

Joseph Phelps

Chairman of the Board

with **Craig Williams**

Winemaker and Executive Vice President

Joseph Phelps Vineyards, St. Helena

60,000 case production

On Making (and Not Making) Riesling

Initially, the focus at Joseph Phelps Vineyards was on Riesling. Phelps was founded in 1973 when sweet white wines had been driving the market: Riesling was hot, a very popular varietal. However, Joe Phelps planned to begin with two whites and two reds. He had made a study of wines for a long time, and had recently built two wineries for Souverain. Joe had grown up in Colorado where he went to college in the dry town of Fort Collins. While there he had a campus job of taking empty schnapps bottles from a fraternity to the nearby [and wet] town of Loveland for refills. Joe found a 79-cent Chilean Riesling there, which made a hit on campus. He happily remembers some 1940's Louis Martini Zinfandels he found as well. Joe became a building contractor, which eventually brought him to California. After building for Souverain, Joe built his own winery. Phelps' first wines were made at Souverain, where Phil Baxter was winemaker, and also at

Joe Heitz's winery, just up the road from Phelps. The week after Joe took title to his Spring Valley Ranch in 1973, Walter Schug came to work as winemaker. Joe notes that Walter had grown up on a Pinot Noir estate in a region of the Rhine that focused more on dry rather than sweet wines--what Walter had grown up with was red. Joe says they quickly expanded at Phelps to produce Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir and, in 1976, Zinfandel. They hired Craig Williams to assist Walter in winemaking. Craig became winemaker in 1983.

Phelps made California's first true varietal Syrah with fruit from a vineyard controlled by Christian Brothers outside St. Helena on Zinfandel Lane. Professor Harold Olmo at UC Davis had brought this Rhone varietal to Oakville Viticultural Station in 1936. It didn't have much success with growers--Syrah was confused with Petite Sirah. So, when UC Davis cleaned up the Oakville station in 1959, out went the Syrah. Christian Brothers took and planted it on their Wheeler Ranch, where Walter found it. Christian Brothers had only used it in blending. Craig says this early advocacy of Syrah came from Joe's passion for the Rhône Valley, especially Côte Rôtie and Hermitage.

Phelps Riesling was first made from fruit from the Stanton Vineyard in Yountville, which produced 940 tons of Riesling in 1973, but only 450 tons in 1975 and just

300 tons shortly after that. As Craig puts it, "Climate drove the bus back then." Phelps made what they could, when they could. They made a "regular harvest" Riesling in 1973 and 1974 at 21-23 Brix. In 1975 they were able to make a botrytised Riesling, a Beerenauslese, just a few years after the Edelwein made by Freemark Abbey (Wente did one, too). The 1978 botrytised late harvest was a notch up, so they made a special selection Trockenbeerenauslese, and put a gold border on the label. Their 1977 early harvest Kabinett-style had a green border, the Auslese a yellow border, and the Spatlese label was light brown. Joe recalls making at least four Rieslings with fruit from Stanton as well as from the vineyards they had planted at Spring Valley Ranch.

They picked into five-ton gondolas in those days, which meant the fruit was pre-macerated before it reached the crusher and de-stemmer. It was pumped into 1,000 gallon steel holding bins designed by Walter and built by Ogletree's. They soaked skins to increase sugar back then, and combined free-run with press juice. Phelps had one of the first Westphalia centrifuges in the Valley for removing solids. The must was fermented dry at 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. They bottled 30,000 cases of Riesling and Gewürztraminer, which accounted for 50 to 60 percent of the Phelps production. Joe and Walter, along with Dick Arrowood at Chateau St. Jean set the profile; Craig defines them as the leading winemakers of the time.



Phelps acquired the Stanton vineyard in 1979 and in 1983 they bought property in Stag's Leap. Its fruit had been the foundation of Insignia, the innovative Phelps blend of red Bordeaux varietals begun in 1974. Phelps also bought on Manley Lane in Rutherford in 1983 (Barney Rhodes was already there). Acreage in Carneros for Chardonnay came in 1989. They also switched some of Stanton to Chardonnay.

