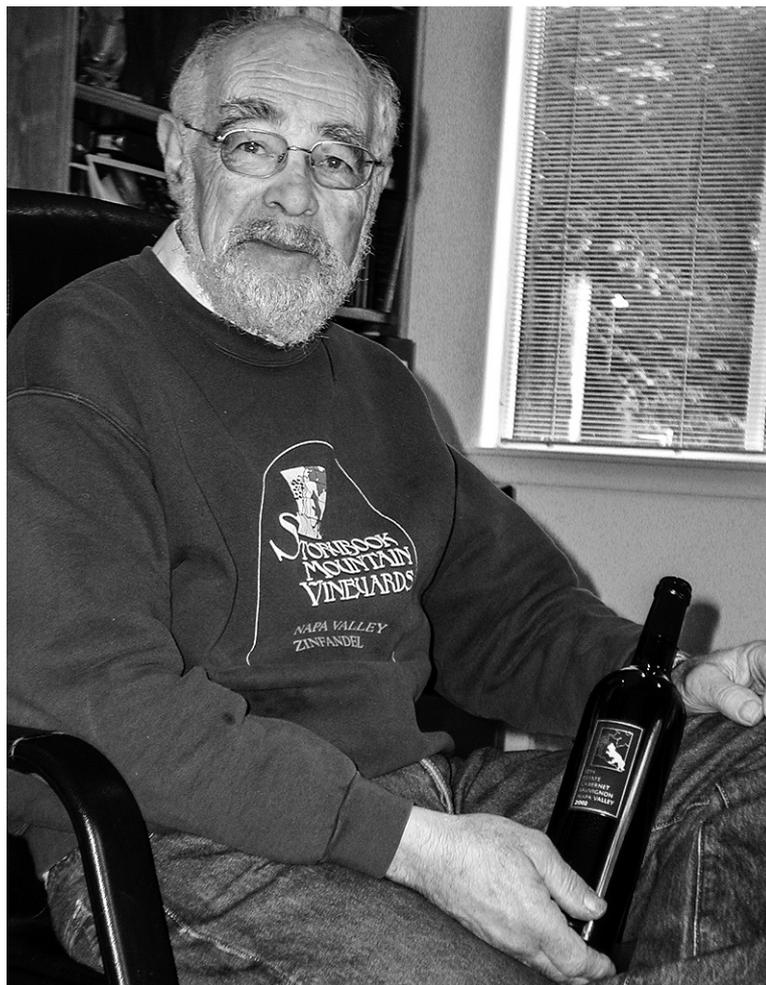


STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS

Master of zin, Seps' success not just a fairytale



Jerry Seps started his hillside winery in 1976.

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

They say that cabernet sauvignon is the king of grape varieties to grow and produce as wine in Napa Valley. The case is a strong one: consider the international stature of Napa cabernet since the Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976, not to mention the combination of cabernet's huge consumer popularity with its critical acclaim among wine writers and professional tasters across the U.S. This famous grape variety often seems to epitomize California wine.

But in a tucked-away little corner of Napa Valley, Jerry Seps, the owner and winemaker of Storybook Mountain Vineyards, turns out extraordinary wines made from California's "other" red wine grape, zinfandel.

Working in a cool pocket of east-facing hills near Calistoga, Seps is widely acknowledged as one of zinfandel's most quality-driven proponents. And like the Paris Tasting in '76, he's a part of

Napa Valley history.

"We bought the place in 1976 and started our replanting program in '77," he said recently while taking a break from tending his vines on a breezy afternoon. "It was an abandoned vineyard. There had been the Hanley fire in '64, so 12 years before we got here it burned right through this area. This was a very large winery at one time." Motioning out towards the steep, vine-covered hills, he added, "When we got here in '76, we literally had to start from the ground up."

To many zinfandel aficionados, the story of how Dr. Jerry Seps, professor of European history, and his Bavarian-born wife, Sigrid, started "from the ground up" is a familiar one: in that watershed year of 1976, they purchased a derelict property on Highway 128, a few miles north of Calistoga.

