

# Harvest 2002: As crush begins, workers dream of a Wine Country career

By Linda Murphy, San Francisco Chronicle - August 28, 2002

They come from Michoacan, Jalisco and Zacatecas, from tiny farming villages like Haro, Las Flores and Aguililla, where they grow corn, beans and fruit and get barely enough compensation to make ends meet.

With little money, few possessions, limited English language skills and no guarantees, they come to the vineyards of Northern California, full of determination and rich with the hope that they will find jobs and build a comfortable life for their families.

The dream begins this week for many of the estimated 7,500 workers, a vast majority of them Latino, who will be needed to harvest North Coast wine grapes between now and early November. They will go where few others are willing to go, to the steep Wine Country hillsides and hot valley floors, crouching under vines to cut off grape clusters with sharp, curved knives, paid by the bucket.

It's the first step in what the workers hope will become the fulfillment of a grander vision, and the Ceja family has cleared the path.

## The Cejas

Ceja means "eyebrow" in Spanish, and Amelia, Pedro, Martha and Armando Ceja lifted more than a few brows when they said they wanted to buy vineyard property in Napa Valley. Considering the high cost of land, the odds were slim, yet in 1983 the Cejas pooled their money with their parents and invested in less expensive land in Napa's Los Carneros region, before it became widely recognized as a premium growing area. With no money to buy vines, the Cejas traded future grape production to Domaine Chandon for vines, and planted their Vineyard del Sol in 1986.

Today, the Cejas -- Ceja Vineyards president Amelia, vice president Martha, winemaker Armando and vineyard manager Pedro -- own four vineyards totaling 113 acres in Napa and Sonoma, and produce one of the most talked-about new wine brands. The family's enthusiasm and visibility have helped, but it's the superb quality and food-friendliness of the wines that have Ceja faring well against tough competition.

The current releases -- 1999 Napa Carneros Chardonnay (\$30), 1999 Sonoma Carneros Pinot Noir (\$38) and 1999 Sonoma Carneros Merlot (\$32) -- are lush yet lively, with focused varietal character not masked by overly toasty oak or buttery flavors and aromas. The complex and delicious house red blend, the 1999 Vino de Casa from Napa Valley, is a terrific value at \$18, and a 2000 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$38) is due early next year. With production at 1,800 cases, the family cannot keep up with the demand, which has come mostly from restaurants, including early supporter Cindy Pawlcyn of Miramonte in St. Helena.



The Cejas' journey from Mexico to Miramonte's wine list took some 30 years. Amelia Moran and brothers Pedro and Armando Ceja left their small towns in Jalisco and Michoacan, respectively, with their farming families to relocate in Napa Valley in 1967. Amelia would marry Pedro, and Armando would wed Martha, the daughter of immigrants from Jalisco.

The families worked in vineyards and wineries, and the kids pursued education at the urging of their parents. Pedro, 46, earned a degree in engineering and took a job in the Bay Area, where he and Amelia, 47, moved with their young family. Armando's UC Davis degree in enology led to a job at Domaine Chandon and his own vineyard consulting business. When the Cejas purchased their Carneros property, Pedro and Amelia returned to Napa pitch in.

As children, "The vineyards became our playgrounds," says Armando, 42. "We worked in them, too. It got into our blood, it became second nature, and it led us to having our own vineyards."

"In the end," adds Pedro, "it has been a very simple and rewarding life, working a piece of land that is ours. It's a special and wonderful experience."

Amelia, the sales and promotional energy of the company, hopes the Cejas' success will serve as an example for other Latinos.

"We had hardships and disappointments, but it's difficult to remember them clearly," she says. "We see them as part of our learning experience, which made us stronger and defined who we are today. We have been taught that education and ethics open doors, and we found support and guidance from so many wonderful people."

The bell icon on the Ceja label represents the church bells that ring in their native Mexico, calling town inhabitants to worship, weddings and funerals. Amelia and Pedro Ceja also have a bronze bell in their home, inscribed, "Vinum, Cantus, Amor." Wine, song, love. "It represents who we are and where we have been," Amelia says.