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**Larry Grassini Savors
Success in Courtroom
and Vineyard**

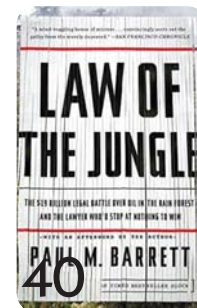
**The Trial Lawyer
vs. The Appellate
Lawyer**

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On the cover: Larry Grassini
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CORRECTION: In *Book Review: A Justice's View of Global Truths* (February 2016, page 41), endnote 8 was published incorrectly. The correct endnote is *Abbott v. Abbott*, 130 S. Ct. 1983, 560 U.S. __ (2010). *Valley Lawyer* regrets the error.

In Vino Veritas: Larry Grassini Savors Success in Courtroom and Vineyard

By Elizabeth Post



Photos by Paul Joyner



Prominent Valley trial lawyer Larry Grassini has achieved a legacy of success in and out of the courtroom. His landmark court victories have transformed California law while providing financial relief for his clients. His family's vineyard is recognized for not only its fine Bordeaux wine but also for its reputation of teamwork and charity.

“ This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.”

— Woody Guthrie



VALLEY LAWYER LARRY GRASSINI IS AMONG the most prominent trial lawyers in California and the western United States. In 45 years of practice in the Valley, he has over 125 jury trials and 11 verdicts exceeding \$10 million. But Grassini’s journey didn’t commence here in the Valley; it began 3,000 miles to the east and could be an inspiration for an American folk song.

Grassini grew up on Long Island, New York and received his undergraduate degree at St. Bonaventure University. In 1970, Grassini earned a J.D. from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He and his new wife Sharon left their wedding in a new red Volkswagen bus with a peace sign on the back to travel across the country to California.

Larry and Sharon had no jobs, friends or family in California. They used the \$820 they received as wedding gifts to start their new life. He planned to establish residency here and take the bar exam. After taking the exam in San Francisco, they moved south to Los Angeles. According to Larry, they “didn’t know the Valley from Santa Monica.” But he was hired by North Hollywood sole practitioner Joe Hurley and shortly after built a house in Bell Canyon where they raised their five children along with horses, goats, and household pets.

Grassini tried his first case in 1971, two weeks after passing the bar. “In my second week as a lawyer, Joe walked into the library and said I’d be starting a jury trial in Burbank that afternoon,” Grassini recalls. He adds, “I had never been in a courtroom, hadn’t taken a deposition or propounded an interrogatory and I was so naïve my only worry was that I was wearing a green shirt instead of a starched white one. Joe told me the shirt was okay and that he’d tell me how to try a case at lunch. I tried it

in Dept. A, Burbank in front of Judge White and the jury gave my client a \$5,000 verdict with \$11 in specials. I was hooked and have never practiced anything but trial law for plaintiffs.”

Grassini’s law practice has evolved significantly since his early victory. “Forty-five years ago, I would try 12-15 cases a year, each one about a week. Now, it’s one or two and they each take a month or two.”

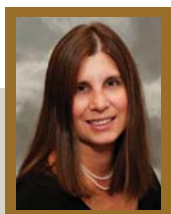
Wall of Fame

Built into walls in the entry and conference room of the Woodland Hills offices of Grassini, Wrinkle & Johnson are wood display boxes with miniatures and news clippings showcasing the firm’s momentous verdicts over the years. The displays bring to life stories of lives impacted by Grassini and his firms.

The most memorable verdict early in his career is the product liability case of *Fortman v. Hemco*. Three-year-old Nichole Fortman fell out of her mother’s moving Jeep and was seriously injured. The \$25.6 million verdict in 1986 was the largest individual personal injury verdict in U.S. history at that time.

“The defense argued that Nichole wouldn’t live past her fifth birthday because of her injuries. With medical and attendant care we were able to provide for Nichole, several years ago we went to her 35th birthday party!”

Most people over the age of fifty remember ventriloquist Paul Winchell, his partner—a dressed, wooden dummy named Jerry Mahoney—and the “Winchell Mahoney Time” children’s television show. Jerry is on display in a wooden box that pops out as you walk into Grassini’s office. Grassini represented Paul Winchell in his decade-long fight against Metromedia concerning destruction of the Winchell-Mahoney tapes. The media



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company erased the remaining tapes of “Winchell Mahoney Time” over a dispute with Winchell about syndication rights to the popular show.

In a six week trial in 1986, the jury awarded Winchell \$17.8 million. Metromedia appealed all the way to the Supreme Court but was unsuccessful; it was affirmed as the largest punitive damages verdict in California history at the time.

The impact of Grassini’s work often extends far beyond large awards he wins for clients. A recent case, *Houck v. Enterprise*, made national headlines. The 2010 case concerned the untimely deaths of twenty-something sisters Raechel and Jacquie Houck in a fiery crash in a PT Cruiser rented to them by Enterprise Rent-A-Car. The car had been recalled by Chrysler the previous month. A jury awarded the parents \$15 million for their daughters’ wrongful death.

