INSIDE THE SCHOOL BOARD CRISIS pg. 37
Valley of the Moon
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Sonoma Valley
STANLEY
MOUSE and the
SUMMER OF LOVE
SAM SEBASTIANI'S
SONOMA LEGACY
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The Sebastiani Legacy

Full circle from Farneta, Sam Sebastiani waters his Italian roots and honors the monastery where the family story began.

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PHOTOS *Steven Krause*

It is usually easier to understand the past from a distance, when you're not entangled in its grasp.

Now 76, Sam Sebastiani has that distance, and from where he sits on the patio of his home off Gehricke Road, at the back side of Schocken Hill, he can see the past all around him, even if the future is sometimes shrouded by fog.

His last name, of course, is woven tightly through Sonoma history; it is one of three names most commonly spoken and prominently honored since the founding of the city's iconic Mission San Francisco Solano in 1823.

Those names—Mariano Vallejo, Agoston Haraszthy and Samuele Sebastiani—cover some very big bases: Vallejo, the founding father; Haraszthy, founder of Buena Vista Winery and the first commercially successful winemaker in California; and Sebastiani, founder of one of the biggest and oldest winemaking dynasties in the state and the model of philanthropic patronage in Sonoma.

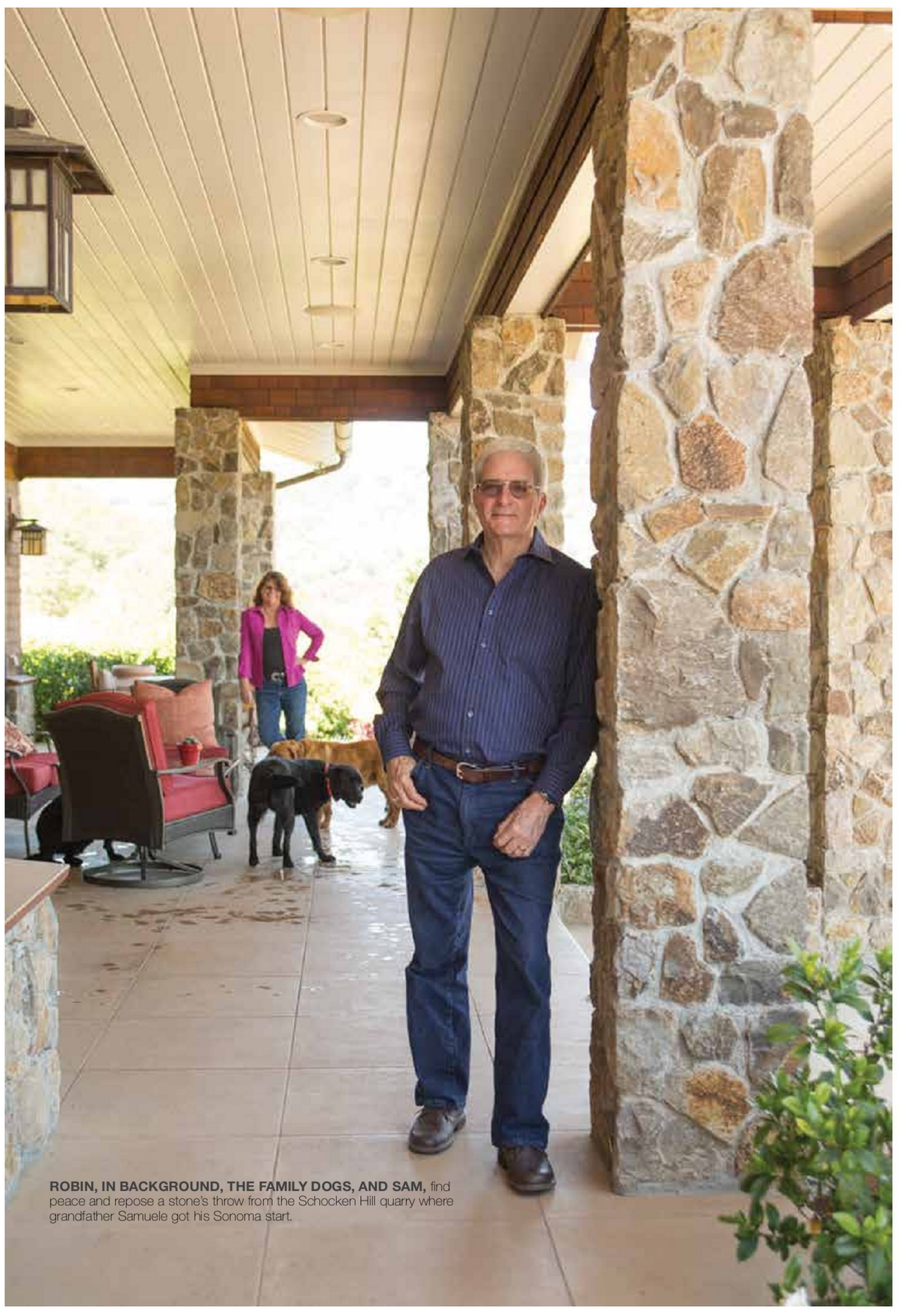
It was on Schocken Hill, in the quarry owned by Solomon Schocken, that Samuele Sebastiani, Sam's grandfather and a recent immigrant from the Italian village of Farneta, labored to deliver basalt paving stones with his horse-drawn cart to scow schooners in the Sonoma slough for construction of the streets of San Francisco. Samuele was 19 when he came to America, with some experience making wine, tending vines and little else. But he knew how to work hard and how to save money, and bit by bit he saved enough to buy a small Sonoma winery in 1904. Then, instead of hauling cobblestones, he used the horse and wagon to haul barrels of wine (believed to be full of zinfandel) around town, selling it by the cup or jug. He never stopped working, and he never stopped building a life and a legacy until he had more or less worked himself to death.

