

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

MIKE WEISS
WINE WRITER

Interview conducted by
Jacqueline Gershon
in 2004

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“Mike Weiss, Wine Writer,” conducted by Jacqueline Gershon in 2004, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2005.

Copy no. ____



Mike Weiss, 2006

Photo: Lance Iverson, *San Francisco Chronicle*

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Cultural Terroir: California Regional Food and Wine

ROHO Food and Wine team members are documenting individual stories of people that have helped spark the development of a “California cuisine” and “California style of wine.” In the latter half of the twentieth century many Northern California food and wine pioneers first developed a regional identity and then exported their ideas and products to national markets and subsequently to the global community. Also included in the series are farmers, marketers, shop owners, writers, critics, workers, and educators that helped implement what many have referred to as a “Food and Wine Revolution.” Significant new historical literature on human foodways has reevaluated traditional anthropological and geographic paradigms by placing more emphasis on interdisciplinary studies that evaluate the individual’s “identity” as it relates to food and wine as interpreted through varying societal belief systems based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, politics, and economics. This series will help document and define the development of a cultural *terroir* or in the words of wine writer Matt Kraemer “somewhereness” for Bay Area communities.

Nineteenth-century American immigrants used food and alcoholic beverages as one means to identify themselves in their new homeland. As a result, by the twentieth-century sayings such as “American as apple pie,” “she’s a dish,” “two chickens in every pot,” “real men don’t eat quiche,” and “apple of my eye” provided the nation with a mixed bag of images meant to separate Americans by race, class, and gender. Added to these ingredients were the intervention of two world wars and a depression that together with the Cold War baked up an American alimentary tradition built on science, the car culture, ease of cooking, and consumer wealth. The 1950s national age of consensus grew new foodways that glorified consumption of hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, Jell-O salad, Miracle Whip, and Spam in what has been labeled as the fast food movement. Yet, at this very same time radical movements (American Indians, Mexican Americans, women, gays and lesbians, the new consumer middle class, and environmental and lifestyle concern activists) consumed the sixties and seventies with an anti-science philosophy and antiauthoritarian spirit that rejected the larger society’s absolute faith in science and big business/government.

The Bay Area of California served as a focal point for much of this radicalization as these rebels struggled to create an identity for themselves and their region. From these radical activists emanated a philosophical foodway that drew heavily from anti-establishment political beliefs, the democratization of class, multiculturalism, and gender and sexual freedom. Hippies on communes and mainstream rebels grew, sold, processed and consumed certain foods from small organic farms as a red badge of courage in their resistance against the system. From the greater struggle activists identified certain gastropolicies and started a food revolution that defined a new cuisine in what many historians would eventually label “California cuisine.”

At first these food and wine pioneers established specialty restaurants and wineries that took regional fresh produce and ethnic cuisine and fused and intellectualized them into a new cultural *terroir*. These frontline warriors of renegade chefs, restaurateurs, farmers, suppliers, winemakers, and writers embraced a 1960s through 1970s counterculture that matched the needs of their local communities by blending common people’s diets and ethnic peasant foods with an abundance of regional fresh fruits and vegetables. They then designed dishes that enhanced the

health advantages of the Mediterranean diet and wine culture and gave birth to a democratized *haute cuisine*. As more and more middle-class and wealthy Americans ate their culinary creations they attempted to replicate their favorite recipes at home and, as with many movement concerns, these new food ideas became mainstream in the eighties and nineties. Old World peasant foods with a California twist became the rage. Amazingly, at the same time the fast food nation grew as many middle-class and poorer Americans found McFood.

The question for food and wine historians is to first document this shift in cultural *terroir* during the sixties and seventies and then analyze the interplay between those of the fast food culture and the acolytes of the California cuisine. Research questions include investigations as to how foodways develop amidst continuing concerns of overpopulation, agribusiness, scientific or “book” farming, global warming, and globalism. Always keeping in mind the use of food and wine as one means to identify oneself and create a regional cultural *terroir*.

Interview with Mike Weiss
 Interviewed by: Jacqueline Gershon
 Transcriber: Kinzie Kramer
Interview # 1: April 4, 2004]

[Begin Audio File Weiss 01 04-04-05.wav]

Gershon:

Mike, can you describe your family history and childhood and the events that really have shaped you in your life?

1-00:00:28

Weiss:

Oh my God, well, that's going to take the whole hour—

1-00:00:30

Gershon:

That's okay

[laughs]

1-00:00:31

Weiss:

[laughs]

I grew up in New York City. My father was an accountant; my mother was at that time in her life a house wife. I went to New York City public schools. I went as far away as I could to college, which was a small school in Illinois. I came back to the east coast for graduate study at Johns Hopkins. I worked for a couple of east coast newspapers. In 1973 I moved to San Francisco and I've been in California ever since. As for what shaped me I would just take too very long, but I will say this, that the only verb I ever heard associated with, with alcoholic beverages in my house when I was growing up was guzzle, as in "Did you see him guzzle that beer?"

1-00:01:24

Gershon:

[giggle]

1-00:01:25

Weiss:

And the only wine that I knew existed was Manischewitz.

1-00:01:29

Gershon:

What made you become a journalist?

1-00:01:32

Weiss:

Ah, circumstance. I needed a job. I had just gotten out of graduate school with a degree in—creative writing basically, I had a masters of fine arts from Hopkins and—my, my wife knew somebody who, who was the editor emeritus of the Baltimore News American, which was the worst newspaper in America. And they offered me a job. And I had no intention of becoming a journalist—I had never studied journalism, although I had been the sports editor of my high school newspaper. And—so I took the job and it was just fascinating and exciting. I mean, there I was with just as naïve as, as a human being could be and, and I was interviewing mayors and governors and sports stars and [Rap Brown] and Stokely Carmichael and the Civil Rights Movements of the mid-sixties—I mean I was thrust into history in a way that I found remarkably exciting. But then after doing that for four or five years—I covered the national presidential campaign in '68—I tired of it, not because I didn't enjoy the journalism, I did, but what I didn't—what I no longer was able to—what I no longer wanted to do was write for a newspaper because of the enormous limitations put on what you could write, and I was interested in more expressive writing and writing in which what I had seen and understood, my perceptions and my opinions, would figure as well as simply recitation of the facts. And so, I quit newspaper journalism and really in a certain sense have never gone back to it—although in the last 10 years or so I've worked for newspapers here in California. I've always worked almost exclusively either as a columnist or for the Sunday magazine writing magazine pieces. So that daily journalism is not something I've practiced since the end of the, really, the end of the sixties.

1-00:03:45

Gershon:

So how did you make it out to California?

1-00:03:47

Weiss:

In a 1966 Volvo 122 S, with the family dog—

1-00:03:53

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-00:03:55

Weiss:

And, my son, and wife and baby daughter. I lived in a commune in Philadelphia.

1-00:04:03

Gershon:

Mmmhmm.

1-00:04:04

Weiss:

The commune, this was in the early seventies, and my first book was about my experiences in that commune, which I think was published in 1973. And, the, a large num—there were eight or ten of us in the commune and most of the people in the commune decided to move together to California as a group and we bought a Victorian in the Mission district of San Francisco. And there I was, I had no real employment. In fact, I wrote letters to every college and university in northern California that offered any sort of communications or, journalism program. Letters were an old fashioned thing that people used to do—

1-00:04:53

Gershon:

[giggles]

1-00:04:54

Weiss:

—whip out pen, paper, and said I was coming out, and would they, I would be a, be interested in teaching because I was freelancing. I was writing for the Village Voice in New York and for Esquire and a couple of other publications but I needed more money than that. And, strangely enough, the only person who even bothered to answer my letter was the Dean of the best school of them all, which was UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. The Dean's name is Ed Bailey. And, he hired me to be a lecturer at, at UC Berkeley—Graduate School of Journalism, though I was teaching in the undergraduate courses. I don't know if they still offer undergraduate courses or not, but that's where I was teaching. And, so I taught there for seven or eight or nine years, usually one course per quarter.

1-00:05:41

Gershon:

So then what made you go back to newspaper?

1-00:05:43

Weiss:

Oh, I went back because a friend of—I, in, in the seventies and eighties, I was a freelancer and I wrote both non-fiction books and mystery novels and a lot of magazine work. And, I went back

into newspaper because a friend of mine became the editor of *West*, which was the Sunday magazine of the *San Jose Mercury News*, and it was, I was doing very well as a freelancer and then suddenly I was doing terribly because my main outlet folded. It was a newspaper—a magazine in London, a Sunday magazine in London, and, I was tired of scrambling to make a living and he offered me a very good job writing exclusively for the magazine, and he was an editor who I had worked with at, at other magazines. He was one of the founding editors of, *Mother Jones*, a man named Jeffrey Klein. And, he was a great editor. One of the very best editors I've ever worked with, so the opportunity to have a full-time job, a paycheck, I had at that point small children, again [laughs]. And, health benefits and to do exclusively magazine writing for an editor I really respected was irresistible. I went back there. I stayed there about five years, Jeffrey moved on. I had—he was succeeded by several other editors, both of whom were also were terrific people to work for. And, then I moved to the Chronicle, just a little more than five years ago, where now, again—when I first went to the Chronicle I was doing other things, but now, again, I work mostly for the Sunday magazine although I just wrote this thirty-nine part series, as you know. Which didn't appear in the magazine—it appeared in the daily paper.

