

Making wine in the trees

Dream finally coming true for Tom & Kerry Eddy

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

Perched at the northernmost spot on the Calistoga map, Tom Eddy looks down, literally, on the rest of Napa Valley.

From this vantage point, he can reflect on a career in wine that, in late 2015, is far from complete. According to his own plans—and because life sometimes intrudes on them—the veteran winemaker has work yet to do. With the help of his wife, a team of friends and colleagues, and a longtime assistant, he is building a winery among the trees, from the underground up.

Only half-joking, Tom Eddy calls himself an “escargociant.” As a winemaker, he has bought grapes in negociant fashion from other growers for most of his career, and he’s also consulted and made wine for a number of outfits that weren’t his own. The snail analogy works: he’s been carrying everything with him for years, accumulating both equipment and experience along the way, and the going has sometimes been slow. When the time came to start his own winery in Calistoga, it practically screeched to a halt.

“I’d already helped design several wineries, and I knew when we saw this property exactly what I wanted to do,” the 63 year-old California native said. He chatted from his desk in the light-filled office attached to his and his wife Kerry’s home a few miles north of town on the border of Sonoma County. Fall briefly threatened to show up on a cool, overcast October morning before the Indian summer weather reappeared. “So,” he said, snapping his fingers, “it was a real quick program. I had my architect, and I had a team together. We literally had the winery application done in six months.”

Tom talked about the sunny, optimistic days he and Kerry

had enjoyed almost fifteen years earlier when, having stumbled upon the north Calistoga property that had fallen out of escrow, they made a rushed but fortuitous decision to buy it and move up-valley to build a dream facility adjacent to their new home. It was going to be a small, modern winery, with a cave underneath, to house the Tom Eddy Wines label they had kicked off in the early 90’s.

Instead, that aforementioned life got in the way.

“We submitted [the application to Napa County], and it took us a while,” he recalled. “The hearings were long and drawn out. It wasn’t until three years later that we got the use permit. We started construction, we initialized the permit, put the road in and some of the underground, and then basically ran out of cash. The recession hit. We lost the investors we had, and we struggled for years maintaining [it] but not being able to really go whole-hog on the construction.”

These were dark times in Napa Valley, from 2007 through 2010 and after. For some wineries that closed their doors during the Great Recession, there was no relief. For Tom, Kerry, and company, the key to their survival was the all-important use permit that allowed them to host visitors and pour the Tom Eddy wines they had been producing off-site.

“Then the strangest thing happened,” Tom explained. “People who knew us for years would come up, say hi, would buy wine. They were really frustrated with me, because every time they came, I always complained about not having enough money to build a winery. And a couple of them asked, ‘You know what? What do you need?’”

Thinking at first that this handful of well-meaning, and well-healed, enthusiasts for his wines were only joking, he quickly realized that in fact they were not. “So, we actually capitalized on that,” he said.

He recounted putting together



PHOTO BY ERICA SCHRECKENGAUST

Tom and Kerry Eddy are building their winery from the underground up.

a group of people in 2011 and 2012 who loaned them the money to complete the winery’s first phase, its extensive cave. “We raised a couple million dollars in a year’s time from friends and customers. We called them the ‘cave partners.’ We’ve been with these guys for three years. They’re all excited. They come back and feel like it’s their winery, too. It’s very close to them.”

He added with a laugh, “These were people who obviously had enough money that they could afford to lose it!”

He and Kerry were careful to arrange simple interest loans, as opposed to taking on equity partners. When they decided in the 90’s to try to move up to Calistoga, the idea was to work entirely for themselves. Even as the timely loans rolled in years later,

Tom remained focused on staying independent and in control of his eponymous label.

“It’s a family operation, and we want to run it that way. Jason’s a brilliant winemaker. We do it all. I don’t need someone telling me how much skin contact time I need on my Pinot. This is my 42nd commercial harvest, so you’d think after all these years I’d know a little bit about winemaking. And it’s worked out well.”

