

William Seavey

Owner, Seavey Vineyard
1310 Conn Valley Road,
St. Helena

2,000 to 3,000 cases



PHOTO: PRISCILLA UPTON

In 1979, William “Bill” Seavey and his wife Mary bought most of what is now Seavey Vineyard from Georgiana Ables, a teacher at the Anna Head School in Oakland whom the Seaveys had known for several years. They were living in Piedmont and

Bill thought the property would just be a place in the country for his family of five children, with horses and cattle, “maybe even vines” he dryly adds. At the time about 40 head of cattle grazed on its 143 acres.

Bill was a lawyer in private practice in San Francisco, specializing in international and banking law. He had grown up in Coronado, CA gone to Princeton and then Harvard Law. Bill had spent his junior year in Paris studying French politics and, after law school, he and his bride had gone to Geneva where Bill spent a fellowship year in International Studies. He and Mary then moved to Coronado and Bill joined a law firm in San Diego. He also became a city councilman and, at 31, mayor of Coronado. Bill and Mary then returned to Geneva where Bill earned a doctorate in international law and economics. He next taught at Mills College, and then joined a law firm in San Francisco.

Soon after they bought the property on Conn Valley Road, Bill had Jim Lider, a former County Farm adviser, come and test its soil for nematodes and to determine if it were plantable for vineyard. A backhoe from Montelli punched test holes: the soil is a balance of clay and loam and, yes, it was plantable. Bill Pickering, a neighbor who had worked at Beringer Brothers was now with Raymond Vineyards. He said Roy Raymond, Jr. was looking for more

grapes and Roy and Bill struck a deal. The whole Seavey family put up deer fence and a crew from Raymond organized the planting. This was all about the time women at cocktails began asking for a glass of white wine in lieu of a Martini. Raymond started planting with Chardonnay down by the creek—it is still there--and twenty acres of Cabernet Sauvignon up the hill. Raymond chose AXR-I rootstock over St. George. Bill says he’d still try either because, “I believe in experimenting.” Raymond also put in sprinklers for irrigation and frost protection. Seavey has since added drip lines everywhere to conserve water, but sprinklers remain on the flat for frost protection.

Bill then undertook a study of deed work on the property, turning to a special section of the St. Helena Public Library for the early history of Napa Valley. He found among other things that the land he now owned was one of the earliest hillside vineyard sites in Napa County. In the 1870’s a Swiss named Volper owned the property and a Frenchman, Crochat, lived across the road. Together they formed the Franco-Swiss Farming Company. Its ghost winery is on the corner of Conn Valley Road and the road into Seavey Vineyard. It produced a Claret that Bill thinks was probably Zinfandel. Bill found several references to Volper in the St. Helena Star on microfilm when Conn Valley was news—in items like, “Franco-Swiss Winery has a big crop this

year!” He also learned that the foundation for the bridge on his road over Conn Creek was laid in 1881, the same year Volper built a 50’ x 60’ dairy barn.

In 1985 Bill hired his present vineyard foreman, Mario Gutierrez, who lives in the red cottage next to the bridge. About that same time, Bill asked Raymond to hold back a barrel or two of Cab to see what it was like. He tasted it and thought it was “damn good.” Now Bill took another look at the shell of the dairy barn Volper had built a hundred years earlier. It had a dirt floor and handsome stone front wall—possibly the work of Italian masons. Bill asked the family, “Why don’t we make it into a small winery?” He called on local architect Thomas P. Faherty for help.

During winery construction, Gary Galleron came to buy firewood. He got to talking with Bill’s son Arthur and offered his expertise as winemaker. The family readily accepted his offer (Gary was working for Grace Family and S. Anderson). He oversaw the first Seavey Vineyard vintage of 1990, and the next few vintages. In the mid-1980’s the Seaveys had bought an adjacent 60-acre parcel with a good well and a fire road and, as it was situated above them, added a new destination to the family’s hikes. They now planted five of its acres to Merlot, Petit Verdot and more Cabernet Sauvignon with budwood from Dominus. Seavey’s first Merlot was released

in 1994. Although its 1993 Cabernet was 8 percent Merlot, it was seldom added and now, not at all. In 1995 Gary left to work full-time at Whitehall Lane Winery. He had thought he could continue to consult, but it proved too much, even though Bill had hired a French girl for cellar help. Luckily, she had mentioned a University of Bordeaux classmate, Philippe Melka, who was in town looking for a job. Bill asked her to send him around. Philippe had been at Petrus and Dominus and struck Bill as intelligent and personable. Bill gave him his first job as winemaker.

Philippe had Seavey pick into shallow Champagne-style bins, and changed the way the grapes were crushed. When he began to consult for other wineries, Philippe hired Mario Monticelli as his assistant and Bill hired Ana Smolenski to help in the cellar. When Ana married Mario and became assistant winemaker for Bryant Family, Bill hired Frederick Ammons, who is now winemaker at The Reserve. To replace Frederick, Bill hired Matthew Reid, the present winemaker, who has been with Seavey three years. After UC Davis, Matt was at Artesa and then Clos du Bois. He is hands-on, taking an active part in both winery and vineyard operations.

Seavey Vineyard practices sustainable agriculture. Its vineyard blocks are planted bilateral VSP (vertical shoot position), with a head-trained vine at an end row

every so often. Matt allows a little Round Up and sulfur for mildew, there are lots of beneficial insects around, and half the electric power for winery operations is now solar. Ten years after its first vintage, Seavey added a second building to the dairy barn, connecting the two with an equipment shed, and a cut and cover cave for barrel storage; elegant arches (pre-formed highway underpass trusses) span its roof to support the insulating earth above. Mary says the arches were Bill’s idea. Today, 40 acres are in vineyard—some of the original Raymond Chardonnay still grows—and cattle still keep the grasses down and provide family and friends with an occasional steak, and Philippe continues to consult with Bill and Matt on the major decisions, such as when to pick or when to take free-run off the skins, and with the blending, especially.

At harvest, Seavey cherry-picks its fruit—a few rows or sides of vines at a time, whatever ripens first. “Production varies according to what God gives us,” says Mary. “2003 was particularly wonderful.” Bills says, “We watch for concentration, density and evenness of ripening; it’s a matter of letting the vines talk to you a little.” Once the grapes are picked they are sorted, destemmed, and go from the hopper into stainless fermenters of varying sizes, a few open-top, for cold soak. Philippe advises that with no crushing the harsher tannins are not released. Seavey inoculates with commercial yeast and fermentation takes

twelve days to two weeks. Must is punched down in small tanks or pumped over in larger ones, and constantly sampled with a spectrophotometer and by tasting. After fermentation, the wine goes into all French oak barrels, 50% new, for 18 or 19 months. Bills says the grapes have a lot of good tannins; Seavey reuses its barrels for a year or two to so as not to over oak its wines. It racks every three months and there is very little fining, if at all. A bottling truck comes in when it is time to bottle and Seavey does all its own packing and shipping.

When asked about his palate and his qualifications for becoming a vintner, Bill replies, “Well, I’ve played the piano since I was nine and my mother was an artist. When my aunt married an orange rancher we would spend time with them in Covina. However, it was probably those years studying in Paris and Geneva that got me going with wine. Growing up, we would have it at home on special occasions, of course, but now we have it every night, in moderation.”