

On Wine | Cultural diversity comes to winemaking

By Deborah Scoblionkov, Philadelphia Inquirer - April 01, 2004

A generation ago, many Americans viewed wine as the purview of pompous white guys in tuxedos sipping claret from crystal glasses. The only ethnic market for wine was Italian immigrants. African Americans and Hispanics were invisible to the wine world.

Today the wine landscape is a lot more colorful. Two wonderful young wineries that reflect this new multicultural diversity are Vision Cellars and Ceja Vineyards.

Ceja (SAY-hah) Vineyards is another dream made real. The Ceja family moved to California's wine country from Mexico in the 1960s to work in the vineyards. They now own 113 acres in the state's premier wine regions, including Napa and the Sonoma Coast.

In 1983, Pablo and Juanita Ceja and two of their 10 children, Pedro and Armando, bought 15 acres in the Carneros region of Sonoma County. Carneros wasn't seen as prime wine grape-growing land at the time, but the Cejas knew that its cool maritime climate and shallow clay loam were ideal for the burgundian grape varieties of pinot noir and chardonnay.

Pedro Ceja's wife, Amelia Morán Ceja, 48, is president of Ceja Vineyards - the first Mexican American woman to head a winery.

"The wine industry has been elitist," Amelia Ceja said during a recent visit to Philadelphia. "The time has gone for the industry to be patronizing."

Changing this attitude, she hopes, will be her family's contribution to the industry.

"There would not be a wine industry in this country without the Mexican labor force," she said. "In our culture, everything revolves around the dinner table, and we can contribute to the customer base at the family table." The industry has traditionally ignored pairing wines with Mexican food, Ceja said. So she has written a wine-friendly Mexican cookbook, tentatively titled Amelia's Kitchen, that may be published as early as this fall.

Ceja Vineyards sells 90 percent of its grapes to other wineries, including Kendall-Jackson, Rombauer and Mumm Napa. Those contracts subsidize the family's winery.

"Otherwise, we couldn't afford to enter this business. We don't have millions of dollars," Ceja said, "but we do have the best ingredients."



The winery's logo is a bell ("the universal symbol of the celebration of life and independence," Ceja said). Its motto is "Vinum, cantus, amor," which means "Wine, song, love," or, as Ceja loosely translates it, "Wine, sex and rock-and-roll."

"When you have a vision and the support from your family, dreams really do come true," Ceja said. "We're a testament to that."

Ceja Vineyards wines are exceptionally well-balanced. The 2000 Carneros Chardonnay (\$32) is a rich, gorgeous, multidimensional wine that combines oak aromas, nutty flavor, a creamy texture, and crisp, bright fruit with earthy mineral notes.

The 2001 Carneros Pinot Noir (\$40) is round and earthy, with hints of delicate rose petal, violet and hibiscus.

The 1999 Carneros Merlot (\$33) is sharp, intense and tannic; meaty and earthy with high acidity.

The 2000 Napa Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40) is beautifully balanced and concentrated, with intense fruit and sweet chocolate-covered-cherry flavors.

Ceja Vineyards also makes a Vino de Casa in both white and red. The 2002 white is a sassy, spicy blend of pinot gris (55 percent), chardonnay (43 percent), and viognier (2 percent). The 2001 red is a gutsy blend of merlot (60 percent), pinot noir (30 percent), and syrah (10 percent). Each sells for \$20.