



# Robert Smerling

**This “lucky” Wall Street exec-turned-venture-capitalist-turned-winemaker-turned-philanthropist says he’s just getting started.**

By Ed Goldman  
Photography by Mike Graffigna



**I**m really one very lucky guy," Robert Smerling says over a late lunch at Scott's Seafood in Loehmann's Plaza in Sacramento. "I married above my station. I have two wonderful kids. And I've had three marvelous careers."

To that last part, he might want to add "to date." For in his first 51 years, Smerling, a transplanted Bostonian, has been a mattress manufacturer, a finance professional (first as a Wall Street executive, then as a venture capitalist) and, since 1993, the founder, chairman and chief executive officer of Renwood Winery in Amador County, which produces some of the country's best-reviewed Zinfandels. The winery is named for Smerling's wife, Rene (pronounced REE-nee, a nickname for Irene).

If there's a common thread running throughout all of Smerling's careers, it's his personal brand of salesmanship. His alternately mellow and thundering baritone can exude instant intimacy or unquestionable authority, depending on the topic and venue.

#### EXAMPLES:

- On a conference call at his office, which delays our interview by 25 minutes, Smerling demonstrates that a closed door is a laughable barrier against his oratorical power (it should be pointed out that this interviewer does not yield to the temptation of taking notes from the other side of that door, though the subject matter is, from a business standpoint, somewhat juicy);

- Driving to lunch a little later in his purring, black Lexus (whose buttery interior's scent offers subtle but unmistakable evidence that its driver is a dedicated cigar smoker), Smerling speaks in the confidential tone of a long-time acquaintance. In fact, we spent a mere two hours together five years ago for another interview, but Smerling has a way of making our second encounter seem like Old Home Week;

- At lunch, Smerling's gestures are as big as his voice, though he is unfailingly polite to the waitstaff and, in consideration of his fellow diners, continuously modulates his volume. But he pumps it up a bit when the restaurant's manager stops by the table and Smerling invites him to an annual open house at the winery "for 3,000 of my closest friends." It's Commander Smerling in full sale: After all, Scott's Seafood serves Renwood wines.

Robert Smerling—never Bob, Bobby, Rob or Robby—is the son of a mattress manufacturer and the

grandson of Eastern European immigrants and labor activists. He says his grandparents' impoverished lifestyle in retirement fueled his desire to provide "really comprehensive benefits" for his employees. In addition, he says that he and his partners, with the blessing of his board of directors, have been moving the company toward employee ownership.

But he's also hoping to take the privately held business public "in the not-too-distant future." Pestered for specifics, Smerling ignores the question for about 30 minutes, then says, mock-peevisly, "OK, OK, in the next few years. Now stop interrupting me." But a moment later he adds, "Well, maybe sooner than that." Meanwhile, Renwood has begun selling off much of the 417 acres of vineyards it owns and cultivates in the Sierra foothills. "Our goal is to concentrate even more on controlling the quality of wine production but to pull away from growing," he says.

It annoys Smerling—and he intends to disprove the theory—that in the wine business, expansion is often equated with lapsed standards. "There's just this terrible mythology out there that the bigger you get, the worse the quality of your wine. That's why some self-appointed wine experts are always discovering"—he sneers when he says this last word and punctuates it by pantomiming quotation marks around it—"little boutique wineries, where they supposedly still do things the old way.

"This is just nonsense!" Smerling continues, his voice rising enough to cause someone at a booth behind him to turn around and see why this interviewer is being bawled out. "We have superior winemakers here: Dave Crippen, our chief winemaker; Joe Shebl, our assistant winemaker; and Jon Alfonso, our production oenologist. These are people who were brought up in the growing business and have advanced university degrees! I'm offended by the suggestion that a company's growth is bad for its product." And while it isn't clear how often that suggestion is actually made to Smerling, his point is clear: This hotly competitive industry isn't for the faint-hearted or thin-skinned.

Which is not to say that Renwood's red wines have anything to blush about.

Earlier this year, a panel of experts at *Wine Enthusiast* gave A minuses and B pluses to several of the company's offerings, including three of its 2003 Zinfandels (Grandmère, Old Vine and Fiddletown). Renwood also took home five medals at the annual Rodeo Un-

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corked! Grand Wine Tasting and Best Bites Competition in Houston this past February. The winery grabbed the top award, "Reserve Champion," for its 2004 Amador Ice Zinfandel, which gets its name from the cryogenic process used to preserve the harvested grapes for several weeks prior to a six-month fermentation period and year-long barrel aging.

Renwood also has been feted by the *Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wines*, 2006 *Dallas Morning News* Wine Competition, 2006 Finger Lakes International Wine Competition and 2005 Los Angeles County Fair Wines of the World contest,

among others. Closer to home, the company won eight medals—three gold, three silver and two bronze—at the 2006 *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition.