Tom nodded to Jason Gerard, seated across the room. His assistant winemaker of nine years worked at his computer, occasionally rising to turn on and off a vacuum pump in the lab the pair had set up in the office kitchen next door. Gerard, a 39 year-old microbiology whiz and graduate of UC Santa Barbara, was check-

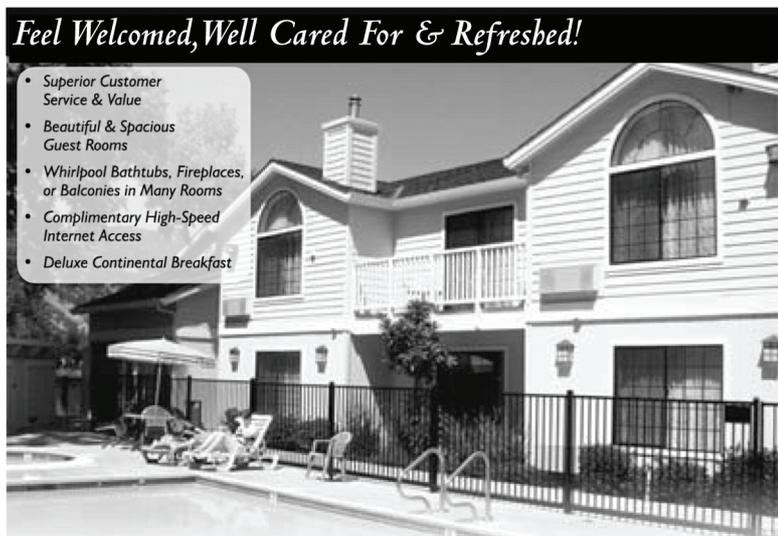
ing the free sulphur levels in selected barrel lots of Tom Eddy wines. While the pump droned in the background, Tom’s assistant suffered quietly through the last stage of a bad flu. His boss noted drily that he was glad Gerard got sick after the recent grape harvest. As for himself, Tom confessed that, for a change, he felt guilty for not being exhausted in mid-October. This year’s drought-affected harvest was early, smaller than usual, and very fast.

Over the last four decades, Tom Eddy has experienced little post-harvest guilt, but lots of fatigue, along with elation, dread, and everything in between. As a lead-up to a career in the wine industry, he studied what was called “Fermentation Science” at UC

See EDDY WINES on page 6

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EDDY WINES
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Davis in the late 60's, now well-known as the school's Viticulture and Enology program. He and his family had moved from Long Beach, Calif. to the university town when Tom was a child. He developed an interest in cooking and wine as a teenager. "I got interested in wine at an early age," he said. "I loved to cook with my mom, and loved anything tactile to cook, taste, and eat. So this wine opportunity came in the sense that I was living there in Davis."

He remembers specifically a trip to the liquor store with his father to pick up a bottle of gin. All of 14 years old, he convinced his dad to skip the spirits and buy some wine instead. He offered to cook and do a wine tasting, an

activity he would enthusiastically repeat many times at home, to his parents' delight. Though they wanted him to go to college at Stanford, they weren't surprised when, finishing high school, he elected to stay in Davis to study winemaking.

Tom's UC Davis degree helped him land a succession of large-scale production jobs after college. He first worked for a Central Valley co-op facility "scrubbing laboratory floors," as he described it. From there he went on to the giant United Vintners in Madera, where he gained experience with many different grape varieties before being hired as Inglenook's director of Sonoma and Mendocino winemaking at their former Alexander Valley operation.

In 1981, the Inglenook position led to a job at the old Chateau Souverain winery, also

in Alexander Valley. Tom found himself in a daunting role as Souverain's general manager, as well as its head winemaker. "I was 29 years old as the GM and sacred to death," he said. "I didn't know what a balance sheet was. But it was a good learning curve."

He finally moved to Napa Valley in 1984 after accepting a job offer from the Christian Brothers winery. In the wake of the retirement of its legendary winemaker, Brother Timothy Diener, the Catholic order was in the process of revamping productions at the four facilities it owned in the Valley.

"So I stayed there and loved the job," said Tom. "I ran all the facilities, had a lot of people working for me, and did a lot of marketing and traveling. It was a great job. I was there for five years, and then the company was sold to [the beverage company] Heublein."

He and Kerry lived in the city of Napa at this time and had just gotten married. They met through her job with The Wine Spectator magazine in New York, and their collective years of gainful employment allowed them to consider branching out on their own. "We said, 'Now's the time. We have money in the bank, and [Christian Brothers] is sold. Let's start our own winery.'"

