

THE // PIONEERS // OF PRITCHARD HILL

FOR 50 YEARS, THE CHAPPELLET FAMILY HAS THRIVED IN ONE
OF NAPA VALLEY'S PRIME *TERROIRS* | BY KIM MARCUS

Vineyard manager David Pirio
(left) and proprietor Cyril
Chappellet overlooking
Pritchard Hill.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ALANNA HALE

In 1967, Pritchard Hill was an isolated and almost forgotten area. In summer, the heat baked its slopes and the rutted track that traversed it was deep with dust. When, infrequently, a pickup truck rumbled through, the dust would billow up and settle on surrounding thickets of poison oak and chaparral scrub.

It was just the type of terrain Donn Chappellet was looking for.

"The realtor kept trying to talk him out of it," says Molly Chappellet about the 320-acre property. "But [my husband] wanted to grow the best grapes in the world, and he thought they were grown on the hillsides."

Today, Pritchard Hill is one of Napa Valley's most coveted addresses. Its residents include giants such as Colgin, Bryant, Continuum and Ovid. But the Chappellets were the first to stake a claim, and this year marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of their winery by Molly and Donn. All six of their children retain ownership interests, and their eldest son, Cyril, 60, is its chairman, a position he's held since 2013.

Donn died last year at age 84, but his vision for the property holds as strong as ever, his personality having imbued the business with a core of resiliency that endures.

"He truly thought the best was yet to come," Cyril says of his father. "He was enamored of this property and the winery. The last 10 years of his life he was enthralled with all the new projects. He was very supportive of it all," Cyril says. "He was a great sounding board and very thoughtful and calm when it came to challenging business decisions."

Jack Daniels, of St. Helena, Calif.-based wine distributor Wilson-Daniels, got his start in Napa Valley in 1976, when Donn hired him to sell Chappellet wines. Daniels remembers those days as the beginning of a new era in Napa's wine history.

"None of the smaller, handcrafted wineries were distributed, and [Chappellet's] was one of the first from the hillsides," Daniels says. "Donn was in only about nine states at the time. Within a year we were in more than 40 states. And one day [we] said, 'Boy, there might be a business in this.'"

"He was a real Renaissance man," Daniels adds. "There wasn't much he couldn't do, from riding a horse to flying a glider. He sailed, loved to collect art and made his own jewelry. He loved food and the good life. He was a peaceful man, and I enjoyed being around him. I never saw him angry once, and for two years we literally lived in that winery together. And he never bragged about anything."

Donn could be forthright as well. "Dad never forced us to do

anything. He wasn't interfering," says Cyril. "But the other part of Dad was that he was brutally honest. Once, he was at a dinner and the host asked him how he liked a wine that had just been poured. 'I'm really happy,'" Cyril recounts his father saying. "I'm happy it's not my wine.'"

Three years ago the Chappellets completed a new state-of-the-art cellar that has helped reinvigorate their benchmark Cabernet Sauvignons. Most of the winery's 100 acres of vineyards have been replanted and are now tended using organic methods; they produce about 25,000 cases of estate-bottled wine annually.

Chappellet's Cabernets have always been long-lived because of tannins and structure, characteristics that spring from their mountain origin. Yet the wines are now more open-textured thanks to



The Chappellet family, shown in 2012 at the groundbreaking for their new winery and cellars: (from left) Jon-Mark, Molly, Dominic, Alexa, Donn, Carissa and Cyril. The siblings share in ownership of the business, with Cyril acting as company chairman.

precision grapegrowing and updated winemaking protocols in the cellar. The first releases, in the late 1960s and '70s, were standards for quality in Napa. After a rough patch in the '80s and early '90s, the wines have regained vitality, in terms of both quality and consumer recognition. They are neither as sleek nor as oaky as some of Napa's top cult bottlings, but they retain authenticity and a refreshing purity of flavors.

Recent releases include the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Pritchard Hill 2013 (scoring an outstanding 93 points in *Wine Spectator's* official blind tastings; \$210), rich, elegant and filled with polished red fruit flavors; and the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Signature 2014 (90, \$65), with restrained tannins behind its dark fruit and cedary flavors. The winery also makes a Chardonnay from fruit purchased from cooler sites on the valley floor; the Napa Valley 2015 (90, \$35) is lively, with white fruit and citrus notes.

