Behind the Scenes: How Fred Ferronato Built Santa Rosa Stainless Steel

Lance Cutler



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANTA ROSA STAINLESS STEEL

IN THE 1960S, most of Northern California was still orchard farming-based agricultural. There were vineyards, but also plenty of apples, pears and prunes. As markets for wine opened in stores and fancy restaurants that couldn't obtain liquor licenses, dozens of people tried their hand at making wine. Sometimes farmers made wine just to do something with unsold grapes. Often, successful people looking for a more idyllic lifestyle decided to try winemaking. As time went on, more orchards were pulled out to make way for grapes. Seemingly everywhere, new wineries were opening to try their luck in the marketplace.

New businesses require equipment, and these new wineries needed storage tanks for their wine. The few wineries who had survived Prohibition used wooden tanks for the most part, but this blossoming of new wineries coincided with a new technology. People figured out how to make stainless steel tanks that would not only store wine, but could also help control fermentation temperatures, chill wine for cold stabilization purposes, and even warm wine to help complete malolactic fermentation. Now, stainless steel wine tanks are ubiquitous in the wine business, but it wasn't always so.

Fred Ferronato learned how to weld making shoe dies for his father-in-law in Bellflower, Calif. Eventually Fred and his wife moved to Sebastopol, and he took a job with Malm Steel Works in Santa Rosa where he did sheet metal work and welding. Some of that work had him welding stainless steel for the apple canneries in the area. The canneries used a lot of stainless with hot and cold baths and other containers.

One day in 1968, Barney Fetzer showed up at the cannery. He saw Fred welding and approached him with a potential job. Fetzer wanted a couple tanks he could use to ferment his wine in, and he wanted those tanks to have some sort of cooling system. His goal was to keep fermentations below 100° F.

Fred and his friend, Charlie Levell, built two tanks that could circulate cool water from a creek on the Fetzer property. The tanks were round bar tanks with flood jackets, essentially two sheets of stainless steel welded together with a space between them. Pipes between the two sheets circled the tank. Fetzer could pump water from the creek, through the pipes in the jackets and drain the water back to the creek. The system worked well enough for Fetzer, so he ordered 12 more tanks.

This was, essentially, the start of stainless steel becoming a common item in Northern California wine production.

Wineries Take Note

Fred and Charlie worked days for Malm and made tanks for Fetzer in Charlie's barn at night. They had to be quiet about it because the whole setup wasn't permitted, nor was it kosher with the union. Other local wineries heard about the tanks and wanted some for themselves, so Fred and Charlie decided to invest $2,500 and start a company called Santa Rosa Stainless Steel (SRSS) in 1968.

The business grew overnight. Local wineries started ordering tanks, and Fred ended up making them for a historical pantheon of wineries: Fetzer, Seghesio, Pedroncelli, Parducci, and Balletto. Koerner Rombauer heard about the tanks, and he had to have them— his friends in Napa Valley wanted them too. Before they knew what hit them, Fred and Charlie had four or five guys working for them and building one or two tanks a day.

Ferronato didn't just do business with his customers, he became good friends with them, often taking family vacations together. Husbands and wives knew one another and all the kids would get together with the various families.

Typical of the Ferronatos' relationships with their customers was the one they had with John Fetzer. "Working with Fred and Mark was like working with family," explained Fetzer. "Fred was a very close friend of both my dad and me. They made it so simple for us and always delivered quality tanks with great workmanship."

John Fetzer sold the Fetzer Winery to Brown-Forman in 1992. When John and his wife, Patty, started Saracina Vineyards in 1996, they counted on Fred and SRSS to make their tanks once again. "Fred was such a gentleman," said John. "I always looked at him being instrumental at getting us started in the wine business. Every single tank in our wineries was made by SRSS."

Their biggest competitor was Valley Foundry in Fresno, which also made stainless steel tanks for wineries. In 1970 Paul Masson asked Fred to bid on a job for 126 tanks to be built on-site. Fred bid against Valley and his price was half as much. Masson gave him the job, but SRSS didn't have enough welders. A friend, Tom Leon, hired a bunch of welders away from Valley to work on the job. Once he finished the project, after all expenses, he had made $100,000 profit, so he knew he had bid it correctly.

