

The Frías, the Ceja, the Robledo and the Rentería families left their country several decades ago in search of a better future for their families. The road to this better future was paved with hard work, most of it in vineyards where they learned the different tasks involved in cultivating grapes, from pruning to irrigating the vine. The Huneuss family brought with them from Chile their knowledge and experience in making their own wines. With great dedication, effort and sacrifice, all of these families toiled along the way until they themselves became owners of productive vines and respected wine producers of the Napa valley, an enticing sector of northern California. James Conaway called the Napa Valley the “Far Side of Eden” in his book of the same name, and the region is categorized as “unique” by the United States Agriculture Department due to its high-quality yields.

Rolando Herrera, born in Michoacán, also settled in the Napa. However, instead of cultivating grapes, he bought them from the Robledos and made his own wines. After working for 12 years in the indus-

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try, he decided the time was ripe to put his knowledge to use and launch his own label “Mi sueño” (My dream). One dream became reality when his Chardonnay was one of the wines selected for the banquet given by President George W. Bush for Vicente Fox during the Mexican president’s first visit to the White House. Herrera sees a glowing future for the wines of Hispanic family wineries. “I believe we are going to try to take advantage of these opportunities and make an impact on the industry through our effort,” says Herrera.

The great fortunes of these families were made early on when they acquired lands, something next to impossible to do in Napa nowadays. With the boom of the dotcom industry at the end of the 1990s, many millionaires wanted to “make themselves known” there, building mansions on the ridges and producing wines of up to 500 dollars a bottle. Prices increased and the availability of land diminished drastically. Today, if you’re lucky enough to find it, an acre of fallow land might cost between \$50,000 and \$200,000.

In the Napa valley there are currently around 260 vineyards that combine traditional techniques with the most advanced technology and the region is celebrated throughout the world for the excellence of its Cabernet Sauvignon. It produces 44 different varieties of red wine and 28 white wines. Practically all of the vineyard owners of the area belong to the 220-member Napa Valley Vintners Association (NVVA), which includes both small family businesses producing less than 200 crates per year and large companies with a production of over a million crates a year. Hispanics are among the leaders, and along with

the biggest producers, they have suffered the consequences of the economic recession of recent years.

As a result, almost all producers have had to lower the price of their wines. In fact, this year the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association recommended keeping the prices of the Chardonnay, one of the most popular Californian varieties on the market, the Sangiovese and the Merlot low. Recent studies by Scarborough Research show that only 6 per cent of wine consumers in the United States spend more than \$20 on a bottle of wine. The same study also revealed that 96 per cent of Hispanics

— who represent 10 per cent of the total of consumers in the country— are prepared to pay a higher amount.

Price, however, is not the only variable that producers have to bear in mind. "Nowadays, you have to lower prices if they are very high, but, above all, you have to take care that the quality of the wine produced is of the highest level, as the pressure we have making wine here is enormous, partly due to the fact that we are Mexicans and everyone watches what we do; there is always someone who criticizes, but I don't care about that because we know our reputation," says Óscar Rentería, president of Rentería

Hispanic family vineyards in Napa

Robledo Family Winery

Reynaldo Robledo was only 16 when he left his native Michoacán with his father and came to the Napa Valley in search of work in the vineyards. "When we arrived we had nothing," he remembers, "I used to earn a dollar an hour." Reynaldo learned to prune and then how to graft vines. With practice and ingenuity, he became such an expert that he was invited to France to demonstrate the technique he used for grafting. In 1984 he bought a ranch of 13 acres in the Carneros region and planted Pinot Noir. The first pressing produced 120 cases, which were consumed by family and friends. Today he has 2,000 acres, of which 160 are planted with vines and the rest with olive trees. Wine Spectator awarded 87 points, of a possible 100, to his "Seven Brothers" and "Robledo Family" wines. The price per bottle is between \$12 and \$32. Varieties: Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Merlot.



Frías Family Vineyard

"For me, the secret is tending to the plants as much as you can and giving them the same attention you give to your wife and children," says **Manny Frías**. His father, Miguel, left Jalisco to go to live in San Francisco, where he worked for an export company. In 1951 Manny, his mother and seven brothers and sisters joined Miguel. Manny had heard about Napa through a friend and began to visit it frequently, promising himself that one day he would have his own land there. In 1977 he and his father sold their old houses in San Francisco to buy 100 acres in Spring Mountain and began by planting three acres. Manny, who had studied business administration, worked in San Francisco to maintain his wife Maria and his five children, while at the same time studying viticulture in the Napa Valley College. He now has 13 acres planted and of the 1,000 cases produced each year, he sells 700. His goal is to raise production to 2,000 cases. He distributes wines to nine states - the Carolinas, Florida and New York are his best markets. Wine Spectator has awarded him 89 points and his specialty is Cabernet Sauvignon.



