

# SALVADOR RENTERIA

— Living the American dream in Napa —

BY TIM FISH

Easing back in his chair, Salvador Renteria looks out over Napa Valley from the deck of his home, knowing that he might easily have ended up with a far different view. At 65, he understands that life seldom turns out the way you plan it, and for Renteria, that's a good thing. Unlike so many who arrive in Napa with millions to spare, he began as a vineyard worker. How he found himself with a \$4-million view of prime California wine country is an unlikely success story.

Opposite: Today the former pool hall barber surveys these Napa vineyards through an owner's eyes.



Renteria, a Mexican immigrant, is a leader in the Hispanic community. And, as friend and one-time Beringer president Mike Moone says, Renteria is a bellwether for the wine industry. "The workers in Mexican-American agriculture are moving into the top rungs of our industry, and they earned it," Moone says. "People in the Mexican-American community look up to Sal. In Spain, he would be a don."

Renteria and his family made their mark with Renteria Vineyard Management, one of the largest grape-farming firms in Northern California, with 140 employees overseeing 1,250 acres in Napa County for clients such as Etude, Caymus, Rombauer and Duckhorn. The family itself now owns 53 acres of vineyards in Napa and is planting 27 more. In 1997 they launched their own Renteria label and today produce 1,800 cases annually of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Plans are in the works for a winery on Mt. Veeder.

"Sal has a reputation as a winemaker's grower," says Williams Selyem winemaker Bob Cabral, who worked with Renteria on the winery's new Russian River Valley vineyard. Moone compares Renteria's knowledge of vineyards to Beringer vineyard manager Bob Steinhauer's. "[Renteria's] vineyards are immaculate," says Moone, who joined Beringer in 1973 and now owns various companies that oversee some 7,000 acres. "He has a natural feel for the crop, what it needs and when it needs it."

Oscar Renteria, who now runs the company day to day, is accustomed to hearing his father described as meticulous, but he might

use the word demanding. Shaking his head and playfully cursing under his breath, Oscar, 36, still remembers the difficult early days apprenticing with his father: "I nearly quit because it was just too hard to work with him." The elder Renteria isn't apologetic. The family wouldn't be where it is today if they had taken the easy way.

**G**rowing up in Jalisco, Mexico, Renteria trained to be a barber and made a good living at it, but in 1962, at age 23, he decided to follow his older brother north to Napa Valley and work the harvest.

"I had never worked on a farm in my life," Renteria recalls of his first harvest. "And 1963 was a really wet year, just miserable. I said, 'No, this is not for me,' and I went back home after three or three-and-a-half months."

Renteria, a thin black mustache highlighting his upper lip, is a good storyteller, reminiscing of years past with tales of people and places. He recalls the laid-back lifestyle of his hometown, where playing pool and going to the movies seemed to take up more time than work. And yet he was tempted by the opportunities of the United States, and in the spring of 1963, he moved to Chicago and began cutting hair at a local pool hall. Before long he was putting down the scissors and picking up a pool cue.

"I started hustling pool and making good money—\$40 or \$50 a day, when some of the guys in the mills were only making \$3 or \$4 an hour," Renteria says.

But the Chicago winters weren't to Renteria's liking, and after



Left: Salvador Renteria with his father, José, in 1943. José was a police officer in Jalisco state, Mexico. Right: Renteria in Sterling's Napa Valley home vineyard in 1964. He would soon become foreman and help redevelop Sterling, establishing his reputation for impeccable vineyards.



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a few months back in Mexico, he returned to Napa Valley. This time, the fit seemed right. He took a job at Sterling Vineyards, and quickly worked his way up from field hand to foreman. "[University of California], Davis was doing a lot of vineyards trials back then," Renteria remembers, "and I learned a lot about the technical aspects of a vineyard. By the end, Sterling wanted me to be in charge of all of their vineyards."

During his decade at Sterling, Renteria helped develop key vineyards, including Three Palms. He also cleared the peak near Calistoga that would eventually become home to the winery.

While his knowledge of new vineyard practices put him in high demand, Renteria believes he was a valuable vineyard manager for a more human reason: He spoke the language of the vineyard workers, knew the people and their lives and had a knack for getting the best effort from his crew.