“[MY HUSBAND SAID,] ‘I WOULDN’T WANT TO BE IN THE WINE BUSINESS UNLESS I COULD MAKE WINES [THAT RIVAL] THE BEST WINES I’M DRINKING.’”—MOLLY CHAPPELLET

Donn was born in Los Angeles in 1931 and grew up in Southern California. He met Molly there when they were both students (she was studying art, a passion that continues to this day), and they married in 1952. Donn’s father was one of five partners who helped build Lockheed into an aviation powerhouse beginning in the 1930s. He encouraged Donn to seek his own path, and the son proved an astute businessman. Donn co-founded the Interstate United Corp. in 1954, helping build it into a highly successful enterprise that distributed the first vending machines to make fresh-ground coffee.

Yet by the mid-1960s, Molly says, the daily burden of managing sales and distribution had begun to wear. “I could see there was no snap in his step. I touched his arm and asked, ‘Donn, do you really want to do this the rest of your life?’ He didn’t know what to do, and I didn’t know. But he liked to be in the country, and one passion he had was wine.”

Donn’s family was of French extraction, and wine had always had a place at the table when he was growing up. His love of Bordeaux helped him decide on his new calling. In 1966, he sold his shares at Interstate and started looking for vineyard land. “He told me, ‘I wouldn’t want to be in the wine business unless I could make wines [that rival] the best wines I’m drinking,’” Molly recounts.

The couple had five young children and a sixth on the way when they bought their piece of Pritchard Hill. André Tchelistcheff guided them there; in this instance as in so many others in Napa Valley’s modern winemaking history, the famed winemaker and consultant set the wheels in motion for profound change. The Chappellets had the foresight to trademark the Pritchard Hill name, and today it remains the rare district in Napa that is a proprietary designation rather than an officially sanctioned sub-appellation.

Pritchard Hill lies east of the hamlet of Rutherford in the foothills of the Vaca Mountains. More of a rugged sloping upland than well-defined summit, it is marked by volcanic soils strewn with boulders and rocks that tumbled down the slopes of an ancient crater more than 4 million years ago. The well-drained soils are full of minerals, but reliable water sources are often hard to find given the underlying strata.

The area long served as a way station on the arduous route eastward from the Napa Valley to the Sacramento Valley. Grapevines followed the travelers, with the first plantings in the mid-19th century, and the Chappellets found a property dating to that period when they came looking in 1967.

“Luckily for us it was all carved out, as it had been a vineyard beginning in 1862 or 1863. Back then the growers realized there was less frost here and it was better for grapes,” Molly explains. “Everybody thought Donn was absolutely crazy. Why would anyone want that dry, hot hillside? But Donn saw all the exposures.”

There was a ramshackle ranch-style house on the property, built in the 1950s. The site had little shade, but there were already 90 acres of productive vineyards planted in terraces and on slopes,

which the Chappellets quickly turned into wine. Molly, who is an avid gardener and has published books on the subject, planted trees to provide shade and a vegetable garden to help feed the growing Chappellet clan. She still lives in the house, which has been greatly remodeled and expanded; its grounds are now an oasis of lush flora amid a tapestry of vineyards, oaks and chaparral.

“It really makes my heart proud. It provides room for inspiration, meditation and consultation. I enjoy its beauty and love sharing it,” Molly says. She has also salvaged various remnants of vineyard trellising and other castoffs to fashion large pieces of landscape art throughout the property.

Cyril and his siblings, Lygia, Carissa, Jon-Mark, Alexa and the youngest, Dominic, lived a tight-knit life at the ranch that would be hard to replicate today. Though the family home is within sight of St. Helena, it’s a long drive down the steep, twisting track to Sage Canyon Road, then out to the valley floor and across it before reaching Main Street. “Anytime you wanted to play with friends or go to school, you had to go to town. And my mother was the bus driver,” Cyril says, laughing at the recollection.

The Chappellet vineyard ranges from 800 to 1,800 feet in elevation. Today, the property covers 700 acres, with about 14 percent planted to vines. At the western edge of the property, above the bowl of the main vineyard itself, the views are as expansive as they are illustrative of the profound changes that have helped reshape Pritchard Hill over the past half century. The footing is tricky here amid the rocks and stones and the tough shrub called chamise, which is common to many California hillsides and potentially combustible in wildfire season.