Sitting in his redwood-walled, leather-bound study, Sam reflects back on the patriarch whose name he carries and whose life reveals the core values of another time.

"I asked my dad why he (Samuele) died, and he said, 'He just got worn out.' He was 70 when he passed. If you ever saw that man's hands, there was a lot of work in those hands. He had fingers the size of two of most people's fingers. I've got some pictures where you can see his hands holding me, like 'meat hooks' my dad used to call it.

"He wasn't one to just do the wine thing. He got the winery going and then he built a cannery and started canning fruit products from the Valley, because he wanted to keep the people who worked on the winery employed. It was a seasonal thing, and when the season was over you don't need the guys. So, he would reason, 'We got a bunch of guys here, let's put them over, we'll build a cannery and then we'll can fruit. Then

IN THE WOOD-PANELED KITCHEN of his Sonoma home, Sam Sebastiani toasts the past with his La Chertosa gold medal Reserve Barbera.



ROBIN, IN BACKGROUND, THE FAMILY DOGS, AND SAM, find peace and repose a stone's throw from the Schocken Hill quarry where grandfather Samuele got his Sonoma start.

we'll just hire their wives.' And pretty soon that's still not keeping them busy, so he started building houses on Fourth Street for the workers; he built most of the houses on Fourth Street—and if you worked there long enough, you could keep it. He gave it to you.

"There are many stories about my grandfather," Sam says. "He'd go to town and play cards with the guys and just fall asleep on his wagon. The horse would pull up next to the house and his wife, Elvira—my grandmother—would come out and wake him up, and then he'd put the horse away."

Sam gets up, walks around the study thinking, comes back.

"Then, he wanted to pave the street down to town, because Spain Street wasn't paved. So he went to the city and he said, 'Well, I'll pave half the street if you guys will pave the other half.' The city basically said, 'Screw you.' So, he paved one half. There's a photo from the air in the 1930s that shows half of Spain Street paved from his house to town. He did it all with concrete."

Besides paving half of Spain Street, Samuele built all of the Sebastiani Theatre, a skating rink, a motel, a bowling alley, a meeting hall at St. Francis Catholic Church and, finally, St. Francis Solano Catholic School.

Sam didn't get to spend much time with his namesake, who died when he was only 5. But Samuele's lessons lived on through the men who worked for him.

"I actually learned and worked with the old-timers. I was fortunate that the guys that worked for him were still alive and kicking strongly when I was a kid, so I worked in the winery with the old Italians who learned things like welding just because they had to. I learned all these trades, not well, but I could do just about anything as long as you only wanted it to last for two weeks.