The name they gave it, Storybook Mountain, would meld an historical coincidence—the original 19th century founders of the property were German brothers named Grimm, just not

those Brothers Grimm—with the couple's impression that their hillside property offered scenery out of a fairytale.

At 40 acres, Storybook's footprint today is the same as it was in 1976. For the Seps, planting a new vineyard all those years ago meant taking a well-informed risk. With some peerless consultation, they settled on becoming zinfandel growers.

"We talked to people like [Andre] Tchelistcheff," Seps said, mentioning Beaulieu Vineyards' legendary winemaker, who steered him towards planting vines that weren't cabernet sauvignon. "He was one of the last people we talked to, and everyone agreed there's just no finer spot for zinfandel in the Napa Valley than the red clay soils above Calistoga. So that's why we started with zinfandel."

Asked to compare that earlier time to the present day at the estate, Seps emphasized that he believes "it's just a question of

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refinement. What we are trying to do is the same thing we tried initially. We found this beautiful piece of land, and I honestly felt that if we took care of the land, the land would eventually take care of us."

For all of the intense focus on zinfandel over the years, Seps has had to remain a flexible grape grower. "Taking care of the land," he said, continuing the thought, "means a number of things: it means being organic, and we're now certified. So that's one way. But the other way, if you're a viticulturalist, is to try and find the right match of grape and site."

This conviction led Seps to plant cabernet sauvignon in 1995 at a hillside location that had always been judged too cool to grow zinfandel. He shook hands with the devil, so to speak. "As I tell my friends down-valley," he joked, "when you have extra land, and you're in the Napa Valley and it's not good enough for zinfandel, you've got to do something with it!"

The Storybook Mountain cabernets are elegant, structured wines that represent roughly 15-20% of the estate's production. But if the winery's reputation is practically written in stone, it's because of its three celebrated bottlings of zinfandel. The Maya-

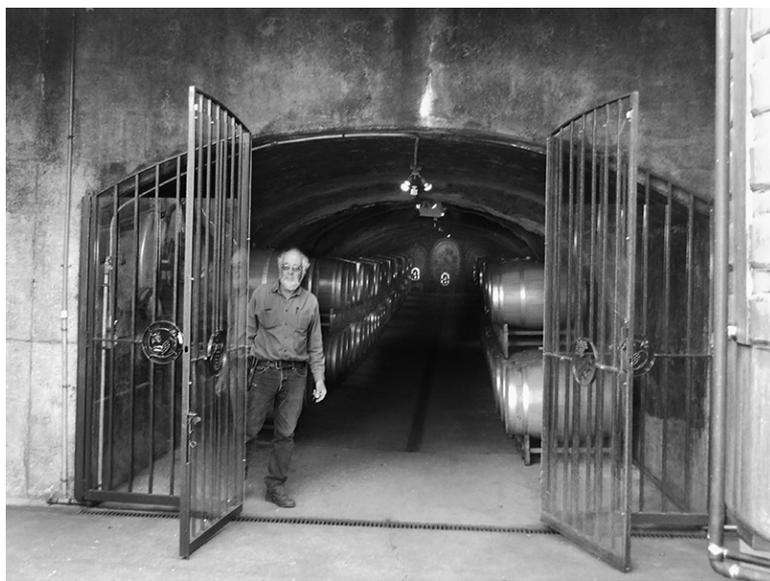


PHOTO BY TONY POER

Storybook Mountain Vineyards winemaker and owner Jerry Seps opens the gates to the winery's caves.

camas Range, Eastern Exposures, and Estate Reserve cuvées have for years received heaps of praise for serious wine publications like *The Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine* and *Wine & Spirits Magazine*. The former gave the current 2009 Reserve its highest zinfandel score ever in its 35-year history; the latter regularly names Storybook as one of the top 100 wineries in the world. Seps also grows viognier and produces a dry white wine made from this floral Rhône Valley variety.