Through all this booming growth, the tanks were still built with flood jackets using stick welding methods.

Stick welding involves striking an electric arc between a metal electrode and the metal to be welded. The current melts the electrode into the metal and forms a weld pool that completes the weld. Building a tank uses a lot of sticks, and while these flood jackets did help cool wine fermentations, they weren't very efficient.

At the same time. the business was taking off. Fred and Charlie moved to a new, almost 3-acre location in Santa Rosa in 1974. There, they switched to MIG welding where they welded by pulling spools of wire instead of using





individual sticks. MIG welding and an innovative design allowed them to leave flood jackets behind and move to channel jackets.

Instead of welding sheets of stainless steel together with space between them, then pumping water through pipes between the metal, channel jackets had them weld strips of stainless steel together and coolant could pass directly through the entire channel space, typically 6 inches wide. With channel jackets that allowed for increased flow and more efficient cooling, these tanks were a game changer. So, from 1974 to 1984, SRSS made tanks with channel jackets, good for up to 20 psi, allowing them to use glycol cooling systems.

When Bob Trinchero developed White Zinfandel at Sutter Home, he needed tanks. SRSS built them, more than 50,000 gallons worth. Then when the wine industry took off in Oregon, SRSS built the tanks, in fact, they sold tanks all over the United States as well as Mexico and Canada.

For a while, SRSS was so busy they were the primary buyers of stainless steel in America, at a time when it was just 50 cents a pound (Now, stainless steel costs $2.00 per pound).

"We built this business on the fly, and it was mostly word of mouth," said Fred. "Winemakers told other winemakers about us. Orders were coming in so fast; we were just trying to keep up. It was tough, because I was the only one talking to customers and giving out the bids."

At its peak, Santa Rosa Stainless Steel's 3-acre manufacturing facility employed 50 employees working year-round to fulfill orders, while producing 400 to 500 tanks per year. They made everything from small cone tanks to massive 40-foot stainless steel monsters.

Their largest tank to date was 375,000 gallons. Over the years, they have built more than 20,000 tanks. In addition to wineries, their tanks are used at breweries, water storage facilities, and distilleries along with manufacturers of vinegar, soda, and liquid soap. SRSS produced turnkey equipment for brewpubs, tanks for Capri Sun and soda. They even made tanks for the septic system on Angel Island.

Fred Ferronato was one of the first to purchase and use spot welders, which welded the flat sheets first and then shaped them into tanks. These were dimpled jackets and could handle 100 psi. They were incredibly efficient at cooling fermentations because the dimpled spot welds created more turbulence of the coolant and more direct points of contact to transfer the cold. Since 1984, wineries have been choosing between channel jackets and spot welded (dimpled) jackets depending on what worked best for their specific needs.

A Growing Company

Carefully listening to customers' suggestions, SRSS was constantly evolving and improving their tank designs. They customized doors vents, and valve fittings. They incorporated manual cooling systems, which evolved into automatic solenoid systems with thermostats, that now can be computerized and operated off-site using smart phones. They helped new wineries lay out their facilities to incorporate their tanks in an efficient manner. They designed efficient door gaskets and connected wineries to companies who could produce them. They customized fittings, ensuring they were effective yet still attractive. good. Whatever it took to make better tanks, they were up for the task.

As more wineries showed off their tanks, SRSS focused on making their tanks beautiful as well as serviceable.

Fred's son, Mark Ferronato, explained, "When wineries give tours, they want things to look stunning, so we pay extra attention to aesthetics. We do perfect welds and use brushed steel and different finishes. The result is not only usable, but beautiful."

Building tanks was difficult enough, but once you had the tanks, they needed to be delivered and set up on site. At the start, SRSS used Santa Rosa Crane to deliver their tanks. When one of the Santa Rosa Crane workers, Budd Eliff, decided to start his own company in 1980, Fred supported him. Budd named his company Precision Crane Service. Precision Crane, like SRSS, is a third-generation family business.

