

Terry Wilson Owner and Vineyard Manager

Rancho Chimiles

1360 Wooden Valley Road, Napa

One of the oldest ranches in Napa County with one of the most highly regarded vineyards, Rancho Chimiles, is in Wooden Valley, in the hills of southeastern Napa County about five miles from Napa City. There, Terry Wilson grows ten different wine varietal grapes, half of them “other reds,” and one of these, Tempranillo, one of the rarer varieties in Napa County. The original Rancho Chimiles was granted to Ygnacio Berryessa in 1846 by Mexico and by Berryessa to William Gordon and Nathan Coombs in 1859. Little by little sections of the rancho came to be owned by various parties related and not related to the Gordon and Coombs families in Wooden and Gordon Valleys. (“Chimiles” in Wappo is thought to mean, “Where the honey clover grows.”)

Today, 70 acres of vineyard are planted at Chimiles, about a third at 600 feet elevation and two-thirds at 900 to 1,000 feet, on the portion of the rancho that still carries its name and is owned by Terry and his wife Lyn, who have been farming it since 1972.

Terry grows Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petite Sirah, Sauvignon

Blanc, Semillon, Syrah, Tempranillo, Valdiguié, and Zinfandel under contract to Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, Pahlmeyer, Orin Swift, Parador and Favia. Mourning doves are the only birds that leave the grapes alone. Turkeys, crows and every other bird but a dove all try to get through swathes of netting unrolled over the tops of the hillside vines after veraison in order to eat the crop. Terry says it’s a scramble. Not until after



harvest is the netting rolled up and stored in the shade until next season. Voles are a problem for established vines—they girdle the trunks, and gophers just pull young vines under. Although Terry says Chimiles has practiced non-tillage on everything for a long time and maintains barn owl boxes as a hedge against voles, it may disc or use a

spader against the gophers. In the fall, compost and gypsum are added to vine rows, in rotation among the vineyards. Chimiles relies on sustainable farming aids such as micron sprayer heads, rubber track crawlers in the vine rows, and bio-diesel fuel for its gators and tractors, and has been certified for Fish Friendly Farming.

Terry is committed to building soil structure and used to do most of the tractoring in the vineyard himself. Now he has a great young manager, José Ramos, and their tailored canopy management with the use of cover crops helps conserve horsepower and time on the tractor as well as fuel. Most vines are too vigorous anyway, Terry says. “Why worry about competition for water in the first four to six inches of soil? Vines are deep-rooted. Rodents are really the only negative.” Besides José, there is a full-time crew of five. Hill Family Vineyard Management from Yountville comes in when it is high maintenance time in the vine rows and Terry’s own crew has done the prep work. Mostly Terry worries that growers only have the one payday at harvest; they really have a *lot* of risk.

In the 1960’s Terry came to the ranch a few times with Lyn and other college friends. Although he had grown up in Woodside and gone surfing in most of his spare time,

Terry’s family is from Montana and ranching was familiar to him. After graduating from San Jose State and making pilgrimages to a few famous beaches, Terry worked as a tour guide to Mayan ruins in Central America before coming to Rancho Chimiles. Initially he helped with its fences and cattle and discussed vineyards and wine with ranch foreman Steve Beresini and with Larry Hyde (of Hyde Vineyards and HdV), a childhood chum living at the ranch and working for Calplans Vineyards in Wooden Valley. Calplans sold its fruit to Robert Mondavi Winery at a time when Bob Mondavi was predicting Napa Gamay would be one of the next big wines of California. Wine was a new world for Terry. His family had only served cocktails.

In 1972, ten acres of Napa Gamay were planted on St. George rootstock in a former pear orchard with soil of Pleasanton loam. When the Wilsons moved onto the property they intended to help pay for subsequent vineyard plantings with cattle, but in the droughts of 1975-1976 and 1977-1978 there was no feed and no water and Terry had to sell the herd. When normal rains returned he bought stocker calves to feed and sell and in 1978 Chimiles was able to plant 35 acres of Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Zinfandel. Terry says he had a few more good years with calves but, “The

writing was on the wall for cows.” Overall, seasonal temperatures in Wooden Valley are comparable to Napa Valley between Stags Leap and Oakville. Because of its altitude and the buffering effect of fog off San Pablo Bay, the afternoons stay cool. Although Terry has taken a short course here and there and reads a great deal, his vineyard management education has mostly been seat of the pants. As a result, Terry firmly believes you need to get your hands on the vines to be a good manager. He has set up three weather stations on the property to monitor wind and temperature, but doesn’t use soil monitors. Terry prefers to read his vines. He says canes are the best indicator of vine status. You just need to watch their tips and tendrils. And there is also the “Buckeye Index.” These trees flourish where it is neither too hot nor too dry. In May and June on still days at Chimiles Terry says their blossoms produce a near tropical fragrance in the hollows, and in August the trees’ leaves wither and die. In the process the trees let Terry know when the hills are drying and that he must attend to vine water requirements.