"We all did the bottling, which was so far different than today that it's laughable. We would put a little siphon filler at the tank that we were going to bottle, just hook it up, turn the valve on, and then you just put bottles on these siphon fillers and we just did that all day. Five of us could do 300 cases in a day. When we hit 300, we used to go home. Now, they do 60, 70, 80 bottles a minute."

The wine in those 300 cases a day flowed from a very different tradition, perhaps more attuned to the rhythms of life back in Farneta and the nearby La Chertosa monastery where Samuele made his first wine. Back there and then, wine was a staple, a part of every meal.

"They were making something that everybody had because it was good for them," says Sam. "It helped digestion, it had flavor, but they weren't aiming for gold medals, they were aiming to make a good food product that was on the table. So they didn't care about the name of the fruit. It was, try a little of this and a little of that. They had varieties of grapes that were for color. Salvador was the prime one; it's like ink. If you get it on your clothes you're not getting it out."

> *"I worked in the winery with the old Italians who learned things like welding just because they had to. I learned all these trades, not well, but I could do just about anything as long as you only wanted it to last for two weeks."*

Sam pauses, reflecting on those early winemaking days in Sonoma. "You don't see Salvador today, it's not very good as a varietal, but we had vineyards with Salvador growing in rows, so we would take Carignan from other rows next to it and add some Salvador to put a little more power in it."

No one had labs back then, no one knew the chemistry of the soil and the vine, and so some practices considered heresy today were commonplace.

"Sometimes," says Sam, "they would use white grapes to sweeten a blend and add more floral characteristics. I remember being in the winery when they'd hook this tank up to that tank, put them together. As a teenager, or younger, you don't ask questions, you just do it. But as I got older, I started to think, 'What the hell are we doing here?' But that's just the way they made wine."

Sam would go on to earn an MBA from Santa Clara University and spend two years in the army before he came back to Sebastiani and dug into the modern business of making wine with his father, August, who had already recognized that quality was at least as important as quantity in the emerging wine industry. Along the way and through the years, Sam took numerous short courses at UC Davis just as the university's fabled enology program hit its stride.

"When I went up to UC Davis, I did not sit there for a 12-month course or anything like that, but I took all these short courses, for years. I would leave here at four-thirty, five o'clock in the morning, I'd be up there at six and I'd go to school, I'd come back. I've got a bunch of these little diplomas, the three- and four-day courses that they taught. But what I was taught, in those days at Davis, 30 percent of it has been proven not to be right. Because, they were just theoretical thoughts and now we know better."

The infinite complexity of making great wine, of course, cannot all be learned in school. The variables are endless, says Sam. "When you get into the winemaking game, there is so much to learn. Where the fruit is grown, what clone the fruit is, the training method you use on the vine, when you pick it, your theory about picking it, the leaf thinning and the process of growing the grapes.

"Then, you go to the winery and you ferment it. Which yeast do you use? You go to your barrels and whether you just let it sit there, whether you turn it, whether you stir it, and if it's white wine what forest you bought the barrels from, what grain you specify—tight grain or light grain or in between. Toasted head,

no toasted head. The length of toast of the barrel. I mean, you really have an infinite number of variables."

Just talking barrels with Sam can quickly become an extended conversation. "The grain of the barrels is to me the biggest piece. A large big grain hole is going to let that much more oak tannin and the various compounds from the barrel into the wine very fast. It's a little harsher, so we specify tighter grain. So it goes on. The type of corks. How much you want the bottle to age it before you release it."

