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GROWERS

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CAWG Announces 2023 Awards of Excellence Recipients

SACRAMENTO, December 6, 2022--The California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG) announced the selection of Central Coast grower Dana Merrill as the 2023 Grower of the Year, and employment and immigration attorney Jeanne M. Malitz as the 2023 Leader of the Year. To honor both, CAWG will be hosting an Awards of Excellence Reception on Tuesday, January 24, 2023, at 6:00 p.m. The reception will be held during the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium, immediately following the welcome reception at the Sheraton Grand Hotel in Sacramento.

"We applaud the leadership of both Dana and Jeanne, who are deeply deserving of recognition by their peers and our industry," said CAWG Interim President Natalie Collins. "Dana has been a pillar in the winegrape sector, from his dedication to sustainable farming, to his innovation in developing new growing techniques. Dana has not only proven to be a leader within the vineyard space, but also through the industry and his local community."

"Jeanne has been and continues to be the industry's go-to attorney on all H-2A matters," said Collins. "In a time when growers are continuing to look at diverse avenues to hire labor, Jeanne's advice has been instrumental. She has dedicated countless hours to education, speaking on a variety of panels and at industry events. The California winegrape industry has benefited greatly from Jeanne's leadership and willingness to share knowledge."

2023 CAWG GROWER OF THE YEAR

The Grower of the Year Award is the highest honor given by CAWG. It is bestowed upon an individual, family or company representing an outstanding example of excellence in viticulture and management. The recipient is an efficient and successful producer of quality winegrapes and recognized for innovation and leadership within the industry.

Dana Merrill is a seventh generation Californian who grew up in an agricultural family and has been farming on California's Central Coast his entire life. He earned a degree in Agricultural Business Management from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

In 1989, he started Mesa Vineyard Management, Inc. to provide premium vineyard services for Robert Mondavi Winery. Today, Templeton-based Mesa Vineyard Management is a leader in developing and managing quality winegrape vineyards in the Central Coast counties of Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara, and more recently expanded operations into Southern Oregon. Merrill serves as company President and his son Matthew Merrill handles day-to-day operations as General Manager. Merrill and his family also started Pomar Junction Vineyard & Winery to showcase estate wines from their Templeton vineyard in the El Pomar District within the Paso Robles American Viticultural Area.

Merrill has been active in industry issues and organizations throughout his professional life. He served as CAWG Chair from 1999 to 2001 and was the first Chair from San Luis Obispo County. In 2001, he became

the first Chair of the California Department of Food and Agriculture Pierce's Disease (PD) and Glassy-Winged Sharpshooter (GWSS) Board, leading the efforts to prevent the spread of GWSS and PD in California through management and control activities, and by funding research to understand the vector and disease for effective management.

Merrill was a charter member of the Vineyard Sustainability Group and the Central Coast Vineyard Team (now called Vineyard Team) that led and promoted sustainable vineyard management practices in the Central Coast by starting the self-assessment, "Positive Points System," and now manages the Sustainability in Practice (SIP) Certified program. He is a past Director of the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance that named him a "Wine Industry Person of the Year."

2023 CAWG LEADER OF THE YEAR

The Leader of the Year Award recognizes an individual whose record of exceptional leadership has benefitted California's wine industry and who is an inspiration to others. The recipient has demonstrated an outstanding commitment to issues of significant importance to winegrape growers and has achieved lasting changes to promote and protect the interests of California winegrape growers. This leadership can include successful and effective representation of industry interests before policymakers at the local, state, or federal government levels.

Jeanne M. Malitz is an attorney with decades of experience specializing in employment-based immigration matters with an emphasis on permanent and temporary labor certification for agricultural employers. She received a B.A. from the University of San Diego, and her J.D. from Boston University of Law.

Malitz is the principal of Malitzlaw, Inc., a San Diego-based law firm she established in 2002. Her practice includes counseling on employment verification related to E-Verify and Form I-9 requirements.

CAWG is honoring Malitz for her leadership on the federal H-2A guest worker visa program and for assisting winegrape grower employers in maneuvering through the legal and administrative paperwork and requirements to obtain needed temporary ag workers. California agricultural employers are increasingly relying on the H-2A program as a means to hire reliable and legal employees, even though it comes with higher costs. Malitz's counsel and advice have also proven invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic, which added a new layer of regulations. Her assistance was vital, as she worked with employers to ensure compliance and safety for H-2A workers at their work sites and housing facilities.

Malitz has been a leader through participation in roundtable sessions and educational presentations for California winegrape growers at the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium, webinars, CAWG's Summer Conference and numerous regional meetings. Malitz actively participates in advocacy for immigration reform through committee work on behalf of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) and the National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE). She is a member of AILA's national Department of Labor Committee and chairs the H-2A Committee for the NCAE.

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