

# Celebrating the Remarkable Life and Legacy of Miljenko “Mike” Grgich: Pioneer of Napa Valley Wine

RUTHERFORD, CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES , December 14, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- It is with profound sadness that we announce the passing of Miljenko "Mike" Grgich, a true luminary in the world of wine and a driving force behind establishing Napa Valley as a premier global wine region. Mike's life, which spanned over a century, was a testament to his unwavering dedication and relentless pursuit of excellence.

Miljenko “Mike” Grgich, who helped establish Napa Valley as one of the world’s premier wine regions, died on December 13, 2023, at the age of 100. A man of boundless dreams, he realized his ultimate goal of celebrating his 100th birthday, leaving behind a legacy that will endure for generations.

Mike achieved international acclaim as the master winemaker who crafted the Chardonnay that triumphed in the historic 1976 Judgment of Paris. This pivotal event saw two Napa Valley wines, including Mike's, outshine legendary French wines in a blind tasting conducted by French wine critics. While he often spoke of his life being shaped by miracles, it was his relentless work ethic, unwavering determination, and pursuit of excellence that played an integral role in the remarkable achievements he unlocked.



Miljenko “Mike” Grgich

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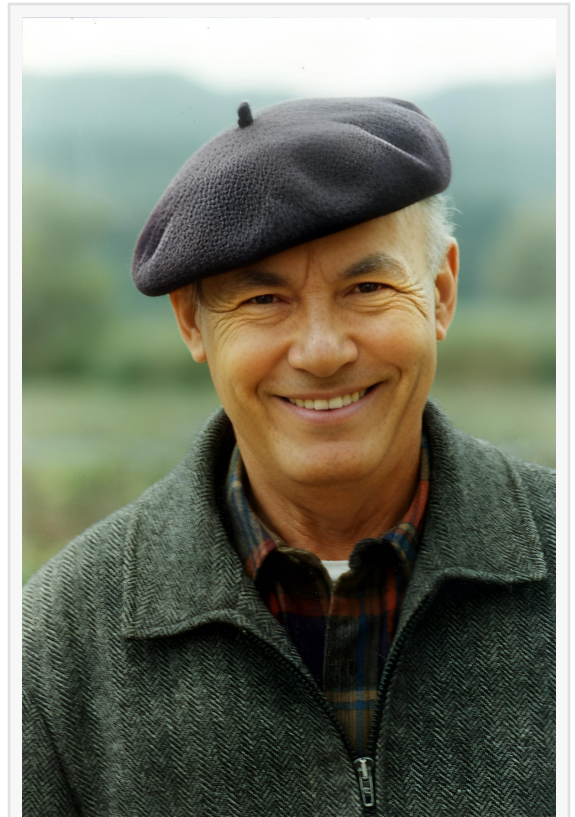
I realized that you don't make wine only with your head and your senses. You make wine with your heart.”

*Miljenko “Mike” Grgich*

Born Miljenko Grgić on April 1, 1923, in the village of Desne, Croatia, Mike's journey to becoming a wine legend began with his father, who made wine. Some of Mike's earliest memories were of stomping grapes at harvest. His mother's aspirations for his education led him to leave home at age 10, where he continued his studies while living with a sister. His father's parting advice, "Every day

do your best, learn something new, and make a new friend," would guide him throughout his life, instilling in him a profound sense of purpose and a continuous pursuit of knowledge.

Although he initially aspired to be a shopkeeper, the harrowing experiences of World War II led him to follow in his father's footsteps and become a winemaker. As communism gripped Croatia, Mike pursued enology and viticulture at the University of Zagreb. It was there, in whispered conversations with a professor, that he first heard of a distant paradise called California. Determined to escape the oppressive regime, he engineered his departure through a United Nations agricultural student exchange program with Germany. He left carrying only a few American dollars hidden in his shoe and a suitcase filled with his winemaking books, now exhibited at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History along with his trademark beret.



Miljenko "Mike" Grgich

His escape took him from Germany to Canada, where he found asylum by agreeing to work as a lumberjack in British Columbia. Four years after he had left Croatia, Mike finally received an unexpected job offer from Lee Stewart, founder of Chateau Souverain in Napa California so he embarked on a journey to Napa to realize his dreams of living and working in "paradise". While working for Stewart, Mike crossed paths with another European immigrant, André Tchelistcheff, who shared his winemaking passion. He subsequently joined Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyards for 9 years in Rutherford.

During his time at Beaulieu, Mike's personal life flourished as well. He married Tatjana Čizmić, a familiar face from his days in Croatia, and together they welcomed a cherished daughter, Violet, into their lives.

From Beaulieu, Mike transitioned to a new opportunity with with a start up winery founded by Robert Mondavi where he created the now famous "Fume Blanc" and and the award winning 1969 Cabernet Sauvignon that made Robert Mondavi famous.

