

Napa Valley *Register*

Truchard began with a slip on a grape

Napa vineyard celebrates its 40th anniversary



May 30, 2014 • KIP DAVIS newsroom@napanews.com

When Jo Ann Truchard slipped on a grape at a Texas supermarket in 1972, little did she know that the fall would soon land her in a vineyard in faraway Napa Valley. Today, Jo Ann and her husband, Tony, look back on the Texas tumble as the real beginning of Truchard Vineyards, a grape-growing pioneer in the Carneros region now celebrating its 40th year. As Jo Ann puts it, it all started with that slippery grape.

Both native Texans, the Truchards had moved to San Antonio in the early 1970s when Tony was assigned to a medical internship at Fort Sam Houston. The couple had three daughters under 5 and Jo Ann was very pregnant, hoping for a boy. The family would be leaving soon for Korea, where Tony was committed to two years of medical service in the U.S. Army. Just before her due date, Jo Ann had gone grocery shopping.

“Coming out of the store, I slipped on a grape,” she said. “I fell and broke my knee so we went to the hospital, they put a cast on and four days later, on the Fourth of July, our son was born.”

Jo Ann’s injury, not to mention the couple’s newborn son, led the Army to change plans for the Truchards, ordering Tony to instead report to the remote Sierra Army Depot in Herlong near Susanville.

“No one’s ever heard of that town,” Jo Ann said. “The reason is it was a nuclear arsenal built during World War II to protect the West Coast. We arrived there in October of 1972 and the very first thing we had to do was go to a meeting in the Presidio in SF.”

After the meeting, Tony suggested a side trip to the Napa Valley, where he marveled at the vineyards and quickly hatched an idea.

“I thought that would be kind of interesting to buy a little piece of land and plant a vineyard.”

A few weeks later the family returned to the Napa Valley and Tony started looking at land.

“The first property I looked at was on Skellenger Lane near Rutherford,” he said. “It was eight acres for \$4,000 an acre. Well I had just recently bought a little farm down in Texas for \$400 an acre so I said ‘God, that might be more than I want to pay.’”

The Truchards looked at land in Napa and Sonoma counties for six months before finding an abandoned prune orchard southwest of Napa. The 20-acre property was in the Carneros region, which at the time was primarily pastureland and orchards. Undaunted by the lack of vineyards in the area, the Truchards decided to buy the land. While the property was in escrow, the couple was told by an ag consultant that the site was not suitable for a vineyard.

“He said that the soil is too shallow there,” Tony remembers, “it’s a little too cool and there’s no groundwater in the area.”

Eager to salvage the land sale, the Truchards’ real estate agent connected them with the vineyard manager for Charles Krug winery.

“Krug,” Tony said, “was one of the original (vineyard) properties out here in the Carneros area. He (Krug’s vineyard manager) said ‘hell, you’ve got two-foot of soil, I’m farming grapes on one foot of soil.’”

Tony talked further with a soil conservation service advisor who suggested he build a pond in a corner of the property and set up a drip irrigation system.

“Drip irrigation was just coming in at that time,” Tony said. “Israel had developed it – so that’s what we did.”

The Truchards’ against-all-odds attitude in Carneros mirrored a similar, though less-successful display of viticultural bravado by Tony’s grandfather Jean Marie Truchard. In 1887, the elder Truchard immigrated to Texas from France at the urgings of his brother, Father Anthony Truchard, a Catholic bishop who was moving to Galveston. Jean settled in Columbus, Texas north of Houston where he planted a vineyard and built a winery.

“It was totally the wrong part of Texas to plant a vineyard,” Jo Ann said. “Down near Houston, it’s hot, humid, everything that could be bad was bad. So they totally changed their plans and converted the winery to a barn and started raising cattle.”

Tony grew up on his grandfather’s ranch that was less than 30 miles from Jo Ann’s hometown of La Grange, Texas. Jo Ann was teaching school in Austin and was home visiting her parents when she met Tony at a country dance in La Grange just before he entered medical school. A year later, the couple was married and living in Dallas where Tony attended Southwestern Medical School. Before his final year he signed up for a U. S. Army program that paid Tony’s senior year medical school expenses in exchange for his commitment for an internship and a medical stint in the army following graduation.

After Jo Ann’s fall and Army’s change of plans, the Truchards settled in for a two-year stretch at the remote base north of Reno. Despite the distance, after closing on the Carneros property the Truchards wasted no time developing their new Napa Valley vineyard.

