

KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards, A Genesis Tour of Ken Wright's Yamhill-Carlton Vineyard Sources

By Jim Gullo

PART SIX: GUADALUPE VINEYARD

In 1988, when Doris Meier Ziegler sold the farm on which she had lived for over forty years, she drew a blueprint of sorts of the land for new owners Jim Stonebridge and Kathleen Boeve, pointing out what had grown or been cultivated on the 89-acre property. Doris had married into the farm in 1945 when, as a 22-year old only recently transplanted from her native Missouri to Oregon, she had married Cecil Ziegler, whose father Charles had owned and farmed the property for decades and left it to his son. The couple would raise three children in the modest farmhouse that overlooked Abbey Road between Carlton and Lafayette. Ten years after they married, in 1955, the Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey purchased the 1,300 adjacent acres to the Ziegler farm and moved their monastery from New Mexico to this verdant hillside in the Willamette Valley.

The highest parts of the Ziegler farm, now planted in Pommard and Wadenswil clones of pinot noir, were a sheep pasture in the 1940s, Doris wrote in a careful, legible hand on a folded piece of parchment paper. They grazed among oak trees and brush. There were some old pie cherry trees up there, too, and prunes from the '40s, with a scattering of old walnut trees. Pears were planted up in that part too, just above the new well that Cecil dug, and the valley between the hills was also given to pasturing sheep, as well as more cherry trees that Cecil introduced to the property. They tried filberts – hazelnuts – on a couple of acres on the south side, but even after twenty years they rarely produced a decent crop and were something of a disaster. There was another walnut orchard surrounding the barn and a spring pasture for grazing cows, near an irrigation pond, that would be butchered for meat or sold off in the fall. The plum trees for prunes were all but gone.

That in itself would have been shocking to anyone who had encountered the farm sixty years earlier, because this land had once been a research nursery and prune orchard when the Willamette Valley was one of the major prune suppliers on the west coast, and Carlton housed a number of busy prune drying houses. In fact, the Brooks prune, a variation of Italian prune which is still a major part of today's prune supply, was invented and first grown on the property in 1937 by Bert and Glenn Brooks of

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the Lafayette Nursery Company. "But prune prices began to decline," wrote Doris, and you can just about hear the sigh in her voice as she recalled the precarious business that was farming. "Cecil saw a better future in cherries, so he planted more of them. We did well in pears," she added, "until the Hunt cannery left the Salem area, which hurt the prune and pear market. We couldn't but break even some years, so took out the pears. Prunes had already been grubbed out."

The Columbus Day wind storm of 1962 blew away most of the remaining walnut trees, and even in good years, when the farm could produce 20 tons of cherries at a quarter a pound, the cherry business wasn't very lucrative before collapsing altogether due to labor and market forces in the mid-'90s. Ever the optimist, Doris, who worked as a teacher's aide in the Yamhill and Carlton school districts, concluded her notes on the farm with these prophetic lines: "Since Cecil has been gone I've had realtors here telling that the southern slope is good for grape planting. I wonder if grapes won't get over-planted."

Grapes would indeed do well on the former Ziegler farm, but even before Doris and Cecil farmed the land, and even before James Scott received Donation Land Claim #2115 in the 1850s after crossing the plains and homesteading in Oregon, the property was a gathering place for Native American tribes. Jim Stonebridge reports that when land was cleared for what he would name the Camas block – thanks to the tuberous plants that grew there that had been a Native American food staple – workers found arrowheads and grinding bowls used to grind the camas into flour. Early pioneers to Oregon noted the acrid smell of smoke in the air from the burning of fields that tribes would conduct in order to have fresh pasture land when they returned the following spring.

Cecil Ziegler passed away in 1985, and Doris was in her mid-60s when Jim Stonebridge and Kathleen Boeve came looking for a quiet property in the country on which they could live and build, with a goal of retiring. The proximity of the abbey, and its vast, undeveloped buffer was attractive. Jim was an ophthalmologist and Kathleen a psychotherapist, and both had an interest in grapes and wine. The farm had become run down and overgrown in places, and they noted that the Willakenzie soil was particularly thin on the south slope, where the hazelnuts had been so unsuccessful.

"There's only one thing that will grow here and it's weeds," Jim recalls saying about that section of the farm. "And grapes are basically weeds."

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With the assistance of Joel Myers, the new owners cleared and planted ten acres of grapes in 1989-90 that included Wadenswil and Pommard pinot noir, and self-rooted pinot gris. The new owners named their farm Abbey Heights, but they realized after a few years that all of the hands who tilled the land referred to the property as Guadalupe, in deference to the Abbey, so they officially changed the name to the Guadalupe Vineyard and erected a sign with a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe to grace the property. By the time the entire property was planted, there would be 28 different, defined blocks of grapes.

The Abbey was not only a neighbor: From the beginning of the vineyard, they were a customer, when one of the monks claimed two rows of grapes to make his own grape juice and wine, a practice that continued for over twenty years.

“It was like starting any small business,” said Jim Stonebridge with a laugh. “At first you could barely even give the grapes away.” But one of his early customers was a young winemaker named Ken Wright, then the owner and winemaker of Panther Creek Cellars, who saw the value in bottling a single-vineyard Pinot Noir named for the Guadalupe vineyard. That wine was a hit, and established the reputation of the property as a source for fine-wine grapes and a major grower in the Dundee Hills AVA (a bit of contested gerrymandering, since the vineyard has the same soil characteristics and lies literally across the street from the vineyards of the Yamhill-Carlton AVA). Now, besides being a primary source for Ken Wright Cellars, which since 2011 has leased the entire 45-acre vineyard, Guadalupe fruit is featured in the wines of Cristom, Beaux Freres, Tendril, Siltstone and Solena.

Doris Ziegler approved. She spent her last years before passing away in April, 2001 in a home across Abbey Road, where she could look down on her former farm. The original farmhouse where she lived had become the home of the Stonebridge’s children, and Jim and Kathleen had built a handsome, Spanish-style home farther up the hill in 1999. She wrote the Stonebridges notes and said she liked what they were doing with the land where, as a much younger woman and newlywed, she had raised sheep and cows, cherries and prunes and hazelnuts that never ripened...and children that did.

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