This past December, President Barack Obama signed into law the Raechel and Jacqueline Houck Safe Rental Car Act of 2015, making it illegal for a rental car company to rent a car that is subject to a safety recall.

Grassini is proud of other landmark cases that have transformed California law. *Janeway v. Santa Barbara* changed the law of releases. Fourteen-year-old Katie Janeway drowned while attending a summer camp for developmentally disabled children operated by the City of Santa Barbara. The 2007 California Supreme Court decision held that a general release of liability will not release a tortfeasor for acts that would be considered gross negligence.

Cornette v. Caltrans changed a decades-old law when the California Supreme Court affirmed in 2001 an appellate decision that a plaintiff has the right to have a jury trial (as opposed to a court decision) on the issue of changed conditions. *Curlender v.*



Bio-Science Laboratories was the first appellate decision to recognize the tort of wrongful life. And *Bridget B. v. John B.* changed the law of liability against a defendant for transmitting HIV or other sexual diseases, from “the defendant knew” to “the defendant knew, or should have known that he had contracted the disease.”

Grassini’s accomplishments have earned him recognition and respect from both sides of the counsel table. He was twice recognized as “Trial Lawyer of the Year” by the Los Angeles Trial Lawyers Association (now Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles) and in 2008, he became the ninth living trial lawyer to be inducted into CAALA’s Hall of Fame. In 2011, Grassini became the third plaintiffs’ lawyer to be inducted into the Association of Southern California Defense Counsel’s Hall of Fame.

All in the Family

Courtrooms are not the only places where Grassini feels at home. In 1989, the family purchased 107 acres north of Santa Barbara in Happy Canyon, a rural area near Santa Ynez. “We were looking for a place to eventually retire. It was beautiful ranch land.”

The family found out that the land was perfect for planting a vineyard, so in 2002, they planted a “few vines.” Grassini Family Vineyards and Winery opened in 2010.

“Realizing I was way out of my league when we first started to plant the vineyard,” Grassini acknowledges, “I relied heavily on consultants who said the rocky hillside soil and the hotter than average climate was perfectly suited for Bordeaux varietals. Our red varietals are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc and



the white is Sauvignon Blanc. We just bottled our ninth vintage and it has received high praise from wine critics and sommeliers.”

Today, Grassini’s award-winning wine can be found in fine restaurants and wine shops up and down California, as well as the winery’s tasting room in downtown Santa Barbara. According to Grassini, “Happy Canyon has its own viticulture appellation (Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara County) and it’s becoming well known for its Bordeaux varietals.”

At the winery, Grassini leaves day-to-day decision-making to the CEO, his oldest daughter Katie—an attorney who tried several cases with her dad. Grassini “always wanted a family business.”



Photo by Kilho Park

In fact, the labels on the wine bottles are adorned with five birds, representing the Grassinis’ five children: Katie, Corey, Mandy, Leo and Molly.

The family environment extends to the vineyard’s employees and a special program was established to provide for them and their families. “We’ve had the same vineyard crew since we started and they are the heart and soul of our winery. A few years ago, our foreman learned his son had a serious health problem, not completely covered by our insurance.


“Sharon and I wanted to set up a fund to assist the crew in these types of emergencies so we dedicated a portion of the vineyard to the “Equipo” project. Equipo means team in Spanish. The crew has control of decisions on watering, pruning, picking and crushing [the grapes], and the wine is bottled under the Equipo label. It is a popular Bordeaux blend and a portion of the profit goes into a fund for bonuses and special needs of the crew.

“We also have a community garden that provides vegetables and 75 chickens that provide eggs for the crew and we just recently housed and fattened up a pig for the crew feast!”



Grassini is mindful of his legacy. “While the winery provides a product and the law firm provides a service, they both have the Grassini name behind them, so I want them to be the best they can be. Our reputation is paramount to me and I make sure we treat our employees, the public and our clients and patrons like I would want to be treated.

“I’m very proud that Grassini Family Vineyards was just voted the 2015 Small Business of the Year by the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce based on our local and charitable involvement in the community and the law firm has been listed as a first tier plaintiff’s law firm by *Best Lawyers in America* since that award was created.

“We’ve come a long way from drinking Almaden from paper cups in the back of our Volkswagen bus... Just like coming to California turned out to be the right thing to do, so too did buying the land in Santa Ynez.” For Larry and the Grassini family, what a strange and wondrous trip it’s been. 

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM A TOP TRIAL LAWYER

What words of advice can you offer to new attorneys who want to become trial lawyers? Try more cases. The insurance companies settle cases for top dollar only with lawyers they don’t want to face in court.

How have court cutbacks affected the way you practice? You have to manage and move your cases forward without the assistance of the courts (since we no longer have individual calendar judges). You have to be more proactive than ever.

What can the Bench and Bar do to reduce the increasing delays in access to justice? Talk among the lawyers. Be civil with each other. Try to work things out without the court’s involvement. It will keep time-consuming motions from bogging down the process.