Over the years, Fred's SRSS built millions of gallons worth of stainless-steel wine tanks and Budd's Precision Crane Service would deliver and install most of them.

They each developed slogans that sum up their work. SRSS said, "We guarantee quality, and we guarantee delivery." Precision Crane Service matched that with a saying of their own, "We do the job right, on time, the first time."

Back in the day, when wineries wanted to order tanks, Fred and Buddy would often go out to the winery together. They'd measure the doors and ceilings and try to calculate the biggest tanks they could fit into the building.







Placement of the doors, the plumbing flanges, the jackets and the lifting eyes was critical. Fred would always design things so they fit perfectly, making installation easier for Budd.

"Precision Crane might not even exist now, if it wasn't for Fred Ferronato," Budd said. "Fred had a great reputation. He did everything he said he was going to do, when he said he was going to do it. He was just a straight shooter and a pleasure to work with. If Fred called me right now and said, 'Buddy, I need help with this.' I'd be on my way."

The Next Generation

SRSS has been a family business for more than 55 years. Fred worked alongside his kids before officially handing down the business to Mark Ferronato, president of the company, and his sister Michele Cotta, as secretary, in 2011.

Mark has worked for SRSS for his entire life, from sweeping the floor to welding tanks to building catwalks and conveyors as well as creating the blueprints for the tanks and supporting equipment. Though he got his start sweeping floors, once he taught, he realized he loved welding. He'd get paid in cash for small jobs like cutting metal, running errands, or cleaning up. After high school, at age 16, he joined the business and got a regular paycheck, his first while doing a field job making stainless steel tanks up at Asti. While he could make tanks, his specialty was crafting other things like conveyor systems, carts, and hoods, and he even worked on aluminum catwalks. Assuming the role from his father, he became the guy who did everything and helped everyone do whatever they needed.

Mark's wife, Debbie, has worked for the company as an accountant for 31 years, although she calls herself the "bookkeeper."

Debbie said, "Mark and I have always worked pretty well together and having the kids here is great, but it is a family business, and I think that brings more pressure. I worry about everything, even the fires in LA. How is that going to affect us? What will it do to the price of goods? If you work for a company, it's a job, but when you work for your entire family, it's more."

Changing Times

In the '70s, tanks were built for about $1 per gallon. Now, tanks cost $7 to $10 per gallon, and the smaller the tank, the greater the per-gallon cost.

Through the '80s and into the '90s, SRSS primarily dealt with family-owned wineries. "It used to be simple," Mark shared. "We'd find out what they needed, give them a bid, and get the job. If we had questions, we'd just call them up and ask. Our customers were loyal because we built a lot of trust over the years."

As the wine business grew, and corporations bought up many of those businesses, the business changed. "Dealing with corporations is different." Mark explained. "Their primary concern is chasing the lowest price."

The COVID pandemic and multiple competitors forced some serious downsizing. Their staff has shrunk from a high of 50 down to 20 current employees. In January 2025, Santa Rosa Stainless Steel moved to a new location. Mark and Michelle are leaving the business in the hands of Mark's two sons, Nathan Williams and Justin Ferronato, and Michelle's son, Danny, making it a third-generation family-owned business.

Fred, even at 94 years of age, visited the shop weekly to walk the building and the business he built from the ground up. He passed away in August 2025. He was a treasure trove of stories about building wine tanks and working with winemakers and told those stories with immense pride in what he accomplished.

In 2025 Santa Rosa Stainless Steel is transitioning into a new phase. Nathan Williams describes this transition simply and eloquently, "I don't think my dad had a choice about working for the company, it was just expected, but the rest of us chose to be here. Santa Rosa Stainless Steel is a wine tank company that spans three generations. It has been home to some of the finest fabricators around. I want to ensure that my grandpa's legacy will not be forgotten. **WBM**