

Volker Eisele, Napa winemaker who led fight for farmland protection, dies at 77

BY DEREK MOORE, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT, January 2, 2015, 7:51PM

Volker Eisele, the outspoken architect of a landmark farmland protection policy in Napa County that became widely emulated as a model for staunching unwanted development, died Friday at his ranch home near St. Helena from complications related to a stroke. He was 77.

The German-born Eisele was an organic wine grape grower before the concept was popular. As a community activist and leader in the agricultural industry he fearlessly took on established orthodoxy, often in blunt style. He will be remembered most for engineering Measure J, a controversial land use policy that was enacted by voters in 1990 over heavy opposition from pro-development forces.

Under Measure J, agricultural lands in Napa County cannot be converted to other uses without voter approval. The measure survived numerous legal challenges, including one before the state Supreme Court. In 2008, it was extended by voters through 2058.

“Volker Eisele was largely responsible for Napa’s foresight in protecting our agricultural community,” North Coast Congressman Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, said Friday. “With his understanding of, and dedication to, land use policy, he leaves a lasting legacy for future generations to follow. Volker made great wine and was an even better friend that will be missed.”

Said Sandy Ellis, executive director of the Napa County Farm Bureau, “No one in the North Bay has done more for farmland protection than Volker Eisele.”

Eisele’s work, which also included a 1980 initiative that limits population growth in unincorporated Napa County, built upon the county’s pioneering establishment of the nation’s first ag preserve in 1968.

Eisele and his wife, Liesel, fell in love with the valley after they purchased 400 acres on Lower Chiles Road near St. Helena in 1974. The estate originally was part of the Rancho Catacula land grant, given to Joseph Bollinger Chiles in 1843 by the last Mexican governor of California. The Chiles family later sold a portion of their land to Francis Sievers, who founded Lomita’s Vineyard and Winery on the site.

Eisele and his wife moved into a farmhouse on the property in order to oversee grape growing and to raise a family, which grew to include a son and daughter.

Alexander Eisele said his father insisted on farming the land organically without the use of herbicides or pesticides, despite conventional wisdom at the time that it would be hard, if not impossible, to sustain a viable crop using those methods.

“He was very adamant about that,” his son said Friday. “It was the right way to treat the land ... as opposed to simply jumping in and spraying.”

Volker Eisele did not take a direct path to winemaking. Born on Aug. 7, 1937, in Munster, Germany, Eisele and his two sisters were raised by their mother after Eisele’s father went off to fight in the war and never returned home.

He moved to the United States in his 20s to enroll at UC Berkeley, where he studied sociology and met his future wife, who was studying for a career as a landscape architect.

Eisele got into grape growing at the urging of a friend. But his main motivation for moving to Napa Valley was because he adored living in the rural environment, according to his son.

Alexander Eisele, who is now president of Volker Eisele Family Estate, said it was “very important” to his father that the valley be governed by good planning, and not random growth.

Juliana Inman, a Napa city councilwoman and architect who knew Eisele for two decades, said she found him “abrasive” on occasion. But she said he also was funny and smart, and that she often consulted with him on land use issues.

“I have a hard time conceiving of Napa County without him,” she said.

Measure J grew out of Eisele’s alarm over what he perceived as a pro-growth majority on the Napa County Board of Supervisors following elections in 1988.

Eisele met with upvalley supervisor Mel Varrelman and Angwin activist Duane Cronk for lunch at a restaurant near St. Helena to discuss putting an initiative on the ballot that would take land use policies out of the hands of pols.

“It was his idea,” Varrelman said Friday. “He asked us to support him, and we did.”

Eisele, who was then president of the Napa Valley Grape Growers, said finding support for the initiative “was all very difficult and a balancing act of the first order,” according to an oral history Eisele provided to the Jack L. Davies Agricultural Land Preservation Fund.

Measure J struck at the pressure points between private property rights and the desire to stem unwanted growth in the county. Pro-development forces marshaled to try and quash the initiative at the ballot box, and then took the fight to the courts after voters supported the policy.

In 1995, a 5-2 majority on the California Supreme Court upheld Measure J on the grounds that it “appears to be a reasonable attempt to effectuate ... a long-range policy intended to guide the county’s development, curb haphazard growth and promote desired land uses.”

Eisele learned of the court’s ruling the following morning as he and his wife were boarding a bus to the San Francisco Airport for a flight to Hawaii. He described the county counsel all but jumping out of his car to hand Eisele a copy of the court’s decision.

The moment was captured in James Conaway's 2002 book, "The Far Side of Eden," which devoted a full chapter to Eisele and his many exploits in county land use planning.

Since passage of Measure J, Napa County voters have approved seven of the 15 land use conversions sought within the measure's guidelines. Voters overwhelmingly approved extending the measure's protections in 2008 with almost no organized opposition.

"It's worked, and it's worked very well," Varrelman said of the original initiative.

Eisele, a past president of the Napa County Farm Bureau, was awarded "outstanding agriculturalist of the year" by the organization in 2008 for his dedication to agricultural preservation.

He also was a member of the St. Helena Choral Society.

Besides his wife and son, Eisele is survived by a daughter, Christiane Eisele of New Orleans; and two sisters, Bettina Harling and Uta Eisele, both of Munster, Germany.

The family is planning a memorial service next week at St. Helena Catholic Church. The specific date and time are still to be determined.

You can reach Staff Writer Derek Moore at 521-5336 or derek.moore@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter [@deadlinederek](https://twitter.com/deadlinederek).