1-00:07:36

Gershon:

Right. Can you recall your first glass of wine? And what did it taste like, do you remember it?

1-00:07:44

Weiss:

I have absolutely no idea. I mean, growing up I probably taste—yeah, I guess I can. I mean, not very, not specifically which was the first, but the only wine I had ever tasted was, was Manischewitz Concord Grape Wine. And I can remember very clearly what it tastes like, because occasionally at family dinners or something I'd be given a sip as a child. When I was living in the commune we drank jug wines, although I don't remember drinking. I've thought back about that and I've wondered—I mean, I don't remember drinking very much in those days. I was trying to remember, for instance if, when we had a party I would drink wine or beer and I can't actually remember because, as I say it, I wasn't much of a drinker, then. And, I certainly cannot remember my first glass of quote good wine. I have absolutely no idea when that might have been or what it was or anything like that. I'm not an oenophile. I'm just a casual consumer.

1-00:08:50

Gershon:

Moving on to *Grape*—

1-00:08:53

Weiss:

Yes.

1-00:08:53

Gershon:

Where did you come up with the idea?

1-00:08:55

Weiss:

Ah, I was sitting with my wife Carole in Mendocino on the porch of the Little River Inn of our room in the Little River Inn, and we were drinking a bottle of California red wine. It was a, actually [chuckles], remember this, it was a Chateau Souverain, I think it was like a 1999 or a 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon. And we were looking at the sun setting into the Pacific and it was all very drowsy and pleasant—we were on vacation. I was actually at a writer’s conference, but we had made it into a little vacation. And, Carole said to me, “Have you ever thought about all that goes into a bottle of wine?” And I said, “Oh, I don’t know. Grapes, yeast, water”—it shows how little I knew that I thought water was involved—

1-00:09:52

Gershon:

[giggle]

1-00:09:53

Weiss:

And, she said, “No, no, no!” because I’m not too quick; and she is, and she said, “You know, like immigrant labor?” I said, “Oh, right.” She said, “Well, the health of our rivers,” and she said, “Sustainability” and I said, “The environment” and she said, “Weather,” and therefore global warming and, I said, “Globalism! And the internet” and she said, “Bilingual education” And, we went on and on in that vein, and, I pulled out—I ran into the room and grabbed a pad and wrote them all down. And that was, the weekend, and on Monday morning I went into the office of the executive editor of the *Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Phil Bronstein, and I told him, that I had this idea, I didn’t tell him it was my wife’s idea—

1-00:10:44

Gershon:

[giggle]

1-00:10:46

Weiss:

That—a bottle of wine is a symbolic product of California. It stood for California in the world, and that if you looked very deeply into a specific bottle of wine, not an abstract wine, but this bottle, right here, you would see all these problems—and issues and questions, that together comprised a portrait of California. And Phil said, “Well, that was interesting,” and I said “yes.” I wanted to follow one specific bottle of wine from dormant vine to finished product, until the

cork was pulled at a white tablecloth restaurant in Paris. And, he said “Well, how long is that going to take?” And I said, “Well, white or red?” [laughs] And he said, “I’ll bite. How about, how about red?” And I said, “About three years.” And he said, “How about white?” And I said, “Year and a half.” And he said, “We’ll do white.” And that was it, and we were off to the races.

1-00:11:50

Gershon:

What was your primary goal in writing *Grape*?

1-00:11:54

Weiss:

Getting it done. My primary goal—well what happened was, and this, this often happens to me, I’ll start with a grandiose idea like the whole California story, but what usually seduces my interest is people. And so, once I got involved with a particular winery, with Ferrari-Carano—and with Don and Rhonda Carano, the proprietors, and with Steve Domenichelli who was the, I forget what was the formal title is, but he’s the guy who grows the grapes, and some of the Mexican guys who work for him are Rene Ruiz and—Rafael Gonzalez, called Boa. And, the winemaker George Bursick and the director of marketing and sales, Steve Meisner—these are all people I came to know very well and what interested me more and more was two things: the process itself, I find process fascinating, and the processes of different people doing different things and the minutiae of what they know and how they know it and how they accomplish what they accomplish. And also, I’ve always found that process is a natural, a natural source of narrative tension within writing. If you look, for instance, at many thrillers—they’re no more than a description of a process of say, a hijacking, a kidnapping—taking a country to the brink of nuclear war and backing off, and then the people. So I became really, really interested in the people, but my overall concern was what it always is in everything I do, which is getting it right, which has a large part to do with why I left daily journalism and went into magazine and book writing instead. I admire the people who do daily journalism, I have many friends who do it, I read newspapers—I have my whole life, they’re the source of much of my information, I’m deeply grateful to them for what they do, but for me it was always a distortion. I was always interested in the subtleties of human interaction. I was always interested in the areas of greatest ambiguity. I’m an absolute sucker for ambiguity; I like it much more than certainty. I find it far more fascinating and nuanced. And, so, I became fascinated by the people who were making the wine, what their stories were, how they came to be where they were, how they interacted, each of their connections to each other, and to the land, and to the vines, and to that finished bottle of wine. And, so, my overall goal is—that the word you used? You used something like it, in writing the book was to get that right, to get the people right, to get what they were doing right.

1-00:15:08

Gershon:

Do you feel that you accomplished that?

1-00:15:10

Weiss:

One never feels one accomplishes that. Imperfection and, and failure are what keep us motivated. I mean, you can never get it entirely right. I don't know an author who doesn't look at what he or she has written and not see writ larger than anything else the flaws, the faults, the omissions, the terrible fear that you've missed something important. On the other hand naturally one feels a certain satisfaction, at having gotten it done at all. I mean that, to me, has always been the difference between professional and amateur writers. Professionals finish. I've known many people who I've thought were far more talented than I was, I am—who don't finish. I mean, they'll send me as a professional writer, you get many people coming to you and saying, "Will you look at this? I'm writing this." And I'm always—well, not always—but often I'm glad to and often I'll read it and be like, God, this person writes so much better than I do. And I'll say to them, "Good, show it to me when it's finished," and I'll never hear from them again. And that to me is the crucial difference.

1-00:16:35

Gershon:

Was it originally meant to be a thirty-nine part series, what was the timeline?

1-00:16:40

Weiss:

No, No, it was initially meant to be no more than a magazine article—maybe a 10,000 word magazine article. A great long magazine article for the Sunday magazine—the *San Francisco Chronicle*—which makes Phil Bronstein's commitment to it utterly remarkable. I mean, he did say to me, "You will do other things during that year and a half, won't you"?, and I went, yeah, of course I said I would. But he knew a good portion of my time would be going for a year and a half into one story. And this is an industry in which the day after tomorrow is considered a long deadline. I mean, many of my colleagues are writing, turning out stories in hours. I wasn't even talking about days, or months, I was talking about years. And it was an extraordinary commitment on the part of Phil. And then what happened was, just at the point where I was finishing my research and I'd come back from actually seeing the first cork pulled in New York, not Paris. By that time newspaper business economics had taken a definite downward turn, and even going to New York was, again, a great commitment on the part of the paper. Simply to go to the Four Seasons and see a cork pulled out of a bottle of wine, I mean, it was a pretty good gig. The meal at the Four Seasons was fabulous. But, just as I was sort of gearing up to write the magazine piece a new editor, a new deputy managing editor for features who's—what that means is, this is the person—the newspaper's sort of divided into news and features. And the hierarchy is executive editor, managing editor, and then two deputy managing editors—one for news, one for features. This is the person over all the features of the departments of the newspaper—food and wine and books and the magazine and so on—the daily Datebook. A new person came on, came to work at the *Chronicle*. Her name was Carolyn White and she has a background in magazine and book editing, actually. She's an Easterner and she had heard about this thing I was doing. Well, all she knew about it, she said to me, "What is this, you're doing something about grapes"? I said, "Well let me tell you about it." She smokes, so we went outside the building and sat on a stoop on Mission Street and she smoked a couple of cigarettes while I told her all about the story and, and what I was going to be writing. And when I finished, she

said, “Well, that’s a book.” And I said to her, “Well I’ve, we don’t know each other at all.” I said, “Well, I’ve written other books.” And I said, “I probably will turn it into a book after I’ve written a piece for the paper.” And she said, “No, no, I want you to write a book for me.”

1-00:19:357

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-00:19:36

Weiss:

And I said, “But Carolyn, it’s a newspaper, where would you put a book?” And she said, “Let me worry about that. That’s my job.” And I said, “Well, listen, I’m really dubious about this.” And she said, “I’ll prove it to you,” and she took me and led me into the office of the managing editor, a guy named Robert Rosenthal and she said, “Rosey, Mike just told me this fabulous thing he’s doing and I told him to write me a book-length piece.” And, Rosey got this very quizzical, bemused, both amused and confused, expression on his face. And I’d seen exactly the same expression on Phil Bronstein’s face when I had told him that I was going to be—what I wanted to do and how long it was going to take. And he said, “All right Carolyn, it’s your section.” So we left his office and I said to her, “Listen, Carolyn, I have a home office and that’s where I actually write and if you want me to write a book-length piece I’m—it was May, I believe, I said “I’m going to, I’m going to disappear into my home office and not probably see you until the fall.” And she said, “Fine, see you in the fall.” You have no idea how rare this is—

1-00:20:44

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-00:20:45

Weiss:

—in the world of newspapers. I mean, this is—I won’t use the word unprecedented because we say everything in America is unprecedented and it’s never true. But it was certainly a rare, rare occurrence, and certainly nothing that I had ever heard, either myself or before. So I did just that, and the first few weeks I was so nervous about it that I would sit down there and I’d work all day. I—my work schedule is—I start very early in the morning and I work until I’m exhausted and then I stop. But the end of the first week and the second week and the third week, I’d call Carolyn on Friday afternoons and I’d say, “I’ve got 46 pages and I’m only at chapter two, are you sure you mean this?” And she said, “Oh, keep doing it. It’s going to be great. It’s going to be great.” She was incredibly encouraging. And, as it turned out, once I finished the piece she was able to help me to whack it into shape. So I turned in something like, 69 or 70 thousand words, I think in September, maybe August, sometime late in the summer. And, then we set to work on it and she said, “Okay, we’re going to we’re make it a series.” I had written it in fairly short chapters. And so, it was—we then worked for many months on breaking it up into these different

parts and figuring out how and when it would run and so on and so forth. And so there was, there was as much time spent in doing that as in actually writing it.

