

Joel Gott, Managing Partner

The Ranch

Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena

The Ranch expects to crush 1,000 to 5,000 tons of grapes for its clients in 2008. Founding partner Joel Gott said that for its first harvest in 2007 it crushed 500 tons and in 2009 expects to crush 20,000 tons. However, the facility is permitted to crush 100,000 tons. Joel points out that only Fred Franzia's facility in Napa can handle more. In 1982 the Trinchero family negotiated a unique permit for the facility it built on the site of a former chicken ranch, to handle grapes from anywhere in the world and produce 12,000,000 gallons of wine—originally, Sutter Home White Zinfandel and Chardonnay. The Trincheros later bought another facility on Main Street in South St. Helena. Now their main plant for popular wines is in Lodi. In 2006, because the Zinfandel Lane property was no longer energy efficient in terms of logistics and transportation costs for Central Valley fruit, it was put up for sale.

The Trincheros joined Joel and his partners in the Three Thieves in 2005 as a joint venture, taking over marketing and

distribution of what is now seven labels of popular wine bottled in boxes, bottles and a glass jug. The relationship is a solid one, so when Joel learned of the upcoming sale of the chicken ranch he gave it a good long look. And decided to buy. The facility sits on 75 acres and includes a tank farm, fermentation, barrel storage, bottling line and case storage buildings, a bocce court and picnic grounds, commercial kitchen, various houses, offices and other outbuildings and the adjacent Chicken Ranch Vineyard. This vineyard is on a long-term lease back to the Trincheros who have also leased back The Ranch, in part, for five years, while a plant in Lodi is completed.

The conversion of The Ranch to a custom crush facility is in four phases. One of two planned fermentation rooms has been built under the guidance of Axion Engineering of Napa to accommodate innovations such as open top fermenters, not needed in previous bulk wine production, as well as over a hundred tanks of different sizes. Hot and cold lines of glycol now can warm or cool jacketed stainless steel fermenters, and a climate-controlled barrel storage room has been constructed. Joel says six or seven thousand barrels help keep temperature constant, although there is an ammonia plant for cooling. The Ranch

has two bottling lines. One is a workhorse handling 15,000 cases a day that came with the plant. The other Joel calls “the Mercedes” is in its own sterile room. It is extremely gentle and just the thing for small, fine-tuned production runs of less than 3,000 cases a day. During part of this interview a fork loader zipped in and out of stacks of cartons of wine from clients including Jim Neal’s Chariot, not to



mention Joel Gott Wines, with most of its 40,000 case production now made at The Ranch (the remainder is made at Fantasca Estate). Outdoors is an extensive tank farm for millions of gallons of bulk wine storage.

In 1998, Joel and his wife, winemaker Sarah Gott, began their label as a custom crush. Sarah had been winemaker at Joseph Phelps and Quintessa. Then she and Joel had three

kids. They started the brand at Robert Craig, moved it to Bennessere and then Napa Wine Company as gallonage and varieties increased (currently, 14 wines from seven appellations are listed for sale on its website). Joel says his years with Joel Gott Wines at Napa Wine were the inspiration for The Ranch. He and his partners interviewed several facilities as they planned their venture. In addition to Alternating Proprietorship and custom crush options, three of twenty planned separate wineries, so-called “studios,” within The Ranch have been built. Each has space and equipment unique to itself. Joel Gott Wines at The Ranch are made in one such studio.

Joel is no stranger to a mixed use of extended premises. He and his brother Duncan founded Palisades Market in Calistoga, which grew from a vegetable stand to a gourmet take-out emporium. Although it has closed, a supplier of its heirloom tomatoes from Knights Valley was Sarah Gott’s mother (and matchmaker). In 1999 Joel and Duncan resurrected Taylor’s Automatic Refresher in St. Helena, which Joel calls the “world dominant French fry chain.” Duncan manages Taylor’s, which has branches in San Francisco and Napa (the St. Helena location includes a car wash). And the Three Thieves brand

sources fruit throughout California for its ten wines. Joel says he and everyone in his family is always tasting food and wine. He characterizes all his wines as food friendly, with a good acid balance—the whites are non-oaked.



During harvest hundreds of work orders arrive daily (everything must be in writing). General manager Bob McCaffrey maintains protocol as fruit becomes wine, meeting clients' expectations with constant communication. Currently, base price for crush with a mechanical sort is \$750 a ton, a la carte. Additional steps, such as sorting by hand, cost more. However, by acquiring something like a cross-flow filter for \$130,000 and then spreading its price among all the clients, The Ranch can provide sophisticated techniques for a fraction of their cost. Presently, there is room for new long-term clients, large and small, and for still wines at every step of their winemaking and wine keeping processes. ■