While the couple mapped out their future, Tom stayed busy consulting and making wine for several wineries around the valley, including Goosecross, Deer Park Winery, Cuvaision, and Sum-



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PHOTO BY ERICA SCHRECKENGAUST

Tom Eddy's new winery is a hillside dream of his and wife Kerry where they make wine surrounded by woods and scenic vistas on Hwy 128. The couple bought the property in 1999.

mers Estate. Here was Tom's "escargociant" plan put into action: starting with the 1991 vintage, he made the first decade's worth of Tom Eddy Cabernet Sauvignons at well-respected client wineries. "I moved around a lot," he said. "It was always beneficial to make my own wine in a place where I was consulting."

"But," he emphasized, "still our goal was to find a place up-valley. We loved Calistoga. We wanted to be up in the trees. We wanted to be close to downtown but not in downtown."

Towards the end of the 90's, he and Kerry made a couple of offers on Calistoga locations that didn't work out. "Then," he smiled, "this property here just kind of fell into our lap."

In late 1999, while Tom was away from the valley on a trip, Kerry took a look at a piece of tree-lined, hillside real estate that straddled the county line, just up the road from Storybook Mountain and pretty much the last driveway on Highway 128 before crossing over to Sonoma County. She found out that the buyers who were first in line planned to clear-cut acres of trees to plant vineyards, but they pulled out of escrow at the last minute. Kerry knew for both of them that this

was the place they'd been seeking. The chance to save a lot of trees was an added incentive.

Tom recalled that "the next morning, the realtor said, 'You've got 45 minutes to make a decision.' And we did. We didn't have the money. We had to figure out how to raise the money. But it was a magical piece of property, and we were so lucky to get it. Then we started immediately to work on our goal to build a winery."

The bureaucratic and recession delays after their move to Calistoga didn't curtail Tom's winemaking creativity. Early on, with the help of Napa friends who relocated to Oregon to grow grapes, he initiated a Willamette Valley Pinot Noir program under the Tom Eddy label. This lasted several vintages and morphed in 2006 into a stylistically similar, cool-climate Mendocino Ridge Pinot Noir bottling that continues today.

Also in '06, in a maneuver seldom, if ever, attempted by California winemakers, he and Kerry launched a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc brand. TENZ, an acronym for Tom Eddy New Zealand, was born out of a combination of opportunity and necessity: at the time they were

pondering a trip to Marlborough to participate in an international cool-climate wine symposium, they discovered one afternoon that they had no good white wine in their refrigerator at home. A

trip to the other side of the planet would eventually solve that problem.

"We took a flyer and called up [New Zealand winemaker] Kim Crawford," Tom said. "He was

in town with a mutual friend. I called him up and said, 'Kim, come on over for a barbecue.' He came over, we sat on the deck, and I said, 'Give me a couple names of growers you respect in Marlborough, because I want to make some Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc.' I'd never been there and didn't know anyone yet."

The famous New Zealand vintner provided contacts for Tom. He and Kerry looked them up when they traveled to the symposium. They spent three weeks in Marlborough going from vineyard to vineyard, meeting the growers and tasting wines made from their racy, distinctive Sauvignon grapes. "Pretty soon we had this unbelievable matrix of flavor profiles that matched vineyard locations and soil types, and we got to know the area really well."

The following spring of 2007—harvest time in the southern hemisphere—the first crop of TENZ Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc was picked, made into wine, and imported back to California. Tom and Kerry now fly to Marlborough every spring about a month before harvest to select vineyards sites. Tom works with local winemakers to produce individual lots of Sauvignon under his protocols, which are sent back to Calistoga as finished samples.

See *EDDY WINES* page 10

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EDDY WINERY

Continued from page 7

to Calistoga as finished samples. He and Jason put together blends from the samples and then buy those lots, pointing out that “we do everything there, except the label.”

Restaurateurs and retailers in Calistoga and beyond have many Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc choices, but, in an attempt to do some justice to an adventurous local winemaker, Kyrsta Scully has taken a slightly different approach. The Director of Food and Beverage at Indian Springs Resort devotes half of her small wine program at Sam’s Social Club to Calistoga vintners, and she includes TENZ in this group. “That’s the Tom Eddy wine I

have on my list,” Scully explained over the phone, “and it’s the story I love telling.”

