

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

Each generation definitely perceives the company or the history through their own lens. Our dad would be able to recall distinctly coming up here and seeing a decrepit, old prune orchard. But he could envision all of this. He could look at that old prune orchard that was falling down, right where we're sitting now, and see all of this. I can remember being a kid and coming up to this vineyard, planted about a year before I was born. I remember the old vines that were here, young vines at that time. But I have a more intellectual memory of it from my dad's stories and seeing the pictures. A third generation, were they to come along, their early memories are going to be of this, everything developed and in tact. Metaphorically, the older the generation is going to remember more dirt under their fingernails, and the subsequent generation that comes along, their hands will be a little cleaner, if that makes sense.

In Italy, some families have maintained properties for hundreds of years. You wonder how they developed that sense of responsibility to family and to the land.

That goes back to a sense of tradition. Countries like Italy, France, Germany, Spain have centuries of tradition and wineries that have been actively producing wine for hundreds of years. Napa Valley doesn't have that yet. We've got some old winery buildings that were here, the Beringer, the Krug, the Trefethin buildings, but it's unusual for any company now to be more than 30 or 40 years old because this most recent incarnation, this modern day Napa, began in the 1960s. For us, the second generation and a 40 year-old company, we're one of the older family-operated wineries in the Valley now. Certainly there are some that are older than us. The Trinceros have been around a little bit longer than us, but not that much. The Trefethin family has been around longer than us, but just by a couple of years. Robert Mondavi, which is not family operated anymore, was started just a couple of years before my dad's. Stony Hill, I don't know exactly when they were started, but that might go back to the 50s. I don't think there are many.

Your father developed a lot of other successful businesses. Does this one mean something special to him?

Absolutely. What we're doing right now is really what my dad had hoped would happen. His previous businesses were just businesses and didn't have anything to do with lifestyle, for lack of a more eloquent way of saying that. When he started this project, he wanted to run a profitable business, but he also envisioned the lifestyle that came with it. He wanted to be doing something that had more substance, more-soul satisfaction than the other businesses that he was running.

I think the idea of creating something, growing something, something that could be multi-generational and have family appeal wasn't necessarily the nature of his previous businesses. We're coming together and enjoying our business in a personal way. When the family gets together for Thanksgiving, we're gathering around the product that we've spent our year making together. If this were an insurance business, we wouldn't be getting all the spread sheets out for Thanksgiving. We could all come together at the office, but this has a different vibe. What we're doing now had a great appeal to our dad. When he did this in 1969, Napa Valley had a very different ring than what it has now. Success wasn't guaranteed then. Robert Mondavi Winery was two years old. Napa was just getting started. My dad started these vineyards seven years before the 1976 Paris tasting that put Napa on the map. When he told his friends that he was going to sell some of his businesses, move up to Napa Valley, buy an old prune orchard, and grow grape vines, a fair number of people thought that was a fine idea, and an equal number of people thought he was out of his mind. He had a great, successful business with a big window office in Los Angeles, and now he was doing this. Its success wasn't guaranteed by any means. Napa Valley had a very different history going back to the late 1800s, which my dad would have educated himself on, but Napa was a new place at the time that he came here.

You're now farming organically. That change could be an important legacy for the next generation.

For us, a big part of the decision to go organic was that we're walking up and down these rows ourselves. We've got kids here. We've got our dogs out there. We're sensitive to our own bodies and what we're using. I think a financial incentive will play out in the long run, but for us it just feels like the right thing to do in terms of protecting ourselves and the health of our property. We've been here for forty years. Hopefully we could be here for another 40 years, but we need to take care of the property in the same way that people take care of their bodies if their goal is to live long healthy lives. I think that same perspective applies to agriculture. If we have a long term way of thinking, then we need to take care of the property.

Organic farming is initially difficult and expensive. What insights pushed you in that direction?

I don't know that there was one single insight. It was a multitude of much smaller insights that just added up. My older brother Kevin has kids who are in their teens now, and my kids are just six and five. But he went through the same thing that I did when my kids got to be that age when