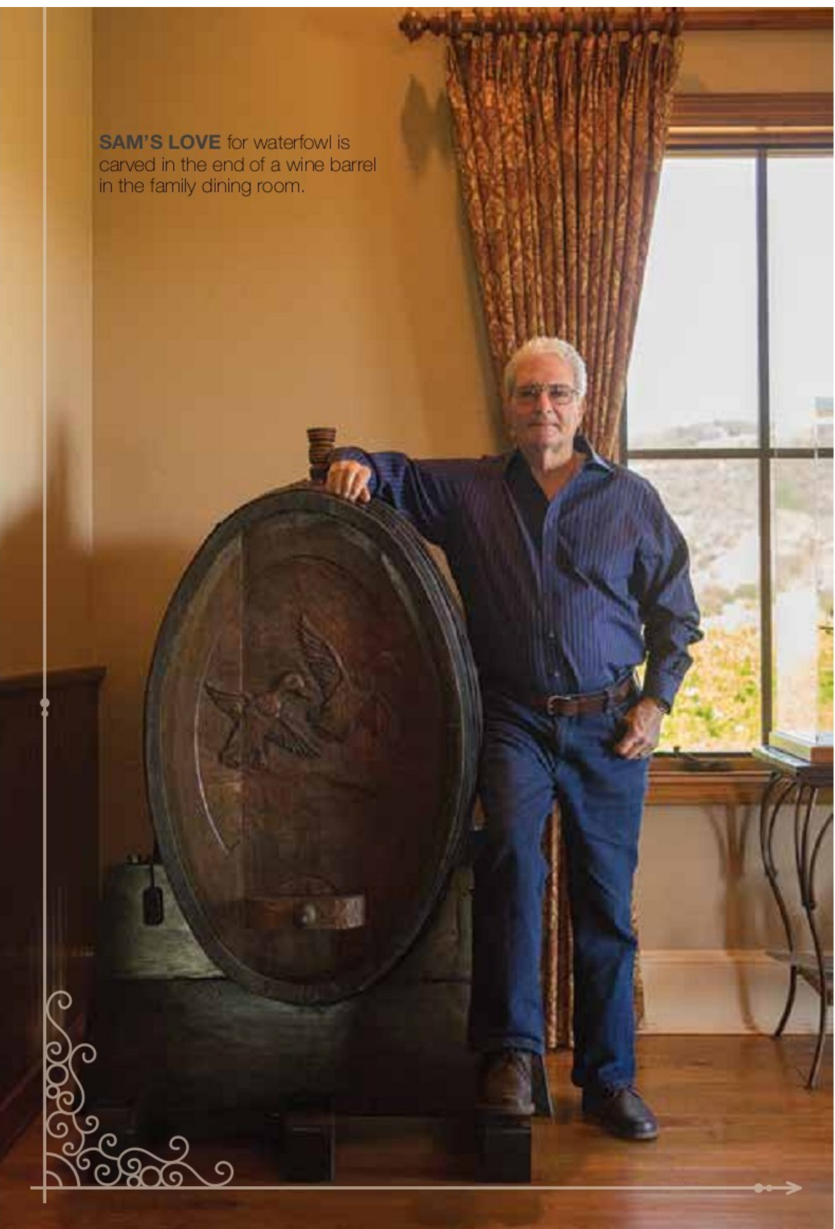
After Samuele's passing, his son August bought the winery with his wife, Sylvia, and it was clear changes needed to be made. Samuele had built volume by selling the same wines to as many as 50 private labels all over the country. "He went into Houston, Omaha, New York, all these places," recalls Sam. "He would say, 'You want your bottling label? You print it, I'll send you the wine.' So, then you had a bottling facility in your warehouse, and the rail cars would come and they'd unload the wine, they'd put it in a tank, tomorrow they'd bottle it, and then the next week it's up in the store. So we had wine all over the place."

Because the bulk wine buyers often had sanitation issues with their bottling operations, and the Sebastiani wine would be compromised by bacteria, August decided to make the process simpler for those customers.

So, says Sam, "He told them, 'Get rid of your bottling line, save the money. I'll ship your bottled wine with your label on it.' So he evolved to having the bottling line at the winery. But we still had all these, 50 or 60 private labels on our wine."

August also pioneered production of varietal wines in jugs, cabernet and chardonnay for the masses, at a time when Gallo's Hearty Burgundy blend owned the market.

"We had these half-gallon jugs and my dad says, 'You've got to get me labels for these, and we've got to have it in the bottle in 30 days.' So we just went into afterburn. I got the labels for him and we started shipping it out to America. We did a press event in San Francisco, and *The New York Times* had a guy at the dinner, they put it on the wire, and



SAM'S LOVE for waterfowl is carved in the end of a wine barrel in the family dining room.

we went from 500,000 cases a year to 3.5 million cases in three or four years."

