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Winery of the Month



Portuguese Grapes in California

Quinta Cruz



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Santa Cruz County is partly a bedroom community for Silicon Valley engineers, who wind their way along Highway 17 over the mountain between Santa Cruz and the Valley. Most of them don't expect to work for the same company for more than three years. Jeff Emery is a Santa Cruz grape farmer and winemaker, and his life is a stark contrast to the tech people, who visit his tasting room. Despite its forested mountain terrain, the area has a long agricultural history, and farmers tend to remain on the land that they know, where they build a knowledge base over time. "I've never written a resume. I've never filled out a job application," Jeff smiles. Now 52, he took the job working for Ken Burnap at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard three years before he was legally old enough to drink wine. Today, he owns the winery. He has more than a 30-year history of making Pinot Noir from vineyards planted in the same Vine Hill neighborhood on the same mountain. Even his winemaking style, European and food friendly, has been consistent all these years since the beginning of his apprenticeship with Ken Burnap, who was the architect of what became Jeff's style too. Regardless of the continuity in his life, Jeff says, "It's important to shake out the rug every decade to avoid complacency, try things that are new." The "new things" in the previous decade were Portuguese and Spanish wines, which Jeff discovered in 1999 when he visited the two countries and fell in love especially with Portuguese red grape varieties. Back in Califor-

nia, his enthusiasm continued to grow, and in 2008, he created the Quinta Cruz brand to showcase his increasing portfolio of wines, made from Iberian Peninsula grapes now rooted in California. Our conversation is slightly edited for clarity.

You've owned this brand, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, since 2004 but farmed the vineyard and made the wine since you were in college.

One day in 1979, I came to help Ken Burnap bottle wine, and I never left. I was a sophomore at the University of California in Santa Cruz at the time, getting a degree in geology and earth science that I've never used. I worked with Ken and with the brand for 25 years, and when he retired, I took over. Ken's idea was that California Pinot Noir was so horrible in the 1960s because it was all grown in the Napa Valley, where it was too hot for Pinot. We all know that now, but they didn't know it then. Ken had done all this independent research because he loved French Burgundy, collected Burgundy, and was convinced that Santa Cruz Mountains or Russian River would be the best places in California to grow it. In 1974, he bought the Jarvis Vineyard in the Vine Hill area of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and right out of the chute, his very first vintage in 1975 got tons of awards and accolades. He was very much in the spotlight with the Pinot that came off the vineyard, one of the top five along with Joseph Swan, Chalone,

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WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

ZD, and Mount Eden. So we farmed 10 acres of estate Pinot there, and he also bought fruit for a Cabernet and a Petite Sirah.

I didn't have enough dollars in the shoebox to buy the property, and he needed to sell it to really retire. So I took over the business, the equipment, and the inventory but had to move off the site. I lost that grape source by definition, but by pure luck, I picked up the Branciforte Creek Pinot vineyard just a mile down the road on the same mountain and Bailey's Branciforte Ridge vineyard just another mile away. So I've spent a whole career with Pinot Noir from that mountain, and I still have those two sources right there. Ken's winemaking approach was very European, hands off. The wine comes from the grapes, not manipulating the wines a lot in the winemaking process. In short, it was a wonderful collaborative apprenticeship. Over the 25 years of working with him, I did more and more; he did less and less. He took a long slow retirement. At first, he was gone one or two weeks, then one or two months. The two final years that I worked for him as an employee, he was out of the country. I never even saw him. So when he retired, I couldn't find a real job. I didn't want to find a real job. I wanted to stay with the brand, and he made that very possible.

In addition to the Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard wines, you have the new Quinta Cruz label for Portuguese and Spanish varieties. How did that happen?

I love to travel in the off season and just by chance went to Portugal twice three years apart and just fell in love with the red table wines. We went in January, the perfect time to go. Everything's open. The weather's perfect like California, and there are no tourists. It's a small country, incredible food, super nice people, and expensive wine in a restaurant is \$15. I was just personally interested in trying to make these varieties. I'd like to take credit for good market timing because it turned out to be, but I was going to do it anyhow just because I wanted to play with it. I was lucky enough to come home to find some growers either visionary enough or crazy enough to grow them. Spanish and Portuguese varieties are really starting to take off.