Stag’s Leap has bought Chimiles Sauvignon Blanc for its vineyard designated varietal wine for thirty years and calls Terry “a meticulous grower.” The musqué clone originally planted in 1983, at Warren

Winiarski's urging, was the first Sauvignon musqué in Napa Valley and budwood from this planting has been shared with any number of vineyards, including those of Mondavi and Cakebread. It is vigorous on AXR rootstock, throwing many shoots in the spring, and drove canopy management changes in the vineyard blocks in the 1980's. In the early 1990's phylloxera necessitated a replant of the Sauvignon musqué onto 101-14 and 3309C. Semillon and Cabernet for Stag's Leap's Artemis program were also planted. In 2003, in collaboration with Charlie Hossom (now at Snows Lake Vineyard) and Nicki Pruss at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, all but two acres of Valdiguié were pulled and more Cabernet Sauvignon planted. The Valdiguié goes to Dave Phinney at Orin Swift.

Terry and several other vintners have found that Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot grow very well in the high Wooden Valley. Five blocks of ridge vineyard at 1,000 feet were developed in 1987: ten acres of Cabernet Sauvignon and two acres each of Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Canopies are adjusted to expose the crop to morning light yet shelter it from the westering sun. A breeze that comes up over the top of the ridge late in the day also helps keep things cool. The mountain Bordeaux varieties from the ridge vineyard throw big

mountain fruit that Pahlmeyer has relied on since 1993, and an acre of the Cabernet Franc now goes into a proprietary blend of Favia for its "Cerro Sur."

In 1998, several hundred feet above Wooden Valley on a terrace facing southwest, an eight and a half acre Zinfandel vineyard was planted to a Primitivo clone on 110-R rootstock. Terry enjoys watching the morning fog off San Pablo Bay, break in big chunks and stream through this vineyard in perfectly formed big pipes that break left; a leg runs south, and a long finger may stretch up into the ridge vineyards above. Terry says it is quite a beautiful thing to see. In the after-

noon wind comes off San Pablo Bay and up the rows; sun and wind help thicken the fragile skins of the Zinfandel.

Below the ridge vineyard Terry also farms three and a half acres of Syrah and four acres of Petite Sirah where the soil is similar to the Zinfandel vineyard, Haire series of decomposed sandstone with some gravel, light in color, and a relatively lean soil. The Syrah budwood is a Hermitage selection from John Alban in Edna Valley. Its growth habit is naturally open—the canes like to run laterally. Terry says he has given up worrying about it. He just shortens the diagonals and has learned that as they ripen,



the bunches will have some drier, wrinkled berries. The Petite Sirah is a Durif, Clone 3 on 1103 rootstock.

In 1999 Chimiles planted a block of Tempranillo, a whisker less than an acre, in the ridge vineyard. Terry had left the block empty, it was so rocky, but when Steve Ventrello of Parador and his advisor, Alejandro Fernandez of Pesquera in the Ribero del Duero, came to assess the site for Tempranillo, they said it looked just like Spain and promptly secured Pesquera budwood. The rootstock is 110-R, with some 1103. At the time of this interview tall canes manifested vigor from a late rain and last year's fairly light crop, with leaves almost five times the size of Cabernet. Tempranillo starts to ripen ahead of Cabernet, but then slows. Its clusters are complex, with double shoulders at times. Terry says the color is beautiful, a deep purple black with blue. He likes how the fruit in the ridge vineyard blocks glows in the early morning sun during veraison.

Rancho Chimiles is also home to horses, hens, cattle and Australian cattle dogs. Several hundred cattle graze its oak savannahs from late May until early November. The controlled grazing reduces fire hazard by eliminating brush and encouraging native grasses rather than thistle. This in turn im-

proves soil structure, which reduces erosion. Water is stored in three reservoirs on the property. The upper one can provide frost protection for the vineyards below and the largest allows Terry and his family to take an occasional spin on a surfboard under tow (Terry had just killed a rattler he found under his board the day before this interview). All the Wilson family take an interest in the work of Rancho Chimiles, and Terry says they now meet regularly about the running of the ranch, which he enjoys. ■