Bruce Neyers joined Phelps in 1975 and introduced Joe to Alice Waters at Chez Panisse. Alice and her team were raising consciousness: a national cuisine of cream, butter and sweet wines was giving way to a healthier kind of cooking, to sautéing, garlic and dryer wines. Joe says the best reason wine is made is to accompany meals. Phelps began their transition out of Riesling in the early 1980's. Their Spatlese was the first to be phased out. 1988 was a tough vintage. It got very, very difficult. The early '90's were so warm there was no botrytis. In some years they could make a Late Harvest Semillon, Sauternes style, and would also blend Semillon into their Sauvignon Blanc. Phelps made a Sauvignon Blanc almost from the beginning, although they initially labeled it Fumé Blanc. It was 85% Sauvignon Blanc and 15% Semillon, its fruit estate and from the Hoxsey (Pelissa) vineyard. They also bought from Christian Brothers, Harris, Chiles Valley. By the 1980's their estate vineyards were planted out--the Riesling pulled from Spring Valley. Towards the end of the program they

got their Riesling and Gewürztraminer from Anderson Valley. Dedicated to consistency, Phelps finally settled on making only one Riesling-style wine, and chose Scheurebe, a cross between Sylvaner and Riesling, first created in 1911. They had made wine from this varietal since 1978 (another American first). They would vinify it in an ice wine style, without botrytis, and call it “Eisrebe”. Scheurebe fruit from the St. Helena ranch is frozen whole cluster to minus 25 degrees Fahrenheit and then pressed until the thawing must is at 40 Brix with 23 to 25 residual sugar. It is fermented in steel and bottled quickly. Phelps makes just 300 cases of this delicate confection.

By the late 1990's Phelps began to have more red than white as they acquired more Cabernet properties in their estate program. Joe is an optimistic vintner, but consistency is his by-word when buying fruit or vineyard—he chooses very carefully--and reds present a different set of challenges compared to whites. Craig characterizes Joe as ‘ahead of the curve, innovative, willing to take a risk’, but methodical and pragmatic, always pursuing ‘what would work’. Joe and Craig want all their wines to represent the place, the estate they are from. Recent vintages of Petit Verdot, Joe says, indicate the Spring Valley Ranch is a good place for it. 120 of this ranch's 600 acres are in vines--Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc as well as Petit Verdot, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Scheurebe. The Napa vineyard they've had since 2000 they

think has a marvelous Cabernet maturing season, unlike anything farther west in Napa. In the 1990's Phelps leased the Barboza property and in 1996, purchased the Backus vineyard in Oakville from which they have made Cabernet since 1977 (more than 20 of its acres are planted to Cab).

Craig is amazed at the renaissance in the wine industry underway today in the Napa Valley. It is very different from what it was even ten years ago. Phelps has made a long, slow transition from making white to making red. Craig says they have now totally transitioned from an original 60 percent white wine production to one of mostly reds, from making more than twenty wines to less than ten, and a case production from as high as 100,000 in 1989 to 60,000 today. They make a Rhone-style blend, “Le Mistral”, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and the Eisrebe. Craig thinks the Phelps transition to mostly reds helps preserve agriculture in the Napa Valley, that Cabernet Sauvignon is an extension of our culture and the land, that Riesling simply can't support what Cabernet can.

Although they have reinvented Phelps as a red wine facility, with more space and more barrel storage, it is the farming that has changed most of all. Phelps believes there has been qualitative improvement in their winegrowing and is committed to giving great attention to detail. Craig's staff constantly looks for ways to improve vine care. They take occasional field trips to Europe to study its practices.

Rather than thinking and acting solo at Phelps, Joe has confidence in his whole team. They manage the entire growing process with an array of techniques. More light is exposed to the leaves now, with vertical shoot positioning, hedging, shoot and leaf management—intensive hand vine care. Craig says their choice of rootstock is more informed now, as they match appropriate rootstock to soil and site. They also take advantage of weather forecasting, and benefit from better record keeping by the industry in general (when to harvest is improving, but Joe says it's a small record book in comparison to Europe's). Phelps has also become a practitioner of biodynamics, a method of sustainable farming that demands constant evaluation. Joe calls Phelps “just a couple of farms”. He says what they do is about the art of growing grapes. “Feed the soil,” Joe concludes with emphasis and deep conviction.