

## Robert Williams, owner of Toad Hollow Vineyards, dies at 69

By MEG MCCONAHEY  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Robert Todd Williams was always the showman, a thundering presence whether tending bar in a neighborhood joint or pouring a fine pinot at a fancy winemaker dinner.

Williams, aka "Dr. Toad" or just Todd, criss-crossed the country over the last 14 years using his copious charm and marketing savvy to build his Russian River-based Toad Hollow Vineyards from a tiny boutique winery turning out 300 cases of unoaked chardonnay to a 120,000-case operation offering dependably good wines at working man's prices.

Whatever and wherever the venue, the bearded and barrel-chested Williams treated life as a stage, assuming the starring role in his own production.

As one longtime friend said of the 69-year-old Healdsburg vintner, who died Tuesday at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital of complications from heart surgery, Williams' larger-than-life personality could be counted on to fill a room, occasionally even eclipsing his famous younger brother, actor Robin Williams. It was often said of Todd that he never met a stranger.

"He was huge. He was everywhere. I'd be at some place in a little town somewhere and they would go, 'Hey, you're Toad's brother,'" Robin Williams recalled by phone from a film set back East.

"In a lot of places around America, I'm just Toad's brother. That's so cool."

The actor described Todd, who at times was a hell-raiser but never lost the hard work ethic and Southern manners he learned as a boy growing up in rural Versailles, Ky., as an "extraordinary man ... kind but outgoing and very much a people person."

"It was his storytelling and the ability to draw to him unusual people. They would find a kind of sanctuary with him."

Robin Williams recalled the disparate characters who frequented a bar his brother once ran in San Francisco as a sort of "1980s version of a William Saroyan novel," from bikers to lawyers to a "guy named Beefy who wore a pillbox hat." When a bartender was needed for a scene in "Mrs. Doubtfire," he recruited his experienced older brother.

"People just loved to come and sit with him and tell stories and shake dice," said Frankie Williams, his wife of 29 years.

It was his gritty years mixing drinks at 17 different saloons, taverns, nightclubs and restaurants from Oklahoma to Chicago to Kingston, Jamaica, that gave Todd Williams a no-airs approach to wine consumption.

His mission, said longtime friend Susie Selby, a winemaker and fellow winery owner, was to strip away the mystique and make wine inclusive.

"He discounted any snobbery around wine and he made it clever and interesting."

His labels, featuring a cast of dapper or dancing toads and frogs, bear irreverent names: Cacophany, Eye of the Toad featuring a red-eyed, drunken toad and the crooked labeled Askew.

Erich Russell of Rabbit Ridge winery in Paso Robles went to many a winemaker dinner with Williams, whose dress uniform was a Hawaiian shirt, jeans and a jacket. He would loosen up a group of sometime stuffy guests declaring, "I'm going to guarantee you're not going to learn chemistry. But you're going to have a hell of a good time."

He found his way to the wine world after a restaurant he and his wife ran in the Sierra foothill town of Arnold, The Whiskey River Inn, turned into a financial failure.

He learned wine through a series of jobs, first doing sales for Whitehall Lane and later working with Wine Distributors in San Francisco selling to upscale restaurants. But it was while working as national sales manager for Shafer Vineyards that he mastered the art of "guerilla marketing," making sure everyone he came in contact with remembered his name and product.

In the 1980s, he put together a marketing company, Hillside Estates, to bring that same national exposure to small, specialty wineries like Hanzell in Sonoma.

But Williams really came into his own after partnering with the late Rodney Strong in 1993 to create his own winery, "Toad Hollow."

"He touched a lot of people in the winery business," Robin Williams remembered. "He was just an honorable man, and in times when that's really needed. He was a man who lived a great life. He leaves a big footprint - a big footprint, with a cork."

Survivors include another brother, McLaurin Smith, and eight nieces and nephews.

Memorial services are pending.

The family suggest contributions to the Boys and Girls Club of Healdsburg, P.O. Box 89, Healdsburg 95448 or to the Norma and Evert Person Heart Institute c/o Memorial Hospital Foundation, 1154 Montgomery Drive, Santa Rosa 95405.