

ABOUT GRACE FAMILY VINEYARDS

In 1976, Napa Valley was a farming community with more cattle, prunes, olives and hay than world-famous wines. That was the year Dick and Ann Grace jumped on the opportunity to buy an estate in St. Helena that included an 1881 Victorian, in dire need of renovation, and 3.5 acres of land, mostly planted with olives. For most people, embarking on such an adventure would have required a plan, but for Dick the motivation was simple: this was the place he felt like he belonged. For a successful stockbroker, and a Marine Corps officer to boot, having such feelings was certainly a surprise. Listening to them and acting on them was downright radical, but not for Dick and Ann as they have always trusted their intuition.

The Vineyards

The Graces were among the first in Napa to implement high-density vine planting and organic farm management. After carefully moving the mature olive trees on the front acre of the property, they put in more than 1,140 Cabernet Sauvignon Bosché clone vines, twice as many per acre as was then customary. In 1978, they harvested their first commercial crop, which amounted to a paltry 49 cases of wine. One case was dropped and broken, reducing the total number of cases to 48. In 1987, they brought the winemaking in-house, and in 1985 their son Kirk oversaw the planting of an additional acre. With phylloxera and oak root fungus compromising their acreage of vines, a replanting was undertaken in 1994, this time with a whopping 3,465 vines to the acre. A third contiguous acre owned by the Perry family planted with the same Bosché clone Cabernet was added in 2000, bringing the total to a still-tiny 3.5 acres of vines, which yields roughly 500 cases of wine annually.

The Winery

The Grace Family estate is known as one of Napa Valley's most iconic and prestigious properties, with its beautifully restored Victorian home, winery, organic gardens, sculptures and art from the family's frequent travels to Nepal and Tibet. Adjacent to their home is the 2,500-square-foot, jewel-box winery designed by friend, architect and fellow Napa winery owner Jon Lail. The stone façade frames hand-carved double oak doors that open to a carefully created space for fermenting and barrel aging. The post-and-beam vaulted ceiling lends the space a temple-like feel. This is a true gem of a winery.

The Estate

Scattered around the property are mature olive trees, some more than 110 years-old, that were moved to make way for Cabernet Sauvignon vines. The original orchard field mixture of Picholine, Sevillano, some Mission trees and other European varieties were augmented in the 1990s with Italian varieties such as Frantoio and Leccino. Each year, Ann leads the hand harvesting of the trees to produce Grace Family Vineyards Extra Virgin Olive Oil. They use the same commitment and care to the craft of producing the olive oil as they do with their Cabernet Sauvignon, and production has increased with the proper pruning, care, as well as the incorporation of various organic and biodynamic farming practices. A koi pond and flower and vegetable gardens lie between the Grace home and the winery.

Wines

At its best, wine is an expression of place, and the little slice of land on which Grace Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon is grown is certainly exceptional, even for the Napa Valley. But wine is also a reflection of the people who make it, and that starts with the farming and stewardship of the land. Radically dense spacing makes the vines work harder to do the one thing on their minds—make fruit—and that leads to a wine that is more keenly in tune with the land. Farming the estate naturally is good for the people living and working there, of course, but it also means that close attention must be paid to the vines at all times so that any potential problems can be nipped in the bud. The more these vines are in balance, the better the fruit, and the better the fruit, the easier it is to make great wine. Grace Family Vineyards' wines have certain signature characteristics: they're elegant, well-balanced, low in alcohol but high in flavor and long-lived.

Partnerships

You might think a former stockbroker—they are the highest stakes gamblers, after all—would always be looking for low risk, high return investments. But all you need to know about the projects Dick Grace has undertaken since arriving in Napa is that he's never had a formal contract for any of them.

The first informal partnership was with Caymus, which made the Grace Family Vineyards' wine from 1978 to 1986. In the late '80s, Grace provided Cabernet Sauvignon budwood to Hartwell Estate Vineyards for its first acre of grapes. Hartwell's wines were made at Grace until 1999. Likewise, Vineyard 29 planted its first three acres using Grace Family Vineyards Bosché clone Cab in 1989, and the wines were vinified at Grace's winery until 1998. Jim Barbour, who planted the original one-acre of vines at Grace Family Vineyard in 1976, established his own vineyard, in 1992, using cuttings from Grace, and his first few vintages were also made there. The most recent such arrangement is with Blank Vineyard. The Blank Vineyard is located in Rutherford, very close to Caymus. The Graces made and marketed this wine, the 2001 vintage their first release. These wines display what is commonly referred to as the characteristic Rutherford Dust. It is always most interesting to have Blank and Grace side-by-side as it is a great insight into the profound effects of terroir. What they both have in common is the Bosché clone and a Napa Valley location. And a handshake.

GRACE

Dick and Ann Grace did not set out to create the world-class Cabernet Sauvignon that would become the first “cult” wine in America. Neither had viticulture training—he was a successful stockbroker, she a busy mother of three—so how did they do it? Is there something in Dick’s family lineage, which goes back 175 years in Hawaii that explains it? Was the first seed planted in 1954, when Ann asked Dick to go to a high school dance as her date? That may have been an early happy accident, but if that was indeed a lucky break for Dick, it was also an early example of him making the right choice. After all, he said yes. Over the intervening 60 years, there have been many such moments, in both their lives, when good luck and wise decisions have intersected.

