



Wine and winery news

Frank Family Winery marks 30th year with elegant hospitality center

By Paul Franson

Rich and Leslie Frank celebrated the 30th anniversary of the winery's founding by building an elegant center for group events and other hospitably.

Designed by ubiquitous wine country architect Howard Bakken to Leslie Frank's specifications, the modern, glass-walled Miller building can be opened on three sides to bring the outside – and killer views of upvalley mountains and vineyards– inside.

Until now, they've only had an old cottage turned into a tasting room and the historic winery itself for events, and neither is really satisfactory. For one thing, one is a working winery, the other without suitable space.



Photos by Tim Carl



The property is 5 acres carved out of the historic Larkmead Vineyards, which surround it, but the Franks have acquired other vineyards in Napa Valley over time. These include the cool Lewis Vineyard south of Bouchaine in Carneros close to San Pablo Bay; Benjamin Vineyard in Rutherford between Quintessa and Honig; S&J Vineyard in Chiles Valley, and Winston Hill, where their home is.

Winston Hill is one of the best-situated Cabernet vineyards in Napa Valley with its steep southwest exposure. They even grow a bit of Sangiovese there, something I learned at the first reception for the media held in the new building on Tuesday.

They also buy grapes from top vineyards including Beckstoffer and Sangiacomo, the Sonoma County source of most of the grapes that Chateau Montelena's then-winemaker Mike Grgich used to make the wine that won the Paris tasting of 1976, beating the best white wines of Burgundy.

It took me back a long way personally. The first winemaker I interviewed for a wine magazine was Hanns Kornell, who owned the winery before Frank from 1958 to 1992. Sadly, Kornell lost the winery to a bank, and Frank bought it with his late friend Koerner Rombauer.

A long-time executive in the television and movie business who was president of Disney Studios for nearly a decade, Frank founded what was first Frank-Rombauer in 1992 but opened to the public on July 4, 1993. He later bought Rombauer's share.

I met Rich soon after I moved here in 1997 and started writing about wine.



Besides being an exceptional gentleman, he helped me appreciate the attention to customers he absorbed so well at Disney.

The friendliness made Frank Family one of the top destinations for visitors. In fact, it became so legendary for bachelorette parties that they had to discourage them.

Part of the secret to the winery's success is its winemaker, Todd Graff.

Graff completed his 20th vintage at Frank

Family last year. Following his graduation from UC Davis in 1984, he worked in Germany, France and Australia, and in Napa Valley at Stags' Leap Winery, Schramsberg and Artesa (which was then focusing on sparkling wine) before joining Frank Family.

Graff has avoided the excess tendencies of many Napa wineries. Though early Frank wines were made at Rombauer, he soon diverged from the super-ripe Rombauer style (which incidentally has made it exceptionally popular with many fans), to be more restrained, yes, Burgundian. In fact, Chardonnays are now Frank's biggest seller, though they initially didn't even make white wines.

We tasted many wines Tuesday, and one thread shown in all of them: restraint.

Even this mostly Anything But Chard/Cab guy would happily drink them all. They're also restrained in price for the quality – and for the pedigree – for Napa.

This began with their sparkling wines (they make four). Sparkling wines are offered by many wineries to have something for parties and toasts, but Frank and Graff, following in Hans Kornell's footsteps, take them seriously.

Four widely available wines are Carneros Chardonnay and Carneros Pinot Noir, both \$40 and from cool vineyards. We had the 2021.

Of course, Cab is king in Napa. We tried the '19 Napa Valley (\$60), which is very popular in steak houses and country clubs for good reason. All are textbook examples of the wines that made Napa famous in the '70s.

A wine I had forgotten about was the Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$45), a disappearing variety here. It came from Chiles Valley and the Napa Valley floor. A touch of traditional Petite Sirah enhances the wine.

We also tried some wines you'll probably find only at the winery. They include Blanc de Blancs bubbly; Leslie Rosé of Pinot Noir, which is amazingly Provence-like; impressive single-vineyard wines, and a late-harvest Chardonnay that probably retains about 12% residual sugar and is the perfect ending for a fine meal.

Rich and Leslie recently sold the company to Treasury Wine Estates, but retained their home vineyard and some others, and remain both deeply involved as the public face of the brand. Leslie, a former Emmy-winning news broadcaster and anchor, supervises the winery's marketing and image. Graff also got access to some top Treasury Vineyards.

The dinner was prepared by chef Christina Machamer with some interesting touches including cinnamon shortcake for the strawberries with whipped macarpone.

Frank Family Vineyards, 1091 Larkmead Lane, Calistoga, frankfamilyvineyards.com