Yet Smerling has no intention of resting on Renwood's laurels. He says that he wants to add a spa and restaurant at the winery, and that his group is hoping to acquire other vineyards—in Napa and possibly Oregon—to allow the company to add such varietals as Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet to its prize-winning portfolio.

And after that? Smerling's body language suddenly goes conspiratorial as he leans forward and thumps the tablecloth with his thick fingers, as if to thwart the efforts of a hidden wire-tapper. "My wife and I have decided that it's time for me to have another adventure." He smiles broadly and adjusts his dark, small-framed, rectangular eyeglasses.

"I love entrepreneurship," he says. "I also love painting, but I've tried that—and clay sculpting—and I'm terrible at them. I also can't sing a note. But what I'm really good at is backing people who have big ideas. They inspire me, in all sorts of fields. I don't care if they're 25 years old or 65 years old. Age is irrelevant. Inspiration and innovation are the only things that matter." Smerling says he's always been drawn

to financing bio-technology, which was his specialty when he worked as a vice president of Paine Webber in Boston in the early 1990s, and hints that this is one of the fields in which he plans to direct his energies.

To buy himself the time to be both vigilant about his winery and available for new opportunities, a few months ago Smerling signed an exclusive sales-and-marketing contract with W.J. Deutsch & Sons, Ltd., a 25-year-old family owned-and-operated wine importer based in White Plains, N.Y.

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What makes the deal fairly unique for the wine industry, Smerling says, is that Deutsch simultaneously invested

"significantly" in Renwood Winery, which also bought Peter Deutsch, the company's president, a seat on the Renwood board. In a statement, Deutsch praised "the synergies between our two companies" and their "mutual desire to expand volume and distribution" of California Zinfandel.

Zinfandel isn't just an interest of Smerling's, of course: It's a passion. As a child, he says, "I thought that all wine came in a bottle with a screw-top and was called Manischewitz. Then one evening, a guest came to our house for dinner. He was British and, naturally, that seemed like the height of sophistication to me at the time.

"Anyway, he brought a bottle of wine for us to share. But it needed a corkscrew to be opened. I'd never even seen a corkscrew." After the wine was opened and allowed to breathe, Smerling, just 13 at the time, watched with fascination as the guest "swirled the wine in his mouth before deciding to swallow it. It really impressed me, and I tried to do the same thing when my parents let me have a taste."

Smerling has been swirling ever since—first, as an amateur who used to visit Napa and Gold Country wineries when he was in California on business trips, then as a pro whose palate is sought after by his own producers as well as by other winemakers. In fact, the day before this interview,

he says, "I was tasting wine for five-and-a-half hours." Asked if his cigar smoking compromises his taste buds, Smerling says, "Not for me, but I guess it differs for other people," then launches into a brief tutorial on what he eats on wine-tasting days. "I never have anything before the tasting," he says, "and when we break for lunch, I'll have a nice hamburger and maybe some potato chips—something starchy but nothing that will interfere with the subtleties of the wine."

He is just as determined to let nothing interfere with his philanthropy. Since establishing Renwood in Amador County and taking up residence in Carmichael, Smerling, his wife and his company have immersed themselves in giving. "In the past year, we did about \$350,000 of charitable work, which was in response to about 400 different requests," he says. "Sometimes we'll just donate a bottle of wine for an auction; other times, we'll provide all the wine for a fundraising dinner. It's always a heart tug for us to decide what we can and can't give."

Among the local beneficiaries of Renwood's largesse are the Crocker Art Museum and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. In the Sierra foothills, the company has set up two internship programs for high school seniors: one for wannabe chemists, who learn the mysteries of winemaking; the other for future farmers, who get a hands-on education in vineyard practices. "Our goal is to eventually grow a local work force in Amador County," he says. "Right now, kids graduate from high school and go elsewhere to college and to work. That's not the way to keep a community alive."

Smerling says he's "stunned" at how well the community he's chosen to live in, Sacramento, has managed to keep *him* alive. "I can't believe it's been eight years since we left Boston," he says. (For Renwood's first few years, Smerling ran things long distance.) "We

love Sacramento. We were delighted to discover there's an enormous but very low-key circle of givers here—people who are consistently asked to be benefactors and who consistently say yes, but very quietly."

As a member of that circle—but, as he admits with a roguish grin, "Obviously, I'm not all that quiet about it"—Smerling is candid about the marketing aspects of his generosity. "We'd be foolish to say there's not some

residual effect from giving back to a community," he says.

"But for me, for Joyce Raley Teel, for Mort and Marci Friedman, for Angelo Tsakopoulos, for all the others, I can tell you one thing: The bottom-line benefits of philanthropy isn't what we get up for in the morning. It's the feeling you get that you're making a difference: That's what makes you feel like a worthwhile person"—and in his case, as he readily admits, a very lucky one, too. ❶



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