

Interviews

John M. Gantner Proprietor

School House Vineyard
3549 Langtry Road, St. Helena
500 cases

John Gantner says there is a terroir taste in common with neighboring York Creek Vineyards that occurs in a band between 1200 and 1500 feet on Spring Mountain. It is earthy and minerally, with a hint of chanterelles. John says the taste “just thrills me, is something special and it is easy to know when to pick because the ripeness is *tasted* for rather than measured.” John has been part of School House Vineyard since the moment he was born.

In 1938, John Gantner’s father John Oscar Gantner found 160 acres to buy on Spring Mountain in St. Helena. The land had a house, a barn, and an old one-room schoolhouse as well as a tractor and truck and a pair of plough horses to work a terraced and dry-farmed vineyard. The property had been planted to vineyard in the 1880’s by the Sheehan family, who sold their 160 acres to John Oscar with 40 acres planted to Golden Chasselas, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, and Carignane. Since 1992, John and his wife

Nancy Walker have farmed School House Vineyard.

In college, John Oscar had had a vision of great Burgundy grapes, and he was definitely something of a visionary. He had been part of Gantner & Mattern in San Francisco when it pioneered the first topless men’s swimsuit in the 1930’s, and then the form-fitting “Wickie.” John Oscar took over the company from his father and introduced the fluorescent dye, Gantron, used in WW II signal flags as well as Gantner swimsuits



before John Oscar sold the business in 1954 and went to work for Arthur D. Little, managing its West Coast offices.

In the 1860’s John’s grandfather and great grandfather had traveled to Napa Valley by spring wagon to taste wines and bring back barrels of wine to stock the basement of the Swiss Hotel the great grandfather owned on Sacramento Street (opposite Jack’s Restaurant) in San Francisco. The hotel could then offer a *table d’hôte* wine by the bottle in its dining room upstairs. John and his two brothers grew up with wine on the table and tastes of wine with water in their glasses, besides John’s having to model an occasional swimsuit for Gantner and Company.

While at Stanford, John’s father had become a good friend and fraternity brother of John Daniel. Soon after graduation, John Daniel (of Inglenook, now Rubicon Estate) told John’s father that property in Napa Valley was going for a song and that it was a good time to buy—for that vision he had of “great Burgundy,” and that John Oscar should look for land that was predominantly hillside. Other friends, Frank Schoonmayer among them, also advised a mountain vineyard site.

When John Oscar acquired the land on Spring Mountain, he fenced twenty-five of

its forty planted acres against the deer and he, his wife and three sons spent weekends and every summer on the ranch. It didn't get electricity until 1951. John's mother cooked on a woodstove all summer long, water was piped to the house from a spring 500 feet up a hill, and an ice box on the front porch held steadily melting twenty-five pounders of ice, attracting hundreds of thirsty wasps. The Beringers had the only pool on Spring Mountain where John's mother would let her children swim only a few times each summer, so as not to wear out their welcome. The Gantners drove to town in a 1932 Chevy truck and John clearly remembers the sounds and excitement of going downhill with mechanical brakes on an unpaved road.

The two plough horses died in the 1940s, one in a hayfield where John says bones turned up for years. Initially, John Oscar sold the Golden Chasselas to his neighbor, Karl Beringer, for what John called "a really dry, nutty sherry" and then the mixed black fruit to the new cooperative, Allied Grape Growers, when mixed black grapes were getting \$25 a ton and white grapes \$15 to \$20. In 1952 John Daniel told John Oscar, 'I'm pulling out one acre of Pinot at Inglenook. The soil is too rich and it's the Romanée Conti clone I promised you, so you can have budwood for your someday to-be-fabled Pinot Noir.'