“I can tell you the reason why is because I’m in virtually big, red Cabernet country, and here is somebody who does that very, very well. But I love the fact that every year he spends time at harvest in New Zealand, and he does his [Marlborough] Sauvignon Blanc. I thought that was a really interesting story to tell.”

For Sam’s Social Club guests, Scully likes to recommend TENZ Sauvignon Blanc with oysters on the half shell and, as crab season approaches, also the restaurant’s Dungeness crab salad. The wine possesses enough intensity of fruit and balancing acidity to complement a variety of shellfish, which can be a tricky thing for any winemaker or sommelier to

pull off (see sidebar for notes on this and other Tom Eddy wines tasted for this article).

Kerry Eddy, who calls herself the “chief taster and bottle washer,” eventually joined her husband at the office, and the couple strolled up and over a crest at the northeast corner of their hillside property to give a tour of the cave. Winemaking equipment and fermentation tanks line the crushpad outside the walkway that leads to the cave. The cave entrance is a round, custom-designed “Hobbit Door,” constructed from African mahogany and designed by Calistoga artist Michael Johnson. This stylish feature and its oversized toadstool door handle are transitional nods to New Zealand, The Hobbit films, and J.R.R. Tolkien. The entire concept pleased Tom’s

artist wife as it came together during the construction.

When Tom closed the Hobbit Door, the loud thud was decidedly cinematic. The well-lit winery cave, with concrete walls stained in a light pigment for better visibility, is equal parts work space, hospitality center, and art gallery. One of the cave’s tunnels is stacked with barrels of Cabernet Sauvignon, mostly single-vineyard lots from Tom’s grape sources around Napa Valley. Small, backlit alcoves line each side of an adjacent tunnel and display Kerry’s sculpture work, some of it whimsical and some solemn. An enormous letter E is carved into a wall at one end of the cave. “We call that ‘The Big E,’ for Ego!” Tom laughed. The H-shaped network of tunnels is compact but can house up to 600

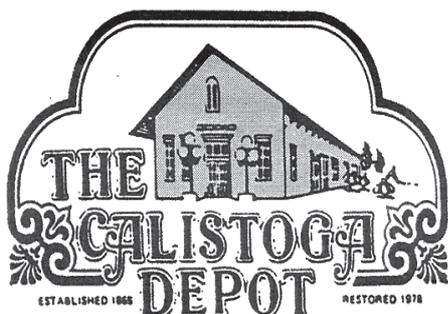
barrels of wine, which represents the maximum production of Tom Eddy Wines, based on the winery’s license.

Back at the office, Tom talked about the next and last phases of construction on the property: an expansion of the cave in two years and a fully built winery by 2020. The road has been long, but he and Kerry made it through the first decade-plus of ownership by bringing their property up to the fire marshal’s code for greeting visitors and hosting events. With the cave’s completion last year, they reached another commercial milestone.

“The thing that’s really important is that by completing this phase, we’ve got our certificate of occupancy, so we’re now technically a real winery, in the eyes of the county. We can do marketing

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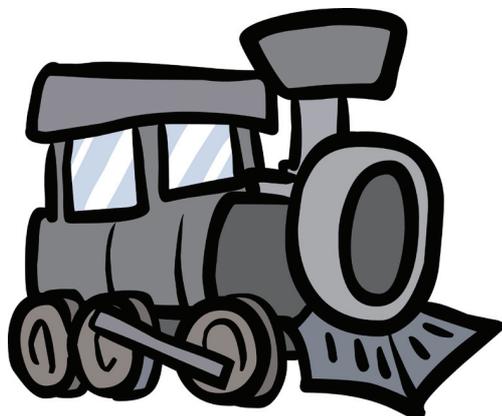
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PHOTO BY CHICK HARRITY

Tom and Kerry Eddy followed their dream of building a winery of their own on Hwy 128 near the Napa/Sonoma county line.

events, tours, and tastings. That's the key thing."