1-00:22:22

Gershon:

Where did you begin your research? And how did you go about that?

1-00:22:26

Weiss:

Oh, I shopped for a winery that was going to be appropriate. I was really lucky because two photographers were assigned to work with me—John Storey and Eric Luse—both very good photographers. But, in addition to being photographers on the staff of the *Chronicle* they are partners in a winery. They are winemakers—the Eric Ross Winery in Sebastopol. And so they had all this knowledge and they knew a lot of people in the business. And, I knew a couple of people in the business as well and basically we solicited the names of wineries we could potentially write about. And we visited a whole bunch of them, and it was great, because all these wineries loved the idea of a whole, huge article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about their winery—free publicity. So everybody put their best foot forward and they all have resident chefs, so we'd go up—me and John usually—we'd go and visit a winery for lunch and, and they'd put a flight of their best wines in front of us and, and the chef would cook a wonderful four-course meal. And, we were just dining and drinking and talking to people—it was great. And then I finally settled on Ferrari-Carano and this, we had the same experience at the Ferrari-Carano in the Dry Creek Valley, outside of Healdsburg. I settled on them, I'm assuming that's part of the question or it was your next question, but, because we decided right away we didn't want to do one of the huge wineries like Mondavi or Gallo or something because they're atypical. I mean, they were dominant, but atypical. And we found to our surprise, that, actually, the most typical wineries are tiny little low-production wineries because, something like 90 percent of the 300 wineries in California actually produce 5000 cases or less a year. Boutique wineries are actually the typical winery, but the problem with boutique wineries from my point of view was their wines tend to be expensive. They'll start in the mid-twenties often and go up to two hundred, three hundred dollars in some cases for a bottle of wine and more. So, I felt it was very important, if I was writing a newspaper article, at that point, let alone the series, about one bottle of wine—that it be a bottle of wine that everybody who read the newspaper felt they could afford to buy. I also wanted it to be a—a good wine, a highly regarded wine because, I mean, if it was a schlock wine, everyone says this wine isn't so good, then I wouldn't really be looking at the process at it's best—I wouldn't be learning how the process was done when it's done well. So that's what I needed—I needed a mid-size winery, a bottle of wine from a mid-size winery, that's sold at an affordable price that was well received and popular. And Ferrari-Carano Fumé Blanc, which is made exclusively from Sauvignon Blanc grapes retailed at, I think it was \$14.99. And frankly, at that point in my life, my budget has expanded a little since then as I've gotten more into wine through doing this piece, but at that point in my life almost all the wine I bought was \$10.00 and under. But, I definitely knew that if it was—if I was in a magnanimous mood or I got a big check for something or it was somebody's birthday I wouldn't hesitate to spend \$15.00. That was an

amount of money, or more, even more—\$20.00, \$25.00—that I would spend for an occasion. And I felt like I was typical. If I was trying to buy under \$10.00 wine but was comfortable going to \$15.00, that pretty much everybody who would bother to read this piece at all, had even a minimal interest in it, would be willing to do that as well. And their production was in the neighborhood of 50,000 cases, it's more now, but at the time I began it was around 50,000 cases. So they met all my criteria—they were that mid-size, big mid-size, and the particular bottle of wine always got pretty good reviews, but more than that, it was the second or third most frequently poured Sauvignon Blanc in American restaurants, by the glass. So it was very popular, and all that added up to a perfect subject, or as close as I was going to come to a perfect subject. Although Sauvignon Blanc, as a rule, I learned as I went along, is not as highly, I mean, most people don't seem to regard it in this country as highly as Chardonnay. It doesn't sell as well as Chardonnay, but, what the heck, I like it.

1-00:27:28

Gershon:

What kinds of questions did you ask George and Steve and Don and Rhonda? I mean, how did you really get to know them?

1-00:27:37

Weiss:

Well, my interviewing style was schmoozy. So, I—what I tried to do is, I tried to hang with people. I'd go up there and I'd spend all day with Steve Domenichelli in the vineyard. And then I'd go back and spend another day with him and all through the day I'd say, "Well, what are you doing? And why are you doing it this way? And why are you doing it that way? And where are you guys working today and what's the next thing you have to do? And what's going on that you have to worry about? And, how many kids do you have and who's your wife and what are your kids like? And, oh, you had a divorce, and so did I." I tend to get engaged in a conversation with the people I'm writing about, in which I participate, I don't just ask questions. And, I would do the same thing to each of them. Now, different people are different. George Bursick, the winemaker, is very private and it was very hard to get him involved in a conversation. In fact, the first time I ended up asking him a lot of personal questions, not deeply personal, not like "How's your sex life? Or, do you have any blemishes on your lower extremities?" But, just, like "Where are you from? And what did your mother and dad do?" And he went to Don Carano, to the boss, and complained. You know, "I thought that this was going to be about making this bottle of wine, why is he asking me these questions?" So I learned that I wouldn't get very far with George doing it that way. Although I was going to be there for a whole year or more, and I knew that if I was patient eventually those things would start to emerge. Anyway, you can hardly spend a lot of time with somebody without some personal stuff creeping in. So that's what I do—I hang out, I listen, I ask a lot of questions. With George, and with Steve, and with Steve Meisner, the marketing director and with the Caranos, I mean, they were technical questions—you know, I mean, "Why do you use stainless steel?" I would ask George, "and barrels? And what kind of barrels are they and where do they come from and why do you use second year barrels and not first year barrels? And why do you use the cooper you use? Where do the corks come from? How are they made?" So I would meet with people, like the guy who makes the corks for them. And then I went—and I would meet with the workers. They have what they call help houses for

their laborers, Ferrari-Carano. And I'd go hang out with them and we could—basically their dormitories on the vineyards and I'd hang out with them and then I would, I think you'll probably get around to asking, but I went to Mexico and so on. So that's what I do—I hang out, I ask any question that occurs to me, and I just keep doing that and keep talking and of course the more information—you know this from what you're doing—the more information you acquire, the better your questions become. Once you've interviewed ten people, instead of saying to someone like a Jeffrey Gould, who is the liaison between the winery and the vineyard at, at Ferrari-Carano, instead of saying to him, “So what's it like going back and forth?” Once you've been there a few months—even though I haven't met him—now, in meeting him for the first time I could say to him, “Well, you know George Bursick is so private and Steve Domenichelli is so outgoing, it must be very hard going back between the two of them.” Or, “Steve tells me that as hard as he tries to be friendly with George, George just isn't a friendly guy.” Now that's not a question you can ask on the first day or the second day or the third day, but obviously a question like, “Is George a friendly guy?” is going to elicit a lot better answer than, “What's George like?” And so that's how I do it, I mean, I'm sure other people do things differently, but that's how I do it.

1-00:31:31

Gershon:

What do you see as being the main themes in *Grape*?

1-00:31:35

Weiss:

The main themes—whoo! I don't think that way, Jackie. I don't, I don't think thematically. I could make up an answer for you, but—I think I'll make up an answer. I'll try—try to see what I can come up with. I guess, one of the main themes is the—passion is the word that everybody in this industry seems to use endlessly, and so they devalue it by using it again and again. Oh, passionate! They're passionate about wine, they're passionate about food, they're passionate about their grapes, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It's a lot of hokey crap. But the truth of the matter is, that I did see an intense devotion to what they were doing, that the people who are doing this take enormous pride and joy in it and they love their work. It's—and what's not to love? I mean they're making wine for God's sake. I mean, they're in—they're in one of the most beautiful places in the United States. They're in the Dry Creek Valley, and you can be almost anywhere in Sonoma and Napa and be in a beautiful place. They spend a lot of time out of doors, and when they're not out of doors they're getting slightly tipsy.