In 1972, Jim Barrett, a lawyer from Southern California purchased a dormant winery, Chateau Montelena, in Calistoga with some other investors and asked Mike to become their wine maker. His second vintage of Chardonnay (1973) was chosen for a blind tasting in Paris, organized by Steven Spurrier and Patricia Gallagher in celebration of the U.S. bicentennial. The results shocked the world when Mike's Chardonnay, along with a Cabernet Sauvignon from Warren Winiarski of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, were named the top wines. This historic achievement revolutionized the perception of Napa as a region around the world.

This success fulfilled Mike's dream of owning his own winery. In partnership with Austin Hills in 1977, he founded Grgich Hills Cellars (now Grgich Hills Estate) in Rutherford, where he continued his pursuit of winemaking excellence. The suitcase that carried him to the U.S., along with his famous beret and a bottle of the 1973 Chardonnay that won the Judgment of Paris, now reside at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and is featured in the Smithsonian's 2013 book, *101 Objects that Made America*.

Mike's accolades continued to pour in. In 1980, in a grand tasting in Chicago, his wine was again crowned as the world's finest Chardonnay, earning him the title of "The King of Chardonnay." As he reached new heights in his career, Mike turned his attention to giving back to both the Napa Valley community and his homeland. In 1986, he assisted his grand-nephew, Ivo Jeramaz, in coming to California. Following the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, he returned to Croatia to finally receive his university diploma.

Mike's dedication extended to Croatia, where he played a pivotal role in rebuilding the country's wine industry. He opened a winery, Grgić Vina, producing red and white wines from indigenous vines. He also founded an endowment at his alma mater, the University of Zagreb, sponsoring the education of Croatian youth to study winemaking and viticulture.

A passion for peace led him to support and work closely with Roots of Peace, an organization dedicated to eradicating mine fields and returning land to productive agricultural use. Mike even accompanied Roots of Peace founder and president, Heidi Kuhn, to Dragalic, Croatia, to inspect an area de-mined with money donated by Grgich Hills, the U.S. State Department, and the United Nations. Roots of Peace presented Miljenko Grgich with its first-ever Global Citizen Award in 2007, honoring his work to raise awareness of landmines in Croatia through the Mines to Vines campaign. He was presented with a lifetime achievement award in Dec. 2022.

Mike continued to lead Grgich Hills until 2018 when, at the age of 95, he passed the torch to his daughter Violet, who now serves as president, and to Ivo Jeramaz, winemaker and vice-president. The dynamic duo continue to advance the winery's commitment to organic, sustainable and regenerative farming practices. He remained an active presence at the winery, a cherished family-owned enterprise, celebrating his joyful 100th birthday in 2023. That same year, Mike witnessed Grgich Hills Estate achieve its Regenerative Organic Certification, solidifying its global leadership in environmentally friendly farming practices.

Mike's life was an embodiment of open thinking, genuine and deep warmth, loyalty, intellect, and unwavering values. As his winemaking colleague Zelma Long wrote in the preface to Mike's 2016 autobiography, *A Glass Full of Miracles*, his journey was filled with unexpected and wondrous consequences—a life fully and well-lived. Of all the many achievements in his extraordinary 100 years of life, he has always said he was most proud of being able to provide employment for his people.

In his own words, Mike spoke openly about the miracles that he had experienced. "In my life, I

have had real miracles. They were between God and me, and when I was offered one, I accepted it with all of my heart and soul, with gratitude. Be on the watch for miracles in your own life." Mike also regularly shared his mantra, "Every day do your best, learn something new, and make a friend." He credits his longevity to his many countless friendship and to a glass of wine a day.

The world of wine has lost a visionary, but the legacy of Miljenko "Mike" Grgich will forever shine as a beacon of inspiration and a testament to the power of dreams and determination.

In honor of Miljenko "Mike" Grgich and in lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be sent to the Community Health Foundation Napa Valley (formerly Collabria), and to Roots of Peace.

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Winery Landing Page: Miljenko Grgich - In Memoriam - Grgich Hills Estate

About Grgich Hills Estate: Grgich Hills Estate was founded after Vintners Hall of Fame inductee Miljenko "Mike" Grgich first earned world-wide recognition when the 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay that he crafted won the 1976 Paris Tasting, beating the best of France and drawing international attention to the Napa Valley. Mike then partnered with Austin Hills of the Hills Bros. Coffee family in the pursuit of creating the best wines in the world and chose Independence Day, July 4, 1977, to launch their family-owned-and-operated winery. Today, Grgich Hills Estate is 100% estate grown and Certified Regenerative Organic through the Regenerative Organic Alliance (ROA), a leading force in the Regenerative Agriculture movement worldwide. Referred to as "Organic Plus," regenerative farming is a science-driven approach focused on no-till soil management, building organic matter to sustain microbial life, incorporating livestock and biodiversity and caring for people who work in the fields and winery. It is a key component of combating climate change and reducing greenhouse gas pollution. In 2022 Grgich Hills Estate was recognized as one of the world's "Top 100 Wineries" by Wine & Spirits Magazine.

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