

Bruce Cohn's Second Wine Act

Bruce Cohn is no stranger to the wine country scene and his name is known to both wine and music lovers across the country. The founder of B.R. Cohn Winery in Sonoma Valley doubled as the manager for the Doobie Brothers rock group, and his winery was known as much for its classic rock festivals as it was for its estate wines.

That is until July of 2015, when, according to Cohn, he was essentially forced by his bank, Bank of the West, to sell his estate — and name — to Vintage Wine Estates group to pay off \$24 million debt.

When contacted by *Wines & Vines*, a spokesman for Bank of the West declined the opportunity to comment on this story, citing company policy.

Cohn explained that over the course of his 40-plus years he'd had to refinance five or six times, and it was never a problem until the economic downturn in 2008, when he simply couldn't find any willing lenders. "So the bank said, 'If you can't find a lender, find a buyer,'" Cohn said.

For the next three years, Cohn met with

several potential buyers, many of whom were turned down by the bank. When it came to Santa Rosa, Calif.-based Vintage Wine Estates (VWE), a company that could feasibly meet the demands of the bank, it was Cohn who refused the offer, because they didn't plan to keep his family involved. His family, said Cohn, was one of the main motivators of starting a brand with his family's name.

In 2013, the bank cut Cohn a deal, requesting him to step away from the winery for 18 months and put his son, Dan Cohn, in charge. "I think they thought they could manipulate him," he said.

At the height of B.R. Cohn's success, the winery was pumping out more than 80,000 cases of wine a year, mostly due to the winery's Silver Label Cabernet, which sold by the glass in many major steak houses throughout the country, and in bottle at retailers such as Trader Joe's.

With Dan Cohn in charge, production was reduced by about half, and the focus shifted to higher priced wines. The decrease in wine and the increase in prices was not enough to get the winery out of debt.



Bruce Cohn rocks on with new wine brand Trestle Glen Vineyards.

PAT JOHNSON



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Cohn said his son tried to buy out the bank and put in an offer of \$14 million that was not accepted. Instead, "On the last day of those 18 months," according to Cohn, his son signed the papers handing over the B.R. Cohn name to VWE. Cohn stayed on as a consultant for about a year, but in 2016 VWE let him go from that position.

Cohn said VWE paid \$22 million for the winery, brand and nearly 70 acres vineyards and land — a fact that VWE representatives were not able to disclose or comment on. But according to Cohn, he is, in fact, still in debt for that remaining \$2 million. "I thought about calling my new label 'For the IRS,'" he said, "But I thought that might be a little too tongue-in-cheek."

When Cohn sold B.R. Cohn Winery, he retained a 21-acre portion of his original 90-acre property in Glen Ellen. The 21 acres, where Cohn also resides, is planted to seven acres of Cabernet Sauvignon and one acre of Zinfandel — some of the same fruit used in previous B.R. Cohn-labeled vintages. And it's from this sustainably-farmed, small estate that Cohn introduces his new label, Trestle Glen Vineyards.

"What I'm going to do is what I should have done in the first place," said Cohn, adding that he plans to stay boutique, producing less than 2,000 cases annually (approximately 1,500

cases of Cabernet Sauvignon and 250 cases of Zinfandel), from only his own vineyards.

Tom Montgomery, who made wine for 20 years alongside Cohn at B.R. Cohn Winery, takes the reins as director of winemaking, and says the transition to the new brand was seamless. "Bruce sold B.R. Cohn and we pretty much dove right in," Montgomery said. "We're doing the same thing...the focus is still on making good Cabernet."

Currently, the wine is produced and aged in barrel at Kunde Family Winery in the nearby town of Kenwood, Calif.

Cohn's Trestle Glen Vineyards property takes its name from the many old train trestles remaining from the narrow-gauge railroad that ran from the city of Sonoma to Santa Rosa along Sonoma Creek in the late 1800s. Cohn's property, which borders Sonoma Creek, has one such trestle running through it.

Always the artist, having designed album covers and marketing materials during his time as the Doobie Brothers' manager, Cohn said that he made it a point in creating his new brand's label to feature the train trestle. He passed his initial concept along to Trevor Swallow, former graphic designer for B.R. Cohn Winery, and the two worked together with designer Doug Stephens to refine and finalize the artwork: a 19th-century-style,

sepia-toned drawing of a train hauling wine barrels.

Cohn said Trestle Glen Vineyards will sell exclusively direct-to-consumer. "Well, maybe one or two local restaurants or shops," he added. Cohn plans to use social media, namely Instagram and Facebook, to get the word out about his new line of wines and connect with his customers. He's also utilizing the mailing list he accumulated from his years of entertaining at the B.R. Cohn estate winery. According to Cohn, the first blast went out the end of June to 14,000 email addresses.

The 2017 Cabernet, which will retail at about \$60 dollars per bottle, is currently in barrel but is available for purchase at a discount as a future. "You'll have to trust us," said Cohn, "If you liked the wines from B.R. Cohn, then you'll like these. Same grapes, same barrel methods."

The first vintage of Zinfandel will be his 2018 harvest, which will be ready for sale in 2019 at about \$40 per bottle.

When asked about his goals for his new wine project, Cohn simply said: "My mission statement or goals are and always have been to be involved in creating world class wines... and producing the very best quality in everything I involve myself in."

—Stacy Briscoe



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