

# Charles J. Wagner

Owner / Winemaker

Caymus Vineyards

Rutherford

In 1941, Chuck Wagner's parents, Charlie and Lorna, bought 70 acres on Conn Creek Road in Rutherford. The property was planted mostly to prunes with some walnuts; Charlie put in vineyard. He had been born half mile away on property *his* dad, another Charles Wagner, had bought on the Rutherford Crossroad in 1906. Charles had established a winery there in 1915 but Prohibition had put an end to it (that property is where Honig Vineyard and Winery is today). Growing up, Chuck helped his dad farm everything on their Conn Creek property. He helped his dad plant Cabernet on budwood they got from Nathan Fay in 1966, '67 and '68. Chuck's other grandfather, Charles Glos, had invented the technique of chip budding, and they worked the expanding vineyards as a family.

They planted new vines whenever they could--Pinot noir and Riesling, Gamay, Burger, Petite Syrah. Charlie became both a well-respected grower as well as home winemaker. Chuck's mother, Lorna, was a good cook and Chuck remembers the wines they drank with Lorna's meals with great affection. He got to know the home wines like friends, and can recall in particular the '68 and '69

Pinot noir from their own vineyard; the Petite Syrah and Zin from the Werli property; and a '48 Pinot noir for special occasions made from fruit of a then-neighbor, Beaulieu Vineyard's BV#3.

In 1971 Chuck finished St. Helena High School and was taking classes at Napa Junior College when his dad made him an offer to help start a small winery. Charlie had put the Conn Creek Road property on the market, but listening to a couple of prospective buyers (the Eiseles had been among those looking) made him determined to start a winery himself, if he could have Chuck's help. Chuck readily agreed and Charlie, Lorna and Chuck formed what is still a family owned and run business, 'Caymus'.

Charlie was then 60 and Chuck just 20. They were farming 55 acres of vineyard themselves with one helper. It took them four months just to prune. The first commercial production at Caymus was in 1972, and included Pinot noir, Pinot noir blanc, a little Cabernet--a few hundred cases--and Riesling. They pumped six or seven thousand gallons into 600 gallon tanks by hand (the pump they used is still close by, and its action is still surprisingly smooth). Their first used barrels came from Beaulieu, with the red bands and heads Chuck can still see in his mind's eye, and puncheons from Inglenook. The 1972 Cabernet did really well when it was released in 1974. Their 1973 Cab, released in 1975,

was given a big plus by Robert Finegan, and the wine merchant turned critic, Wilfred Wong, said the Caymus 1973 was the best Cabernet he'd ever had. Caymus was at the beginning of that niche of local effort, and their telephone began to ring.

George Duer helped at first as winemaker. He had retired from Inglenook in the early sixties after 30 years with John Daniel and he was hugely helpful about the chemistry. He taught them his "golden rules" of winemaking. And, for a while, Robert Stemmler consulted on winemaking, but they soon figured out how to do it themselves. This was especially true when Randy Dunn came on board. "We were all learning together," Chuck recalls. And he readily acknowledges a debt to Laurie Wood, another mentor and friend, "a great man".

Caymus made several wines for many years, but Cabernet became the focus. By the 1980's Caymus made just two Cabernets, Special Selection and Napa Valley, from their estate vineyard. In 1984 they bought some additional fruit and introduced a third wine, Caymus Napa Cuvée, which they made for only three years. Now they buy fruit from their longtime growers and farm additional fruit themselves on land under long-term contract around the Valley, from St. Helena through Rutherford to Atlas Peak. These vineyard blocks vary in size from two to fifteen acres. Their original Cabernet vines had come from that early Fay



*Chuck Wagner*

PHOTOGRAPH: PRISCILLA UPTON

they planted in the 1960's, but about fifteen years ago, with the help of viticultural consultant Paul Skinner in Oregon, they successfully cultured what they call the 'Caymus clone'. They have replanted most of their vineyard to this clone. At Caymus they have always worked to improve the product every year.

Chuck has been directing all the winemaking since 1984. Caymus Special Selection has been 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon since 1975. Caymus Napa Valley has included as much as 10 percent Merlot, a small amount of Petit Verdot and, in some years, Cabernet Franc. Chuck thinks the Caymus Cabernet structure comes from Atlas Peak fruit, its sweetness from the Caymus estate, and the rest from small amounts here and there in the Valley. The wines are aged in oak barrels from at least five different producers. Caymus is constantly playing with the new/old barrel ratio, with 60 to 90 percent new wood for both programs.

Caymus has replanted vineyard an average of every 13 years which Chuck believes works to Caymus's advantage. Each replanting brings a chance for new choices, for upgrades in viticulture--rootstock, trellising, clonal selection. It makes for fast evolution. Chuck tests and tastes throughout the vineyard blocks with a similar situation and conditions, looking for the best results from row orientation, from spacing. He is part of a group that has always

talked together about what to do, but he's not sure even today they are really doing anything right. Chuck just makes sure at Caymus they implement smart farming practices.

Competition between vines is definitely a quality factor in closely spaced vines. The Caymus clone Cabernet has very, very loose clusters, so yield per vine is low. The newest plantings are on meter-by-meter spacing. The soils at Caymus are gravelly and dark. The rootstocks are *Vitis riparia* and *berlandieri*. St. George had proved too inconsistent. The vines are basically dry-farmed, with most vines watered only during the first year. They've always thinned crop throughout the growing season at Caymus. Whenever growth is still too heavy, they cut out the centers of any thickets, to make the crop more uniform, while making sure they leave next year's fruitwood. They make their last pass for thinning at 90 percent veraison. This year, in late May, they have made two thinning passes. There are already some shot berries. Chuck is predicting an early ripening with good quality fruit.

He and his two sons farm wine grapes in four other California counties as well as Napa. Their Mer Soleil Chardonnay program is in Monterey County with Charlie Wagner II, winemaker; the Belle Glos Pinot noir program is in Sonoma County and the Santa Maria Valley with Joel Wagner, partner and winemaker; and Conundrum, an independent label still owned by the family, is largely in

Monterey County and Santa Maria.

Additionally, the Wagners farm almost 400 acres of table grapes, more than 100 acres of lemons (at Mer Soleil), and, this year, tomatoes--including over 14 acres of heirloom tomatoes right in the Napa Valley. If the tomatoes prove successful, they will plant them where vineyard acreage is idle in their replanting cycle.

In the 30 years Chuck has been with Caymus, change in the character of the Caymus Cabernets has been relatively slow. Production has been held steady at about 30,000 cases since 1989. The wines are made a little riper now, but still balanced, for they have always been made to be enjoyed as often as you can. And, if you are able to, counsels Chuck, you should drink great wines every day.