Cabernet Sauvignon is Chappellet’s benchmark varietal, as is the case now for most all Napa-area producers. But 50 years ago Cabernet had yet to establish its preeminent role, and the Chappellets’ plantings reflected the diversity then common to estates in the valley. In addition to 30 acres of Cabernet, the Chappellet vineyards held a like amount of Chenin Blanc, a white grape that makes dense and deeply flavored whites in its homeland in France’s Loire Valley. In California, Chenin was more often used for jug white blends, but the Chappellets fashioned it into delicious dry versions, full of white fruits and beeswax notes. The rest of the vineyard grew Riesling, Chardonnay, Gamay and Merlot.

From Molly and Donn’s home, the three-sided wooden pyramid of the original Chappellet winery peeks above a copse of live oaks. Fifty years ago, Molly notes, it was hard to miss, and now she is considering trimming the trees for a better view. It was the second new winery built in the valley in the postwar era, right after Robert Mondavi’s in 1966.

The inspiration for the unique design came from Molly. When the architect asked what buildings she admired, the pyramids of Egypt came immediately to mind. “Two days later he built a cardboard

model, and Donn said, “That’s great,” Molly recalls. They relied on neighboring vintners for advice and counsel as they built their pyramid. “The whole community was supportive. They were so helpful. We were from L.A. and used to its cutthroat culture, so this was a pleasant surprise,” Molly says.

The dramatic design came with limitations, though. Space can’t be added, and the angles within the enclosure make the logistics of tank and barrel movement tedious. Electrical lines had to be pulled down from the high-peaked ceiling, and the bottling line was squeezed into one corner. Cyril worked in a loft-style office up a long staircase at the peak of the 40-foot-high pyramid for 30 years.

The new 20,000-square-foot cellar, which sits directly across from the pyramid, is dug deep into the ground, both to camouflage its bulk and to provide stable temperatures. The facility can be

cooled to a constant 53° F, versus 60° F in the pyramid. The new cellar provides space for cool barrel fermentations that were not possible before. “The difference in what we can do here than in the pyramid is just staggering,” Cyril says.

But the pyramid has not been mothballed; it has been entirely refurbished and now is used mostly for barrel storage.

“The old facility could control temperature well, but it was very dry,” says winemaker Phillip Corallo-Titus, 60. “The wines we’ve made since we’ve built the new facility have a freshness and energy.” Corallo-Titus is continuing the evolution of Chappellet from the epitome of mountain-grown Cabernet—characterized by hefty tannins and a decades-long wait for an optimal drinking window—to a riper and more open-textured style.

He has worked with Chappellet since 1981, except for a six-year hiatus (from 1984 to 1990). Among his predecessors in the cellar were the first winemaker, Phillip Togni (1968 to 1974), then Joe Cafaro and Tony Soter before Cathy Corison arrived in 1981. Titus-Corallo worked under Corison as an assistant from 1981 to 1984, and though he left to pursue another venture, Donn persuaded him to return and take over the wine-making reins in the spring of 1990. He also runs his own label, Titus Vineyards, from a family winery located nearby.

“The one thing that Donn said was we can make the wines a little less tannic,” Corallo-Titus says. “The biggest thing we did was to develop a fermentation and winemaking protocol specific to Chappellet and not just what everyone else does. You can make a lighter wine that is soft and easier to drink, but it’s not that interesting. The quest is to make it big and rich.”

To that end, Corallo-Titus has allowed the grapes to hang longer in order to let the seeds, and thus the tannins, get riper. He’s changed the equipment with the goal of a more gentle crushing.

Renovations in the vineyards have also helped his quest. Where originally all the grapes were dry-farmed, they are now irrigated in the dog days of summer, helping to reduce vine stress. Ten different clones of Cabernet are planted on multiple rootstocks, depending on exposure. The vineyard was certified organic in 2012; vineyard manager David Pirio, who has worked at the winery since 1984, says it was a long process.

“We were very cautious. Going organic can negatively impact the winery if not done right. It took a lot of learning,” Pirio says. “Not having an easy spray with [the herbicide] Roundup or for mildew has made us better farmers.”

