
MATSON VINEYARDS

BEYOND ELDERBERRIES

STORY AND PHOTOS BY EARL BLOOR

Oscar Matson, the patriarch of Shasta County's oldest bonded winery, has not always been a winemaker. That happened by chance. Before winemaking, he spent several years teaching modern languages—French, German, Spanish, and English—at Shasta College in Redding and, with his wife Stella, raising a family of four boys. In the 1960s,

perhaps thinking of his boys and his retirement, he seized the opportunity, with two other families, to purchase eighty-one acres of land adjacent to Redding. The group divided this land on Arapaho Drive, near the bridge over Salmon Creek, into three twenty-seven acre lots, one lot for each family.

Oscar Matson's portion is now twelve acres, the site of Matson Vineyards.

It all started with elderberries. It must have been in the late '60s or early '70s, Oscar says, that he first made wine. Oscar's son Gary Matson brought home elderberries after hiking in the Yolla Bollies, and, with his father Oscar and brother Roger, he fermented them into really bad elderberry wine. "Absolutely undrinkable!" reminisced Oscar. Perhaps as penitence for this first, bad batch of wine, a decades-long odyssey into winemaking began. Plus, says Oscar, the kids had moved out, and he thought why not appropriate a vacated bedroom for wine-making.

The next stop for fermentable fruit was the Fetzer vineyard some miles away in Manton. The Fetzer harvest had been completed, and the Matson family received permission to



glean the leftover grapes. The family picked several varieties of grapes, and the extra bedroom began bubbling with fermentation. The wine the Chardonnay grapes yielded was very drinkable, and the family branched out to grow their own vines. Gary Matson, whose green thumb and community

organizing skills helped create the community gardens in Happy Valley and launch the Redding Farmers' Market, planted some Colombard grapes on his Happy Valley property, and Oscar's extra bedroom soon housed their fermentation. In the '90s, Gary and his partner were murdered on their Happy Valley property in a senseless hate crime, but Oscar and Roger credit Gary for the adventurous spirit behind their wine odyssey, Oscar referring to Gary as a *universalisch*, a term that brings together his agricultural, community, and musical talents.

A horticulturist educated at Davis, Gary noticed the good soil on the Arapaho Drive property and planted grapes when the house was built in 1981. The Matsons enlisted Lloyd Lider, a professor of viticulture at the University of California at Davis, to help them select the varieties to plant. Carignan, Ruby Cabernet, and Columbard were planted, but, before harvesting, they became infected with a fungus called *armillaria*, which grows on oak roots and had spread to the vines. This is where Lloyd Lider's brother Bob became involved. Bob Lider, now living in Redding, was a plant



pathologist, also at the University of California at Davis. Bob recalls working with Oscar during Redding's searing summer heat, digging holes one morning for four and a half hours, perspiration pouring off Oscar, as the two searched for the fungus that attacked the bark girdling the vines' roots. After extensive experimentation with grafting, a rootstock was found that was resistant to *armillaria*.

The vineyard. From the beginning, Oscar sought to produce "a quality product while leaving the smallest footprint." Today, son Roger expresses a disdain for the herbicide Round Up, not from any fear of its persistence in the soil but rather out of concern about the dangerous chemicals used in the synthesis of the weed killer. Instead of spraying, Roger appreciates a carpet of clover, a natural nitrogen-fixing plant, that grows between the rows. Similarly, the Arapaho property has its share of blackberries, but rather than blast them with Round Up, Roger allows the blackberries, which harbor an anagrus wasp that eats leaf-hopper eggs, the leaf-hopper being a notorious grape pest.

Wasps, lace wings that eat aphids, and even turkeys have been welcomed when, early on, the vineyard was plagued with grasshoppers. Oscar knew that turkeys ate grasshoppers, but Bob Lider warned him that they also love grapes. Heedless of their taste for grapes, Oscar introduced turkeys to the vineyard. When, in short order, the grasshopper population

was under control, the turkeys began to eat the grapes. Oscar says they ate only a few grapes as the hors d'oeuvre to their entrée, the plentiful acorns scattered throughout the fields. Then the Matsons, protecting their investment, ate the turkeys. And so goes the cycle of nature.

