



Wine Travel Adventure

By Dave Nelson, July 10, 2015



Carmen Policy at his Casa Piena vineyards. Photos by Dave Nelson

The proprietor of Policy Vineyards pours a glass of wine for me and says:

“Up here, I have the time to actually listen to what people have to say. I never knew I was capable of that. I’ve learned more here, kicking back, than I did when I was right there in the middle of everything.”

I should clarify the geography. “Up here” refers to Yountville in the Napa Valley. The “middle of everything” is where Carmen Policy has always managed to be.

“I have always been able to understand where people are going and how they’re going to get there,” Policy continues. “That enabled me to deal with both sides of the equation. There have been times when people on my side have thought I was disloyal because I was able to articulate the other side’s position.”

Skills like that would serve well if you were, say, a county prosecutor, a defense attorney, or an NFL executive. Policy has been all those things, of course. He is most famous for his work as President of the San Francisco 49ers in the golden era of the 1980’s. He is credited as the first executive to crack the NFL’s salary cap rules, enabling the Niners to horde the football talent that carried the team to five championships.

There was really only one time Policy’s negotiating talent failed him. “Growing up in Youngstown, Ohio, I worked in a grocery store as the produce section guy,” he recalls. “I tried to keep the produce pure and clean. The old ladies who would come in would kill me because they would grab and squeeze my tomatoes. I’d always say to them, ‘Let me pick them for you, please. Don’t squeeze my tomatoes!’ ”

Let the record reflect, not even the legendary Charmin’ Carmen could convince the old ladies of Youngstown to keep their hands off his tomatoes. His produce days are long gone, though. Now he is a Napa Valley land baron and winemaker. Why this? As far as I know, there is no salary cap in the Cabernet business.



A view of the vineyards.

“I never intended to own this much property in the valley,” he explains. “I didn’t even intend to be that committed to the wine business. But we fell in love with the place. The Mondavis sold us the ‘privilege’ to come in and spend a bunch more money to get the vineyard productive—drainage, new soil by the truckload, nutrients, full drip irrigation, a frost protection system, everything.”

An old joke goes, the only sure way to make a small fortune in the wine business is to start with a large fortune. Listening to Policy tick off the particulars of his investment in his Casa Piena wine label, I realize it isn't a joke at all. It's a business model.

"Do I make a profit?" he asks himself out loud. "The answer is, 'No.' This is our 11th year and we are probably just now at the stage where the revenues coming into the checkbook are exceeding our expenses. And we sell everything we can make."

Nothing like overnight success in the wine business. Policy has another confession.

"I really don't know how to make a profit in the wine business. Casa Piena is so small compared to other wineries. We make a thousand, maybe 1,200 cases of wine a year. There are wineries nearby that are making 80,000 to 120,000 cases a year. They are making a profit.

"We are making only what our vineyard gives us. We could generate seven or eight tons of grapes per acre and produce a very drinkable wine. But if you want to produce a truly special Napa Valley Cabernet, well, now you're down to two tons an acre. Then you are truly into hands-on winemaking. We have a rock star winemaker, Thomas Brown. We do not limit him in any way. He has carte blanche authority."

Unable to resist, Policy draws on his pro football days for an analogy. "The grapes are the athletes," he says. "The winemaker is the head coach who gets them to perform at the highest level and hopefully turn out a winner."

I know he is trying to illustrate the winemaking process, but suddenly I can't shake the mental image of grapes as tiny football players. I picture Winemaker Brown wearing khaki shorts and screaming at the wine berries to "Huddle up!" I suppose there are advantages. After practice, the little guys could report to the weight room and bench press themselves into juice.



The backyard at the Casa Piena estate with a covered swimming pool.

Policy and I are conversing on the patio of the guest quarters on his Yountville estate. We are surrounded by lawns, bright gardens and his vineyards, naturally. His wine cellar holds 4,200 bottles. (My refrigerator holds three, maybe.) It is the kind of bucolic sanctuary a French noble might envy. Even the birds tweet in four-part harmony. This place is about a million miles, and several lifetimes, removed from the Smokey Hollow neighborhood where Policy was born.