The family regularly drove the nearly 300 miles from Herlong to Napa to work the land and lay out the vineyard. In 1974, they planted five different varieties, including cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, pinot noir and chardonnay. The first crop was harvested in 1977 and sold to Francis Mahoney at nearby Carneros Creek winery. Soon, that first vintage would get a promising review.

“It was kind of a field blend of the cabernet predominantly, then the merlot and the cabernet franc,” Tony said of the Carneros Creek wine made from that first crop. “Dan Berger wrote it up as really a outstanding wine. That really gave us the impetus to plant more cabernet.”

After fulfilling his army obligation in Herlong, in 1975 Tony looked into opening a private practice in Napa but found more of an opportunity in Reno.

“They really needed an internist there and it worked out well,” Tony said, “other than that we had to drive down here on weekends.”

As the vineyard developed, the Truchard family also continued to expand to six kids – four girls and two boys. The family would pack into a Chevy Suburban on Friday nights, drive the four hours to Napa and work the vineyard and return to Reno on Sunday night.

“We bought a little travel trailer...that we would stay in with six kids on the weekends when we would come here,” Jo Ann said. “We did that for years and years. The kids talk about it now and say ‘Can you believe we did that?’ We got something that slept eight people, it had two tables that folded down into beds. But there wasn’t a bed for the youngest one so she slept in the bathtub. We always kid her that she was the bathtub baby.”

Tony’s instinct about growing grapes in Carneros, it turned out, was dead on. Napa Valley wineries were impressed with the consistent quality of the grapes and neighbors began offering to sell the Truchards adjacent farms and property. The Truchards responded, slowly accumulating acreage and expanding their vineyard well beyond the first 20-acre parcel. Now, Truchard Vineyards covers 400 contiguous acres with 280 acres of vineyard. Eight reservoirs scattered on the property collect and supply irrigation water to the vineyards.

“We had no intentions of even doing that,” Jo Ann said, looking back to that first purchase in 1973. “When we bought that first property, I mean, that was it. It was going to be a little hobby.”

The success of the Truchards and other pioneer grape growers in the area helped to quickly transform Carneros into a premier Napa Valley wine region.

“What happened is we started selling grapes and the wineries began realizing the quality of grapes grown down in this area,” Tony said, “(wineries) like Mondavi, Grgich Hills, Shafer, Clos Pegase — they all came down and they bought bigger chunks of land, old dairies and whatever. Now when you get up on a hill you look down and it’s just a whole valley of grapes.”

In 1987, Tony moved his medical practice to Napa and began spending more time in the family’s growing vineyard operation. The Truchards began producing their own estate wines in 1989. The next year, they built a small winery in a 100-year-old barn that, coincidentally, was constructed about the same time Tony’s grandfather started his barn-based winery in Texas. A profile of that Texas barn now serves as the Truchard Vineyards logo and appears prominently on the family’s wine label.

Stretched between the family vineyard and his medical practice, in 1991 Tony hung up his stethoscope and became a full-time vintner. A cave was dug adjacent to the winery in 1997 and the following year Sal DeIanni was hired as winemaker, a post he continues to hold today. Truchard Vineyards now produces 18,000 cases annually under its own label and still sells about 70 percent of its grape harvest to more than 25 area wineries. Predominant varietals are chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon with lesser plantings of cabernet franc, pinot noir, merlot and sauvignon blanc and other varietals.

Raised in the vineyard, the Truchards' two sons have followed their parents into the wine business. Anthony Truchard earned a law degree and worked as an attorney for several years before joining the family winery in 2005. He is now general manager and handles sales and marketing.

John Anthony Truchard, born a few days after his mom slipped on the grape, earned an economics degree from U.C. Davis, formed Vinewerkes — a Napa Valley-based vineyard management company — and later started his own wine label — John Anthony Vineyards — which has a stylish tasting lounge in downtown Napa.

Sitting in their home in the center of the 400-acre vineyard-studded ranch they created, the Truchards admit that they have a lot to celebrate — especially this year.

“This is the 40-year anniversary of our first vineyard,” Jo Ann said, “it’s the 25-year anniversary of our winery and, personally, it’s our 50-year wedding anniversary. It’s a monumental year.”

The couple also acknowledges the significance of that long-ago incident in Texas that quickly changed the course of their life together. If she hadn’t slipped on a supermarket grape in 1972, Jo Ann knows exactly what would have happened.

“Oh we would have gone back to Texas and had cattle,” she said. “It was a big change of our plans.”

