

Eugene R. Kirkham

Co-owner, founder and general manager
Casa Nuestra Winery, St. Helena
1,500 case production

On Making Chenin Blanc

Gene Kirkham grew up in San Francisco, but he spent weekends and summers in Oakville, trapping and hiking, bombing around in go karts, looking for arrowheads, exploring old buildings, fishing, all the usual, wonderful Napa Valley kid-stuff in the 1950's and the early '60's.

In 1987, when Gene wanted to move with his wife and their two year-old child from the city to the country, they found a place in St. Helena with a ten acre vineyard on the Silverado Trail belonging to Tom Blackburn. Gene was far more interested in the house (a scene in Elvis Presley's "Wild in the Country" had been filmed out its back door) than its vineyard, planted in 1966 to Napa Gamay, Chenin Blanc and Grey Riesling, and under contract to Christian Brothers and Robert Mondavi Winery, or so Gene assumed.

But, when Gene went to Christian Brothers, he learned a change in ownership voided the contract for Grey Riesling (he thinks they had an oversupply of white grapes). Robert Mondavi still wanted his Napa Gamay and Chenin Blanc but not the Grey Riesling and Gene had been advised to sell his grapes to

just one place. In successful grape marketing, he had been told, fruit a winery wanted could be leveraged for fruit they didn't. He then learned the cost of hiring a vineyard contractor would exceed proceeds from the sale of his fruit--this with a fledgling law practice, a mortgage, and a young family to support. Gene felt the vineyard was fast becoming a millstone.

Fortunately, the Napa Valley Coöperative accepted his application. Lots of people had a lot of sympathy for his innocence, for city refugees taking up winemaking and grape growing. When Gene had spoken to his predecessor, Tom Blackburn, an Annapolis-trained former naval officer, about becoming a grape-grower, Tom recalled his own start and said, 'if these knuckleheads can grow grapes, I sure as hell can--so, what kind of knucklehead are you?' Tom had run his vineyard in military fashion, keeping excellent records. Gene could virtually follow Tom's journals (Casa Nuestra's chief winemaker, Allen Price, says, 'Excellent records are vital. Data gets you close, as close as you can to understand rainfall, thermal curve, profiles of the years').

Gene also had help from Winkler's book, General Viticulture, farm advisor Keith Bowers, Dave Perez from the Coöp, his neighbors and old-time grape grower, Elwood Mee. Whenever Gene'd see a farmer doing something, he'd ask and go do it, too--if he had the tool to hitch behind the tractor. It turned out Gene really enjoyed farming; he liked

becoming handy, meeting problems and just simply dealing with them, overcoming the fear of making mistakes. And the things they did back then, Gene shudders to recall--the chemical sprays, clouds of herbicides, no white suits, hardly any regulations.

Gene began to angle away from his partnership in a Napa law firm to farming. But vineyard cost \$5,000 an acre and it took 40 acres, minimum, to support a family as a winegrower. Without prospects to acquire another 30 acres, Gene realized he could add value if he could turn his fruit into wine and have a financially viable operation--the Stony Hill model. Gene had been brought up to wine in college and thereafter, always liking dry rather than sweet wines. He wondered if he really could make wine which would meet the standards and be commercially viable. He talked to Tom Cottrell, a founding partner of Cuvaison and a good friend. Tom said 'Sure, he'd help,' and so did Phil Baxter, a winemaker at Souverain and Rutherford Hill.

White wines were then emerging in the US as a cocktail beverage, so whites seemed like a good bet. Gene already had a utility shed, so, with Tom consulting, Gene worked weekends and with Allen Price's technical support bought and installed two 500 gallon stainless tanks and a chiller fabricated by John York (all still in service) in the shed. They made a few tons of Chenin Blanc and Grey Riesling in 1978. The Grey Riesling proved unstable (fondly remembered as the "Green Torpedo"

for its exits from its Sylvaner-style bottles) but the Chenin Blanc was very, very good--until it oxidized. They hadn't blanketed the tank properly, so they lost the 1979 (Gene called it 'my winemaker's getting a divorce' wine'). By 1980, they were fully licensed. They eventually pulled the Riesling and Gamay, replanting to Merlot, but kept the two acres of Chenin Blanc.

Chenin Blanc is an ancient varietal with vinifera origins in Europe. It is capable of making enormous yields and performs well in warm districts. The 1988 Napa County Crop Report cites 2,019 bearing acres of Chenin Blanc; 7,000 Chardonnay and 3,644 Sauvignon Blanc out of 15,374 white and 13,869 black varietal bearing acres. In 2003 there were only 132 bearing acres of Chenin Blanc; 7,000 Chardonnay and 1,700 Sauvignon Blanc out of 9,962 white and 29,144 red (black) varietal bearing acres. In the 1980's nearly every winery made a Chenin Blanc--a sweet, uncontroversial, low alcohol white wine ('Still the active typing and a cross to bear all these years,' sighs Gene). Most Chenin Blanc was farmed 15 to 17 tons to the acre, picked at 20-21 Brix, fermented to 12%--the rest left as residual sugar--to make an ordinary, neutral, devoid of varietal character jug white wine (most Chablis at the time was probably Chenin Blanc).

