

Mexican American Winery: A conversation with Amelia Morán Ceja

"We are the present and the future of the wine industry"

By Alan Goldfarb, St. Helena Star - July 14, 2005

She's a five-foot tall colossus of wit, strength, enthusiasm and intelligence. But most of all, Amelia Morán Ceja possesses in her diminutive body enough energy to power the electric grid of the entire Napa Valley.

The figurehead of one of the most successful and growing number of Mexican-American-owned wineries in California, Morán Ceja lights up a room, and then makes one pay attention. But before you can get a word in, she has taken you from there to here -- and back -- into her world, which has transcended the familiar saga of immigrant poverty to fearless, unabashed triumph.

In fact, "fearless" is a word that perhaps best describes Morán Ceja.

She uses the adjective liberally, peppering her responses and pronouncements with it numerous times during a four-hour conversation in the Carneros home that will soon become the office and hospitality center of Ceja Vineyards.

Own 113 acres of vineyard

During the discussion -- which included her husband Pedro, who helped her prepare a lunch that included a cactus salad and naturally, their wines -- Morán Ceja talked about her beginnings in the Napa Valley, and that of her family, and how it is that refugees from Mexico came to own 113 acres of vineyard and a wine brand.

One of about a dozen such families now in California, she doesn't hesitate a moment to proclaim that Ceja Vineyards, as well as other Mexican-American-owned wineries, "are the present and the future of the wine industry."

Pedro Ceja added, "What is good for Ceja is good for the industry. We're in a position to bring in a whole new segment of the population. The entire industry benefits."

Have to work harder

Since the day 38 years ago, when she was 12 years old and was laughed at in class for her accent, Morán Ceja knew, "I would always have an accent and I would have to work harder.

"I'm fortunate, and I feel confident about myself."

One quickly realizes that she is not being boastful at all -- just assertive and truthful. Especially after she's asked, "Do you ever feel that you don't belong here?"



"Not anymore," she says succinctly, admitting that "I'm definitely not quiet (but) I'm a citizen of the world and I don't care if people like me or not. I am who I am. I've proven myself, and to my family, through lots of challenges.

"We're part of a wonderful culture, but we've re-evolved from what we learned from our parents."

Deep roots in valley

Her husband, whom she first met while picking Merlot at the Robert Mondavi Winery in 1967 -- the year that both families coincidentally settled in the Napa Valley for good from Michoacán and Jalisco, respectively -- surmises that the Moráns and the Cejas "are well-vested in the valley. Our roots go deeper than what's in the bottle."

What's in the bottle -- all 60,000 of them -- comes from the family's own vineyards that are planted in the Carneros, in both Napa and Sonoma counties, and on the Silverado Trail south of the Stags Leap District, as well as on the Sonoma Coast near Petaluma.

The wines, which were first released in 2001, are made at MacRostie Winery in Sonoma by Pedro's brother Armando. There are plans for a winery, but that is most likely a couple of years from coming to fruition.

To which Pedro Ceja, a strapping man of good humor, and who is an electrical engineer says, "If you work hard, the world will conspire to do it."

A really cool family

"Conspire" in its most positive meaning, seems to be another of those words upon which the Ceja family relies. As when Morán Ceja says with a laugh, "We're two years ahead of our business model, we have a great spokesperson (her) and we have a real cool family.

"Everyone's conspiring to help us. These wines have lineage with three generations having touched them."

The work ethic of all immigrants, she adds, "is parallel to none because you left everything you loved, behind. The U.S. is a magnet for immigrants -- and that's its strength. When people congregate here, they bring their strengths (because) you have to want something so much better than what you left."

Morán Ceja, who insists she sleeps only four or five hours a night because "sometimes I think I'm going to miss something," believes her brand has almost "arrived."

Everyone can relate

"You know when you know when you're almost there?" she asks rhetorically. "We represent all that is great about the wine industry. Our faces are different and everyone can relate to what we went through.

"We're (also) fearless about how we present our wines. But we're non-threatening. We are embracing, and in return, people embrace us. We're unifying. We bring culture and people together. That's what wine is all about, isn't it?"

She said that what she and her family have done "is just not about Ceja." She predicts that over the next five years, "you're going to see at least eight more Mexican-Americans who are going to release their wines throughout California."

Nonetheless, as far as Ceja Vineyards is concerned, "We've proven we're business-savvy and that it's not true that unless you have deep pockets, you can't penetrate (the business). We're opening up the possibilities."

Fearlessly and with great confidence.