

Vintage journey: Two farmworkers blended their dreams and families to become owners of a prestigious Napa-area winery

By Jim Wasserman, Sacramento Bee - January 8, 2006

NAPA - The afternoon sun hung low over the Ceja family's vineyards and beamed through the window of the tasting room, warming a hardwood table filled with Mexican food and wine produced by farmworkers who realized the unlikely dream of becoming owners.

A silence fell among them as matriarch Juanita Castañeda Ceja, 70, was asked to recall her arrival here in 1967 and the years since then. After pondering how to sum it up, she responded by culling some of the most vivid images from the past: A young wife, she is leaving her village in Michoacán and arriving - with nowhere to live - in the Napa Valley that her husband had so lovingly described over the years. She is seeing again the looks on the landlords' faces as they survey her seven children, the endless early moves, the inability to see any vision for the future, and the desperation and determination that eventually created one.

These experiences evoke such deep feelings that she quits the past by saying simply: "It was really difficult when we got here."

How much - and how little - has changed. In a state where one in three residents is a Latino and in an industry where the majority of farmworkers are as well, the Ceja family's journey to become vineyard owners remains improbable and remarkable.

A family partnership, Viña del Sol, ranges over 113 acres of Napa and Sonoma County vineyards and a family-owned company, Ceja Vineyards Inc., produces "ultra premium" wines, signaling a heartening coming of age for California's \$45 billion wine economy.

The Cejas' story is yet another indicator of the demographic transformation that will make Latinos the majority population in California by 2040, a sweeping change that has already begun to affect the face and marketing focus of the wine industry.

Rise of new wine powers

Already, a dozen Mexican American families are forming what they hope will be dynasties that one day rival the Italian ones created by the Mondavis, Gallos and others.

Longtime Napa Valley winemaker Robert Pecota, the son of Belarussian immigrants, said the emergence of Latino vintners is a "natural progression" that mirrors how many Italians came to the forefront.

"What they represent is what the Napa Valley used to be, the farmer who started to convert his product into a finished good," he said. "They grow the grapes and make the wine and sell the wine."



Among the most successful Latino winemakers are the Cejas, who produce wine under their own name. They pruned and picked other people's vineyards for decades, sent their children and grandchildren to California universities and colleges and learned everything there was to know about growing Napa Valley grapes.

"It's always heartwarming when someone has learned their business from the ground up as opposed to having made some fortune in the Silicon Valley and building an egotistical temple," said Karen MacNeil, author of the 2001 book, "The Wine Bible," and chairwoman of the wine department at Napa-based Culinary Institute of America.

Already, the Cejas have diversified the 1,200-vintage wine list at Old Sacramento's Firehouse Restaurant.

"It's a great story," said Firehouse general manager and wine buyer Mario Ortiz. A Mexican-born Californian, he added Ceja wines to the menu after meeting the family at a Napa Valley restaurant.

Better than the immigrant success story, he said, is the wine.

"I love the pinot noir," he noted. "It's one of my favorites that they make."

First land purchase

The Ceja family bought its first 15 acres of vineyards in 1983, cobbling together \$400,000 in cash and loans for land in Carneros, the hill country 40 miles north of San Francisco. Where there were fruit orchards and cow pastures, the family planted 13 acres of pinot noir grapes, and in 2001, the family released its first 750 cases of wine.

Just a year later, riding the reputation of its pinot noir, chardonnay and merlot vintages, 90 wine writers voted Ceja "best new winery."

Though the family still sells about 85 percent of its grapes to other prominent wineries such as Rombauer, Mumm and La Crema, Ceja's wine production has climbed steadily since the 2001 release. The 2006 goal is 6,500 cases and the family plans to build its own winery (it now leases space at MacRostie Winery in Carneros) when it reaches 10,000 cases annually.

The Cejas say the long journey out of Mexico, the decades of manual labor and the gamble of trading everything they'd saved for land is revealing its rewards.

"We're literally here because of so many people not being afraid, and taking risks," says Amelia Morán Ceja, 50, a gourmet cook who married into the Ceja family 25 years ago. A history and literature graduate of the University of California, San Diego, she is an unabashed marketing force for the family wines and calls herself the first Mexican American woman president of a California winery.

She declined to discuss overall revenue. The company sells a \$38 pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon, a \$32 merlot and a \$30 chardonnay, as well as syrah for \$28, and an \$18 red blend.

Mission bell on label

The family adorns its wine labels with a mission bell to honor its heritage.

The bell, like wine, said Morán Ceja, is "the universal symbol of the celebration of life." It also pays homage to how wine was introduced to California, via 18th century Franciscan missions that brought the "mission" grape north from Mexico.

On the bell, the Cejas inscribed "Vinum, Cantus, Amor" in Latin, which translates to "wine, song and love." The Latin, she said, is used for mystery - and because it is traditionally the language of the Mass in the Roman Catholic Church.

