

CALIFORNIA WITH RESTRAINT

Adam Lechmere visits Heitz Cellars in the Napa Valley, whose commitment to elegance, regardless of the dictates of fashion, is being recognised once again.



PHOTO: BALL TUCKER

Kathleen Heitz Myers,
president and CEO

On a cold, wet February evening, a small group gathers in the living room of the hundred-year-old farmhouse that has been the Heitz Cellars headquarters for the last half-century. There's Kathleen Heitz Myers, president and CEO; her nephew Harrison (Harry); the new public relations consultant Mia Malm; and one journalist. The room is a time-capsule. There's a dark oak dresser, an ornate iron stove (by Bridge Beach and Co of St Louis, MO), cane-backed chairs around the polished oak table, a sepia picture on the wall of Kathleen's father, Joe, and her mother, Alice. There's a leak in the roof and brass pots and kettles are strategically placed on the tops of cupboards. "I'll be in trouble with my mom if the floor gets wet," Heitz says with a laugh. As everyone concentrates on tasting, the silence is punctuated by regular drips. The rain beating against the French windows makes you glad to be inside.

Deep roots

There is a handful of Napa wineries that can claim to be true aristocracy, and Heitz Cellars is one of them. Heitz's flagship wine, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, was the first vineyard-designated wine in California, from a 34-acre alluvial plot south

of Oakville, which Heitz still rents exclusively from the family of its founders, Tom and Martha May. Joe Heitz, who died in 2000, was making wine before Robert Mondavi built his winery. When Warren Winiarski and John Shafer came west a few years after the release of the 1966 Martha's, he already had two decades of vintages under his belt, starting at Gallo and moving to Beaulieu Vineyard and working under the legendary André Tchelistcheff. Heitz embodied the American Dream. "He was forthright and direct. You knew where you stood with him. He grew up in the Depression and his biggest thing was education. He believed that you could better yourself. He had that drive. He was characterised as grouchy, but that was how he would challenge you," his daughter says.

Heitz understood that to break into the London or French markets they had to raise the quality of the wine. He was the first to recognise the importance - both in terms of quality and marketing potential - of the single-vineyard designation. The 1966 Martha's Vineyard was for decades the benchmark by which quality Napa Cabernet Sauvignon was judged. Along with Robert Mondavi's To Kalon, Martha's Vineyard is regarded as one of the great vineyards of the world, whose wines are served to presidents

(it went with Ronald Reagan to Paris), its "unique mintiness", as Kathleen Heitz calls it, renowned worldwide. Its designation is Napa Valley, because, she says, "We believe in Napa Valley first and foremost. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

A shy, courteous figure with a ready laugh, Kathleen Heitz has been in charge here since 1998. She is perfectly aware of the legacy of her father, but there's nothing old-fashioned about her approach to keeping it alive. She is an indefatigable traveller, a well-known face at tastings from London to Tokyo (Japan is a key market). She and her brother David, who makes the wine with managing winemaker Brittany Sherwood, aim to achieve a fine balance between modernity and tradition. Put simply, the wine stays the same while the technology goes forward in leaps and bounds. So while all manner of hi-tech gizmos are employed, including tractors equipped with infra-red water-detecting sensors, the idea that the wine should be an accurate reflection of the land hasn't changed. "You have to balance the technology with overmanipulating the wine. You want the terroir, and the vintage, and the vineyard to come through in the wine. You'll see differences in our vintages. The [rainy and damp] 2011 is a good example. It's much lighter in style. Some people added concentrate to beef the wine back up in order to sell it, but we chose not to do that." (In 2011 all of Martha's Vineyard was declassified into basic Napa Valley).

Commitment to elegance

Heitz Wine Cellars has never been a beefeater, and it has been criticised for it. Robert Parker - who has also praised the wines - once suggested that Martha's Vineyard "lacked aroma", a solecism for which he is regularly pilloried by the champions of moderation in California wine.

The pendulum has now swung back. Heitz says with pride (and the mildest dig at those who mistook restraint for lack of

muscle), "I think we've stayed true to the land. Sometimes that's hard, but we have been in the business long enough that we can see trends coming and going. For years it shifted to those over-extracted, sweeter wines. Everybody started picking later, and I don't think it was appreciated but we stayed true to our style." The winery has always favoured earlier picking times to achieve higher acidity. "If we can make a lower pH it really benefits the age-worthiness of the wines," Heitz has said.