It wasn't always easy. He spent many nights bailing workers out of jail, or worse. "I managed so many people in my life, it was crazy," he says. In 1987, after serving as No. 2 man in a large vineyard management company for more than a decade, Renteria was fed up with managing people and vineyards. Quitting, he went off on his own to quietly oversee a single vineyard.

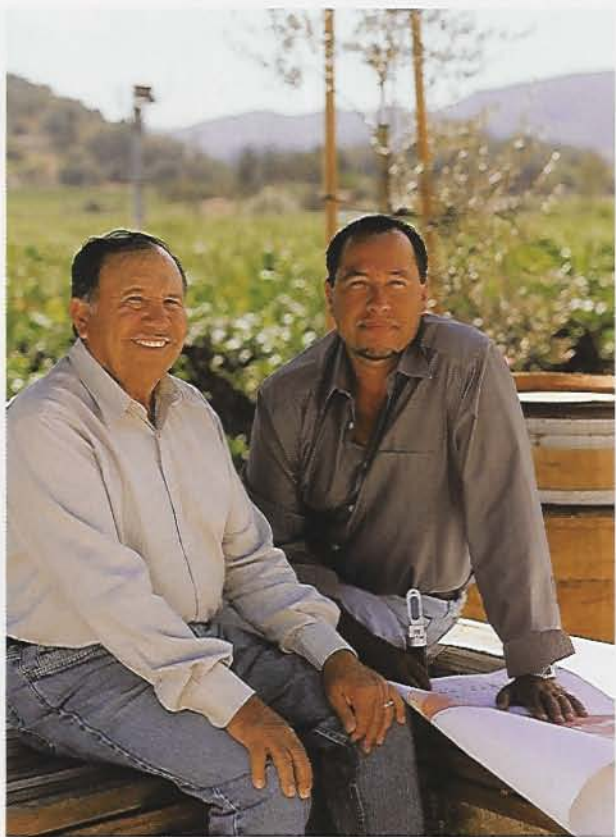
That didn't last long. Renteria was approached to take on more vineyards. He worked on projects at Screaming Eagle, Dalla Valle, Chandon, Trefethen and others. "Sal Renteria is a nice guy," says Screaming Eagle owner Jean Philips. "He was great to work with." He worked with André Tchelistcheff, Ric Forman and other noted winemakers. Cabral explains what makes Renteria special. "I told them that I wanted 1 ton an acre and it's a 34.7-acre vineyard, and at harvest I pulled 34.08 tons," Cabral says. "That's how meticulous it got."

Renteria has often worked in the fields alongside his wife, Maria Louisa, his son and other family members. Oscar was 12 when he first picked grapes with his parents. While the Renterias lived modestly at the time, Oscar went on to graduate from St. Mary's College, and his sis-

ter, Marcella, went to Stanford. In 1993, six years after Renteria started his own company, Oscar stepped in to lead the firm and molded his father's knack for people and vines into the successful business it is today, with gross revenues expected to exceed \$350,000 this year.

Making wine was Oscar's idea and he is also finishing plans for an 8,000-square-foot, gravity-flow winery on the family's Mt. Veeder property. Debuting with the 1997 vintage, the wines have shown promise; the Renteria Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 1997 scored 91 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, and the current release 1999 rates 87. "I saw making the wine," Oscar says, "as a way of completing the circle."

**R**enteria lives in the hills above Silverado Country Club, and although he and his son put considerable sweat equity into the house, it's in an exclusive neighborhood that includes a number of well-heeled industry veterans. Renteria is a regular on the Silverado golf course, where his nickname is Radar because he consistently shoots in the 70s with a 6 or 7 handicap.



Renteria's son, Oscar (right), assumed leadership of Renteria Wines in 1993, successfully adopting his father's demanding standards.

Groth winemaker Michael Weis, who has known Renteria for two decades and still relies on the family to oversee crucial Sauvignon Blanc vineyards, laughs when asked about the hours Renteria spends on the golf course. "You work hard and it pays off. Now Sal can play golf and he deserves it," Weis says. "I think his whole success story is pretty cool."

While Renteria may not be involved in the day-to-day workings of the family business now, he still knows the vineyards. During the growing season, he's out walking the rows not long after sun up. Oscar likes to say that his dad is in charge of quality control.

When Renteria isn't in the vineyards or golfing, he can usually be found out on the deck, taking in the view. "I never thought my life was going to change so dramatically," Renteria says, shaking his head. "I feel like I'm living in a dream." □