they're roaming around. You bring them out here, and you want to show them the grapes. But then it occurs to you that maybe you shouldn't because we just did a spray a couple of days ago. So that sort of makes you think. For instance, my dog comes to work with me every day, and he goes running out into the vineyard. You start to think what if he nibbles on those grapes. So I think it's a multitude of insights like that. Certainly some of the natural issues that we deal with in farming, like diseases and pests, are the same thing that a person deals with. We want our immune systems to be able to withstand onslaughts of viruses or bugs, things that can afflict people. So when we see things like Pierce's Disease and European grapevine moths around, we want our grapevines to be as healthy as they can possibly be to withstand those natural onslaughts. So organic farming seems like the best way to move in that direction. And I think lastly, going through the certification process, causes us, and Kevin in particular because he's managing those details, to really think very carefully about each individual process that we're undertaking in the vineyard. We go through that carefully during the organic certification process, and it falls into that 'footsteps in the vineyard' concept, that the way to grow quality grapes is to have a lot of footsteps in the vineyard, and anything that causes more footsteps has got to be a good thing. It causes you to have more of an interest, spend more time in the vineyard. Part of going through that certification process, helps us to maybe take another look at what we're doing through a different lens. Maybe instead of the chemical sprays that we've been using in the vineyards, we'll be applying a spray that's a more natural fungicide, and in turn putting that on, might have us rethink the way that we're leafing, or pulling laterals on the vines for instance to avoid mold or mildew. Maybe we'll be more or less inclined to have less or more leaf canopy, so it kind of opens up new ways of thinking in terms of applications and how they relate to leafing, lateral pulling, the amount of crop that we're leaving on the vine. A really good example is using a brutal chemical to suppress weeds. So when we stop using that, there's a number of different ways that we can deal with weeds. What we do is have the guys go through with weed-eaters and just eat the weeds down. One way or another, we still need to deal with these weeds. So if we're not going to use this product, what are we going to use? We need to take some action. I've heard of some vineyards using goats, but we're not currently set up to do that. But having the guys go through with weed eaters is an effective way. It's more expensive for us to do that, so in the short term, we might not see financial incentives. But in the long run, healthier vines and a better crop will be beneficial.



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Winery of the Month



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Monticello Vineyards

If short term thinking and profits dominated business behavior in the last decade, the Corley family was immune to the message, even from its own Napa Valley wine community. Examples of boom and bust or develop and sell mark the terrain, enriching some, impoverishing others. Chris, Kevin, and Stephen Corley are the second generation to run Monticello Vineyards, which their father Jay established in 1970. They're in it for the long run as their father intended and operate the business so that the next generation will inherit an estate that incorporates not only their father's improvements but also theirs. Chris makes the wine; Kevin grows the grapes; and Stephen directs sales. But they cooperate, and together they are stronger than they would be individually, Chris says, succinctly defining the advantage of family life. That respectful conviction directs their behavior toward one another, toward the estate, and toward the future. For this interview, Chris and I met in the wine library which occupies the basement area of the Jefferson House, loosely modeled after Thomas Jefferson's residence at Monticello. With its pervasive quiet, muted lighting, deep leather chairs, and wine bottles stacked in shadowy rectangles against the walls, the room was a sanctuary and radiated a tranquility that extended even to the outside, to the winery and vineyards where a few scattered people worked peacefully during an August afternoon. I repeat our conversation with minor editing for clarity.

How is this economy affecting Monticello Vineyards?

My family and I are all pretty steady people, who are interested in steady progression. In a tortoise and a hare race, we'd be the tortoise rather than the hare. I think that is what has allowed us to successfully and happily manage a 40 year-old wine

business with as many family members as we have involved with the day to day operation. There are three of us, my two brothers and myself, and our dad who comes through town occasionally. And we've got a huge number of employees who have been with us for 20-plus years, so we have an extended family. But it's a sort of even-keeled, steady progression that appeals to all of us here that has kept us going for so long and will keep us going for a lot longer. We're always experimenting with different winemaking ideas, playing with different viticultural ideas, but I would say the overriding vibe here is a relatively conservative approach to what we're doing. We're not big risk takers. When we put a grapevine into the ground, we expect that it's going to be there for 25 years. So we're going to weigh options carefully. That way of thinking might make us miss out on fads that come along, but our observation is that more often it prevents us from getting sucked into something that didn't pan out. Staying true to ourselves and true to our property and keeping an eye on that long, straight road is what seems to work the best for us. That's what I perceive for both the short term and the long term future. Hopefully we can happily extend this for a third generation. And I say happily, because it's not really enough for us to be the second generation managing a family company. We're doing it with smiles on our faces. We're enjoying what we do. My brothers and I could work all day together and then go to one of our houses for a barbecue at the end of the day. We're doing this happily, and I think that's an important caveat to put into the sentence. Our interest would be to extend the business for a third generation, and have it function well and happily.

Each generation experiences the business differently.

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CelebrationsWineClub.com

Anna Maria Knapp, Owner
75 Pelican Way G1
San Rafael, CA 94901

1-800-700-6227

Celebrate@
[CelebrationsWineClub.com](mailto:Celebrate@CelebrationsWineClub.com)

August 2010

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