That pendulum swing, and the shift of the limelight back to the 'classic' style (everyone's celebrating acidity now) explains the presence of PR consultant Mia Malm in the tasting room. Things are a bit crowded now, Heitz says. "When we started there were about ten wineries. Now there are 700. There's a lot of pressure from the media searching for something new, and there are very few stories of this depth and history and we need to tell it. You have to polish the legacy. Even though we're famous you still have to show your face as people have a short memory span. Mia will take a close look at what we're doing, and improve our skills."

Malm's job is to blow the Heitz trumpet. "The Heitz family is hardworking and modest, their focus over the past 55 years has been on delivering the best possible wines, not on trying to make a splash," she says.

Her implication is that it's been ripples up to now, and they in their way are as difficult to ignore as splashes. The Martha's Vineyard 1970 Cabernet was one of the triumphant winners of the Paris Tasting, and together with its neighbours - Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Montelena, Ridge and the rest - conferred legitimacy on Napa. Did Joe

Heitz come home excited the day he found out California had won? "It was fabulous recognition and it helped all of Napa Valley," Kathleen Heitz says. "But there were other tastings where Napa wines were starting to do well. A lot of people say it was a line in the sand, this is where everything took off. But for us, because we were an established winery, it wasn't that dramatic."

But you can still be dramatic in a minor key. Through the last difficult decades, when Napa became synonymous with excess, Heitz serenely continued to produce wines with what the Wine Spectator called "impeccable balance". Karen MacNeil, author of *The Wine Bible*, said of the 2009 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, "It's immaculate. It's beautiful. It's structured, and at the same time it has a sustained elegance."

The wines' pedigree is unquestionable. It's there in the vintages. Heitz wines retain their value. Though reviews are by no means fawning, any vertical tasting of the Heitz portfolio is guaranteed to reveal lasting quality. "Lovely, complex, minerally beautifully balanced claret - not unlike Château Latour; at its peak," Jancis Robinson MW wrote a couple of years ago of the 1985 Martha's, which sells in London for about £250.00 (\$312.00) a bottle. The 1974 Martha's - described by Michael Broadbent MW as "one of California's greatest classics" - has more than once topped polls of the world's finest Cabernet Sauvignons.

Heitz Cellars wines - from the Grignolino (Joe Heitz's first purchase was an eight-acre vineyard planted to the aromatic white), Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay ("It was my father's first love"), through to Martha's Vineyard - pull off that difficult trick of achieving a balance between straightforwardness and complexity. That's true especially of Martha's, multi-layered though it is. These are not flashy wines; perhaps "restrained opulence" is the best way of describing them. They have solidity and presence, like very fine old furniture. The quality does not need to be advertised.

The decades have seen changes, but nothing too dramatic. The vinification is different, of course. Martha's now spends two and a half years in new oak, whereas in Joe Heitz's day there were more old barrels in use. "When you are starting and growing a business, priorities were always balanced



Heitz stone cellar

with how many new oak barrels were purchased," Heitz says. But her father, she adds, would have approved of much of what they do now. "He would still recognise many winemaking patterns and procedures, but would be delighted that we didn't rest on our laurels and have embraced new advances in science and equipment."

The new generation

The fact that Heitz is a family concern helps with keeping things on an even keel. Harry, son of David, represents the new generation, and he's part of a close-knit team. With about 20 employees, making 40,000 cases of wine a year, it's the ideal size, Heitz says, to keep it all in the family. "Our goal is to pass it on to the next generation, so we're not trying to grow to a size where we have to sell."

The Heitz family gives off an aura of calm, which is not to say they don't enjoy themselves. All of them travel a healthy amount, and when they go to England they like to stop off at Cliveden, the former home of the Astors, scene of the Profumo scandal in the 1960s, and now a hotel. It's easy to imagine these undemonstrative people ordering tea in one of the great drawing rooms of the huge mansion. Harry laughs when he's asked about his expense account. Then the conversation turns to food, and I discover that Yorkshire pudding is called 'popover' in the US, and that the Heitz clan is fond of another northern English dish, sticky toffee pudding, which is as delicious as it is unsophisticated. We talk about matching the wines. What would go with the Trailside Cabernet, Martha's Rutherford sibling - bright cherry but without the famous mint? On my recording there are a full fifteen seconds of near-silence as Kathleen Heitz thinks; all you can hear is the drumming of the rain on the roof, and the odd drip. Then she says, "Well, my husband's a wonderful barbecuer, so some grass-fed fillets of beef with some steamed vegetables. All organic. To me, living in California is all about the freshness of your produce." ■



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