Ceja Vineyards

One of Pedro Ceja and **Amelia Morán's** plans when they wed in 1980 was to buy some land. Three years later they, along with Pedro and Juanita - Pedro's parents - and Armando, his oenologist brother, put their resources together to buy a 15-acre property in the Carneros. "We were on the verge of losing it because of having to pay the quotas and we put it up for sale, but no one wanted to buy it," says Pedro. Both families had come from Mexico in the late 1960s to work in the vineyards and fruit orchards. Amelia and Pedro went to the same school and from an early age worked in the vineyards. Today, Ceja Vineyards has 113 acres planted with grapes, but only 10 per cent are used to produce wine, the rest are sold. Their first pressing yielded 750 cases and went on sale in 2001. This year they hope to sell 2,500. In the 2002 Wine Literary Award Press Tasting, Ceja Vineyards obtained the Best Vineyard Award. The price of the wines varies between \$18 and \$38 a bottle. Varieties: Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon.



Family Vineyards. In any case, wine is not Rentería's only source of income. "Five percent of the money I make comes from wine and the remaining 95 per cent comes from the produce and managing of the ranches," says Rentería.

Despite the problems, the Napa Valley producers are tremendously optimistic. According to a study by Gallup, more and more people are drinking wine. While the consumption of beer shrank by 5 per cent between 1990 and 2001, the consumption of wine rose by 9 per cent. Eva Bertran, vice president of the Spanish wine seller Gloria Ferrer, believes that a way to increase consumption is

CONSUMPTION OF WINE ROSE BY 9 PERCENT IN THE LAST TEN YEARS.

to "demystify" wine. "What happens is that wine culture is still centered around a few markets; in Spain for example, it is part of the table setting, just as the spoon or plate is."

And when wine consumption increases, in particular that of the Napa Valley, there will be Hispanics there to

enjoy it. "We, the Hispanics, know every kind of operation from beginning to end," says Reynaldo Robledo, owner of the Robledo Family Winery. All of these families feel proud of being part of the glamorous world of wine. "One day we are going to surprise everyone, because the wines made by Hispanics are improving a lot and there is a bright future," Robledo says confidently.

PODER spoke with these families to hear their stories and to learn how they made their wines so widely recognized - some of those wines have even found their way to markets in Japan and China. ♦

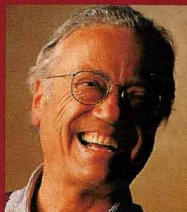
Rentería Wines

After working as a barber in his native Santa Cruz, Salvador Rentería left Mexico in 1962 and began work at Sterling Vineyards, where he later became a team supervisor. He worked in four other vineyards until in 1987 he set up his own ranch management company, applying the most modern techniques in grape management. Five years later, Salvador retired and named his son Oscar, who had studied economics and finance, president of the company. "My dad spoke to me about helping him manage the company and I couldn't say no because I knew the sacrifices he had made for me," says Oscar. Today it is the third largest company in northern California. Among their clients are Robert Mondavi and William Selyem. In 1997, **Oscar** produced 500 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon with the grapes sown by Salvador in 1974. Wine Spectator has awarded his wines 91 points. Their price varies between \$40 and \$48 a bottle. They are sold in more than 15 states, as well as in China and Japan. Varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Pinot Noir.



Quintessa

Besides having his own vineyards in Chile, **Agustín Huneeus** was also director of the Concha y Toro vineyard, "but the economic and political situation suddenly became very difficult so we went to Argentina and later to California, where the viniculture conditions are very similar to those in Chile," explains Huneeus. This was in 1973. Agustine began working at Seagram's and when he obtained his green card he bought some brands with some friends. Of those early brands, he has only retained ownership of Veramonte. In 1990 he acquired a 280-acre property that had been affected by a pest that ravaged the Napa Valley during the 1980s. Today he has 170 acres planted with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc. Valeria, Agustine's wife, studied viniculture in Chile. She is the "mother" of the vineyard that today produces one of the most respected red wines in the Napa Valley. Wine Spectator awarded more than 90 points to their wines, whose price per bottle is \$100. They have an annual sale of 10,000 cases, distributed throughout the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan and Canada.



Gustavo Thrace

In 1956, three-year-old **Gustavo Brambila** and his family left Jalisco for Rutherford. At that time, his father worked in the Beaulieu Vineyards and before long young Gustavo joined him. When he was 24 years old, Gustavo finished his fermentation sciences studies at the University of California and immediately began his career making wine at Chateau Montelena. A year later he joined Grgich Hills Wines where he stayed for 23 years. "In those times we won around three dozen gold medals, especially with the Chardonnay," he recalls. In 1996 Gustavo decided to launch his own brand along with Thrace Bromberger. The partners began with 350 cases of Zinfandel. Today they produce 4,000 crates per year, specializing in Chardonnay and Zinfandel. Last year Gustavo and his partner bought a thousand acres in the Valle de Chiles, of which 465 have been put up for sale in order to finance the future vineyard and outlet. The price of their wines varies between \$16 and \$35.

