

Martha's Vineyard

Napa Valley, California

TERROIR

DAVID VOGELS, CWP



THIS IS NOT SO MUCH A STORY OF SOIL AND CLIMATE AS IT IS A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES.

Joe and Alice Heitz were Midwesterners who married in California after World War II. Well before the University of California-Davis offered degrees in viticulture, Joe earned a bachelor's degree there in food chemistry and a master's in distillation. He worked for seven years under the legendary André Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyards, then went to Fresno State University to help set up a degree program in enology. He and Alice returned to Napa in 1961 so they could open their own winery on Highway 29, on the outskirts of St. Helena. The vineyard on their new 8 acres was planted to Grignolino, which Heitz Wine Cellars still makes in small quantities today. But in 1964, the Heitzes had an opportunity to buy a 160-acre property at the end of Taplin Road, on the opposite side of Napa Valley, from a San Francisco restaurateur, and they began growing Cabernet Sauvignon in both locations. The original winery on the highway was converted to a tasting room, which was replaced by a modern visitor facility in 2002.

Tom May, a Delaware native, took a job as a schoolteacher in the Santa Barbara area in 1956. There he met his bride-to-be, Martha, who was living on a cattle ranch. After marrying in 1962, the Mays decided to look for Napa Valley property where they could establish a vineyard, finally settling on a 40-acre piece of land off Dwyer Road, east of Oakville. The Cabernet Sauvignon vines that had been planted in 1961 would not bear their first crop for another two years. When the Mays moved into their new house in August 1963, they found two bottles of Heitz sparkling



Alice Heitz and Kathleen Heitz Myers at the Taplin Road winery (left); Laura May Everett with her parents, Tom and Martha May, in front of Martha's Vineyard (right).

wine in the refrigerator—a gift from the previous owners. Thus began a relationship that has spanned two generations.

Impressed by the Heitz wine, the Mays went to Joe's sales room on the highway and asked if he would be interested in buying the grapes from what Tom had impishly christened Martha's Vineyard, after his wife's name. Heitz found that he loved the fruit, so he incorporated the first crop into his 1965 Napa Valley Cabernet. Tom May asked for a separate barrel for his own family's use, and Heitz said, "Why don't we just put a label on it?" So in 1966, the Heitz Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon became the first vineyard-designated wine in the Napa Valley.

"The original handshake was between Joe and myself," May remembers. "Now we're getting more people involved, so we've just recently had to put it on paper." Indeed, the second generation of both families is now running the show, but as Laura May Everett, the Mays' daughter, puts it, "With 40 years of good faith behind us, it wasn't difficult to do." "Now they're making the decisions," Tom says of Laura and her brother,

Richard May. Laura quickly adds, "They've got it down. Our job is to provide that consistency of quality."

By the time Joe Heitz died in 2000, he had already prepared his son David and his daughter, Kathleen Heitz Myers, to take over the operation. Alice is still going strong and living on the Taplin Road property, but David is now the Heitz winemaker, and Kathleen serves as company president. "My father was definitely the patriarch," says Kathleen. "For our generation, it's more that you've got to continually modernize."

The Mays were able to buy an additional 30 acres adjacent to Martha's Vineyard in 1965. This plot, which had first been planted in 1920, became known as the South and West blocks, with the original vineyard called the North Block. The South Block was originally planted to Riesling, but was grafted over to Cabernet in the late 1970s. In all, there are now 34 planted vineyard acres.

"The original great sites are still wonderful locations," says Joe Norman, Heitz's associate winemaker, and perhaps that's as good an explanation as any for Martha's extraordinary terroir.

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Heitz Cabernet Sauvignon Martha's Vineyard

1997 \$140

The first vintage made after the vineyard replanting, 1996, currently seems a bit disjointed. Martha's hit its stride again with the 1997, which carries a special label dedicated to the memory of Joe Heitz. Deep violet core, turning lighter on the rim. The nose is more eucalyptus than mint, with notes of cocoa, cedar, blackberry, and blackcurrant. Firm tannins on the superb midpalate, followed by a long, elegant finish dominated by silky chocolate.

1998 \$110

A sleeper vintage, as with many of Napa's top-of-the-line Cabernets. Garnet color, fading to brick red. Nose of mint chocolate, cedar, vanilla, dark cherry, and blackcurrant. Smooth tannins anchor a balanced structure; the only relative drawback is an abbreviated finish.

1999 \$140

Same deep violet as the 1997. Aromas of mint, chocolate, cedar, and a tobacco-leaf note. Shows harder tannins than its predecessors, but the solid structure presages long aging ability.