1-00:32:51

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-00:32:52

Weiss:

And, drinking better wine than the rest of us are—most of the rest of us are going to drink. So, I mean, to me, I guess, if there is a theme it's the intense involvement and pleasure that they take. Maybe another theme that emerged is, it is a business, and there is an enormous amount of anxiety, you can't afford to screw up, it's a very thin line between a good wine and a not-so-good wine. And particularly for a company like Ferrari-Carano, and in this particular wine, which is their lowest price wine, and what they call their "Friendship Wine"—this is the wine which is supposed to make their label familiar to a lot of people who they then hope will then go on and buy their more expensive wines. And, they pride themselves on a certain consistency—that they turn out something very similar year to year. And that if they fail to do that they'll lose market share and their profitability will slide. Plus the fact that they're farmers, and they have to work by the calendar, and they can't control the weather, and they can't control infestations of deadly insects like the sharpshooters and rot and all these things. There's—you have to—you're moving at the rate of nature, which is both slow and rapid. I mean, Mother Nature moves very slowly, but the cycle repeats itself, the vine-growing cycle every year. And there's a continuum so what you do this year is going to affect—what you do this year you'll begin to plan what you rise last year and it's going to affect next year's production as well. So there's a kind of three year continuum. What you did last year, and what you're doing this year, how this will impact next year. All of that adds up to enormous pressure and anxiety. As a city person I sort of imagined that all these guys would be like laid back and bucolic and go with the flow, nature sort of guys. And, in fact, they're driven. In addition to being passionately involved, they're very driven, they're all nervous, there isn't a single person I wrote about in the hierarchy there, I'm trying to think, no, not a single person in the top six or seven people there, who didn't tell me he had sleep problems. Everyone of them is awake, all, every night, or, "Oh my god, did I do this? Did I do that? Did I do the other thing?" So that was a big surprise and it becomes a kind of theme in the book, this sort of endless anxiety. I guess those aren't very overarching themes, you can see, I mean, it's the people who come to interest me rather than the big questions. I'm not a big question guy.

1-00:35:41

Gershon:

[laughs] What, well, as you became closer to the Carano family and told everybody that you were chronicling, did it become hard to be objective?

1-00:35:52

Weiss:

I don't try to be objective. I don't believe in objectivity. I try to be accurate, fair, entertaining, and to the limited degree that I'm able to be, insightful. I think that's all I owe people. I don't even know what people mean by objectivity. Balanced is another word that's often used. I'm not sure I know what balanced really means. I mean, two opposing ideas are not necessarily equally moral or equal in weight. And so, to balance every idea against, and every other idea, is not very—every opposite idea, is not very appealing to me either. But those are the things I try to be—accurate, fair—

1-00:36:34

Gershon:

Was there ever a moment where you felt compromised in doing that?

1-00:36:37

Weiss:

Oh, well, no—I mean the closest I'd come was Don was always trying to give me freebies.

1-00:36:43

Gershon:

[giggles]

1-00:36:43

Weiss:

Free wines, free stays at his hotel in Reno, and I was always saying “No” I couldn't take it and Don really didn't understand that because, I think many of the people who write about wine for a living do take that stuff. I understood that he was doing it not to bribe me or, but rather because he's in the hospitality industry and generosity is part of his nature and part of his business and so from time to time I would accept something. I mean, just because it seemed churlish for me not to. For instance, I won an award, I can't remember what for, for something else that I had written. The newspaper, whenever one of their people wins an award, runs a little story saying, “Oh, look how great we are. This guy just won an award.” And so there was a story in the Sunday paper that said that I had won some award, and the next time I showed up there—I don't remember what they're called, but Don had a great big double sized bottle of the wine, like this one. In fact, it's just like this one here in Vic's office [referring to ROHO associate director Vic Geraci.] You know, they'd written on it, however they do that “Mike, Congratulations.” I mean, I had to take that. I couldn't say no. So those are, that was the only way that I felt, that was the only issue of compromise and frankly, the newspaper is very strict and journalism is becoming terribly concerned with ethics, much more so now than when I first broke in. If it had just been up to me I would have felt more comfortable taking wine some, not all, of the time it was offered, but some of the time, because I believe that ethics arises out of character, not out of a set of rules. No matter what kind of an ethics code I sign, or what kind of an ethics code the paper has, if I'm not an honest and scrupulous person then I'm not an honest and scrupulous person, and I'll sign the ethics code and break it. But, it's very important to me to be able to maintain my fairness and my distance. And so, I'm not going to allow myself to be compromised because I'd hate myself. Not because the paper says I can't be, but because I'd hate myself.

1-00:38:57

Gershon:

What did you learn about yourself as a writer?

1-00:39:00

Weiss:

On doing this story? Boy, that I sure loved it up there.

1-00:39:04

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-00:39:05

Weiss:

That's what I learned about myself. I, God, I loved getting up in the morning knowing it was one of the days I was going to drive up there and I'd leave bright and early. And I'd get over the Golden Gate Bridge and, and I'd start—I'd drive past Petaluma, and the sun was shining and the vineyards were there. And, oh man and I'd go out there and I'd hang around the vineyards—it was really a nice life and I really enjoyed it. Other than that, I don't think I learned very much about myself as a writer. This was not significantly different from many other stories that I had done. And as I say, I've done other books, and so nothing comes to mind.

1-00:39:51

Gershon:

What, and quickly thinking back, because I'm sure you learned an incredible amount about the wine industry, what was the biggest thing you learned about the wine industry?

1-00:40:02

Weiss:

About the industry, I don't think I learned, I don't think I was—well, yeah, I guess I learned how cutthroat competitive it is, mainly from Steve Meisner. Since you've asked about the industry, now, if you asked about what I—what were the biggest things I learned, it might be a different answer. But, specifically about the industry, I mean, Steve Meisner, he's the director of sales, and marketing, and he, Don Carano, calls him his box warrior. And, he's just a *driven* guy who chain smokes and his legs thrums all the time when he talks. He seems completely out of place in this beautiful valley, and he's the sales guy. And he said to me that—he used the expression, “a thing of desire”. I suppose he probably meant to say an object of desire, but what he actually said was, “a thing of desire.” That fascinated me, and I said, “Well, what do you mean by a thing of desire”? And he said, “Let's face it,” he said, “nobody needs a \$25 bottle of Chardonnay,” he said. “So, if you're selling it, \$25 bottles of Chardonnay or Gucci or Lexus or Mark Cross pens, that what you need to do is create the aura of desire around it, and that this is a desirable object.” And that was his job, because he was selling good wine. And, I was part of his overall scheme—people like me, I mean people who write about wines are part of that scheme, which is why they're always being given all these freebies. All this free wine and everything to entice them into creating an aura of desire around the bottle of wine. Perhaps anybody else would have known this going in, but for me it was an eye-opening moment about the industry, and that that

was how it worked, that the truth of the matter was that what was in the bottle was important, but in terms of selling that bottle it wasn't as important as what people thought that particular wine represented. So that, a bottle of Screaming Eagle a 1998 Screaming Eagle, which people spend hundreds and hundreds of dollars for, I mean, I mean maybe that wine is significantly better than lots of other wine, but I doubt it. Now, I don't have the kind of palate that can really be sure, and I think very few people do. But God knows that people who have a lot of money and are interested in this aspect of life—they want to have that because it is a thing of desire, as Steve Meisner said. I once heard a great story about—this is getting off wine—but I interviewed a, an elderly Jewish man who had, who had escaped here and, from Germany, and avoided the Holocaust. And, he told me that how when it was time to get out, when he and his family had to leave Germany, he had a business and that business was seized. And their possessions had been seized, but they had managed to acquire exit documents. And, a Gentile friend of his, a German Gentile, a friend of his, brought him to his house one night and the man, the man's name was, was Ginsburg, and he said to him, "Ginsburg", he said, "I run a perfume business," he said, "and I'm going to teach you the formulas for my perfumes because they can't take away from you what's in your head. And then, when you get to America you can be going to the perfume business, you'll have, you'll have something you can start with." So he taught him all his perfume formulas and this guy got, his name was Ginsburg, he got to New York, and Helena Rubenstein was the foremost maker of perfume. And he just went into a New York phonebook, I mean, we're talking like late 1930's here, and he looked up Helena Rubenstein. He called headquarters, he went up there, and he walked in and he said, "Hello," he said, "My name is Ginsburg, I just escaped from the Nazis and I want to see Helena Rubenstein." And, the secretary was very frosty, "Just one minute," and she went in, and Helena Rubenstein herself came in and said, "I don't do this, but if you just got away from the Nazis I'm going to give you five minutes. Come on in." And he said to me, "You know, she was the ugliest woman I've ever seen."

1-00:44:50

Gershon:

[giggles]

1-00:44:51

Weiss:

He said, and, and, I told her that I had these perfume formulas in my head and I wanted to know how you sold perfume. And she said, "All right, I can show you that." And she took two bottles, this is a true story, the guy was actually telling me the story, she took two bottles of perfume and put them on, on the desk between them and she said, "See this bottle. Very plain bottle." She said, "What's in here is exquisite perfume. I can sell this for \$5 a bottle. Now look at this one," and it was a beautiful swan-shaped bottle, gorgeous, what she said is, "What's in there is rat piss." She said, "I can sell that for \$15 a bottle."

1-00:45:26

Gershon:

[giggles]

1-00:45:29

Weiss:

And—I guess that’s the same thing that Steve Meisner was telling me in his different way, so much of it is marketing. And the image that you create around the bottle of wine—it’s a very long answer to your question, so what’s the next question?

1-00:45:44

Gershon:

That’s a great answer. Before *Grape*, what level of knowledge did you have about winemaking? In the wine industry?

1-00:45:52

Weiss:

You had to drink it. I told you when, when, when my wife asked me did you ever think about what went into a bottle of wine I included water. At that time—that was the level of my knowledge. I knew there was red wine, I knew there was white wine, I knew the names of some wines. I knew, you could—there was Merlot and Cabernet, but, I mean, I didn’t know anything about wine.

1-00:46:11

Gershon:

When you were done how did you go about fact checking? And verifying all of the information that you had?