As soon as I came home from the second trip to Portugal, I saw an ad in the Wine Country Classified for Portuguese varieties. The Pierce family in the San Antonio Valley in Monterey County had planted them, but I think they were just trying to see if anybody was going to buy these grapes after they put them in the ground. I contacted them, super nice family, and we started working together right away. They grow a lot of Syrah, Petite Sirah, Cabernet, Touriga Nacional, Graciano,

and are doing test lots of many interesting Portuguese varieties, easily two dozen. Graciano for instance, only two vineyards in the state have it. I helped them out with some home wines that they were making from the early fruit. So I have very close interactions with them. I go down there a lot and taste the four or five varieties that I buy from the ranch. When I go down to pick up the first one to ripen, I'm sampling the next one and so on. I drive the truck down to get the fruit, so I can be out in the vineyard checking the next variety that I'm going to pick. So I'm pretty hands-on even though it's a two-and-a-half hour drive each way. I buy Verdelho from Lodi. I don't mess with the winemaking at all. It just comes in balanced even though it's a hot climate. Many people try to plant Merlot and Cab there, and it just makes cooked wine. But these grapes that grew up in the hot climate of the Iberian Peninsula do well in Lodi. I buy Grenache from Bill and Vicky Crawford in Mendocino. On our scale, it doesn't make sense to be the farmer for all these wines. There are a lot of good growers out there. It's very much a buyers market now.

You're making these terrific wines, but they're taking you away from this amazing cool-climate Santa Cruz Mountains appellation that you inhabit.

Well, I'm still very much here too and dedicated to local Pinot and Cabernet. If I found Tempranillo here, I'd buy it in a moment. I'm trying to convince growers that Tempranillo will grow beautifully here in the Santa Cruz Mountains in slightly warmer zones like the East Side and Summit where Cabernet grows. I don't have the ability to plant and farm it, so I have to convince growers that it's a good idea in terms of having a local source. This is a great region, but I've been on the board for the winegrowers association for longer than I can remember, and again and again we've tried to market ourselves, but the reviewers forget we exist. I understand some of the issues. It's a huge appellation. It has so many micro climates. It's more Cab on the east side and Pinot on the west side and other varieties in between, so it's a big area to get a handle on. It's not a discrete little piece like Napa County, which is Napa Valley. It is the first appellation in the U.S. to be based on climatological, geographical, geological factors like the European model. The Santa Cruz Mountains appellation covers three counties, Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Santa Cruz counties and is based on elevation. Nominally on the west side, any area below 400 feet is not in the appellation, and on the east side anything below 800 feet is not included. The mountain range goes north to

south, so Santa Clara and San Mateo counties are on either side, and Santa Cruz in on the west side.

There's been talk of creating sub appellations. We already have one. Ben Lomond Mountain got established years ago. But I don't think anyone has the time for the bureaucracy that's involved. The process to get an appellation approved is unbelievably Byzantine. You've got to have some very dedicated volunteers, who ignore their own businesses while they go do this. And I'm not so sure that it's important. Our winery association has divided up sub regions in terms of our marketing materials, so we have these pods, Corallites, Summit, Woodside. To me that's enough. To get appellations, someone's going to have to draw a hard firm line somewhere. That's a difficult thing to do when you have such varied terrain like we do here. I work at vineyards that are close to each other with the same grape variety planted, and they ripen a month apart because they have different exposures. What do you use as your criteria to draw firm lines? So I think loose regions make sense without having to create a legal appellation for a label. People talk about where we grow our Pinot, which historically has been called Vine Hill District. It's had vines since 1863, so I can say that in the text on the back label, or you can refer to Summit area, or Corallites area. People who live here know that. You can say Woodside. That means something. You can say Saratoga. I think all of those are very applicable sub groupings without being appellations.

This is a picturesque street. How many wineries are located in these warehouses?

On this particular street there are 12 wineries. It just organically happened. No one said let's have a wine ghetto. And it's worked really well especially in the context of a region like the Santa Cruz Mountains, where it's so hard to get around. It's the second smallest county in the state, but people visiting don't realize the driving time between wineries. This warehouse that we're in was Bonny Doon Vineyard. They owned the whole thing, did their whole production here. Bonny Doon Vineyard went through two major downsizings and is way smaller than it used to be. With the second downsizing, the company sold this building. I'd been looking for such a place for several years. The guy who bought it wanted to do a food and wine thing. It was already a winery so it was a slam dunk in terms of city permits and that kind of thing. We moved in June 2008. Before, we were located up in the mountains, hidden away, so this is relatively new to be in town with a tasting room. It serves us all very well to be together.