Chappellet remains a small endeavor. In addition to the 25,000 cases from the estate, it also produces 20,000 cases of its Mountain Cuvée, made from purchased fruit and estate grapes. The family has also owned Sonoma-Loeb, which specializes in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, since 2011, though the brand had been made at the Chappellet winery for 20 years before the purchase.

“We’ve stayed at this as a family winery, but then we



Cyril Chappellet saw the construction of his family’s pyramid-shaped winery as a boy and worked there for decades as an adult. The unique structure was just the second new winery built in Napa in the postwar era.



started making big changes in '95," says Cyril, who started working at the winery in 1985. He went to school at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and returned to Pritchard Hill after a five-year stint working for an oil and insurance company in Florida. "I trace it back to the beginning of the modern era, when we made a transition from the Chenin and Riesling to Cabernet, which is what this hill is built for, but which wasn't always obvious."

Key to that endeavor was the replanting of the vineyards, which he credits Corallo-Titus and Pirio for spearheading. "Dad ended up getting two more sons to build this property," Cyril says.

As the flood of Cabernet washed over the valley and demand for it soared, the writing was on the wall. Chappellet's Chenin Blanc was one of the best made in California and gained a loyal following. But by 2004 the vines had declined and had not been replaced. Yet at Chappellet today the tug of history remains strong. There are 3 acres planted to Chenin at the urging of Molly, who felt its absence left the winery without one of its signature varieties—and a connection to its past.

"There are some things much more important to my mom than economics," Cyril says.

The tight-knit community the Chappellets first encountered 50 years ago has changed beyond recognition with the influx of new arrivals and their wines. Including Chappellet, there were only 32 wineries back then; today there are more than 500 brands.

The price of land and grapes has exploded as well, and while the Chappellets are content to further exploit their patch of Pritchard Hill, there may be room for growth outside the property someday. An aunt and a cousin own large neighboring tracts of land, small portions of which could be

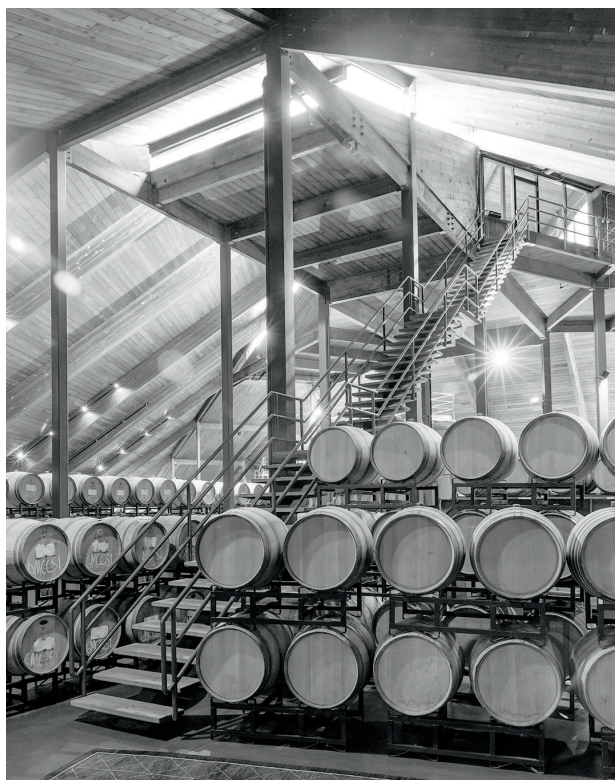
plantable, though the costs may prove to be as daunting as those faced by newcomers.

"I don't believe prices can keep going up as quickly as they have," Cyril says. "But how do we protect ourselves in the long run from rising grape prices? It's probably here. We just have to develop more water."

Just below and to the west lie many of the trendsetting vineyards and estates carved out of the large ranch once owned by the Long family: Tim Mondavi's Continuum; Ann Colgin's estate, Ovid, whose 15 acres and winery were sold recently; and David Arthur, created by David Arthur Long of the original ranch family.

