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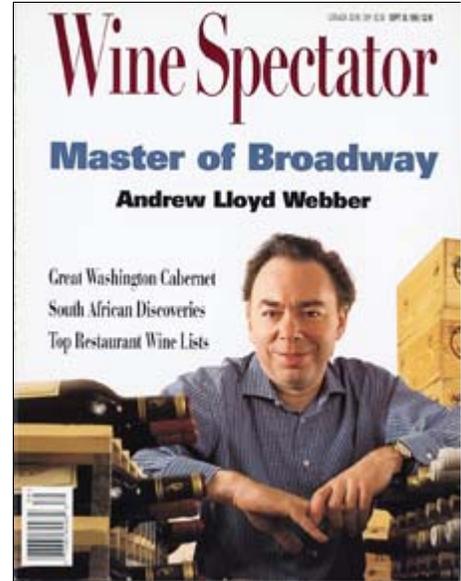
By James Laube

If Jo Ann Truchard hadn't slipped on a grape and broken her knee 23 years ago, she figures she and her husband might well be running cattle in Texas today instead of farming grapes in Carneros.

Call it a simple twist of fate. Her knee injury came three days before the birth of their fourth child and kept Jo Ann and Tony, an Army physician, from a tour of duty in Korea. Instead, they remained stationed at the Army's Presidio base in San Francisco, which allowed them to explore the possibilities of buying vineyard land in Napa Valley. "If we'd gone to Korea, I'm sure we would have returned to Texas and bought a cattle ranch," says Jo Ann. Tony came from a farming background in Texas. In the 1880s his family tried wine growing near Houston, only to see their grapevines wilt in the simmering heat.

When the Truchards first looked at land in Rutherford near Caymus Vineyards, they were jolted by the \$4,000 per acre asking price. "We'd just bought land in Texas for \$400 an acre, so that was a real culture shock," recalls Tony. Still, they persisted, finally looking at and buying, in 1973, a 20-acre prune orchard in the rolling hills of Carneros, which they replanted to grapes.

Since then they've systematically added adjoining parcels here and there, commuting to Napa much of the time from Reno, where they lived until 1990 and where Tony practiced medicine. Today their vineyard holdings cover some 175 acres and they've hedged their bets, planting most of the popular varieties, with 90 acres split between Cabernet and Merlot, 40 to Chardonnay, 25 to Pinot Noir, 15 to Cabernet Franc, four to Syrah and one to Zinfandel. It's a remarkably diverse mixture of grapes, but each of the



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varieties performs quite well, as their vineyard has a remarkably diverse mix of different soil types, elevations (160 to 420 feet above sea level) and exposures. It's been a challenge of matching the grape variety to the proper soil and then assessing its quality. Only Riesling didn't meet expectations. It ripened too late in the season and was grafted over to Chardonnay.

Wineries quickly discovered the quality of the Truchards' grapes. Francis Mahoney of Carneros Creek was the first to recognize the distinctive features of their Cabernet and Merlot, and in 1980 he bottled a Truchard Vineyard Cabernet. For Duckhorn, Mondavi, Cafaro, Havens and Heitz, among others, the Cabernet and Merlot proved excellent. Saintsbury, Carneros Creek, Ferrari-Carano and Mondavi found the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to their liking. Through the 1980s, the Truchards sold all their grapes and by 1989 began making their own wines. They still have a diverse portfolio, selling 85 percent of their grapes and producing 7,500 cases.

The thread of similarity that runs through all the Truchard wines is a blend of pure flavor, harmony and finesse. The Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are wines of texture and grace, not massive or ultrarich, but the kind in which you discover a new nuance or flavor with each sip. Cabernet and Merlot are richer and fuller, but not powerful. They too impress with their subtlety and polish. Truchard's Zinfandel would seem out of place in Carneros, known as a cooler climate. But because of the elevation and southern exposure it fully ripens, shares the other red wines' balance and texture, yet shows off the variety's pure pepper and cherry notes.

The Truchards never envisioned planting Syrah, but in 1990 Tony decided to devote two acres at the very top of their property to this Rhône variety and has since added two more. The first vintage was harvested in 1992 and it was apparent from the moment the wine was fermenting that this was a special wine, with a potent, exotic array of smoke, currant, cherry, leather and mineral flavors--truly distinctive and exciting.

It's a wine that has totally taken the Truchards by surprise. As excellent as their other wines are, once customers taste the Syrah it's difficult to steer them to anything else. "All they want to do is talk about the Syrah," says Jo Ann. It's a problem many vintners would love to have. It's a lesson in unique microclimates. And it's exciting, which is what wine should be about.

James Laube is a senior editor of Wine Spectator and author of two books on California wine.

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