



AUCTION NAPA VALLEY

HEITZ

TRIED AND TRUE

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Photo by Scott Manchester / The Press Democrat

Kathleen Heitz Myers, at the family winery, is president of Heitz Wine Cellars in St. Helena and daughter of the winery's founders Joe and Alice Heitz. Joe Heitz, shown at top in 1961 with his first vintage of cabernet sauvignon, apprenticed with legendary winemaker Andre Tchelistcheff.

One of few well-known old Napa wineries that is still independent thrives on creativity, consistency

By VIRGINIE BOONE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Napa Valley has seen so much growth and innovation over the past half-century, it's easy to forget a few of the well-known wineries that have been here from the beginning, the tried and true.

Heitz Wine Cellars in St. Helena, host of this year's Auction Napa Valley on Saturday, is among those, a legendary cabernet sauvignon house started in 1961 by Joe and Alice Heitz.

“If Robert (Mondavi) was more of a marketing/public relations guy,” explained Kathleen Heitz Myers, Joe and Alice's daughter, “my father was more the winemaker's winemaker.”

Joe passed away in 2000. Like his friend Mondavi, he enjoyed the success that came with all those decades of hard work. His partner in life and business, wife Alice, continues to live on the 160-acre winery property east of Silverado Trail on Taplin Road.

The Heitzes also maintain their modest tasting room on Highway 29, the first plot of land they ever farmed. Joe Heitz moved out to California in the 1940s from Illinois, where his father had made home wine. While serving in the Air Force, he took a night job working in a winery and found his calling.

“It was a combination of falling in love with California, the climate, the culture, the people, it was everything,” recalled Heitz Myers. “Even back then, California was ahead of its time with fine dining and fresh food.”

After the war, Heitz went to UC Davis, where he earned a degree in enology. He later worked for Gallo in and around Modesto, arriving in the Napa Valley in the late 1940s, apprenticing beside wine master Andre Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard.

“He was always supposed to be promoted to become winemaker when Andre retired,” his daughter remembered, “but he (soon) figured out Andre wasn't about to retire, and there weren't many wineries here then.”

Unsure of his next move, he took a job at Fresno State, setting up a curriculum for their burgeoning enology program and teaching for three years. But the bug had bitten. It was time to start a place of his own.

“There are a handful of people that made Napa Valley the pre-eminent appellation in America,” said Peter Mondavi Jr., whose father, Charles Krug winemaker Peter Sr., had always been close to Heitz. “Joe Heitz was one of those people. His Martha's Vineyard cabernets, under his unwavering focus and dedication, rank among the finest wines ever produced in California.”

Heitz remains small (40,000 cases annually) and family-owned and -run. Son David is the winemaker. President of her family's winery, Heitz Myers remembers moving into the old farmhouse next to the working winery when she was in elementary school, choosing a second-floor bedroom with the best view of the barn, where she was sure she'd soon have a horse.

The idyllic setting, still the site of the Heitz homestead and circa-1898 stone winery, embodies the family's old-school values, of believing that slow and steady wins the race.

Heitz's independence over all these years is enviable. Most of the wineries around when Heitz started in 1961 -- Beringer, Beaulieu, Inglenook, Christian Brothers, Louis Martini, Hans Kornell -- have either become part of larger entities or disappeared.

“Our reputation for consistency and quality in good years and bad years has stayed with us,” Heitz Myers noted. “We wouldn’t be in business if it was just my parents’ peers who were our customers. My parents had the creativity, the idea and they really broke out of the box with their work ethic, which they passed on. But if you don’t modernize, keep evolving, you become stagnant.”

Consistency and quality have been hallmarks of Heitz’s 100 percent cabernet sauvignons, especially its vineyard designates. Martha’s Vineyard was the first and remains the most famous. The first bottling of Martha’s was designated as such as early as 1966, making it the first vineyard designate in the Napa Valley.

Back then, the valley was a small farming community with nary a restaurant in sight, or much of a social scene. When Tom and Martha May came to town in the early 1960s, taking over an old ranch in Oakville and eventually planting grapes, someone dropped off a bottle of Heitz cabernet as a welcoming.

Impressed, they soon stopped by the Heitz sales room on Highway 29, where they met Joe and Alice Heitz and were invited to dinner. The families became lifelong friends.

When the Mays were ready to harvest their first grapes, Heitz was given first crack. It was like stumbling onto Sutter’s Mill before the gold came rushing. Heitz used the grapes in a larger Napa Valley bottling that first year, 1965, but forever after, their greatness undeniable, Heitz’s Martha’s Vineyard became, year in and year out, among the best bottles of cabernet produced in California, a complex, rich wine with traces of mint, chocolate, currant and cedar.

“It’s the consistency of style and the complexity the wine develops with age that sets the Martha’s Vineyard cabernet apart from many of its contemporaries,” wrote Wine Spectator’s James Laube, who has tasted every vintage.

Having picked up plenty of lessons from Tchelistcheff and others, Heitz wasn’t afraid to follow his own path, opting to make 100 percent cabernet sauvignon when others preferred to make blends, exporting to faraway places like Hong Kong when most wineries sold only locally and choosing to age his wines in French oak, something only Hanzell in Sonoma Valley, a pinot noir and chardonnay producer, had been doing.

Wanting their wines to be drinkable upon release, Heitz continues to follow a late-release policy, aging the wines and holding them back from consumers for much longer than most. Want a current release of Martha’s, let’s say? The 2003 is the most recent you’ll get.

“He wanted to make sure the wine was finished and finished the way we want it before it’s tasted and judged,” said Heitz Myers of her father.

Through it all, Alice was equal partner to Joe, a support on all fronts, running the tasting room, handling accounting and bookkeeping, even driving to San Francisco to find soft cheeses -- unavailable around here in those days -- to pair with their classic wines.

“She did a lot of the entertaining,” Heitz Myers said, “and I think having that open home policy, making it so personable, really developed some of their important relationships, which lasted certainly their lifetimes and have now been passed on.”