she didn't own a computer or have an answering machine at home -- was because she was baling hay or fixing the chiller in the barrel room.

A gray-haired rebel with a cause in tweed suits and sensible shoes, Juanita became internationally known as the woman who decided in the late 1990s to do something about the fact that she could go to jail for shipping wine from Virginia to New York. "The Constitution," she said, "is not just a piece of paper. We should use it. There's such a thing as freedom of commerce."

So she got a New York lawyer friend who liked her wine to help her fight the good fight. Shortly before the protracted five-year legal battle was about to be played out in the Supreme Court, she got a call with an offer of high-powered legal help from some West Coast wine folks. She told them -- not too politely -- to get lost. Her lawyer had been with her from the start, and she was damn well going to have him be the one to stand up with her in the Supreme Court. She came honorably by that kind of fierce loyalty and the traditional values she cherished, growing up during the Depression on a farm in Illinois.

The day in May 2005 that she got the news she'd won her court case should have been sweet, but it wasn't. Instead she would always remember it as the first anniversary of the death of her husband, Wayne. A former high school English and French teacher, she'd met him in Saigon in 1952 when they were both in the Foreign Service; they married a year later. The love affair continued for 51 years.

After Indochina there were overseas posts in Africa and elsewhere in Southeast Asia -- none of them garden spots, because Wayne always took the toughest assignments. They bought Valley View Farm in Middleburg in 1976 before he retired. Juanita moved there with their son, Marc, while Wayne was still abroad.

The old stone house, on land that was part of Lord Fairfax's holdings, was in a bad state, so they spent four years meticulously restoring it. They went to dinner to celebrate a friend's birthday the day after finishing construction and came home to firetrucks. Faulty wiring had started a fire. The solid stone exterior had acted like a large furnace, and the interior was in ashes. Juanita said that when she touched the doorknob, it was still red-hot. A week later, they started rebuilding.

At first they raised cattle, but the expenses were crippling, so they tried grapes. After years spent overseas drinking good French wines, Juanita decided that because those were the wines she liked to drink, that was the way she'd make her own: dry, well structured, silky on the palate.

She and Wayne put down roots in the Middleburg community as deep as the roots of their vines. Always a maverick, she helped found the Vinifera Wine Growers Association, a group of wine industry pioneers and oenophiles dedicated to proving that *Vitis vinifera*, the noble grape of Europe, could be successfully planted and thrive on the East Coast. Juanita remained an active member the rest of her life. A bumper sticker on the file cabinet in her offices reads, "World Domination Through Vinification."

Generous, plain-spoken and modest, Juanita helped anyone who asked -- and everyone did. She had time for me, a would-be mystery author, when I dropped by one day and asked to hang around to see if some of the business of winemaking would rub off; I intended to set my first work in a fictional winery. That was seven years and countless notebooks ago. Turned out she loved to read mysteries and happened to have a good mind for murder . . . on paper. By the time the first book contract arrived, I felt as though I'd gotten a degree in viticulture and oenology.

"Oh, dear, I think I'm giving you too much detail, aren't I?" she'd always say after launching into an explanation of the difference between primary and secondary fermentation (the first converts sugar to alcohol; the second, or malolactic, gives the wine its buttery taste) or the various systems of trellises. But I wrote it all down -- including her homespun comments.

"We're not interested in making Chateau Humpty-Dump at your winery," she told me over and over. "We want the wine to be good."

My favorite time spent with her -- and what I will miss the most -- was when she took me out among the vines to show me the grapes as they were developing or what frost damage or powdery mildew looked like. If we didn't take her wine-colored Chevy with the VA PINOT license plate, we'd go out in her ATV and she'd usually floor it. We'd zoom down hills and screech around corners while she talked a mile a minute.

When my editor decided to put a map of my fictitious vineyard in my novels, I showed her my drawing for help. She took one look and said, "Your vines are running the wrong way. They've got to go north-south. Didn't I teach you anything? We've got to get this right."

Lately -- especially after Wayne's death -- we'd talk about "our" books, "our" reviews, "our" foreign sales. When I told her about my upcoming travel schedule, she asked, "With all this running around, when are we going to have time to write?"

The new book is dedicated to her, and to Wayne's memory, and I got a little sentimental. I gave her an advance copy back in March and didn't say anything about the dedication -- nor did she. I wondered if she liked what I'd written; then I realized that if she hadn't, I would have heard about it.

She was like that.