“Smokey Hollow, in Youngstown, was the kind of neighborhood where you could get beat up, but you’d never get killed,” Policy remembers. “It was a little tough but it wasn’t dangerous. There, you had everything you needed and you never had the sense that you were poor. But you certainly understood there was more to do to make life better.”

Policy was forced to understand the ways of the world sooner than most. As a small child, he awakened to find that his mother, Ruby, had died in the night. She was only 43.

“My father, the poor guy, couldn’t handle it,” Policy says. “He got sick shortly thereafter and finally died about five years later.”

So, at the age of nine, Policy and his older brother were effectively on their own. His grandmother raised him with help from his Uncle Carmen, his namesake.

“When your parents die, there is no one there to make sure you are being treated specially. Your sense of entitlement disappears and it doesn’t get in the way of how you deal with the world. There’s no filter. I oftentimes think that my experience, as bad as it was, worked to my advantage. Somehow, some way, through some God-given talent or attitude, I was able to handle the experience. If you can’t handle it, it kills you.”

When he wasn’t fending off old ladies in the produce section, he was powering his way through school. He jumped from Ursuline High School to Youngstown State University and graduated in three years. He had an interest in attending Georgetown Law School because his hero, Edward Bennett Williams, had gone there. His pedestrian LSAT scores made that possibility a long shot, however, until...follow closely now...a friend from the neighborhood asked his Dad, an influential CPA and Youngstown State instructor, to speak to the President of Youngstown State who then called the Dean of the Georgetown Law School (who just happened to be a graduate of Youngstown State himself) and asked him to give young Policy priority on the admissions waiting list. And he got in!

For Carmen Policy, the guy who knows the guy who knows another guy who can make the deal, a recurring pattern had been established. He himself marvels at how lucky he has been, at every stage of his life, to meet people who have acted as benefactors. Good fortune, maybe, but luck tends to be the residue of design, as somebody said. Policy probably knows him.

“Going to Georgetown changed my life,” he says without reservation. “I arrived and suddenly I was among Ivy League types from all over the world. They were talking about summer vacations in Europe and I had never even been on an airplane. I drove an old Ford from Ohio which I had to sell for living money.”

Policy compares himself at the time he entered Georgetown to a pair of old leather shoes. Georgetown polished him the way a shoemaker might burnish some worn-down Florsheims. It also invested in him a taste for the finer things in life, particularly scotch and, you guessed it, fine wine.

Policy returned to Youngstown after graduating because the only gig available in Washington D.C. was drudge work as a corporate lobbyist. He yearned to be a trial lawyer as his hero, Williams, had been. Back home, he got all the trial work he could handle as, first, a bankruptcy attorney, then as Mahoning County prosecutor, then as a flamboyant defense attorney, the Edward Bennett Williams of northern Ohio. A federal judge in Cleveland first called him “Charmin’ Carmen” and the moniker stuck.

Back then, a Lebanese contractor came to him with a problem. A big construction company was stiffing him on invoices worth \$500,000. (That was when a half million represented real money.) Despite his client’s misgivings, Policy immediately filed a lien against the miscreant company. That company was the DeBartolo Corporation, inventor of the shopping mall. It was owned by Edward DeBartolo, Sr. who, it turns out, grew up in Smokey Hollow. Nevertheless, DeBartolo Senior hit the roof and assigned his son, Eddie DeBartolo, Jr., to take care of the problem.

After one meeting, Policy had a check for \$500 grand and a dinner invitation from Eddie Jr. The rest, as they say, is hysteria.

Policy went on to survive the palace intrigues of the DeBartolo siblings, Eddie and Denise, and the nouveau Cleveland Browns. He tried to retire to the hard scrabble lifestyle of Napa Valley but the NFL recently dragged him back in. He now heads the corporate partnership of the Raiders and the Chargers seeking to build a new football stadium in Carson, California. Who knows how that will turn out, but it probably doesn’t matter. Here and now is the true life of Policy.

The man who has always found the right people seems to have found the right place.

<http://winetraveladventure.com/2015/07/10/a-life-of-policy/>