One of the most important bursts of serendipity occurred in 1976, when the couple took a trip to the Napa Valley for a wine tasting. Ned Smith, the proprietor of the newly opened Wine Country Inn, where they were staying, stopped by to chat on his way out the door to “do some real estate.” What made him come back to their table and invite them to see a property that had just come on the market we may never know. But come back he did, and though the Graces were not looking to acquire property, and Dick certainly didn’t need a two-hour commute to his job at Smith Barney in San Francisco, they were curious, so they piled into Smith’s truck. After walking around the rundown property for 15 minutes, and after about 60 seconds of discussion, they decided to buy the old 1881 Victorian house on 3.5 acres. They moved their family from the upscale Bay Area neighborhood of Orinda to the agricultural Napa Valley.

That relocation set in motion a series of events, the sum total of which adds up to one of American wine’s treasures. Dick says he followed his intuition at every fork in the road, but the number of good guesses he’s made defies all odds. The person who told them that the former olive grove in front of their property might make a nice vineyard was Mike Richmond, then working at Napa Cabernet Sauvignon pioneer Freemark Abbey. (The Graces had thought they’d have a garden; they knew nothing about growing grapes.) Richmond went on to suggest that the vines be spaced much more closely than was conventional at the time. When Dick asked him why, his response struck a chord: “Grapevines are like people,” Richmond said. “If they struggle and make it out the other side, they have finer character.” That appealed to the Marine in him (there are no ex-Marines), and since the vineyard was just a hobby, the added labor that cultivating closely spaced vines would require didn’t faze him. After all, they had three strong kids! Additionally Dick made the wise choice to keep pesticides and herbicides out of the vineyard. He now admits that at that time he didn’t even know the word organic it just made sense.

The first harvest, in 1978, even though it was just an acre of vines, took quite a bit longer to pick than anticipated as it was picked by family and friends. That turned out to be lucky as well, since the plan had been to deliver the fruit to Caymus for blending into their highly regarded Cab. Because the convoy of station wagons filled with grapes arrived four hours later than it was supposed to, Caymus’ owner, Charlie Wagner, happened to be at the winery. When Wagner saw and tasted the quality of their grapes

KIRK GRACE

Some 16 year olds would react negatively to being uprooted from their school, their friends, and the city they grew up in. Kirk Grace embraced the move from his upscale suburban neighborhood to a place that was, in 1976, a thoroughly agricultural community. In fact, he set his roots deep in the Napa Valley dirt, and he has thrived like the grapevines he helped plant on his family's land.

After earning a bachelor's degree in crop science from Cal Poly, Kirk returned to Napa to work at St. Supéry Estate Vineyards and Winery. He later helped Robert Sinskey Vineyards transition to organic and biodynamic farming. Since 2006, he has been vineyard manager at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and is currently Director of California Vineyard Operations. In addition to farming Grace Family Vineyards, Kirk and his wife, Lynn the vines on their own property, Wise Acre Vineyard, all planted to the same Bosché clone of Cabernet Sauvignon that thrives at Grace Family Vineyards. Kirk's diverse home farming also includes hops, bee's, chickens and sheep.

Kirk's farming philosophy has developed over the course of his more than 30 years in viticulture. He has combined the best of organic, biodynamic and sustainable agricultural practices into what he calls "Bio-Correct Farming." The goal is to mimic the natural processes of a stable environment, which requires constant attention.

HELEN KEPLINGER

Helen Keplinger was appointed winemaker at Grace Family Vineyards in August 2014. She was a natural choice as her philosophy of making classically structured wines that reflect their origin aligns with the Grace family tenets. Helen will direct the production of the Grace Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon and Blank Cabernet Sauvignon. She will also steward the winemaking for Lynn and Kirk Grace's project, Wise Acre Vineyard and collaborate with vineyard manager Kirk Grace in the ongoing organic viticultural protocols for the three acres of estate vineyard that are planted entirely to the Bosché clone of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Named "Winemaker of the Year" by *Food and Wine* magazine in 2012, Helen is one of very few American winemakers that have worked extensively in Europe. She spent three years in the Priorat region of Spain at Cellers Melis before making Napa Valley her home, where she has worked with several wineries, including Bryant Family Vineyard, Arrow & Branch and Kenzo Estate. She and her husband, D.J. Warner, also have their own brand, Keplinger Wines, which emphasizes single vineyard Rhone variety wines. Helen holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology from Smith College and a Master of Science Degree in Enology from the University of California, Davis.

DAWN ROTHWELL

Born and raised in Napa Valley, Dawn Rothwell joined Grace Family Vineyards in May of 2014 as Operations Manager. Dawn oversees customer service, accounting and new wine releases, and assists in coordinating private tastings, special events and the winery's charitable donations. Prior to joining Grace Family Vineyards she worked for 16 years as an Accounting Manager for Hanson and Paul, Inc. and more recently was the Office Manager at Cope Family Center a local non-profit organization. Dawn holds a Mathematics Degree from Sacramento State University.