Morán Ceja, also the daughter of Mexican migrant farmworkers, said Ceja's defining difference from other Napa Valley wineries is the emphasis on pairing wine with non-European foods, targeting 12 million Latino consumers in California and 29 million more nationally.

"There are so many in the Hispanic community just waiting to be invited in," she said.

"Before, it was seafood with white wine and red meats with red wine," said Morán Ceja, who touts cabernet sauvignon with beans and a red wine blend with salsa.

In a commercial kitchen off the central dining room in the family's Carneros tasting center, she pairs the traditional Mexican soup pozole and a quesadilla of arugula, Oaxacan cheese and mushrooms with pinot noir, chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. She demonstrates similarly with Asian foods, mindful of 14 million potential Asian American customers.

"All of a sudden I just spoke to the rest of the world," Morán Ceja said. "All of a sudden we brought wine down to reality."

About half of Ceja's wine club consists of Latino members, including such political notables as Art Torres, chairman of the California Democratic Party, state Sen. Martha Escutia, D-Whittier, and Assemblywoman Nicole Parra, D-Hanford.

"Most people just drink beer with Mexican food," said Torres. "She's starting to promote wines which go so well with our own favorite dishes."

Torres, a former lobbyist for the United Farm Workers, recalled the hopes of late UFW chief Cesar Chavez that one day "California farmworkers would own their own winery. And here it's happened. It's a classic example of the American dream."

Two immigrants meet

The dream that created a \$38 pinot noir made by sons and daughters of immigrant farmworkers began with a pair of young Mexican men in the 1940s and '50s. They met in the fields of California, put themselves on the road to citizenship and, on the same month, brought their families to Napa Valley.

"Our fathers knew each other from the fields - pears in Washington, grapes in Fresno, grapes in Napa," said Morán Ceja.

Her father, Felipe, came from Las Flores, Jalisco, as an undocumented worker who followed farm trails through Arizona and western Texas, California, Oregon and Washington. Her father-in-law, Pablo Ceja, came from Aguililla, Michoacán, as a U.S. government guest farmworker.

In pursuit of legal residency and citizenship, both proved they could support families with steady work, filed income taxes and supplied letters from their employers to U.S. immigration authorities. Morán gained legal residence in 1962, Ceja in 1963.

Both still live in Napa Valley with their wives. Family histories say the pair fell in love with the region in the 1950s, describing the town of St. Helena as a "magical lady, a place that can cast a spell on you."

Finally, in June 1967, Felipe Morán told his wife, Francisca Fuentes Morán, and their two children that he had applied for them to join him. Ceja had done the same for his wife, six young sons and a daughter. In the serendipitous way that risk-taking opens the door to opportunities, the Morán and Ceja families met almost immediately while picking merlot grapes near Oakville.

"The first time I picked grapes, I met Pedro and Armando," said Morán Ceja of the two Ceja boys, one of whom she would marry and the other who would become a trusted business partner. "We didn't speak a word of English."

A moment of destiny

Their impromptu meeting proved a moment of destiny that came to shape both families and has since become part of the Ceja wine story. The children say they knew quickly, while picking Napa Valley grapes together, that "something great's going to happen."

Thirteen years later, Amelia Morán and Pedro Ceja married.

Today, Pedro, 49, an engineer at Thermo Electron Corp. in San Jose, also is co-owner and secretary of Ceja Vineyards Inc. Armando is chief financial officer, vineyardist and winemaker. Armando's wife, Martha, daughter of an immigrant farmworker from Jalisco and sister of Gustavo Brambila, another Latino Napa Valley winemaker, is vice president.

Armando Ceja, who made his first barrel of wine at 17 at St. Helena High School, said he never had any other ambition.

"I knew from an early age what I wanted to do," he said.

Now at 45, he possesses what the Cejas claim is a singular advantage in a competitive industry: an all-around knowledge of grape growing and winemaking based on the experiences of a farmworker family. That's backed by years of viticulture and enology classes at University of California, Davis, and Napa Valley College.

Asked to say what his wine symbolizes for the family, Armando Ceja reflects on a journey he still calls by its Spanish name, "El Camino."

"My dad ... had the best work ethic," he said. "My mom was more the visionary, saying, 'You gotta go to school.' In hindsight, we weren't afraid of work. They taught us by example."

The Ceja story comes down to the simple delight of four parents who left their tiny hometowns and endured hardship at the bottom rungs of the nation's biggest farm economy. They worked the fields, sent nearly all their 13 children to college and watched them find professions such as banking, optometry and wine.

Back at the tasting room table as the sun descended into the vineyards, Juanita Castañeda Ceja is in the here and now.

"I am happy and content," she said. "I've seen my kids go get educated and do something with their lives." This memory will be another stop on "El Camino."