Asked what he attributes his wines' critical success to over the years, he slipped easily into professorial mode. "It's the way we take care of the grapes," he began. "We run through the vineyard six

times eliminating grapes before they get to the stemmer-crusher. We really regulate crop size and average two or two and a half tons per acre.

"But I think perhaps most important of all is that we are continually trying to make the vineyard better. By that I mean, we have 96 different areas of a vineyard of 40 acres. What I do at the end of every season is that I grade each area. I grade on the quality of fruit first, of course. And I grade it on the quality of the vines. Do they look good? Are they healthy? Are they balanced? And anything that finishes at the bottom of the 96 gets replaced. We replace a minimum of a half-acre every year automatically."

It would be somewhat mind-boggling to picture this well-spoken farmer and retired academic doing his viticultural due diligence on many thousands of gnarled zinfandel and cabernet vines planted on rugged hillsides of ski slope precipitousness all by himself.

Asked if this was the case, he smiled and answered no. "But we have a huge advantage: we've had the same family work for us for 37 years." He went on to describe the role of the Ayala family from Michoacán, Mexico, four of whom work full-time at Storybook. "They're here five to six days a week. I think that's been important to our success. They know the vineyard. They care about what they're doing. And," he added, with feeling, "when their friends come from Michoacán, the Ayalas show them their vineyard and their cave. And it's true. I mean, they are very much a part of this."

Seps' office is in the winery, which was built in 1996 on top of the Grimm brothers' original wine cave. As a series of three connected tunnels, the cave was hand-dug by Chinese laborers out of volcanic rock over a century before and is where the patient business of aging about 400 barrels of Storybook wine takes place.

The main winery building is its own architectural statement.

It's almost completely concealed by a stately redwood grove from the guest parking area only a few dozen yards away. The design scheme at Storybook is functional and integrated, right down to the winery's cast concrete walls. Ascending the exterior stairway, Seps pointed this out. "You'll see there are ribs in the construction," he said. "And those ribs were solid. What we did was we took an eight-pound hammer, and we knocked out the surface so that you could see the interior and get a feeling for the intrinsic material that is part of this hill. And it's that kind of tactility that we're looking for in the wines."

On the map, the vineyard and winery seem fairly remote, though they're only a short drive from downtown Calistoga. Heading northwest, Storybook Mountain is the last Napa Valley winery you pass on Highway 128 before crossing into Knights Valley and Sonoma County. The vineyard's hillsides face east, and the property sits a short distance south of the Chalk Hill Gap, a geographical feature straddling Napa and Sonoma counties that allows cool afternoon breezes and fog to penetrate the upper reaches of Napa

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Valley. Both of these details are key to Seps' goals as a winemaker and to Storybook's success as a brand. "If you make a division in the world of wine between cool-climate wines and warm climate wines," he said, "ours are definitely cool-climate in the sense of their structure and acidity."

Even compared to his thoughts on viticulture, the misconception of the Calistoga AVA as a "hot climate" region seems to get Seps the most animated, and not necessarily in a happy-go-lucky way. "That's been one of my hesitations about putting the [Calistoga] appellation on the label," he explained patiently. "You know, with Chateau Montelena, we were the two wineries that spearheaded getting the appellation. I think that overall for Calistoga, it's a good thing. But there is this common perception that this is the hot area of the Valley, and it's really not true. It is along the Silverado Trail, maybe. Three Palms Vineyard is a very warm site, as an example. But the other half of this whole appellation is relatively cool. I think the heat is a misnomer, and it's something I've been trying to overcome for a number of years."

Earlier in the day, standing among the vines, Seps had stressed that "you'd be 10 degrees more comfortable than you would just north of St. Helena on the Silverado Trail, which is the hot spot in the valley, and you'd be

more comfortable for two reasons: one, we face east, so you don't get that late afternoon bake that you get along the Trail side of the valley; and the second thing is that the Chalk Hill Gap is right above us. We're right in the zone between the two valleys. So when that breeze comes up, just like it has right this second, we're going to feel it. Again, it could be ten degrees cooler, and when it's 100 down-valley and 90 up here, you really appreciate it."