1-00:46:18

Weiss:

Ah, I trust my notes. And when I’m uncertain I go back and double check. And that’s what I do. You know, when I’m pretty sure that I got it right I trust that. And luckily enough over the years I haven’t gotten it so egregiously wrong so often that that I get sued or I’m out of the business or anything like that. And when I’m not certain, and even when I have—you have to be honest with yourself. I mean, you realize that you’re really not certain, you go back and you ask again and again. And I do that even while I’m researching. I think one of the reasons George Bursick found me a little annoying is he’s telling me a lot of technical things about wine-making and I would make him explain it to me four and five and six times. And it drove him crazy, because he didn’t want to waste time with reporters. But that’s how I do it, I try to be very thorough and, double check myself, but keep an eye on myself and make sure I really understand. And copyeditors at the Chronicle go over it with great thoroughness and catch and correct numerous errors. And then when I expanded into a book, I went up to UC Davis to the School of Enology and Viticulture and spent a lot of time talking to three or four different professors up there trying to expand my knowledge, particularly of the chemistry of both wine growing—grape growing and winemaking.

1-00:47:39

Gershon:

So do the Caranos feel that you portrayed them correctly?

1-00:47:42

Weiss:

What?

1-00:47:43

Gershon:

Do the Caranos feel that you portrayed them and their winery—

1-00:47:45

Weiss:

Well, what Don has said to me—they were upset with the degree of personal information included in the series. Don has said to me on a number of occasions was that—he felt that, that the stuff about the winemaking was the best thing he had ever read about winemaking and how it was actually done. But that, then he said, “But the other stuff—and then he’d get this kind of look on his face like “I really didn’t want you to do that,” you know. They felt very much as though, their privacy was compromised in a way that they weren’t happy about. Although I made no secret of it and, that I was going to write about them as people and the closest the thing came to falling apart was that at one stage after, when I told you—George went to Don and said—and then there was a second incident where Steven Domenichelli had told me some stuff and then I went about how he had gotten his job and so on and I went to Don asking about that. And Don became very, very upset. And he wrote me a letter, this is, perhaps in May? I had been working on this since November, so that would have been, May 2002—I began working in November 2001, saying don’t do any more interviews. You know, we’re concerned about the personal nature of some of this stuff and we, you know—he almost backed out. But we talked a few times, and he—I—basically what I said to him then and then expanded it later in subsequent—I really expanded it in what I wrote finally in the book I’ve got coming out, based on the series. The book is called *A Very Good Year*, not *Grape*, and it’s coming out in June 2005 was, the people, the people are a story. You know, don’t you believe yourself that you’re a winegrower and you’re a winemaker, and all these people—that they’re essence is in this wine, that they, put their whole selves into it? And if all I do if write about the chemistry of fermentation no one’s going to want to read it; I have got to write about the people and I mean, I never made a secret of that. I made the—when I first talked with him, I talked about what I wanted to do was follow the making of a single bottle of wine. Now, the problem with that, of course, is that what *I* meant by that was I wanted to follow the people making the wine as they made the wine. What Don and Rhonda heard was that I wanted to follow the process. And that was not clear between us at the beginning and, and when it became clear Don freaked out, but then he—then he got okay again. So, it all worked out in the end.

1-00:50:52

Gershon:

About Ferrari-Carano, their mission statement is “To make fine wines from our own premium Sonoma County Vineyards that would be the best California had to offer and that would rival the best the world has to offer.” Do you think that they have achieved that, and if so, what makes them different than the other wineries?

1-00:51:10

Weiss:

Ah, I have no way of knowing if they have achieved that, because I’m not—I don’t have that kind of palate and I don’t drink that kind of wine. Apparently they’re doing all right. I mean, people are spending the money to buy their wine, so, it must pretty good—I mean, I like it. When I drink their wine I like it very much. I love the Fumé Blanc—I still drink it. I’ve been drinking the 2003, I’m looking forward to the 2004 coming out. It’s now usually discounted in places like Trader Joe’s. So it’s down in my price range and I can afford to buy it. And as far as I can tell, pretty much every winery in California has an identical mission statement. So I think they’re meaningless. And, except insofar as that is their intention within certain limits. Clearly they’re a big commercial winery, and therefore they are not able to put the attention to each vine and each grape and each bottle as smaller wineries. I mean there are issues of scale here. If you’re producing, I guess they’re up to I don’t know, a couple of hundred thousand cases a year across all their different varieties of wine. I think they—they’re running a factory up there. On the other hand, it’s very clear to me they’re very serious within that—those limitations of trying to make the wine as good as they possibly can. So I would assume that some of the really fine little boutique wineries are producing wine of a higher quality. But I feel like I’m not really in a position to know one way or the other. And, I like California white wines, but I don’t drink California red wines—I don’t like them. I drink French red wines. I also think there are better bargains available in French red. So almost all the red I drink is usually from France, Italy, or Spain.

1-00:53:14

Gershon:

You previously told me that you and Don clicked, which made for Ferrari-Carano one of the best candidates for the piece. This is essentially best PR campaign they could ask for-

1-00:53:26

Weiss:

Right

1-00:53:27

Gershon:

What kind of deal did you have to make between them and the paper? Was there no contractual deal?

1-00:53:34

Weiss:

No, none what so ever. I just I liked him. I mean, it's always better to like people than to not like them. But I would have gone ahead and written the same story whether I liked him or didn't like him—the difference would have been he would have been portrayed differently. I would have seen an unpleasant character and portrayed that unpleasant character. In fact, Don Carano is a genuinely gracious, nice person—easy to talk to, fun to hang around with. He's got a good sense of humor. He listens to people. But no, there was no contractual agreement of any kind, between the newspaper and the winery. And, liking him made my life a lot more pleasant because I was spending a lot of time with him, but it didn't have any affect on the integrity of what I wrote. I mean, certainly on the content, but not on the integrity.

1-00:54:34

Gershon:

What do you think is unique about the way Don Carano sells wine?

1-00:54:391-00:54:39

Weiss:

I don't know enough about the wine industry to answer that question.

1-00:54:44

Gershon:

Okay

1-00:54:44

Weiss:

I don't pay much attention to anybody else's marketing. But, they do they do have what they call—I can tell you how they market it. I can't tell you what makes it unique because I don't know enough about how other people market. But, they market it through what I came to think as “The Story,” capital T, capital S. And the story is, and, and Don and Rhonda will both tell you this story at the drop of—a question. You know, they're both Italian. They both grew up in Reno. They came from families that didn't have that much. Don's father died when he was young, his mother worked hard to support him. Rhonda's father was a furniture mover, and, but there was wine, homemade wine in the house always. They made wine and they made [head] cheese and they made salamis and, there was one, even when they were little kids they'd both be at the dinner table and they'd have a glass of wine and it was cut with maybe 7-Up or water, but, and, they combined that and they built the, this remarkable villa, which is their hospitality center at their location in the Dry Creek Valley. They have vineyards in three different valleys, but this is their headquarters, is their Villa Fiori, the house, the villa of flowers. And Rhonda is very much the one that designed that, and furnished it, that's her bailiwick—it's the artistic side. She's the one that designs the bottle, and the label. And, so what they're selling in the story, the components of the story are Italian, family, hospitality, wine—Italian family wine hospitality. And if you look at their ads it's all about gracious living. They, they have this hospitality center. Their ads are very beautiful, and the two of them are sitting there together. Rhonda's sort of

sitting on Don's lap and there's platters of cheese and figs, the bottles of wine and that's what they're selling. They're selling, and Rhonda's very out front about this and is very aware of it, that what they're selling is a way of life. And that everything, I wish I'd written about it a little more, everything about the bottle is supposed to say elegance. The label,—they spent months and months and months, in fact I think it was close to two years designing the label. And the label looks like an invitation—here it is. You know, it's art deco, it's platinum gold and white, and if you think about it looks like a fancy Bar Mitzvah invitation or a wedding invitation. And it's an invitation to drink their wine and therefore participate in the elegance of their lives. And it's all very purposeful and that's The Story—that's what they're selling. Now, clearly they're not the only ones selling that. I mean, in fact, it's patterned on the Mondavis—the Mondavis are selling a very similar thing, but, that's what, that's how they market. They market through what I call "The Story," and, I would assume that a lot of other wineries do too. I mean, when I'm choosing a bottle of wine, nothing in their marketing campaign has any bearing on my decision whatsoever. I might be aware of, that I had another bottle of wine from this region that I liked, or that the price is good, or a good wine shop that I trust is suggesting that I buy it. Or, I had it before. Or I've been curious about—something about this. But I'm almost oblivious to marketing.

1-00:59:12

Gershon:

Steve Domenichelli says, "It's an old trick—it wakes him up, gets them all the same size and they wake up—that's what my grandfather used to say—"

1-00:59:22

Weiss:

Right

1-00:59:24

Gershon:

"—in regards to snapping—"

1-00:59:23

Weiss:

Right, right, right, right.

1-00:59:24

Gershon:

"—the vine." What did you learn about this superstition in the business?

1-00:59:29

Weiss:

I don't think of that as superstitious. It seems to work.

