

# **PAUL MASSON**

One of California's  
most noted  
winemakers

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## INTRODUCTION

The name Paul Masson and all it had to do with wine could be traced as far back as the collapse of the Roman Empire. The art of grape cultivation was in his blood as his relatives were winemakers in France, and he grew up learning the art of the winemaker. Paul an imigrant from Burgundy, France, came to the United States to take part in the growing California wine industry and in 1898 founded the PAUL MASSON CHAMPAGNE COMPANY.

## THE BEGINNING

Paul Masson was born at the family vineyards in Burgundy, France on St. Valentines Day, 1859. As a child Paul helped out around the family vineyards. He pruned the vines in winter and watched for the green-leaf buddings in spring.

At the end of summer Paul would help pick the grapes. Paul was educated at the Sorbonne Theological College in Paris. In 1878, at age nineteen, Paul left France to take part in the booming California wine industry. After arriving in the Santa Clara Valley, Paul continued his education at the University of the Pacific in Santa Clara, from which he never graduated. He meet Charles Lefranc, dean of the valley's winemakers, in 1880 and later became his bookkeeper. Convinced that the California soil could produce wines comparable to those of

France, Paul returned to France in order to gather men and bring back equipment and cuttings from some of the finest vineyards in the world.

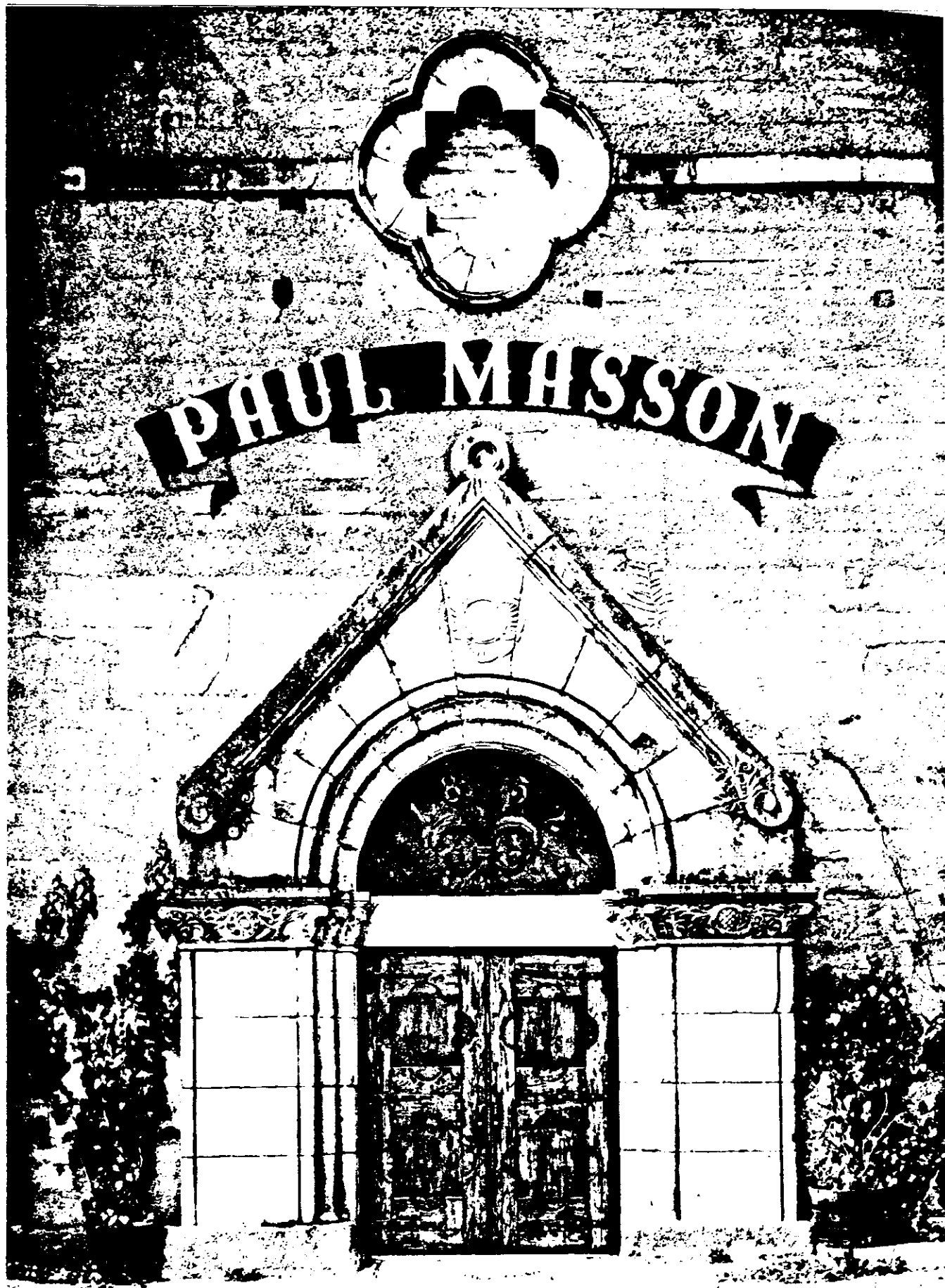


PAUL MASSON

## CHAMPAGNE

The partnership between Masson and Henry Lefranc lasted for four years until 1892 when Paul bought his partner out. Paul had finally achieved his life-long ambition, to have a winery wholly his own which featured the one wine which fascinated him most of all - champagne. Although supplies of champagne from France were decreasing champagne prices were increasing. It would be risky, but Paul saw only one result and that was success. He traveled to France to bring back men who were skilled in the art of champagne making, machinery and cuttings of fine French vines. That next spring after gaining sole ownership, Paul unveiled his first champagne. This made Paul the first vintner to bring commercial importance to champagne production in California. His first success came with his displays at San

