

Ceja honorary co-chair of 'Three Tenors' concert

By Jack Heeger, Napa Valley Register - June 7, 2004

Amelia Morán Ceja is a woman who is always on the move. When she's not on the road selling Ceja Vineyards wines, she's in her office doing the multitude of tasks that a winery executive must do. She's also a chef, preparing Mexican dishes for visiting dignitaries and for friends whom she frequently entertains at home.

And even with all that, she finds time to get involved in public service, the latest effort being her involvement in Armonia, the organization that will present "Three Tenors and a Soprano de Mexico" at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church June 12.

This is the third year the three world-renowned tenors, Marco Antonio Labastida, José Medina and Eduardo Rosada will come to Napa to present a concert of classical arias, and popular romantic and folk songs to support the St. John's youth group programs. This year mezzo soprano Mónica Ábrego will join the event, an afternoon concert followed by a gala dinner and auction. "The Return of The Three Mexican Tenors and a Soprano!" marks the launching of Armonia, which Father Gordon Khalil, pastor of St. John's, hopes will expand as a celebration of the rich cultural diversity in the valley.



Between trips recently, Ceja met with Three Tenors event committee chair Fran Abbott and Father Khalil, of St. John's, who asked her to accept an honorary co-chair position for Armonia, along with Margrit Biever Mondavi and Napa Mayor Ed Henderson.

"I couldn't go when they (The Three Tenors) were here last year because I was traveling," she said. "So when they asked me, I jumped at the chance to be involved. My kids attended St. John's Catholic School, and I've always been interested in education. This event benefits youth programs in Napa County, and at Ceja Vineyards, we support organizations that nurture and educate the next generation in our community."

She added that the concert would showcase part of the Mexican culture that few know -- "We have a very rich tradition of music in Mexico."

Her first assignment came in the form of a request to see if she could line up Roberta Gonzales, the weather person at KPIX to serve as mistress of ceremonies. "I know her," Amelia said, "so it was easy to just pick up the phone and call her."

Ceja Vineyards is one of the event's wine sponsors, and Amelia has contacted Hispanic media with whom she has worked to arrange coverage. She also spoke at the church on Mother's Day, urging congregates to either attend the concert, volunteer to help or support it financially.

She is enthusiastic about her involvement with Armonia because it supports the St. John's youth outreach programs, which now serves more than 500 young people. According to Armonia's Web site, youths in grades 6 through 12 are included, regardless of their religion or whether they are English- or Spanish-speaking.

She relates to youngsters

Amelia can relate to youngsters of that age and what having an opportunity can mean to them.

She was born in a small village, Las Flores (The Flowers) in the state of Jalisco in Mexico. "We only had about 50 people," she recalled, "and we had no electricity or running water, and we rode donkeys to the river where we washed the clothes."

Her mother and grandmother never went to school, but they placed great emphasis on education for Amelia and her sister and brother. "All we had was a one-room school, with one teacher," she said. "I went there until the sixth grade."

Amelia's father had worked as a mechanic for a Napa Valley winery since the late 1950s, and in 1967, when she was 12, he brought the family to Rutherford where they lived in a small house just north of the Grange building in Rutherford.

"The next day I was in school," she recalled. "Imagine the culture shock. I was one of only a handful of kids who didn't speak English." That was in junior high school in St. Helena, and it was there that she met a boy who was to become her future husband, Pedro Ceja.

"A teacher, Mrs. McDonald, took me under her wing. I already knew math from that little one-room schoolhouse in Jalisco, and by the time the first year ended, I was in the most challenging class," she said, adding that she learned English very quickly.

In the eighth grade she did a paper on the Civil War, and could receive extra credit if she read it in class. "I've never been shy," she said. "I read it." She credits that with helping her develop her love of history.

But it was also then that she received her first taste of prejudice. "One boy in the class made fun of my accent," she said. "It hurt. But it also made me even more determined to succeed. That was one of the most challenging moments in my life. It's hard to have someone criticize you. You can go climb in bed and give up, or you can move on." She moved on.

Because she arrived in Rutherford at harvest time, her father invited her to go into the vineyard and pick grapes. "The smell of harvest -- I just fell in love with it," she said. "I fell in love with the possibility of working in the wine industry, and I knew that someday I'd be part of it."

Return to Mexico

Two years later another turning point arose in Amelia's life. Her parents asked her if she wanted to return to Mexico to attend a special boarding school, which was one of the top-rated schools in Mexico. "Girls from every state (in Mexico) were there, and I was invited to go to their homes on weekends," she said. "It gave me a chance to explore our (Mexican) culture, and I learned the cuisine of Mexico. I also learned French. I had led a sheltered life in that little village (where she grew up), but here's this school that provided growth," she said. After two years there, when she was 16, she returned to Napa Valley and attended Justin Siena High School. "I saw Pedro periodically," she said, although he was attending St. Helena High. "He had grown tall and handsome."