Casa Nuestra made Chenin Blanc dry. Gene was a maverick. Actually, it was the easiest way. Stopping fermentation was technically

more difficult. And, at 3 1/2 - 4 tons an acre the character is entirely different. As Gene says, 'If you take care of the fruit and let the wine make itself, it will be as good as it can be--a question of what you do with what you got.' Gene didn't go out and try to get some-

thing else, and his mailing list of friends in San Francisco who were wine collectors were extremely favorable about the wine.

Gene became interested in how much the vintages differed. He remembers the early vin-



PHOTOGRAPH: PRISCILLA UPTON

tages with great particularity and fondness, the last ten are more of a blur. In 1983, wine writer John Movius and Harvey Steinman of the San Francisco Examiner started a wine tasting competition because there was none in the City (there was one in Los Angeles, but not San Francisco). Gene was urged to submit his 1983 which he did. It took the gold and it still tastes terrific today. Chenin Blanc ages longer and better than any other white variety, if it's made properly. Minerally French ones are steely, flinty, highly structured and pretty hard to find outside the Loire Valley. Gene would have saved more of his '83 in the library if he had known how good it would be after 25 years. There had been so many problems back then--no vacuum corker, low fills. Still, the bottles of the early vintages have held.

1984 was a hot year, the grapes just popped. Crews were hijacked for a dollar more an hour right out of the vineyard. Fruit was riper than expected so they made an off-dry Chenin Blanc. 1985 brought a new problem: botrytis. They left half the crop in the field; the fruit was too sweet and looked just plain moldy to Gene. The wine they did make was off-dry again. They didn't have oceans of wine to blend to and it never occurred to Gene to buy wine. Ron Long, a lifelong wine collector, wanted to pick the botrytis fruit and make a late harvest. He made ten cases by hand with a basket press, with Brix up to 36. In 1986 they duplicated Ron's wine by just leaving the fruit out (Chenin Blanc really wants to get

botrytis. Its fruit grows in tight bunches; as it matures, berries split inside the bunch which botrytis finds congenial). The 1986 Late Harvest Chenin Blanc, quite an original idea in North America at the time, won a Best of Class.

Gene thought American taste was developing toward large, flabby, fruity Chardonnay; like a soft, squishy persimmon versus, say, a loquat. South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the Loire Valley in France all have large plantings of Chenin Blanc, where it is taken seriously, has a different character deserving of different winemaking techniques. Over here, it was so hard to sell Chenin Blanc, even at \$50 a case, delivered, that Casa Nuestra took out half of it in the 1990's and replanted to red grapes. In 1989 they made a Johannesburg Riesling from a six-acre vineyard they had bought across the street. All but seven of its rows were later grafted over to Cabernet Sauvignon, which Gene regrets. The popular Riesling they have made is on allocation. They could sell it all day long, if they had it. It is off-dry (they've never offered a dry), aromatic, rather floral in the nose, with a hint of moscato-apricots-character, exotic tropical flavor.

Today, they ripen their Chenin Blanc fruit more. It's evolved from a lean, flinty, highly structured wine in the 80's to one with a bigger, fuller mouthfeel. Besides longer hang time they are also partially barrel fermenting in new and old French oak. Doing whole cluster can be stemmy, but in small amounts it can be

crushed, then pressed right away. Chenin Blanc goes through a wonderful aromatic phase as young wine, just post-fermentation, which had been hard to capture in a bottle. On a trip to Chile, Gene and Allen learned how sensitive the variety is to O₂. Fruit was never left to stand in the open air, nothing left half-empty. With very careful handling and bottling the aromatic phase could be held. In St. Helena the fruit ripens to 21-25 Brix, ideally the high 23's, when it's yellow but before it dries out. They can be patient, wait for melon flavors to be present and then pick in a day. Casa Nuestra inoculates with yeast and ferments the fruit cold at 55 degrees for about two weeks, racks off the lees, and after 30 to 35 days (their battonage is with an old canoe paddle), to keep pace with demand, they bottle. There is no bottle time for the wine, really, before it's out. Because of the demand they couldn't make a 2004 Late Harvest, or a Riesling.

All the wine is made by hand in small lots, each one unique (they offer seven), for a clientele who value their wines. Gene thinks it's important to give the public the chance to trust their own sensory experience. He feels the whole question of tasting wine has been over-hyped. The shape of one's palate, the number of cigars you've smoked in your life, your toothpaste all affect your palate. No one tastes the same thing the same.