



TODAY WE MOURN THE LOSS OF “MR. MERLOT,” DAN DUCKHORN

NAPA VALLEY, Calif. – February 25, 2026– Daniel J. Duckhorn, the visionary co-founder of The Duckhorn Portfolio, a leader in the Napa Valley wine community, and the iconic pioneer of luxury New World Merlot, died today. He was 87. According to his wife, Nancy Andrus Duckhorn, he passed away peacefully of congestive heart failure.

Dan Duckhorn changed the face of the U.S. wine industry when he and his then wife, Margaret Duckhorn, founded Duckhorn Vineyards in 1976 and made their inaugural vintage of Napa Valley Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon in 1978. Though many Napa Valley wineries used Merlot as a blending grape in the late seventies, Dan believed this elegant variety was underappreciated in North America and championed its potential in California as a great standalone wine. Dan also recognized that the American palate was undergoing a dramatic shift, moving away from jug producers toward quality varietal wines. This conviction played a key role in establishing Merlot as one of the New World’s most popular and respected varietal wines.

A native of Northern California, Dan earned a bachelor’s degree and subsequently, a master’s in business administration in 1962 from the University of California at Berkeley. Over the next decade, he held managerial positions with Matson Navigation Company, Adpac Computing Languages Company, and Crocker Associates, before moving to Napa Valley in 1971 and becoming president of Vineyard Consulting Corporation (VCC). It was during his time at VCC that Dan learned about winegrowing from the soil up and honed his skills for assessing vineyard sites and pairing grape varieties with their most suitable terroir. To support the shift to more luxury-oriented wines, Dan adopted new clones and rootstocks and planted vineyards in more favorable locations with modern trellising systems.

In 1976, Dan and Margaret, along with a group of investor friends, founded Duckhorn Vineyards. A great fan of Merlot since traveling to St. Emilion and Pomerol, Dan made the pioneering decision to focus on producing a world-class Napa Valley Merlot. To achieve this, he sourced grapes from the now legendary Three Palms Vineyard (which The Duckhorn Portfolio acquired in 2015). Their first harvest in 1978 yielded 800 cases of Three Palms Vineyard Merlot and 800 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon. Of this first vintage, Dan once said, “It was a great year. We could have made wine out of walnuts.”

Beginning in the late 1980s, Dan led Duckhorn through a period of careful growth, expanding the Duckhorn Vineyards estate program and diversifying The Duckhorn Portfolio, instinctively knowing when to explore a new grape variety, appellation, or opportunity.

In 2007, when The Duckhorn Portfolio was sold to GI Partners, allowing the winery’s original investor families to monetize their position, and again in 2016 when TSG Consumer Partners

acquired Duckhorn from GI, Dan stayed on, remaining actively involved as founder and chairman of the board. Following The Duckhorn Portfolio's acquisition by TSG, Dan collaborated closely on the planning and execution of the Company's IPO. When The Duckhorn Portfolio became the first wine company in almost two decades to go public in March of 2021, Dan celebrated this crowning achievement in his 45-year wine career by ringing the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

Dubbed "Mr. Merlot" by Frank Prial of the *New York Times*, Dan was one of the most highly respected leaders in the wine industry. Dan served on the board of directors of the Wine Institute, the American Vintners Association and Family Winemakers of California. He was also a past president of the Napa Valley Vintners Association and the Wine Service Co-op, and a past chair of the Napa Valley Wine Auction. Additionally, Dan's vision and guidance were instrumental in founding the Premiere Napa Valley Trade Barrel Auction. In 2005, Johnson & Wales University awarded Dan the degree of Doctor of Oenology Honoris Causa, and UC Davis recognized him as a Wine Industry Pioneer.

On behalf of the company, The Duckhorn Portfolio's Chief Operating Officer, Zach Rasmuson, who worked with Dan Duckhorn for more than two decades, praised his contributions, "Dan was one of the great visionaries of the modern winemaking era. Like Robert Mondavi before him, he helped to change the way Americans think about and enjoy wine. While his legacy will always be rightfully entwined with exceptional Merlot, he was a pioneer in so many other ways that impacted California's wine business, from recognizing the promise of new appellations to championing innovation. When the history of California winemaking is finally written, Dan Duckhorn will be one of its great names. He was an inspiration and will be greatly missed."

Doug Shafer, the former owner of Shafer Vineyards and one of Dan's long-time, close friends, shared, "Dan had a remarkable and historic influence on the Napa Valley we know today. He was the force in the winery's growth, as Duckhorn became one of the most well-known, respected, and admired wine brands throughout the world. Dan was noted for his philanthropy to both community and the wine industry, serving the Napa Valley Vintners as president in 1994 and spearheading the annual Premiere Napa Valley Barrel Auction, which fulfilled his personal goal of establishing a permanent home for the Association. Passionate and fun-loving, he also mentored the generation that followed with wisdom, enthusiasm, and joy. Dan played an outsized role in bringing the world to the Napa Valley and the Valley to the world. If there was ever a Mt. Rushmore of American wine, he would deserve a place on it."

In addition to his wife, Nancy Andrus Duckhorn, Dan Duckhorn leaves three children, John Duckhorn, David Duckhorn, and Kellie Duckhorn; a stepdaughter, Nicole Andrus; nine grandchildren; and two siblings. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests donations to the California Waterfowl Association.

While services will be private, a remembrance board has been created [online](#) for anyone wishing to share a message or condolence.