To drive home the point, Seps pointed out that his site gets "almost as much fog as Carneros does. And this particular vineyard, if you do the heat summation, as I've done, has the same heat summation as Carneros. So this is really a cool-climate vineyard."

Unfortunately for many zinfandel-producing wineries in California, the term "cool-climate zinfandel" is oxymoronic. Happily for Seps and his associate winemaker, Colleen Williams (who is also his daughter), due to the ideal location of their vineyard, it's an accurate description of their style of wine.

Tasted in the cool, rustic cave, the 09 Mayacamas Range showed amazing depth of red and black fruit flavors on the palate, not to mention penetrating, spicy aromas. It was a densely concentrated red wine, buoyed by a fine layer of



Colleen Seps Williams



Sigrid Seps

bright acidity and framed by even finer tannins.

Echoing the surrounding architecture, the wine seemed to possess Seps' characteristic of "tactility." It would be impossible to produce such an essential zinfandel in anything less than ideal climactic conditions.

Back behind his desk, with a redwood-lined view to the east, Seps shared a bit more history.

"Over 30 years ago when we started, we just wanted to make a living up here. The kind of wine we produce, though, I think has given us both a responsibility and a reputation. The reputation is in a sense that if people talk about first growths of zinfandel," he said, referring to the historic classifications of the great wines of Bordeaux, "we are there. We definitely are. We might not be Chateau Latour, but we're very probably Chateau Lafite. That's the style of our wine." It came across as a somewhat bold claim until Seps shared a list of Storybook's north-

ern California restaurant accounts. It was fairly long list, replete with fantastic places to eat around the Bay Area. Some were well-known and some more obscure. Names like Chez Panisse, Boulevard, and the French Laundry practically jumped off the page. "If you're talking about the quality of the wines, I think if I can get that many buyers in the very competitive areas of Napa Valley and San Francisco to purchase our wines for their customers to enjoy, I'm making a style of wine that has a following among the most critical audience there is."

"It was a lot easier in the 70s," he said with some nostalgia. "It was great being a new winery, going around and presenting your wine. Everybody had the door open and was happy to taste. And that went on in the 80s. Now, I think it's exceedingly hard when you knock on that door, for that door to open. Thank god we have the reputation. Upon saying I'm from Storybook, it does help open the door."

Some of the most enduring support Storybook Mountain has received over the years has come from right down the road in Calistoga. Tom and Tammy Pelter, owners of the Calistoga Wine Stop, are respected retailers and longtime fans of Seps' wines. "I think we've had every wine they've made over the years," Tom Pelter said. "Maybe there's a vintage or two that we missed, but we pretty much have three or four Storybooks in here at any time."

The Pelters' store is well-stocked with Calistoga-area labels, along with wines from up and down Napa Valley. "[Storybook's] wines have as good an aging potential as any zins made in California," Pelter said, reflecting on his tasting experience with them. "I think a lot of that has to do with the balance. They're not out of balance. They're put together well. If they're well taken care of, they have a lot of aging potential."

Then he laughed. "Whether we want that or not is another story. We'd prefer you drink them the day you buy them, and buy another bottle the next day! But for people who like to treasure something, the wines hold up beautifully."

Seps had mentioned early in the conversation that his first wine job was as the sommelier at the famous Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. He was 21 and described it as a great job but "a long, long time ago." Glancing at the list of Storybook's restaurants, there it was at the top: the Ahwahnee. It made perfect sense. Most of what goes on at Storybook Mountain seems to make sense. The place has both history and symmetry. Its wines—and its owners—are iconic.

"We didn't come here for zinfandel," Seps summed up, recalling the beginnings of Sigrid's and his lives as winegrowers. "We came to make fine wine, and we tell people we make fine wine that happens to be zinfandel, because that's what goes with the land."

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