2000 \$110

Deep garnet core, fading slightly on the rim. Mint, green tea, cedar, currant jam, and blackberry on the nose. Great balance on the palate, including a noticeable acidity that matches well with food. Long finish; the complete package.

2001 \$140

Fortieth-anniversary vintage of the winery. Same color as the 2000. Nose of mint, cassis, anise, cocoa, earth, ripe plum, redcurrant, and an obvious whiff of alcohol. Round, smooth mouthfeel, with well-integrated tannins on the big finish.

2002 \$140

Deep, dark violet. Jammy blackberry and blackcurrant fruit dominate the nose, with the mint in the background. Cocoa and cedar emerge on the palate. Long, elegant finish.

Prices are estimated retail.

"The mint has made the wine distinctive," says Myers. "In the early days, you could really pick out Martha's Vineyard." Steven Spurrier selected the 1970 Martha's for his epochal 1976 Paris Tasting, but Myers notes, "The '68 and '69 really made Martha's. My father started to export a little before the Paris tasting. We've always taken wines overseas, and that opened doors for us."

Joe Heitz was a Bordeaux lover—he was one of the first California vintners to use French oak barrels for aging—but he was not trying to emulate the French style of Cabernet. "He was doing what best fit California and the Napa Valley," Myers says. "It has always been picked mature, but the alcohol is always 13-14%. We



don't do an extended maceration—we want a more natural expression. It's getting the flavors of the vineyard to come through." The three Martha's Vineyard blocks are vinified separately. "Martha's always gets priority in the cellar," says Myers—"the timing, the cooperage, all the way down the line." Its aging program is the same as Joe Heitz established for all his Cabernets, however: a year in large American oak tanks, two and a half more years in Limousin barriques, and another year in bottle before it is sold. "We want it to be appreciated on release," Myers explains. A staggered release policy means that only half of the several thousand cases produced of Martha's Vineyard are made available in the first year, ensuring longer availability for consumers and restaurants.

"The quality of the wine comes first," Myers adds. "But we're a working winery. We want people to enjoy it." Two generations of customers join two generations of Heitzes and Mays in drinking to that. 🍷

The old wood-floored wine cellar, built in 1898, still holds barrels and fermentation tanks for Heitz wines.



want that mint flavor getting into their Cabernet. The Mays did nothing more than trim the eucalyptus back a bit—not to appear unneighborly, but more because they don't believe the popular legend. Neither did Joe Heitz, who always took offense when his Cabernet was described as smelling like eucalyptus, an aroma he likened to that of cat urine. Both the Mays and the Heitzes think the mint has more to do with the intense, small-berried Cabernet clone that has always grown in the vineyard. That makes sense to me: the Clone 7 grown in the Herb Lamb Vineyard, which seems to bear a hereditary relationship to the Martha's clone, has a similar mint-chocolate profile, even though the two vineyards' microclimates are miles apart.



The soil is primarily Coombsville gravel mixed with loam, with some clay loam in the north section. The original rootstock in the North Block was AxR#1—the first in the county used to grow Cabernet, according to May. But the phylloxera-prone strain finally began to succumb around 1992, and the Mays knew it was time to replant the entire vineyard. That meant no Martha's Vineyard grapes from the 1993 through 1995 vintages. "We knew it was coming," says Myers, but it was still an economic hit for both the growers and the vintners, not to mention a disappointment to loyal collectors. "A young vineyard can still produce outstanding Cabernet," Myers adds, "but you've got to drop crop."

The Mays had taken the precaution of propagating their proprietary clone in nurseries, so vineyard manager Mark Neal was able to graft it onto new, hardier 039/16 rootstock, planted in closer rows. "This rootstock drinks more water," says Everett, so the owners have added drip irrigation from well water "to keep the vine from stressing itself. It's a balancing act," she says of the irrigation program, but that description

could apply to the family's entire vinicultural approach. "Even in the '80s, before it was in vogue, my father was doing sustainable agriculture," Everett notes. The entire vineyard, which has a cover crop planted in alternate rows, was certified organic a few years ago.

During my golf-cart tour of the site, Laura and Tom examined a bit of frost damage on the east end of the vineyard, where leaves would have to be clipped off to avoid uneven ripening. Martha's was much less affected by the severe April frost than many parts of Napa and Sonoma, which indicates how well this location is sheltered by the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains. Only the section shaded by the vineyard's two towering eucalyptus trees showed any detectable frostburn.

Which brings us to the myth of mint. Anyone who has ever been introduced to a Martha's Vineyard Cabernet has been told about its signature mint profile. It has often been attributed to the influence of eucalyptus oil; in fact, the owners of an adjacent vineyard once asked the Mays to remove the trees because they didn't