

American Dream: Cejas Release Wines Under Their Own Label

Former Winery Workers Achieve the American Dream

By Jeff Morgan, Wine Enthusiast Magazine - June 2002

Until she was 12 years old, Amelia Ceja lived in the small Mexican village of Las Flores—population 60—about 350 miles northwest of Mexico City. There was no electricity or running water. “We took our water from the river,” Ceja, now 46, recalls.

Today, she and her family are part of the American dream. As immigrants, they arrived in the United States with little more than a strong work ethic. But after three decades, they own some 100 acres of valuable vineyards in Napa and Sonoma counties as well as a new wine label, Ceja Vineyards.

“Wine was introduced to the Americas through Mexico,” Ceja reminds us in her perfect, but slightly accented English. “The oldest winery [in the New World] is in Parras, [Mexico]. Parras means vines, and the winery is 400 years old. It still makes wine today.”



Any visitor to California wine country is quick to notice the importance of the Hispanic community to the wine industry.

Hispanics provide the backbone for much of the agricultural work that’s done in this area, yet relatively few Mexicans have become vintners. The Ceja family is putting a new spin on the changing face of California wine.

“All of our parents came to work in the vineyards,” Ceja explains. “As children, we worked alongside them. At first, we didn’t speak English, but later, when we did, we chose to continue working among the vines, especially during our school vacations.”

Amelia’s father was employed as a mechanic by grapegrower Andy Beckstoffer, and her mother was a vineyard laborer. The vintner’s parents-in-law—Pablo and Juanita Ceja—were also vineyard and winery workers.

Pablo and Juanita Ceja encouraged their two sons, Armando and Pedro (who is Amelia’s husband), to go to the University of California, Davis. At Davis, they learned the viticulture, enology and engineering skills that have enabled them to run their vineyards and budding wine business. Amelia also attended the University of California, San Diego and worked at various wineries in marketing prior to her full time commitment to Ceja Vineyards.

But the path to a family vineyard was not a straight one. Both Amelia and Pedro originally chose other careers after college. The couple lived in the Bay Area with their young children; Pedro Ceja was working as an engineer. But he and his mom, Juanita, always wanted to buy some land.

In 1983, the family found a 15-acre plot of open pasture with a home in the Carneros region. “We pooled our resources and bought it,” Ceja remembers. And if ever there were a family compound, this was it. “Pedro’s parents moved into the home, and two years later we built a home for ourselves on the property. We lived with Pedro’s parents while we built our house.”

During that time, Amelia’s brother-in-law, Armando, worked at Domaine Chandon. The young enologist brokered a deal with the sparkling wine estate that would make it possible for his family to build up its own business. Chandon agreed to plant the Ceja property and required payment only after the vineyard began bearing grapes three years later. In return, the Cejas pledged to sell their grapes exclusively to Chandon. “It was very generous of Chandon,” Amelia states. “We believe in good karma. We have always worked hard, and many people have been helpful to us. But we still had to keep our day jobs to pay the bills.”

After seven years, the Cejas began to see a profit off their vines. In the early 1990s, Armando found another 20 acres to purchase and plant. “We had to borrow money,” Amelia says, “but we had the cash flow to support the loan.” Soon afterward, an eight-acre purchase followed. The family continued to sell its grapes to Domaine Chandon as well as to other new clients in the area.

Then, in 1997, the Cejas closed on a 65-acre parcel in Sonoma Valley. Fittingly, it lies very close to some of the county’s earliest vineyards, planted by Mexico’s General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo in the mid-19th century. The vineyard began bearing a commercial crop in 2001 and brought the family’s total holdings to 113 acres.

“Whatever it’s worth,” Amelia comments, “it’s worth more than money. It represents our journey, our history and our passion. We received our vision from our parents, and that can’t be quantified. It is priceless.”

In 1998, Armando added the title of winemaker to his vineyard manager moniker. Ceja Vineyards’ first wines are 1998 and 1999 vintages of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Merlot. The winery will release a Cabernet Sauvignon later this year.