1-00:59:32

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-00:59:33

Weiss:

Steve anthropomorphizes the vines. He's told me that he can he can—he sees each vine as a separate entity. I look and I see vines, but I—he means it. He sees each—in the things that we're good at, in the things that we love and we pursue with our lives are—we have deep vision. And I think that's true of every human being that loves something—whether it's another person or their work. And Steve sees deeply. There's a story I tell in *Grape* about Steve taking me up to a place where he does root stalk experiments, grafting different vines onto different root stalks, trying to make one that works just right, for a certain way. I didn't realize that the vines themselves, which are called the scions, and the root stalks are two separate things when I began this, but I learned that they were and that you grafted the one onto the other and you, you would adapt them for the conditions you had and what you were trying to accomplish with those vines and the grapes you hope to get from them. And he had talked to me a lot about his children and he was very attached to his children—he was intensely family oriented. And, he got—he had done this grafting and he—we went up there and he dropped down onto his knees. He had his pruner in his hands—and he had to lop off the top to encourage bottom growth and he looked up at me and he said, “God, I love this” [whispers]. And it was—at that moment that I grasped the spiritual connection between him and the land and the vines. And, so, when he says, “This is what my grandpa taught me and I'm waking the vine up,” I don't think of it as superstition. I think of it as the intense interrelationship that exists between this man and these plants, a relationship which I can see and explain, but not feel.

1-01:02:15

Gershon:

“Nobody had ever thrown the kind of resources, money, men, machinery Don has into making great red wines from Sonoma Hill, Sonoma Hillside vineyards”—

1-01:02:26

Weiss:

Mmmhmm.

1-01:02:27

Gershon:

—Is something you said.

1-01:02:28

Weiss:

Mmmhmm.

1-01:02:28

Gershon:

How do you think Ferrari-Carano stands out among its competitors?

1-01:02:32

Weiss:

Because they had a thirty-nine part series written about them in—in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. I don't know. Again, I don't know enough about other wines or, and the industry to do comparisons. My focus was very narrow here. I wasn't trying to learn about the industry. I was trying to learn about how this winery did it. And somebody else will have to answer that because I can't answer that.

1-01:02:59

Gershon:

That's okay. Can you describe the Fumé for me? Do you remember how it—

1-01:03:02

Weiss:

You mean like the taste? I can tell you what they said. What they said is that it's fruit-forward, with tastes of apricot and pit fruits, I guess they were saying. And then, but then there's also a vegetative quality associated with, traditionally with Sauvignon Blanc—mostly bell pepper I think. Now—I couldn't taste any of that.

1-01:03:27

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-01:03:28

Weiss:

I just don't have that kind of palate, and to me what it tasted like was kind of sweet and melony, but not too—not over the top sweet. And it had what I've learned to call a nice, long finish, which just meant to me, the way I would have put it before I knew these people, was that the taste and the sensation lingered in my mouth a long time, which I liked. And, it's not fizzy, but

it's a—God I'm starting to sound like an oenophile—it's assertive. I mean, it doesn't just go into your mouth and sort of lay there and you mull over the flavors. It's very—as George used to say, “It jumps right out of the friggin' glass!” There's something about it that goes whoop! when you, when you drink it. In fact, Carole was saying to me just last night because I'd brought home a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, somebody else's Sauvignon Blanc—Grgich Hills, because I wanted to try it because they have a great reputation and it's a little more expensive and, so we drank it a few nights ago. And last night I asked Carole if she liked it, and she said that the truth of the matter was that she didn't really like Sauvignon Blanc so much because it was such an aggressive kind of taste in her mouth, that she much preferred Chardonnay. So, to each his own. But that's how I'd describe it and the ways that I would, and of course they would describe it, you know—God, if only we have the label here because they—the back of the label they tell you everything about how it's supposed to taste and, I could never sense those things. Once, once I actually tasted I think it was—and I can't even remember, I think it was pineapple and I was—they had mentioned and I was so proud of myself that I could sense the pineapple. But I have a really dull palate I think. And don't pick up that stuff.

1-01:05:39

Gershon:

What makes the Fumé different than their Sauvignon Blanc? Did you learn that—

1-01:05:43

Weiss:

Well, there is, there is no—they don't produce a Sauvignon Blanc. This *is* their Sauvignon Blanc. All Fumé—Fumé was a marketing term created by Robert Mondavi because Sauvignon Blanc wasn't too highly thought of in this country. Although it produces great wines in France and elsewhere. And, it's very adaptable. It's grown worldwide. But, Robert Mondavi wanted to take Sauvignon Blanc, which wasn't selling too well I guess, or it wasn't very popular in the market, and make it into something sexy and exciting. And so he created the expression Fumé Blanc, which, it doesn't mean anything. It, the wine encyclopedia describes it as a fanciful, fanciful varietal. In other words it doesn't exist. There's no such thing as Fumé Blanc grape. But the Caranos use it, they say, to connote the fact that not all, but most of it, is aged in oak barrels as opposed to stainless steel. Some of it goes into stainless steel. So Fumé often, and apparently often means that it's aged in oak barrels, which purists actually don't like because they feel that the oakiness distorts the true character of the Sauvignon Blanc grape. Now, I've tasted some of the unoaked Sauvignon Blancs with people like John Storey and Eric Luse, the photographers, who also always tell me they're much better and much more round—I don't like them. I find them sort of sour. I like the Ferrari Carano style, but then the Ferrari-Carano style is directed at someone like me. I mean, I'm just a—when it comes to drinking wine, I'm clearly not an expert—I'm an everyman. And so that's exactly who they're trying to appeal to with this wine—everyman's taste. I get the feeling that it's a sort of, it's a sort of a middle-of-the-road wine. In other words, I compare it to a Toyota Camry. It's a nice car, but it's not either a very large car or a very small car or a very fast car, but it's a good car and it sells more cars than anybody else and people like to drive them because they—they're reliable and they're comfortable and they do okay. It's not a Mercedes, but it's a heck of a lot better than a Chevrolet and, I think that's what

Ferrari-Carano's doing. They're turning out Toyota—with this wine they're turning out Toyota Corollas, Camrys. They're turning out a middle-of-the-line, middle-of-the-road, good, reliable bottle of wine. That's what their goal is and that's what they're, I think, accomplishing.

1-01:08:42

Gershon:

Okay, we're going to stop the tape.

1-01:08:43

Weiss:

They probably hate me comparing it to a Toyota Camry

1-01:08:46

Gershon:

[laughs]

1-01:08:47

[Begin Audio File Weiss 02 04-04-05.wav]

Gershon:

Okay, we are in the second part of the interview with Mike Weiss and we are going to be speaking about migrant workers and El Charco now, is that how you pronounce it?

2-00:00:14

Weiss:

El Charco.

2-00:00:15

Gershon:

El Charco. What made you decide to go down there and follow the lives of the workers?

2-00:00:20

Weiss:

Oh, well, because it was such an important part of the story. I mean, I'd learned quickly from Steve Domenichelli that almost all their workers came from the same village. And I'd met a couple of the guys—Boa and Rene particularly and began to become friendly with them. I was at somewhat of a disadvantage because I speak very limited Spanish, and so I could only really communicate well with the guys who spoke some English, which was a great pity and I think a real shortcoming in my piece. I would have liked to have done much more than I did with the

workers. But there was—it was difficult talking to them and of course that—I was also somewhat compromised, this is a second issue that I should have thought to bring up earlier when answering that question because in effect, Ferrari-Carano could pick the workers I would talk to by putting certain guys who spoke English in front of me and saying, “Here, talk to him.” And the guys that they picked were very loyal to them. And so, if there were people who felt more malcontent, I didn’t discover them. Also, because I didn’t speak Spanish and so I couldn’t really penetrate, and because I’d been introduced by the bosses, regardless of what I may have thought about my integrity and being perfectly willing to listen to what everybody had to say and report it, from the viewpoint of these migrant workers I was part of the bosses. So I wasn’t going to be really trusted. Nonetheless, I think I did learn a fair amount about both Boa and Rene and a third worker. There were three I followed to some degree in the series—a young guy whose name is eluding me right now who got married and is very, very happy, loved his wife, and he became a foreman at the end. And I can’t remember his name. I can see him very clearly in my mind’s eye. But at any rate I went down there because I was fascinated. Here was a village in rural Mexico that was providing almost all the workers to a winery in the Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma County. And I went down there and I found a company town. Something like 60 percent of the men in that tiny little village worked at Ferrari-Carano. So the economy of this tiny little village depended entirely on Ferrari-Carano. And insofar as what I’ve learned, Ferrari-Carano was a pretty good employer. I mean, they paid the going wage. They paid the top of what, as good as any migrant workers are making in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys. They provide these help houses. They provide a place to live for their permanent workers. They don’t hire undocumented workers. And, you know they do some nice things. Steve Domenichelli got Don to buy a small herd of cattle so there’d be meat for the workers. And, so I went down there to see what life was like there and how it related to why they came and one of the things that I discovered is, I mean, it had been an agrarian village but they’d had a long drought and no help from the Mexican government and there’s no money to made in trying to be a farmer down there. There’s this terrible price you pay to be a—you come to the United States to be a migrant worker in the vineyards because you can make much more money than you can by staying at home and your family needs that money. The irony is that by coming to the United States and doing that of course you become very separated from your family. Or can become separated. Some guys manage to bring their families along, but it takes years to do. And so there’s this tremendous push-pull and the guys get very lonely and the families back at home get very lonely and yet, there’s refrigerators, which there wouldn’t be if they weren’t working at a place like Ferrari-Carano in El Norte. So, it’s a tough, tough situation, but that’s why I went, I went to see what life was like there.