John says his father took the budwood to Emmolo Nursery where enough bench grafts were made onto St. George rootstock for three or four acres. Nick Montelli did the tractor work for the replant and from 1957 to 1959 John Oscar took his Pinot Noir to Stony Hill for vinification. John says they destemmed by hand, rubbing the fruit through a sieve. From 1960 to 1968 School House Pinot Noir was made at Buena Vista in Sonoma, where Al Brett was winemaker and André Tchelistcheff consulted. André considered the School House planting "a great clone." Over the years a number of wineries and winemakers were involved, including Ric Forman at Sterling and Jerry Luper and Bo Barrett at Chateau Montelena. In 1967 School House planted 4 ½ more acres of Pinot Noir on St. George, using cuttings from its original planting. Now



there are two more young acres, one planted six years ago and another three years ago, both on I10-R. John says St. George is a mismatch of vigor; it can create a vegetative imbalance in the Pinot Noir. Nancy interplanting is constant at School House.

John's grandmother, Dorothy Erskine, began coming to Napa Valley from San Francisco on weekends to see her daughter and her family and got involved with land use. Dorothy had been effective in getting the City to set height limits for its buildings in order to protect everyone's view of the Bay and in 1958 had founded People for Open Space (now Greenbelt Alliance). She bought a house north of Calistoga and began working with Jack Davies and Volker Eisele on a Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve. In 1968 they were successful in founding the first such preserve in the United States. Dorothy died in 1982.

In 1965, John Oscar got budwood from his friend Fred McCrea at Stony Hill Vineyard and planted three and a half acres of Chardonnay on St. George rootstock (now being replanted on I10-R). All the Golden Chasselas was pulled in 1986 and the land lay fallow for over seven years so School House wouldn't have to treat the earth with methyl bromide for oak root fungus before re-planting. Unfortunately, that replant just

got under way after a very long permitting process because the land was fallow for over six years and Napa County treated it as new vineyard rather than a replant.

In the 1970's, 1980's and into the 1990's the single acre of School House mixed black fruit went to Paul Draper of Ridge for its Ridge Claret Langtry Road that John calls a "Zinfandel Claret" because the original planting from the 1880's was 20 percent Carignane, 25 percent Petite Sirah, and 55 percent Zinfandel. That single acre was the genesis of the School House field blend, "Mescolanza," John says "is itself, original with this place." The first vintage was 1992. After having it made in various places by various winemakers, since 1998 "Mescolanza" has been made at Pride Mountain. It is aged in the French oak first used for the School House Pinot Noir. Sometimes a little new American oak is added (the Chardonnay is aged in used French oak and stainless steel). Today the Mescolanza field mix propagated from the original planting is 76 percent Zinfandel, 17 percent Petite Sirah and 7 percent Carignane.

At the time John Oscar bought the property, all the vineyard avenues were planted with prunes (plum trees): French, President and Rubaix which John and his brother would pick and then take the fruit to a dehydrator

on Crystal Springs Road, more for something to do, John says, than to make any money. The prunes were pulled for vines in 1970. John says that although he came to the ranch every weekend since the time he was born, the running of the vineyard was his father's project.

After John finished Stanford and law school he lived and practiced law in San Francisco. In 1992 he and Nancy took over the farming of School House Vineyard, which had been largely unattended to for several years. John Oscar was then in his eighties, he died in 2002, and the star thistle had gotten really *thick*. In 1993 School House stopped disking and planted cover crops of annual lupine, clover and peas. Since 1998 its Chardonnay as well as Pinot Noir have been made at Pride Mountain Vineyards. Lately, Nancy does all the tractoring and John all the pruning and, since 1996, Nancy also has done all the marketing for School House. About 12 acres are in production, six in Pinot Noir, three and a half in Chardonnay, and the balance in the field mix. John's two brothers have houses adjacent to the vineyards, but neither has any interest in School House Vineyard.

To keep up with the vineyard John reads "*Wines and Vines*," but he says most of what he learns comes first-hand, "You live up here,

see what the neighbors are doing, bounce stuff off. We talk all the time. It's a pretty good coterie of knowledge." And Nancy says with considerable pride, "The 2007 Pinot Noir, to be released in 2010, will be the 50th vintage of School House Vineyard." ■