If Gary's was the inaugurating spirit, Stella, Oscar's wife, provided much of the sustaining spirit, both by designing the labels for the first wines, Shasta Claret and Shasta Glacier, and by overseeing the crush and bottling celebrations. A glance at the butterfly on the "Stellar Red" label gives an indication of her talent with watercolor. That label marks a wine created in her memory, first produced in the year of her death, 1992. She also served as extraordinary hostess at the vineyard's crush and bottling events.

When the grapes were ready for harvesting, friends from the community—teachers, realtors, folks from all walks of life, and sometimes international horticulture interns—came together for crush. Since Oscar liked to sleep late, picking started in the hot mid-morning and ended late. Then the party began. While the picking was going on, Stella prepared a feast. A band of amateur musicians, the Vintners and Sudsers, provided the music. According to Toby Bodeen, who has been a regular picker since 1988, "It takes a lot of beer to make that good wine." More than a wine-making operation, "Matson Vineyards has been a place for a lot of people to

come together and enjoy each other,” Toby says. “And the teaching goes on. People learn when they are around Oscar.” At the crush parties, they probably learned the lyrics to a German drinking song, “If the water in the Rhine were just golden wine. . .” that Oscar still sings in the tasting room.

Blended wines. Today the operation of the vineyard is in the hands of youngest son Roger. After graduation from high school, Roger’s first choice for higher education would have been a program related to wine-making, but he somehow thought that only wine-making families, with roots in the Napa Valley, gained entry to that route. So he went to UC Santa Cruz, “willing to brave the winds” with an undeclared major, taking courses like linear algebra, physics and organic chemistry. This prepared him to complete a degree in fermentation science in 1980. Roger honed his winemaking skills in Mendocino County with wineries Olson (later Conrad and now Fife), Parson’s Creek, and Kendall-Jackson.

Roger figures prominently in what Greg Butler, the President of the Shasta-Cascade Viticulture Association, identifies as the uniqueness of Matson Vineyards: its blended wines. Matson Vineyards produces eight or ten different styles of wine, blended by Roger from the 22 varieties of grapes now grown in the Arapaho Road vineyard. Oscar says, “A group of friends gets together to taste various mixtures of wines. If we find a good one, we bottle it!” but the truth is, Roger enjoys blending varieties and has skill in blending. Among the blended wines created by the Matsons are wines called Bordeaux Blend, Red Wine Blend, Port Style, Stellar Red, Shasta Glacier, Shasta Ensemble, and White Wine Blend. This list evokes Roger’s playful willingness to experiment with mixtures of varietals. Such blending is what Roger likes best. He says he has always been interested in blending wine and cannot understand California’s preference for single varieties—“Come on now. Why such resistance?” He points to Australia’s successful experiments blending Cabernet and Shiraz, the Rhone wines, Bordeaux, Chianti—all blends. He’s clearly proud to fall within those traditions.

Indeed, we brought home a blend of Chardonnay (80%) and Viognier (20%). The label describes it as “exhibiting pear, pineapple and lemon aromas integrated with subtle creamy and buttery characters



provided by partial malolactic barrel fermentation,” and the description reflects Roger’s expertise with fermentation science. We found it perfectly refreshing. Another blend we brought home was the full-bodied Shasta Ensemble, bottled in 2004 blending Merlot (62%), Cabernet Sauvignon (19%) and Petit Verdot (19%). Its rich, warm mouthfeel made us want to sip and linger. Roger’s recent work on the Arapaho property has focused on nurturing Tannat grapes, originally from the southwest of France and now the national red grape variety of Uruguay. Roger expects that the Tannat grapes will thrive in Redding’s intensely hot summers. He has also bought another ten acres, which he calls Wisteria Vineyards, in Inwood, near Shingletown. There he has planted 800 vines of Cabernet and plans to plant Viognier, both of which will enjoy the cooler weather. No doubt he’ll be blending those too.

Roger Matson, his wife Keiko, and their daughter Erika can often be found at events sponsored by nonprofits, where Roger freely offers tastings of the wine. Matson Vineyards wines are available for purchase in Mount Shasta at Berryvale Market; in Redding at Kent’s Meats and Groceries, Sunset Market, Holiday Market, and the Liquor Barn; in Red Bluff at Holiday Market and California Kitchen & Company; and in Chico at Raley’s. In addition, visitors to their website, www.matsonvineyards.com, can use the “Visit Us” link to arrange visits to the tasting room at the vineyard. A visit to the Matson Vineyard for a tasting will undoubtedly evoke a German drinking song from Oscar as he proudly pours samples from among the broad selection of wines.