The August years could be called Phase Two of Sebastiani Winery. When August died in 1980, and Sam took over, Phase Three began.

"We were at 4.2 million cases by then and I had a lot of really tough decisions to make. I started doing the cost accounting and we were making 25 cents a case on some wines. It was hardly worth starting the machinery. So I started cutting out items, and these private label guys, and I shrugged the winery back down, kept the high-end, quality wines, where we were making larger profits."

There were also serious quality control issues arising from aging equipment that resulted in recalls.

Sam's response was a major investment in new equipment and better technology. "We spent a lot of money on the lab at Sebastiani—$25,000 microscopes, mass spectrometers; they could tell you everything that's in your wine."

The result was that in 1985 Sebastiani Winery won 96 awards—more awards for more wines, says Sam, than any winery in America.

And that's the year his mother, his brother Don and his sister Mary Ann decided he was spending too much money and had to go. They, in essence, fired him.

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What followed were some tough years, during which Sam and his then-wife Vicki regrouped, scraped together all the cash they could and launched Viansa (a compound of Vicki and Sam) on a knoll above the Sonoma marsh wetlands at the southern mouth of Sonoma Valley. With sons Jon and Michael (who eventually became president and winemaker of the operation), they pioneered a new marketing model, cutting out distributors, selling direct to consumers through an ingeniously designed wine club, an Italian marketplace that drew people by the thousands to the hilltop tasting room, and through a chain of retail outlets they set up across the country.

In the process, Sam—who cared deeply about waterfowl—poured energy and money into an elaborate restoration of the previously drained wetlands at the foot of the Viansa hill. He and Vicki were living in a mobile home on the edge of the property and, says Sam, "I used to go out there every morning, every night. We put owl boxes out. We'd have owls flying around. We'd have all kinds of bird life; it was alive."

Sam's efforts created the largest private wetland in Sonoma County, strategically sited at the top of the bay. Why was it so important?

"Well," he says bluntly, "because I'm not an asshole kind of guy. I like the outdoors, and we've gone too far with our expansion as human beings; we need to start preserving, or we won't have places where these animals and these birds have a place to carry on their life cycle."

At its peak, Viansa was grossing some $25 million a year with a wide range of Italian varietals and gourmet food products created by Vicki.

But then the marriage fell apart, Viansa suffered collateral damage, Sam and Vicki sold the winery and Sam retreated to Nebraska, where he had bought a ranch on the central flyway of the North Platte River.

It looked like that might be his final chapter, but you can't make great wine in Nebraska, and it turns out that Vitis vinifera flows deep in the family veins.

In 2014, Sam debuted La Chertosa wines, an Anglicized name that harkens back to that Italian monastery outside Farneta where Samuele did his first fermentation. Sam had visited the monastery many times over the years, and was taken by both the scenic, rugged similarity of the locale to Sonoma Valley, and by the deep red soil, full of iron oxide, that closely resembled the California dirt where Sebastiani vineyards was born.

Tradition is a core value in Sam's winemaking—so much so that he was knighted by the president of Italy in 2002 for promoting Italian varietals in the U.S. And tradition is at the core of La Chertosa, which offers a 2014 reserve zinfandel that has won four gold medals and Best of Class of Region in recent competitions; a 2014 reserve Barbera, with four golds and two best of class awards; a 2010 reserve Sangiovese with a gold and best of region awards from the 2017 California State Fair competition; and a 2015 reserve chardonnay with two golds.

In what might be called his Phase Four, Sam Sebastiani appears to be having fun. "I want to keep it small," he says, by keeping La Chertosa at around 1,200 cases. "and it's the first opportunity in my life when I haven't had to sell enough wine to make payroll."

He and his wife Robin share the home on the hill behind the quarry where Samuele got his start in Sonoma. It is a full circle. It makes him happy and proud.

"If you go back and look at what my grandfather did," says Sam, "you see he was a benevolent guy. He built homes and apartments for his workers. He gave homes to workers who stayed with him. He built a theater for the city. He tried to keep everyone employed. My father tried to do the same thing. I guess benevolence is vaccinated into our psyche." ☾

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