

Career Changer

Recipe for Success: Grape Advocate

By Jim Howard

Most intelligent people fail to see how working as a criminal defense trial lawyer is the perfect training to promote grapes. But there's actually a strong link between the two. Getting a jury to find your client not guilty often means finding a compelling story about how fate, bum luck and bad police work has led to an unjust criminal charge. Getting jaded New York magazine writers to write about a product that has changed little in the past 10,000 years requires telling a compelling story about, well, whatever you can think of that is new, exciting and of interest to their readers. Still, I did not set out to represent the California Table Grape Commission. I set out to be a lawyer.

One year when my wife and I were living in Iowa, I made Thanksgiving dinner for a dozen people, including a newspaper editor who was impressed with the meal. When the job as restaurant critic for the paper came open, this editor figured I knew food and suggested I throw my name in to the mix.

After writing an essay and competing in an anonymous reviewing contest I landed the job. Suddenly, I was being paid to eat and my legal career was doomed. A few years later, we ended up in Fresno, California, and while I worked there as a restaurant critic, pickings became slim once the chain restaurants moved in. One day, I received a call from the California Table Grape Commission.

Frankly, I'd never heard of the commission. I didn't know what a commodity group was and I could only guess at exactly what they meant by "table" grape. Incredibly, the job requirements turned out to be an ideal fit with my varied background — food, writing, reporting, photography and law.

The back-story to my current world is intriguing. The California legislature created the commission in 1967 to increase demand for fresh California grapes. As the person in charge of domestic promotion, I still write — just switched from stories and reviews to news releases, brochures and speeches. The complex issues facing a billion dollar agricultural industry requires the strategic thinking I'd learned in law school and I soon discovered that the best way to get magazine editors to write about your product was to take them to dinner. Once again, I was being paid to eat.

Rare Job: *Garbage Anthropologist*

William Rathje is professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona, where a study called The Garbage Project has existed for many years. Says Rathje, "The food that we throw away can be very revealing."

Among the study's findings:

- Halloween garbage contains candy wrappers but no candy, while Valentine's Day garbage contains both wrappers and candy. "On Halloween what's important is the candy; on Valentine's Day what's important is the gesture," Rathje concludes. (One could also conjecture that children do not throw away candy, but some adults do)
- The more repetitious a family's diet is, the less food they throw away. (They keep buying the same limited number of foods and eating them without wasting any surplus)
- Paradoxically, more food that is considered in short supply is discarded than foods considered abundant. This is because consumers tend to overbuy the "scarcer" foods, which then go bad before they are eaten.