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Renteria: Napa Valley

By Laurie Daniel
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NAPA - The vineyards didn't immediately agree with Salvador Renteria. A barber in his native Jalisco, Renteria first came to the Napa Valley in 1962 to pick grapes and other crops.

After a couple of trips home and a detour to Chicago -- where he cut hair in a pool hall and hustled pool at night -- Renteria returned to Napa in 1964. This time, he did more than just pick the grapes. "I started working the fields, and I loved it," he says. "I liked to be in the vineyards doing everything from the beginning." He turned out to be a natural, and within a couple of years Renteria, then in his mid-20s, became a foreman.

He quickly gained a reputation for his vineyard skills. Over the years, Renteria was involved with some of the Napa Valley's best-known vineyards, including Three Palms Vineyard (a grape source for Duckhorn and Sterling), which he developed, and Beaulieu's B.V. No. 1, which he managed for a time during Andre Tchelistcheff's tenure there. He also worked on a number of vineyard experiments with the University of California-Davis.

In 1987, he decided it was time to start his own company taking care of other people's grapes. At first, Renteria Vineyard Management had just two clients with 70 acres. That first year, he made just \$8,000. But the business grew quickly and now manages more than 1,100 acres.

His son, Oscar, joined him in 1989. As a preteen, Oscar had done a little vineyard work during vacations. His father had always wanted him to work for someone else for a while, but when Oscar graduated from St. Mary's College in Moraga, he was needed to help with that year's harvest.

At first, Oscar drove equipment -- forklifts, tractors and the like. At the same time, he put his business degree to work by modernizing the office operation.

After Oscar's second harvest, Salvador had him start learning every aspect of vineyard work so he could supervise field crews. In 1993, Oscar finally took over the business. And though Salvador officially retired, he still advises his son on farming and does what he calls "quality control."



Renteria Wines

Oscar, left, and Salvador Renteria produce about 1,500 cases of wine a year.

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``They know that the old man is watching the kid," Oscar says.

But even in retirement, there was one thing Salvador had always wanted to do: ``When I started my own business, I said, `Someday I'm going to make wine under my own label.' "

The first vintage from Renteria Wines was a 1997 cabernet sauvignon made with grapes from a hillside vineyard Salvador planted in 1973. Currently, the company produces two cabernets and two pinot noirs. The winemaker is Karen Culler, and the wines are made at Rombauer Vineyards, one of the Renterias' vineyard clients. All the wines -- about 1,500 cases a year -- are made from vineyards they own or manage.

The vineyard management company is still an important part of their operation -- in addition to Rombauer, clients include Robert Mondavi, Rutherford Hill, Juslyn, Reynolds Family and Williams-Selyem -- but Oscar recently cut back on his client load so he'd have more time to devote to the wine company.

The family is planting vineyards in the Mount Veeder appellation. They have a small property in Carneros. And Oscar is in a partnership with his sister Marcella, his only sibling, on a vineyard in the Pope Valley section of the Napa appellation. There are long-term leases on other vineyards.

Eventually, Oscar hopes to build a winery. ``My wife has agreed to let go of her dream home for our winery," he says.

The vineyard and winery business have been good to the Renterias. Salvador lives in a spacious home above the Silverado Country Club and likes to play golf as often as he can.

He is a little reticent when asked how he has achieved such success. But his son tells a story about his father's retirement party: The vintners and growers ``all said over and over again, `Your dad is terrific in the fields. He's the first one there, the last one there.' "

But they singled out more than just Salvador's hard work, his son adds. They talked about ``his ability to communicate with people and get things done."