

ATTENDING THE 30TH ANNUAL WINE TASTING OF RUBY WINES, INC., I WONDERED AMID THE CHEERFUL BUSTLE ABOUT THE BEGINNINGS OF THIS FAMILY COMPANY, AND SET UP A BREAKFAST MEETING WITH CEO BOB RUBIN TO RETURN TO YESTERYEAR.

**IN THE BEGINNING** was the soda company, and it was in Lynn. Bob's grandfather, Samuel Rubin, emigrated from Russia, settled in Haverhill and then moved to Revere. He founded Ruby California Products in 1921. Among those products was Ruby Root Beer. The sodas quenched the thirst of revelers at the then-popular Revere Beach resort. When Prohibition ended, Ruby began bottling fortified Californian wines purchased in bulk. Bob's father, Irving, having worked at the company from its start when he was 17, succeeded Samuel on the latter's death at 91 in 1942. World War II interrupted the sugar supply, and the sugar substitute then available didn't hold up, so the sodas were dispensed with in favor of wine. The company changed its name to Ruby Wines in 1946. Moving to Everett in 1953 – as its portfolio expanded – Ruby began to import wines from Europe. Some cost as much as \$8 per case. The import spectrum widened exponentially, especially into higher levels, via such conduits as Austin Nichols and Chateau & Estates.

## RUBY WINES AN AMERICAN STORY



Brothers Ted and Bob, (Ted the elder by 14 months) who both had worked at Ruby during high school, were in it full time, primarily in sales, after graduating college. They took control in the early '80s when Irving retired. Ted was CEO until his much-lamented death from leukemia in 2009. He had become a prominent figure in the trade, in good causes, in the genesis and guidance of the Boston Wine Expo, and on the golf course. Ted's son, Brad, part of the company's fourth generation, is senior vice president and director of sales. Bob, now a youthful 74, likewise has devoted himself to good causes. His daughter Jaime has joined the company.

Ruby made a significant addition in 1988 in the person of Wayne Niemi, now executive vice president and general manager. He was able to organize sales so that Ted and Bob could concentrate on running the company instead of calling on customers. Wayne joined Ted and others in helping with the Boston Wine Expo.

Continued growth required another move in 1997 to larger quarters in Avon. Reporting to Bob are four vice presidents, seven division managers, a sales force of 45, and two product managers. Mainly wines are offered, plus artisanal spirits and a few beers – more than 5000 distinct items. Sales are expected to reach \$90 million (more than one million cases) in 2013. The Annual Tasting, attended by nearly 900 members of the trade, exhibited about 20 percent of Ruby's offerings.

Ruby's most significant suppliers, with which I have more than a nodding familiarity, include Bedford International and Palm Bay International. Bedford is a family company founded in 1992 by Mario Belardino, a former attorney who saw the wine light. Headquartered in Larchmont, New York, Bedford specializes in small Italian producers, and has recently branched into South America. Watching Belardino's personal interactions with his producers is convincing of the quality and integrity of his imports. Palm Bay is a much bigger firm. I am reminded as I review its portfolio of how many of its products I have savored over the years. The two are but a sample of a broad array of suppliers to Ruby, large and small, producer and importer/distributor.

Looking ahead, Bob Rubin envisions broadening Ruby's offerings and customer base, and continuing the company's close contacts at both ends of the supply line.

**HARVEY FINKEL**