2-00:04:46

Gershon:

What, like on your first experience going down there, what—were you feeling any anxiety, what were your feelings towards—?

2-00:04:55

Weiss:

No, my first—we went down—I went with John [Storey], the photographer, and there was one, there were two hotels in the—in the Urinagato, in a larger market town near in—there’s no

hotels in El Charco. It's just—this is not a tourist place. And so we got in there and—no, I didn't feel any anxiety. I was excited, I was anticipatory, and, so we got to this hotel and we just dropped our stuff off. And Rene and Boa met us and we drove to El Charco and we came back late at night and went to sleep and got up in the morning and discovered that there was no water in this hotel. I don't mean no hot water, I mean the water didn't come out of the taps.

2-00:05:39

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:05:40

Weiss:

So we got—I was going to—and I had—just like this, I had like about a half bottle of bottled of water with me and that's what I had to use to wash, brush my teeth, and get going in the morning. And—same thing the second night. And then we were going to spend one more night—and in fact we had to be back in El Charco very early the next morning, like four am, five am—we didn't care. We drove to Morelia, which—a big town. And checked into the best hotel in Morelia. When the bellhop showed me to my room I had him bring me two margaritas and turned on the shower. It was a great shower. I hadn't showered now in three days. And it was like hot and there was a lot of water and the guy brought the margaritas and I went in the shower and I was holding my margarita at the—

2-00:06:38

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:06:39

Weiss:

—then the hot water cascaded over me and I drinking my margarita. So I learned you can get really dirty in a hotel with no water. But no, I didn't feel any anxiety. I wasn't—no more than the usual anxiety, I mean, you're about to do an interview you want it to go well. But I've done so many of them in my life that I don't feel particularly anxious. As I said, I feel eager—eager to get going.

2-00:07:06

Gershon:

What were you expecting to find?

2-00:07:07

Weiss:

I had no expectations. I mean, I've been to Mexico a lot of times. I like—I love Mexico. I enjoy being there. But I didn't know what I would find. And I don't usually anticipate in that sense, "What will I find?" What I did find is a small town. The most intense gender segregation I've ever encountered outside of Islamic Pakistan. I mean, the women—in the three or four days that John and I spent there we never once—well, once we, we talked to a woman—once. And that was because we specially requested it and we had to request it like three times. And we finally got to talk to the wife of that young man whose name I can't remember. And she was very shy and barely spoke to us. But the women and the men seem to live very segregated lives. And there are no stores or shops in the village except these little [tiendas], these little mom and pop grocery stores which also double as bars. So you can go in there and there's—the shelves are half empty. You know, and there's some laundry soap and some hand soap and some tins of beans, and some Coke and things like that. And half the shelf is empty, but you can go up to the counter and get shots of tequila. And buy these little beers they call [Coronitas]. And, the guys who were there when we went because we went in December, which is the months the guys come back to the village. And, I mean the guys were on vacation. They'd earned their year's money and they, there was no job opportunities for them there. They couldn't work so they get up in the morning and everyone's knocking back beers. It was really kind of nice. Everyone was getting loaded by nine in the morning, except us. I mean, they'd keep on offering us beers and we'd say, "We can't, we're working." And it's a hot sun and we can't get loaded at nine in the morning—thanks.

2-00:09:12

Gershon:

What did you learn from the workers about vineyard culture?

2-00:09:16

Weiss:

What do you mean by vineyard culture?

2-00:09:17

Gershon:

I mean, just you talked in your book about the sandwiches they would make on the barbeque.

2-00:09:26

Weiss:

Oh, Mexican hamburgers, is that what-

2-00:09:31

Gershon:

Yeah

2-00:09:32

Weiss:

-is that what-

2-00:09:32

Gershon:

Yeah

2-00:09:32

Weiss:

—call them. Yeah, it was just hamburger meat with a lot of chilies in it. I don't know—when they grew their own chilies and did their own cooking at the help houses they lived two to a room. So that seems about the size of a small college dormitory room. Communal kitchen, there are times when violence flares up. But not many, I don't think. And they—essentially it was all about the money. It was all about the money. Make the money, make the money. And that's what they were there for. They weren't there because they loved vineyards although, I mean, acquiring those skills—learning how to prune or drive a tractor is—are very important—they're going to increase the amount of money you make. But these guys aren't into the world of wine. They're into the world of farming. I mean, they don't drink wine. They drink beer. And I saw that graphically at the, at the harvest party which includes all the bosses and all the vineyard workers. I mean, there were big ice buckets full of sodas and beers and bottles of the wine that they had made, the wine that I'm writing about. And, at the end of like a four hour feast—I mean, Don flew chefs in from Reno to cook this food, it was incredible, not one bottle of wine had been drunk by the guys who made—who grew the grapes. I mean, they're not wine drinkers.

2-00:11:06

Gershon:

What can you tell us, and I know this is not your specialty again, but what can you tell us about the number of migrant workers that participate in the growth of California's wine industry? Do you know if they're—mostly in unions or independent, like they are at, at Ferrari-Carano?

2-00:11:22

Weiss:

No, I have no idea what the numbers are. I'm sure you could very easily acquire it. I may even have included it in my article for all I know. But I mean, I don't remember that if I did. And, no, there—the UFW has been trying to organize them with some limited success. The industry is incredibly resistant and I think it's going to be very, very, very hard for the UFW to succeed. And, there was a bill that passed the legislature while I was working on this story and the UFW held a big march urging Gray Davis to sign the bill, basically workers at a winery would certify a union to represent them, usually the UFW, and then the winery would drag it out—first they'd resist certification if it were possible. But then once the union was certified the winery would drag out contract negotiations literally for years. Dolores Huerta, who is one of the leaders of UFW, told me she had been in negotiations with Gallo of Sonoma for seven years. It was before they had a contract—it's seven years to get a contract. So obviously there was a certain

resistance on the part of the owners to do that, and the bill before Governor—then Governor Gray Davis would have put various sanctions and pressures on the owners to make sure they did that in a timely fashion. And, Davis wouldn't sign it. Between the time it passed and the time that Davis had to either sign or not sign it the wine industry contributed like \$50,000.00 dollars to Davis's campaign war chest. In the end they had a compromise. They weakened the bill, considerably so probably it was toothless. And then he signed it.

2-00:13:18

Gershon:

What does UFW stand for?

2-00:13:19

Weiss:

United Farm Workers.

2-00:13:20

Gershon:

Okay.

2-00:13:21

Weiss:

Cesar Chavez

2-00:13:23

Gershon:

Right. In an article entitled "California's Secret Weapon" Larry Walker wrote that, "California has one advantage over the competition—the vineyard workers. There isn't another wine growing region that has workers with the work ethic, the ability to rapidly learn necessary skills, and the joy of life that California has with its Mexican and Latin American field workers. They are an asset and can hardly be measured in dollars." Based on your experience at Ferrari-Carano, what can you tell us about the importance of the migrant workers?

2-00:13:50

Weiss:

I agree with every word of that. They're obviously incredibly hard working people. I mean, they're working hours that would kill me, doing back-breaking labor, much of it for very little money. And, pretty cheerful people for the most part. I think—just really happy to have the opportunity to earn a living. Although, as I said, also there's a lot of sadness that goes with it here—the separation from family. But I agree with that sentiment. Again, I don't know enough about the wine industry in say France or Chile or Argentina or New Zealand or South Africa to

know who the hell the vineyard workers are there. We're fortunate to have such a huge, inexpensive labor force.

2-00:14:33

Gershon:

The agriculture business is by and large a seasonal business-

2-00:14:37

Weiss:

Yes.

2-00:14:37

Gershon:

What do the migrant workers do off season?

2-00:14:39

Weiss:

They go home, and they get drunk. I was just telling you. They go home and they hang out with their families. They drink, they hang with the guys. They have a good time.

2-00:14:50

Gershon:

And do their employers feel at all responsible for things that happened off season?

2-00:14:55

Weiss:

I don't think so.

2-00:14:57

Gershon:

Okay. There are over half a million field workers in California and with the booming sales of wine in Northern California the need for more workers has increased and available housing and shelters are harder to find, if at all and are often full. Ferrari-Carano is unique because it has its help houses.

2-00:15:13

Weiss:

Right.

2-00:15:14

Gershon:

What can you tell us about the help house?

2-00:15:16

Weiss:

Well, we've already discussed it. Haven't we?

2-00:15:18

Gershon:

Yeah. A little bit. Is there anything—I mean, you went there, did you see anything that kind of stuck out in your mind?

2-00:15:23

Weiss:

Just the things I've told you. More Mazola oil than I've ever seen in my life.

2-00:15:27

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:15:27

Weiss:

Everybody cooks with Mazola oil. Growing a little cottage garden for various kinds of hot peppers and cacti. And it's where they sleep. Hang out.

2-00:15:43

Gershon:

After 25 years the short hoe was just made illegal because of all the work that Cesar Chavez did—

2-00:15:49

Weiss:

Mmmhmm.

2-00:15:50

Gershon:

And the problems that it caused the migrant workers who used it.

2-00:15:52

Weiss:

It wasn't just made illegal, was it?

2-00:15:53

Gershon:

Within the last ten years.

2-00:15:55

Weiss:

Yeah. Okay.

2-00:15:57

Gershon:

Are any of the pesticides used by Ferrari-Carano workers dangerous? Have their workers have any medical problems?

