



## Relighting Passion

### *Wine and America on the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United States*

**By Karen MacNeil**

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The Statue of Liberty was crumbling. But in 1986, after five years and \$250 million, the statue—an extraordinary gift from France--was “relit” in a thrilling nationwide celebration presided over by then President Ronald Reagan. No matter what your political persuasion today, the relighting of the Statue of Liberty was a magical event in America.

I was, at the time, the first food and wine editor of USA Today, based in Washington DC, and I had what I thought was a simple but potentially exciting idea. What if, at the exact moment that the statue’s giant torch was relit, wine drinkers across the country, toasted the Statue of Liberty with a glass of American wine? I named the event “A Toast to Liberty,” and within two weeks, the trade groups of New York State, Oregon, Washington State, and Texas all agreed to participate.

#### **A Wine Toast Across America**

Amazingly, on the night of the relighting, not only were wineries involved, but many restaurants across the country served their guests a free glass of American wine with which to toast. That night, I was at Jean Louis at the Watergate, then the most powerful restaurant in Washington DC. Every politician in the place lifted a glass of wine in a toast.

I think back to that moment now because as the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of America seizes our national consciousness, I realize that some things about America have changed (lots of things, among them, it’s hard to imagine a room full of American politicians all toasting with wine), but a love of our country has not changed. In fact America needs us to love it more than ever.

Not unlike wine.

## **The Founding Fathers Drank Wine When They Signed the Declaration of Independence**

Wine has built many rural communities in the US and sustained them for a century. There are 12,000 wineries in the US, most of them family owned. These are the foundations of American wine culture. While we often look to Europe as an example of what is right and good and true about wine, we forget that America, too, has a wine culture.

In fact, wine is the historic national drink of America, and as this 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary dawns, it's important that we remember that, and celebrate it.

After all, the Founding Fathers were drinking wine when they signed the Declaration of Independence. Francis Scott Keyes was drinking wine when he composed the Star Spangled Banner. At the first Congressional Congresses, the Congress members always drank wine. Ironically, wine—not spirits—was the forerunner of what would eventually become the American “cocktail party.”

## **The Creation of the Largest Pro-Wine Campaigns in the US**

I am thinking about these facts now with a heavy heart and yet a heartful of hope. Because two years ago, I, along with my cofounders Kimberly Charles and Gino Colangelo, created the mission-driven *Come Together—A Community for Wine*. It was (and is) a pro bono effort. We launched two campaigns: *Come Over October* and *Share & Pair Sundays*. So far, the campaigns have reached 2.9 billion impressions in the media with another 5.6 million on social media. They have become the largest pro-wine grassroots campaigns ever launched in the US. And we're not done yet.

Our grassroots campaigns happen because wineries, trade groups, restaurants, retail stores, magazines, importers and distributors all feel the same passion we do—the passion that says: wine needs protecting. It needs champions. It needs wine drinkers to share wine with friends and family. Because we wine drinkers believe in authenticity, nature, and the good that comes from mindfully drinking an artisanal product connected to the earth.

And so in July, in this most important month, it seems right to drink some wine, to drink in and lean in to American wine culture.

As Americans, we need to re-fill our hearts (and glasses) with what's possible.