

Ed Ewing

Vineyard Manager
York Creek Vineyards
St. Helena

When the owner of York Creek Vineyards, Fritz Maytag, first saw what was the "Hummel Ranch" during the harvest of 1968, it was love at first sight. He had found a property with beautiful forest and a producing vineyard. Today, less than 20 percent of this 750+ acre property on top of Spring Mountain is cultivated. Most of it is wild. Ed Ewing oversees extensive forests as well as managing orchards of cider apples for brandy and Mission olives for oil, a small Standardbred trotting horse breeding operation, and 125 acres of vineyard planted to a "baker's dozen" of varieties.

For the estate wines bottled at Fritz's York Creek Winery in San Francisco, in its third vintage, 14 red and 1 white varieties are grown: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot for a Meritage; Zinfandel, Grenache, Barbera, Petite Syrah, Carignane and Alicante Bouschet for a "mixed black"; Tempranillo, Tinto Cao and Touriga Nacional as well as Petite Syrah and Zinfandel for port; and Pinot Blanc for a white wine. There is also a small amount of Napa Gamay. But only about 15 percent of the harvest goes to San Francisco. The rest is sold to several wineries: Ridge Vineyards in Cupertino, Delectus in Napa, and Barnett, Pride Mountain and Behrens & Hitchcock on

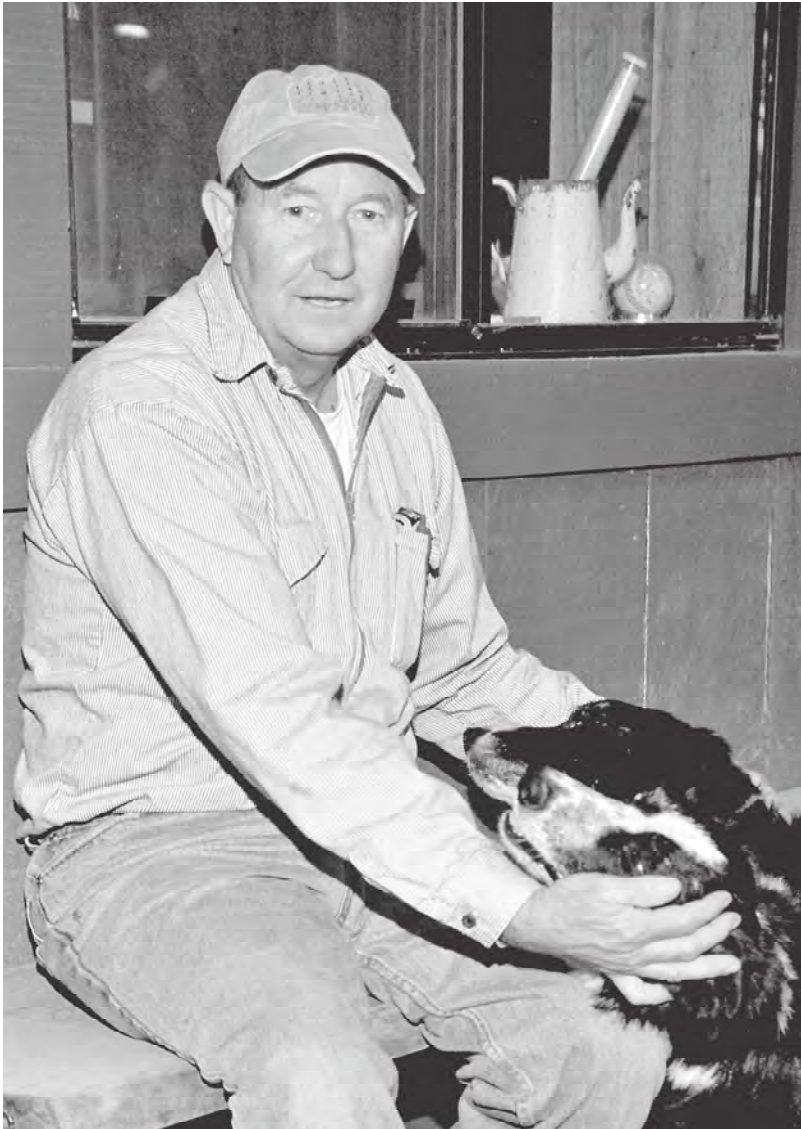
right Spring Mountain, and they are glad to get it. York Creek was one of the earliest California estate vineyards designated on a label, in 1971 by Ridge.