After graduation, she moved to San Diego to attend UC San Diego where she studied literature and history. But she returned to Napa Valley for her first Christmas vacation and learned how to prune vines. "I worked in the vineyard during the summers, and I learned viticultural practices," she said. "I got to know Pedro more, because he and Armando (Pedro's brother) were also working in the vineyards."

Amelia lived off campus with some friends, and she became the "house cook" for her roommates. "I made something and we paired it with wine." That was the start of her interest in matching food and wine.

Her attraction to food continued while she worked as a server in top restaurants in La Jolla and Del Mar, and after she graduated, she took a job at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Palm Springs as a nutritionist, making up a menu for each patient individually.

Meanwhile, Pedro was studying engineering and they had started "seeing each other a lot," she said. In 1980 they were married.

After their first child, Navek, was born, they started thinking how they could get into the vineyard business. Pedro's mother was driving through Carneros, saw a "Vineyard for Sale" sign, the family (Pedro and Amelia, Pedro's parents and Armando) jointly qualified for a loan, and the 15-acre vineyard was theirs. Over the years they added more acreage and today they own 113 acres and have long-term leases on about 20 additional acres.

Raises three children

During all this time she managed to raise three children: Navek, now 23, who is attending UC Davis and majoring in communications; Ariel, 21, who is studying film production at Occidental College in Los Angeles; and Dahlia, 19, a business and marketing student at UC San Francisco.

They sold their grapes to some of the top wineries in Napa Valley, but in 1998 they officially decided to create their own label. Armando had been making wine for the family's own consumption since 1983, so the decision meant that it would now be done commercially. Total production under the Ceja Vineyards label in 1998 was 750 cases -- today it is around 5,000 cases.

"We needed someone to run the company," she said. "Armando was taking care of the vineyards and was the winemaker, and Pedro was working, so if I hadn't stepped in, nothing would have happened. I started learning everything I needed to know."

She assumed the title of president, becoming the first Hispanic woman to head a winery in the United States. But the title doesn't match the job description: she also handles marketing, sales, public relations, compliance, shipping, and just about every other duty except production, which is handled by Armando. Although Pedro still works full-time at his engineering job ("My job pays the expenses so we can keep on making wine," he laughed), he helps Armando with production and assists Amelia with marketing.

"We had to look at ourselves and ask, 'For a new brand, what makes us different?' and we decided to put emphasis on pairing food and wine," Amelia said. "We have a style of wine to complement all kinds of food." There's no better way to show how wine and food complement each other than to serve them together, and Amelia does just that for visiting distributors, retailers and writers, right in the Cejas' home.

She cooks mostly Mexican food, then pairs one of the Ceja varietals (pinot noir, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, syrah and chardonnay) with each of the various dishes. Invariably, the visitor places an order before leaving.

Lots of time on the road

Amelia also spends considerable time on the road. "I've been out as much as 10 days a month this year," she said. She goes into a new market by calling on a key columnist or wine writer to tell the family's story and pour the wines, then meets with a distributor and some retailers. In 2002 she opened markets in Florida, North Carolina and Hawaii; in 2003 it was Colorado, Pennsylvania and Illinois; and in 2004 "now it's like gangbusters," she said.

She recently hired an office manager, Debbie Re, so "that allows me to go out and meet with distributors. I do staff tastings for them, and if we have the time, I do it with food along with the wine," she said.

When she's not traveling or taking care of winery business, she gives as much time as she can to the community. She sits on the board of directors of the Napa Chamber of Commerce and the Napa County Library Foundation, and is involved in Peer Support and Summer Search, organizations that assist young people.

She also became involved with Napa Valley Vintners and last year hosted one of the vineyard visits. She's on a committee to select NVV scholarship winners, and last year teamed with two other vintners to offer a lot at the Wine Auction. This year Ceja participated in five auction lots.

And when she's not doing any of the above, she's usually found in her kitchen. "I learned to love cooking from my mother and grandmother," Amelia said. "Everything we ate (in Las Flores) came from our garden, and all the meat and chicken came from the farm."

Breakfast took two hours to make

When she was growing up, she said cooking took much longer than it does today. "We had to start a fire, and make tortillas from scratch," she said. "We started breakfast at 5:30 (a.m.) and it took to 7:30 to make breakfast."

She has been featured in numerous articles and television shows, pairing wine with her own recipes for Mexican dishes, and she's planning to publish a cookbook, "Amelia's Kitchen." She has two publishers interested. "It will have original recipes, and many of them are offshoots of my grandmother's recipes," she said.

"My parents and grandparents were a big inspiration to me," Amelia said. She gives this advice to others: "You can always learn. Take pride (in) and love what you do. What matters is the effort you put into it. Do your best." She and Pedro became American citizens in the late 1980s. "We wanted to vote," she said. "We take that right very seriously," additional advice that she passes along.

"People respond to a story, and we are a real story -- the American dream. I hope that we're inspiring others to go beyond their expectations," she said. "I hope they think, 'If she can do it, so can I.'"