

# A celebration of life at Ceja Vineyards in Carneros

By Annette Hanami, Napa Valley Insider Examiner - April 16, 2010

Arriving at Ceja Vineyards on a cool spring morning, one is struck by the impeccable landscaping – just one of many signs that the Cejas take pride in their work. Ceja was founded by Amelia and Pedro Ceja, Pedro's brother and winemaker Armando Ceja, and his wife Martha. Ceja produces about 10,000 cases of wine a year from 115 acres of prized vineyards in Carneros and Sonoma Coast that reflect both the cooler terroir of these appellations and their own personal styles.



The wines are elegant, medium-bodied and show fine restraint with a judicious use of new oak. The 2007 Ceja Carneros Chardonnay shows such finesse with clear pear and melon flavors, rich mouthfeel, elegant acidity and long finish. The 2006 Ceja reds - the Carneros Pinot Noir, Carneros Merlot and Sonoma Coast Syrah - show purity of fruit and freshness from the cooler climates. Their Merlot would make anyone a fan again. The 2005 Ceja Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon shows black currant and plum fruit, balanced acidity and medium body. All the Ceja reds have an approachable structure, with supple, round tannins that come from extended maceration and long ageing of 20 months and up to 30 months for the cabernet. According to Amelia, they release their wines when they are 'ready to drink.' The combination of the medium body, fresh acidity and softer tannin structure of the reds make them ideal partners with any food, but particularly with spicy Mexican fare.

The quality of their wines have attracted a loyal following. On a mid-week visit, the tasting room in Carneros which is only open by appointment, was continuously filled with visitors who were greeted warmly by family members. It was clear that the people who were there, really wanted to be there. The quality of their wines and their path to success is rooted in pride of work, a life philosophy ingrained in them by their parents from their childhoods.



Amelia and Armando Ceja met in the vineyards at Robert Mondavi Winery when Amelia was 12 years old, where both fathers were working at the time. Both fathers were migrant workers from Mexico in the 1950's and 1960's, following the annual harvests on the West Coast from Coachella in the south with melons and working their way up north to Oregon where they would finish the year with pears – then returning to Mexico for the winter. Both men's dreams however, was to bring their families to the Napa Valley which they were able to do in 1967, coincidentally at the same time.

While both sets of parents never went to school, they were very focused on making sure their children received

a good education as a path to mobility. Amelia, now President of Ceja Vineyards, spent part of her high school years at prep school in Mexico, where she gained a broader and deeper appreciation for her culture as she traveled throughout the country and learned about Mexico's great ancient civilization. Amelia continued to work in the vineyards during the summers, embracing the work and using the opportunity to learn about viticulture. When Amelia refers back to her life experiences, she speaks of working in the vineyards with as much weight as finishing at the top of her class in school. After all, her parents told her at an early age that it doesn't matter if you are a street sweeper or a company president, if you take pride in your work and do it well, you will be successful. Amelia, Pedro and Armando went on to study at the University of California and began successful careers when the opportunity arose to buy land in Carneros with Pedro's parents in 1983. They planted their first vines in 1986 with the first vintage in 1988.

The path to success was not without challenges. Amelia speaks about being one of the only students to volunteer to give an oral presentation on the Civil War when she was in 7th grade, only three months after having arrived in the Napa Valley, and having a fellow student make fun of her accent. Or the great difficulties they had at the height of the 80's recession when Pedro's parents lost their jobs and they struggled to make mortgage payments, putting the Carneros land up for sale – fortuitously without any buyers. But they persevered together and made it through the hard times. For the Cejas, small successes became larger ones, and then success became a way of life.



Today, the Cejas continue to move forward. In 2008 they opened a tasting room in Downtown Napa on First Street and in a few weeks will open a café just a few doors down called Bistro Sabor. They are also finalizing plans to build a new 26,000 square foot winery of Hispanic design in Carneros with target completion in 2011. The Cejas adult children Dahlia and Ariel are actively involved in the business, bringing new ideas and technology to the fore.

The images of bells, representing celebration and their Mexican culture, are prominent throughout the impeccable landscaping, in the interior décor and on the label of the bottle, very fitting as the Cejas celebrate their lives in the vineyards by crafting beautiful wines.