Francisco's Midwinter Fair of 1894. Paul's sparkling wine caught on and by 1900 his showroom in the cellar of the Hotel Vendome had 500,000 bottles of champagne. Two years later he bought land in Saratoga's Mount Eden district. In 1898 Paul established the PAUL MASSON CHAMPAGNE COMPANY. In 1914 Paul Masson Champagne recieved the first Grand Prix ever awarded to an American champagne at the St. Louis Universal Exposition. Paul continued to make his champagne personally until four years before his death when he was bought out by Martin Ray a young stockholder from Saratoga. Martin, as did Paul Masson, dreamed of owning a winery since he was a child, and now he did.



## LA CRESTA

Paul built an extremely large house at his Saratoga vineyards. He called it La Cresta (The Summit). He frequently preferred this vineyard retreat to his house in San Jose. Paul Masson's chateau in Saratoga was the scene of some very elaborate parties. The house had a great fire place, rotisserie which could accomodate three turkeys at one time. Crayfish and lobsters were kept alive in pools at the vineyard when Paul threw his extravagant parties. Paul entertained many distinguished guests at his parties. One person who he entertained was the world famous stage beauty, Anna Held. Anna received national attention when it was reported that she had taken a bath in the famous Masson champagne! Many others have slept at Paul's mountain

retreat such as, " John Steinbeck, Charlie Chaplin, the  
Ziegfield Girls, Ray Charles, George Shearing, Dave Brubeck,  
Ramsey Lewis, Smokey Robinson, and Victor Borge."<sup>1</sup>

## PAUL'S DEATH

On October 22, 1940 the headlines of the San Jose Mercury read, " Famous Wine Maker Dies, Pioneer of American Wine Industry Succumbs at 81."<sup>2</sup> After his wife died in 1931

Paul lived with his sister-in-law in her family's house. He continued to make a trip each year to his native France when his health permitted. His last trip was in 1936. Paul died on October 22, 1940 around noon in the quiet dignity of his own home at two hundred eighty five, South Thirteenth Street in San Jose, after suffering from a lengthy heart illness. Paul

his wife and daughter are all buried at the Oak Hill Mausoleum, in San Jose, California.

" My health keeps good, looking ahead into the future I see nothing that will bother me",<sup>3</sup> he wrote to his daughter on August 17, 1940. To the "Nothing" he could

see in the future that would bother him, was added an  
anonymous check mark some three months later and the  
notation: "Only death-October 22, 1940."<sup>4</sup>

## DEDICATION OF THE WINERY

The California State Park Commission officially designated the Paul Masson winery as a State Historical Landmark in 1960. The Unveiling of the plaque highlighted the contributions that Paul Masson made for over a century. Paul showed the world that California is capable of producing great wines. The Paul Masson winery is part of the state-wide one hundred Year Club. The plaque, that summarizes the history of the Paul Masson Vineyards, states :

" From the winery that bears the name of Paul Masson, premium wines have flowed continuously since 1852, even during prohibition under a special government license.

Twice partially destroyed by fire and earthquake, the original sandstone walls still stand. The 12th century

Spanish Romanesque portal came around the Horn."<sup>5</sup>

An art historian who commented on the 12th century portal, in 1960, stated :

" It should be forever preserved as a symbol of the colonization of California by European settlers who brought with them the Roman heritage of grape cultivation."<sup>6</sup>

Down the years since, domestically and internationally, earning distinguished award after award, the Paul Masson Winery continued to comport itself with the dignity and brilliance by which any great wine name is ultimately established.



## PAUL MASSON MOUNTAIN WINERY

FROM THE WINERY THAT BEARS THE NAME OF PAUL MASSON,  
PREMIUM WINES AND CHAMPAGNE HAVE FLOWED CONTINU-  
-OUSLY SINCE 1852. EVEN DURING PROHIBITION UNDER A  
SPECIAL GOVERNMENT LICENSE. TWICE PARTIALLY DESTROY-  
-ED BY EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE, THE ORIGINAL SAND-  
STONE WALLS STILL STAND. THE 12TH CENTURY SPANISH  
ROMANESQUE PORTAL CAME AROUND THE HORN.

**CALIFORNIA REGISTERED HISTORICAL  
LANDMARK NO. 733**

PLAQUE PLACED BY THE CALIFORNIA STATE PARK COMMISSION  
IN COOPERATION WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO LANDMARKS COUNCIL  
AND THE SAINTE CLAIRE CLUB, SAN JOSE, JUNE 29, 1960.

## CONCLUSION

Paul Masson was as extraordinary person. He was introduced to wine making as a child and later made it his life. Paul wanted to be the best vinetner he could, so he came to California to take place in the growing wine industry. After working for other people and sharing a winery with a partner, he reached his life-long goal, to have a winery wholly his own that bore his name. A tribute to Paul now stands in Monterey, California, a museum totally dedicated to Paul Masson, his life and times of winemaking. Although Paul is now dead the winery that he built up is still producing quality champagne and wines.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1) Mercury News, November 22, 1986.
- 2) Mercury News, October 22, 1940.
- 3) Lloyd Eric Reeve and Alice Means Reeve, Gift of the Grape. (San Francisco : Filmer Publishing Co., 1959), p. 58.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Mercury News, July 14, 1960.
- 6) Ibid.

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