



Ceremony honors Volker Eisele, defender of Napa vineyards



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When friends and admirers of Volker Eisele gathered in St. Helena to remember his life, they came to remember his work even more.

“Today, we celebrate both an event and a person,” county Supervisor Diane Dillon told more than 300 people Sunday at Charles Krug Winery during the tribute to Eisele, who spearheaded two ballot measures that fortified land protections in the Agricultural Preserve.

Eisele, a native of Münster, Germany, who made wine in Chiles Valley for 40 years, died Jan. 2 at 77.

During an hourlong gathering organized by the Napa County Farm Bureau, Napa Valley Vintners and the Jack L. Davies Napa Valley Agricultural Land Preservation Fund, a succession of friends and allies shared the many sides of Eisele.

Their stories revived memories not only of the conservationist, activist and winemaker but also the ardent fan of Wagnerian opera, the reader of Goethe who gloried in getting The New York Times to observe the author’s birthday – even the take-charge vigilante who once ripped away the sign to a new motorcycle park and carried it to the county counsel’s desk to prove its intrusion into the Upvalley vineyards.

Eisele’s most durable legacy has been Measure J (1990), which requires most changes away from agricultural uses inside the preserve to go before a vote of the people. He also organized support for its 2008 successor, Measure P, which extended the popular-vote requirement to 2058.

“If you truly love the Napa Valley, you have to truly love the Ag Preserve – and you have to truly love Volker Eisele,” said Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena. “The Ag Preserve is the

foundation that protects the valley, and Volker was responsible for it being as strong as it is today. Everyone knows he fought so hard for the land he lived in and the land he loved.”

Throughout his four decades in the valley, Eisele spoke out on growth issues and worked to defend and extend the Ag Preserve’s safeguards. In 2012, he was involved in the failed attempt to pass a ballot measure that would have changed land designations from urban-residential to agricultural use in Angwin.

Hugh Davies, whose parents began Calistoga’s Schramsberg Vineyards half a century ago, recalled how Eisele’s drive and love of the wine country rallied like-minded winemakers to protect the valley’s rural character.

“Coming from L.A., my parents had seen in their young lives how quickly farmland could be lost,” he said, comparing the rural areas urbanized annually in California to “the area from Napa to Calistoga.”

Organizers promoted Sunday’s event not only as a celebration for Eisele but also the 47th anniversary of the Ag Preserve’s creation. However, several speakers declared vigilance more important than ever as the county’s housing demands, traffic congestion and winery visits all grow.

“How many tourist sardines can be squeezed into this can before we all get squeezed out?” said Norma Tofanelli, the Farm Bureau president. “When is enough enough?”

“What Volker disliked about Americans was the notion that a property owner had the right to build whatever he wanted, regardless of his neighbors,” said the author James Conaway, who has known the Eisele family since the late 1980s and devoted a chapter to them in “The Far Side of Eden,” his 2002 book on Napa County. “It would be a shame if the spirit of the Ag Preserve would be undermined after the passing of Volker Eisele.”

Dillon, the county supervisor, urged Napers to keep Eisele’s memory alive by sharing his determination to keep the rural Napa Valley rural.

“I’ve thought a lot of what Volker would have wanted me to say today,” she said. “Simply put, it’s this: It’s hard work, but it’s worth doing, folks. This place is irreplaceable.”