He pointed out the framed print over his assistant Jason's desk, a rendering by Calistoga architect Patrick Mervin of the modern, 10,000 square foot winery that will eventually be built on the slope and flat directly above the winery cave. He com-

mented on how Mervin executed the original design around his winemaking style: "We wanted to focus on barrel-aging, because we age all our Cabernets for three years in new French oak, which most people won't do or don't do. So we needed a facility for that. We wanted gentle winemaking. We don't use any of the hard

press, so any time we could take advantage of gravity, we did."

"The concept of gravity draining down into the cave is not real yet," Tom added, "because we haven't been able to build the main facility on top. So we've made some modifications to the equipment to make it easier to maintain our philosophy. But the philosophy is really still the same as far as winemaking."

Tom and Kerry's property is wild, idyllic, and fairly remote, considering its proximity to Calistoga. The 900 acres of land that surround it were placed a few years ago into the Sonoma Land Trust, per the wishes of the late owner before she passed away. To this day, Tom thinks of it as "the most extraordinary thing." Because of the Trust, the neighboring land will never be developed.

A few Black Angus cattle roam that land and venture back and forth between the two counties. Once or twice, the animals have broken through the fence and wandered across Tom's crushpad. It's an inconvenience but is, by his estimation, an otherwise a small price to pay to be able to live and work—and sometimes play—at the top of Napa Valley.

"That's why we wanted to find a property to buy that had elevation and that was on a hill," he said, "not just for the views and everything personally but, you know, kind of a winemaking-in-the-trees approach. And so when we found this property, it was so perfect."

Tom Eddy Wines

Tony Poer's Tasting notes (and an Addendum)

Master Sommelier Brahm Callahan first came across Tom Eddy's 2001 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon a decade ago while working under the wine director at the Excelsior Restaurant in Boston. "I really didn't know all that much about California when I started there," Callahan said in a phone call. "I was very Eurocentric in my training. But the restaurant had a great California list, and it was run by a sommelier who knew California as well as anybody." That was a decade ago. Today, with a large team of his own sommeliers working and training under him, Callahan directs the wine program at Boston's acclaimed Grill 23. Of course, he includes Tom's wines to accompany Chef Jay Murray's meat and seafood-driven menu.

In Callahan's own words, he has always been "blown away by the elegance of" the Tom Eddy Cabernet Sauvignon. "It clearly speaks to where it's from," he said, "with beautifully integrated, full fruit, alcohol, and oak usage."

2013 TENZ Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand

Exotic, lychee/herbal nose, pink grapefruit, hint of white pepper, saline, minerals. Ripe, juicy palate of lemon-lime, green melon. Crisp, balanced, restrained. Textbook NZ Sauvignon "from" Napa Valley. **800 cases, \$24**

2012 Tom Eddy Pinot Noir, Manchester Ridge, Mendocino County

Aromatic, spicy ripe red fruit aromas, cinnamon, clove, a little gamey, wet earth and stones. Wild cherries, red currants, red plums, cured meat, grilled herbs, touch of saline in the finish. Medium tannins. Structured, cool-climate Pinot Noir. **1000 cases, \$60**

2012 Tom Eddy Cabernet Sauvignon, Elodian, Napa Valley

Spiced plum, raspberry, cracked pepper, mineral, aniseed nose. High-toned red-black fruit flavors, wild raspberry, red cherry, plum, rich and complex fruit, Bordeaux-like tannins and restraint. Straightforward, everyday Cabernet, nice balance of old and new world. **300 cases, \$65**

2009 Tom Eddy Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

Sweet cigar box-mineral nose, dried cherry, pomegranate, burnt orange peel. Very complex aromas. Ripe cherry-raspberry, cassis liqueur, good balance, acid tension, very bright, crisp texture, medium-dry tannins in back of palate and through finish. Hints of Iberian spice, red and yellow pepper, herbs, grilled meat. Overall light on its feet, bright acidity, firm tannins, definitely ageworthy. **650 cases, \$120**

2010 Tom Eddy Zinfandel Dessert Wine, Sierra Foothills

Rich, heady, cherry liqueur, Christmas plum, chocolate, cracked pepper nose. Fat, sweet, cherry pie, fruit pudding, brambly, nice acid balance, some texture through the finish. Unmistakably Zinfandel. Complex, delicious, well-executed sweet wine.

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