Fritz bought York Creek as a mountain property so he could take his family camping. He thought his long-term goal of clearing land and planting vineyards was way off in the future. Herman Hummel had originally managed the property for a Mr. Lanza, buying it from him in the 1930s. In 1940 Herman sold 300 acres to Jerry Draper. He and Jerry really built the reputation of Spring Mountain fruit. As soon as Fritz bought the property from Herman in 1968, he asked Laurie Wood to act as vineyard consultant and hired Frank Saldivar as his vineyard manager. They got busy clearing and laying out new vineyards and orchards and converting the old vineyards from Green Hungarian, Burger and Palomino to Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Merlot; the mixed black blocks to single varieties. And they worked hard to improve drainage everywhere, in the fields and for new roads. An oval track for training the trotters was built right into newly planted vineyard for Zin. The Maytag family has yet to camp at York Creek Vineyards, but the York Creek Winery label features 24 native tree species which grow naturally at York Creek, perhaps forest campsite enough.

With Laurie's advice, the new vineyards were planted closer than most back then, 10x7, and trained to the "cordon" system, on AxR1 rootstock. York Creek believes in modern canopy management, and Fritz and Ed

have since developed their own higher trellising system for most of the vineyards: three fixed wire pairs and a fruiting wire barely a foot above the ground. The vines need little trimming during summer growth, bunches are exposed to partial sunlight, cane vigor ceases with veraison and bunches are thinned as needed. Production is consistent, with grapes of what seem to be a high quality. Not every block is vertically trellised, however. The old Zin and Petite Syrah blocks are now head-trained, the old fashioned way. Fritz has always been a true believer in these varieties, planting more Pets and Zin when others were pulling them out. But, since Ed became vineyard manager in 1987, several other varieties have been added, including Petit Verdot and the Portuguese varieties. Petit Verdot is cane pruned at York Creek, otherwise it shatters like crazy. Their budwood is chosen for the wine it has made, not because it's "virus free".

Olive trees were planted around the ranch, starting in 1973. The olives have been made into oil since 1984 (York Creek bought its own olive press in 1991), but the trees are now also valued as a foil for the blue-green leafhopper, carrier of Pierce's disease. The disease has not been a big problem at York Creek. Hopefully, the leaf hoppers are stymied by the olive trees in their pursuit of softer vegetation. With the advice of long-time consultant Aman Kasimatis, York Creek has established a specific program for eutypa. No pruning is done during rainy periods, serious cuts down to good wood are made only in dry weather, and a sucker is left near



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PHOTOGRAPH: PRISCILLA UPTON

the very bottom of every vine (that has one). So far no phylloxera has been spotted in the vineyards, although neighboring vineyard owners have suffered from it. To hedge their bets, York Creek began interplanting AxRI with 110R rootstock several years ago, on a drip system so the new vines could compete with their older brothers. By next year interplanting will be complete. None of the new or replanted vineyard blocks are terraced. Vines grow on the natural slope of the hills. Ed says they have to spray to keep weeds out of the vines (they tried with no spray, but weeds went way up in the vines), but they can mow between the rows and encourage as many wildflowers as they can.

York Creek Vineyards begins far down on Spring Mountain Road, and runs up and over the crest of Spring Mountain, its western border well into Sonoma County. On a summer evening fog may come in from Sonoma through the low places, or find its way up from Napa. Typical temperatures at ranch headquarters are 8 to 10 degrees lower than St. Helena's (it's 1575' at the main barn) and their growing season usually is behind the Valley by several weeks. Harvest starts about October first. The ranch maintains a crew of 8 to 12 workers year round, with a couple of extra hands at harvest. It is one of the last ranches in Napa to offer overnight quarters for workers. There are substantial springs on the property. Water for the vineyards comes from the springs, two lakes and two wells. A perimeter six foot wire mesh fence keeps most large creatures out of the vineyards, but the mesh has to be checked all the time and it's a real challenge getting the occasional deer back out.

Growing up, Ed Ewing helped farm sheep and worked in many, many orchards and vineyards. He's from the farming town of Geyserville. You get the feeling Ed likes the steadiness of the Standardbred trotting horses as much as the constant challenge of the vineyards, orchards, water systems and roadways he so carefully watches over at York Creek. 2004 will be Ed Ewing's 18th harvest and Fritz Maytag's 36th.