2-00:16:03

Weiss:

Yes. They spray with sulfur and it does cause respiratory and skin problems and, in some cases, can be—very few, but some can be quite serious. But there's no question that the use of these pesticides again and again and again by guys who work in the vineyards is not good for their health. I didn't get into it in enough depth to know more than that, except for the obvious that the sulfur was particularly bad. It caused more worker illness and injury that I think that any other substance in California. That's about what I know.

2-00:16:51

Gershon:

On the wine industry: food and wine go hand in hand. On their website, Ferrari-Carano has their menus that go with the wine.

2-00:16:59

Weiss:

Right.

2-00:17:00

Gershon:

And Rhonda's recipes

2-00:17:00

Weiss:
Right.

2-00:17:01

Gershon:
What do you think about the regionalism of food and wine?

2-00:17:04

Weiss:
What do you mean?

2-00:17:05

Gershon:
—in wine country. Well, that it's a regional thing that with the wine comes the food. It's great food, great wine.

2-00:17:12

Weiss:
Yeah, what's there to think? Eat it and drink it.

2-00:17:16

Gershon:
Did you learn anything about sustainability?

2-00:17:18

Weiss:
Yeah, that it's ultimately not something I had heard anybody talk about.

2-00:17:24

Gershon:
Okay.

2-00:17:25

Weiss:
That's—which is learning something about it. I mean, yeah, they want to keep their land healthy and their vines healthy, that's important. And Steve is concerned about the environment and he is concerned about the health of the Dry Creek, which runs along the edge of the vineyard I was

writing about. And he does believe that he's a steward of the land. On the other hand, it's a business and they're mass producing wine and they do make decisions—I mean, there are some wineries that are not using pesticides. There's some wineries that are not using tractors because of the threat of erosion, so Ferrari-Carano's not one of them. I think you've got a guy running their farm operations who cares about that, but also cares deeply about the bottled wine and has to strike that balance.

2-00:18:19

Gershon:

What does organic mean to you?

2-00:18:21

Weiss:

Expensive.

2-00:18:23

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:18:25

Weiss:

Usually not very tasty. I shop at Whole Foods, I shop at Farmer's Markets. I like the idea. I have nothing against—I like feeling that that when I shop at a Farmer's Market, which I do every week, it's part of my life's pleasure, and when my daughter, my youngest daughter, is home in the summer we ride our bicycles every Saturday morning to our local Farmers Market and shop together and I really love doing that. Frankly, the fact that it's organic matters a lot less to me than it's fresh. What I really—what really appeals to me about the Farmers Market is this stuff was growing earlier that morning or at least yesterday. And I know what organic means. It means they're not using pesticides and so—I'm not that worried about that stuff. I eat food that I'm sure has pesticides on it and I've eaten my whole life, and I don't glow in the dark. And I'm used to certain tastes and I like junk food too, but I appreciate what Alice Waters has done. And I've eat—Chez Panisse is probably the best restaurant I've ever eaten in. And, what else can I say?

2-00:19:58

Gershon:

That's enough. What does it mean to be a Bay Area? And how do you think food and wine plays a part in that?

2-00:20:03

Weiss:

Well clearly it, it plays a big role in the lives of the people who live in this area. I don't know what it means except that we live here. And no matter where you live you take on certain sensibilities associated with that area. And this is an area which is very interested in food and wine, so I've taken on a certain amount of that. I really love eating.

2-00:20:29

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:20:30

Weiss:

I love it far too much. And I enjoy cooking and I enjoy shopping. But then again I enjoyed all those things when I lived in Philadelphia and New York and Baltimore as well, probably not shopping as much but, so, you know that's a part of our identity here, but it's not the whole story by any means.

2-00:20:57

Gershon:

Within the last few months Harvard just came out with the new Food Table—the new Pyramid. And it lists that one should have between one and two glasses of wine a day.

2-00:21:06

Weiss:

Yeah.

2-00:21:07

Gershon:

How do you think that will affect the wine industry or just you, as a wine drinker?

2-00:21:10

Weiss:

Oh, it has no effect on me whatsoever. I mean, it's a big joke. You know, it's like I drink what I want to drink. I drink more wine than that, and I've always learned a living. I don't beat my children. I don't fall down the street. I don't fly off the handle. I don't pass out in public.

2-00:21:29

Gershon:

[giggles]

2-00:21:30

Weiss:

And, those are my standards. So I don't care what Harvard says or anybody else says. I try to eat a well-balanced diet and, which is easy if you like everything.

2-00:21:44

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:21:45

Weiss:

And I do. And I drink wine because I love it and it's enjoyable and part of it is the ambiance and culture surrounding it and part of it is what's actually in the glass. But when I get home from work I like to have a glass of wine. And I'm not going to stop even if Harvard tells me it's bad.

2-00:22:06

Gershon:

Okay. After this whole experience-

2-00:22:10

Weiss:

Yes.

2-00:22:10

Gershon:

And this following the wine from dirt to bottle-

2-00:22:15

Weiss:

Mmmhmm..

2-00:22:15

Gershon:

What are your sentiments on the romantic dream of working a vineyard?

2-00:22:21

Weiss:

Oh, is there a romantic dream about working at a vineyard?

2-00:22:23

Gershon:

Yeah.

2-00:22:24

Weiss:

Who has it?

2-00:22:25

Gershon:

Well, to own a vineyard and—

2-00:22:26

Weiss:

Oh, own a vineyard-

2-00:22:27

Gershon:

Sorry, to own a vineyard.

2-00:22:28

Weiss:

Oh, god I don't know. I mean, I never wanted to own a vineyard. Looks like hard work and I'm not an agricultural kind of guy.

2-00:22:33

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:22:36

Weiss:

So it didn't affect my—I never had such a dream. My dream would be writing a great book, not of growing great grapes.

2-00:22:45

Gershon:

Okay. If you were to work on a vineyard—

2-00:22:48

Weiss:

Mmmhmm.

2-00:22:49

Gershon:

—now having experienced all the different people that work and create a bottle, which position would be your—

2-00:22:54

Weiss:

Ah—that’s a great question. God. Well, the only two jobs that genuinely appeal would be George Bursick’s, the winemaker, and Steve Domenichelli’s, the grape grower. I think Steve lives a better life. I mean, he’s outdoors and it’s beautiful and he seems to have a lot of fun. And George is the creative part. You know, he gets to mix all this stuff and make it into just what he wants. So, both those jobs are very appealing, but one involves an element of hard, physical labor, and knowledge that I don’t think you can really acquire by going to school and the other involves a degree of scientific and chemical knowledge. I got C’s in chemistry.

2-00:23:47

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:23:48

Weiss:

So, I couldn’t do either. They don’t appeal to me as, “Gee, they’re lines of work I’d love to do.” Being a chef appeals to me. I mean, I have never studied it, I’m not good enough. But if I were given another life and told I could do anything I wanted as long as I couldn’t do what I do now, which is what I really want to do, I would probably choose to either be a lounge singer or a chef.

2-00:24:15

Gershon:

[laughs] Okay. What do you hope that your readers take away from *Grape*?

2-00:24:22

Weiss:

Pleasure.

2-00:24:26

Gershon:

That's a great answer. What did *Grape* do for the *Chronicle*?

2-00:24:31

Weiss:

Well I don't know. I don't know that it did anything for the *Chronicle*. You know, it got a significant readership, we know that. One of the things it did do for the *Chronicle* is it produced this soft-cover book, which the *Chronicle* put out called *Grape: The Making of California Wine*, which is a compilation of all of the articles that appeared. All thirty-nine with a short introduction that I've written to it. And this is the first time that the *Chronicle* has ever turned articles into its own book. And so it did that. It allowed the *Chronicle* to publish a book which is available if you subscribe to the *Chronicle* now. You could get this as a gift-

2-00:25:16

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:25:17

Weiss:

So I would like all the people listening to this interview one hundred years from now, to run right out and subscribe to the *Chronicle* and demand that they get a copy of *Grape*.

2-00:25:26

Gershon:

My last question-

2-00:25:29

Weiss:

Go ahead.

2-00:25:30

Gershon:

Who is Deep Cork?

2-00:25:32

Weiss:

I can't tell you that because I promised Deep Cork that I would never reveal his or her identity.

2-00:25:37

Gershon:

How did you meet this contact?

2-00:25:38

Weiss:

I can't answer any questions about Deep Cork.

2-00:25:40

Gershon:

You can't tell me why they're so afraid of coming out?

2-00:25:43

Weiss:

I can't.

2-00:25:44

Gershon:

Okay. Thank you so much for your time.

2-00:25:46

Weiss:

Thanks—that was good. I never expected that question. I like that.

2-00:25:49

Gershon:

[laughs]

2-00:25:51

Weiss:

Good try.

2-00:25:50

Gershon:

Is there anything that you want to add? Anything you don't feel like you've said?

2-00:25:54

Weiss:

No, no, no, no.

2-00:25:55

Gershon:

[laughs]. Okay

2-00:25:56

Weiss:

You did a good job—that was a good—

2-00:25:57

Gershon:

Thank you very much.

2-00:25:58

Weiss:

—those were great questions.

2-00:25:59

Gershon:

Thank you

2-00:26:00

Weiss:

You really covered all the ground. You could not have done it better.

2-00:26:02

Gershon:

Thank you. Sorry to keep you so long.

2-00:26:06

Weiss:

That's okay.

[End of interview]