Beyond that cluster of wineries, the heart of Napa Valley unfurls below. To the north, the summit of Mount St. Helena climbs to more than 4,400 feet; to the south, the waters of San Pablo Bay shimmer in the far distance. Over a ridge to the immediate south is the 600-acre Stagecoach Vineyard, recently purchased by the Gallos from the Krupp Brothers, who first began developing it in 1995. It sells fruit to more than 90 wineries and is one of the largest continuous vineyard tracts in Napa Valley; its sale price was not made public, but some neighbors speculate that it was in the \$250 million range.

The Krupps, like those who settled on the former Long Ranch,



Left: The original pyramid winery has been refurbished top to bottom and, since the completion in 2014 of a new winery next door, is used mostly for barrel storage. Right: Helped by better climate control and state-of-the-art equipment, winemaker Phillip Corallo-Titus is making wines with greater freshness and energy in the Chappellets' new facility.

faced enormous hurdles in getting the land ready to plant. Huge boulders, some the size of buses, had to be dug out and crushed, with development costs tallying \$150,000 (and sometimes more) per vineyard acre.

Cyril recalls that his father thought it ridiculous to spend even \$15,000 an acre to plant in the early days. Worries about costs and incurring debt are still a driving force for the Chappellets in a valley where billionaires can afford the unaffordable.

"I'm delighted to see what they've done," Cyril says of his neighbors. "But some of them are just boulder-crushing operations, and I wouldn't want to trade places with them," he adds. "I'm not envious of what my neighbors have had to do to plant a vineyard."

It's not only real estate and grape prices that have skyrocketed. The costs of equipment, materials and labor have also risen exponentially. Cyril estimates that the expense of operating the winery has gone up five- to tenfold over the past 25 years.

The way to sell wine is undergoing a dramatic shift as well. Currently, the winery sells 20 percent of its production directly to consumers, through its tasting room and its wine club. They'd like to see that figure grow to 50 percent in the next few years in order to capture for themselves some of the profits that would otherwise go to the middlemen of the three-tier distribution system.

"Our growth isn't in volume but how we sell it," Cyril explains. Key to that is providing unique tasting experiences at the winery. "We need to talk to the millennials who will be drinking more wine. They don't want to be sold to and have another Madison Avenue pitch to drink our wine."

Cyril is a big man, like his father. He's gregarious with visitors and staff, but his tone turns serious when talking about the hurdles faced by a family-run winery in today's Napa Valley. "The Diageos, the Constellations and the Gallos of the world all have incredible appetite for wineries," he says. "It's an interesting challenge when I see the families that aren't here running wineries [anymore], like the Beringers and the Martinis."

Those families, as well as the Mondavis and a few others, had Napa Valley virtually to themselves after the repeal of Prohibition and in the immediate post-World War II era. They were mostly the sons of immigrants for whom winegrowing was something carried in their genes from the Old World.

But in the 1960s those who had made their money elsewhere began to pursue winemaking dreams on the valley floor and its surrounding slopes. The Chappellets were part of that groundbreaking



Carissa (left) and sister Lygia Chappellet alongside a wall designed by Lygia that repurposed stones excavated from the vineyards into an art feature, one of many sculptures on the property made from found natural objects.

migration, and whether they continue to thrive on Pritchard Hill will say a lot about what the future may hold for family-run wineries in Napa Valley.

For now, the future seems secure at Chappellet. "None of the family wants to sell. Donn put the question several times to the children—and that someday the winery will be yours," Molly says. "Finding the next niece or nephew who wants to be mentored to run the winery and to be good stewards of the property is vital. We have quite a few things on the plate to watch for," Cyril says.

Corallo-Titus is keeping his eye on the long term as well. "What also has to happen is to codify a system of Chappellet winemaking that can last another 40 or 50 years," he says.

But in the end, it comes down to family and the bonds that tie it together.

"One of the magical things is that my [siblings] love this place. And it's a reason I've paid down debt, so we don't need outside investors. Because that's how so many other family wineries have been lost," Cyril adds.

The pioneers of Pritchard Hill are dug in and don't plan on going anywhere soon. Today, the old dirt road up to Chappellet is neatly paved, and its wines are coveted. But there's still plenty of poison oak just off the asphalt, and challenges ahead. □

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BONUS VIDEO: Molly Chappellet presents her family's 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon Signature cuvée at the Wine Experience Top 10 Tasting. Watch at www.winespectator.com/chappellet2006.

