

M I C H A U D V I N E Y A R D



MICHAEL MICHAUD LOOKS BACK ON 25 YEARS OF WINEMAKING

October 2003 - Michael Michaud has more experience in making wine from the mountainous Chalone Appellation than anyone. In fact, his relationship with the region spans 25 years and encompasses nearly all the modern history of winemaking there.

Before it achieved status as an official American Viticultural Area (AVA) on July 14, 1982, the remote section of Monterey County east of the Salinas Valley was best known for the Pinnacles National Monument Park, a towering range of crags and peaks formed by the ancient collision and subsequent subduction of the Pacific Plate by the North American tectonic plate.

A rare combination of decomposed granite from the North American plate and limestone created from eons of marine deposits is found in the area's soil, perfect for wine grapes, providing ideal drainage to the roots and imparting mineral flavors to the fruit.

Following, Michael looks back on 25 years of harvests, successes, setbacks, challenges, milestones and life.

1979

Michael Michaud graduates from UC Davis with a BS degree in Chemistry. He asks friend and fellow classmate Randall Graham if he has any leads on jobs. Graham refers him to Richard Graff. Michael is offered and takes a job as assistant winemaker at Chalone Winery under winemaker Peter Graff, and owner Richard Graff. Reasoning that real experience is worth more than a degree, he leaves UC Davis for Chalone that September with 98% of his enology course work completed.

The remote Chalone Winery is at the time a freewheeling bastion of oenological exploration. It is a property completely off the PG&E electrical grid, with no telephone and without a dependable water supply. Dick Graff had chosen the site for its ability to produce complex, mineral wines in the style of great Burgundies. Graff spares no effort in pursuing that style at Chalone and Michael is in his element. He experiences his first harvest, and falls in love with the dry, rugged landscape and the cooling fogs that spill in from Monterey Bay. He becomes aware of the unique microclimate's affect on the grapes and learns first-hand how Graff's Burgundian winemaking techniques bring out the finest qualities in them.

1980

The season brings only a small harvest of very concentrated fruit. At the time Chalone has 110 planted acres of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc and Chenin Blanc grapes. Michael becomes so taken with the region, he searches and finds to buy a small 10-acre parcel of land with a decrepit house on it.

1981

With a group of friends that includes Professor Ann Noble of UC Davis, Michael plants the first vines of his own at Michaud Vineyard; Pinot Blanc, from cuttings of the Chalone 1946 planting.

1982

The Chalone Appellation receives official designation as an American Viticultural Area (AVA). Favorable weather graces the growing season that year yielding a very good quality harvest. Michael begins taking over more of the winemaking duties. Chalone wines continue to win acclaim and popularity. Severe storms blow away a two-hole outhouse at Michaud Vineyard.

A neighbor decides to close road access on his side of the fence, forcing Michael to use an all terrain cycle to transport groceries and propane to his remote vineyard setting. Despite the isolation, Michael purchases another 40 acres adjacent to the first 10-acre parcel.

1983

Michael is appointed winemaker by Dick Graff. It's a wet year at the Pinnacles. A large Chalone harvest yields better than expected fruit with good aging potential. Winter storms wash out a road crossing at Lopez Canyon making it necessary to erect a temporary bridge of three 2x12s to span the 10x15 foot hole in the road to Michael's property. In the spring, after major road repairs, continued rains wash out Michael's driveway. A '58 Buick is buried to stop the erosion.

1984

Michael is appointed general manager of Chalone in addition to his duties as winemaker. In his new position, he supervises the construction of Chalone's wine caves that summer. Chalone becomes a publicly traded company. Autumn brings a small harvest after a cool growing season. Michael meets his future wife, Carol Hastings, at the Monterey Wine Festival. At his vineyard, Michael clears and rips 15 additional acres in preparation for planting more vineyards. A huge rattlesnake is found with its front half stuck deep in a gopher hole. When it becomes available, Michael makes the decision to purchase another 217 acres of adjacent land.

1985

This year, the second year of a drought, brings a good harvest. Jean Louis Chave works the harvest at Chalone Vineyard. Four raccoons try to commandeer Michael's pick-up truck while he's using a public phone at the Pinnacles National Monument Park.

1986

The first power lines come to the Chalone Appellation. Prior to that electricity had come from six generators. Chalone brings in power and telephone service by stringing 8 miles of wire and finally replaces the radio telephone that was used since the early '70s. Michael plants an additional 5 acres of his own vineyard with the venerable Wente Chardonnay clone from the old Chalone vines first planted there in 1946.

1987

The growing season was the driest in Michaud's entire 25-year experience in the appellation. Only 7 inches of rain fell, the usual average annual rainfall is approximately 12 inches. Fortunately, in the spring of '87, a permanent 8" water main, 8 miles long is completed bringing irrigation water from the Salinas Valley to the Chalone Appellation. At Michaud Vineyard, Michael gets telephone service by installing, along the property's west fence line 1.5 miles of wire, which was donated by an elderly resident of nearby Bitterwater.

1988

Michaud plants 5 more acres of Chardonnay at his vineyard, again from the Wente clone. Due to the remote location and absence of phylloxera in the region, Michaud is able to plant the Chardonnay on its own roots, a technique not commonly used since the 1880s. Vincent LeFlave visits Michaud Vineyard, hiking to the top of the hill to introduce himself to the vineyard workers. Robert Parker cites the Chalone Chardonnays the "Montrachet of California Chardonnay" in a review.

1989

The isolated location of the Chalone Appellation made practical a long-held dream of Michaud's; he gets his pilot's license. Michael and Carol are married on June 4 in Bovernier, Switzerland, his father's birthplace. This year was one of the hottest in memory with temperatures commonly above 105° and peaking at 117°. The heat brought on a very quick harvest. What normally could stretch on for weeks was done in just 10 days. Edrulfo Agustin joins Michaud Vineyard as its first employee. Edrulfo oversees all day-to-day vineyard operations. He is especially talented in the training of young vines and grafting.

1990

Adequate rainfall, the new source of water and favorable weather make 1990 a great vintage for the Chalone Appellation. Michaud plants 3 more acres of Chardonnay on his own vineyard as well as 1 acre of Viognier and a .6 acres of St. George root stock in preparation for later grafting.

1991

Michael's son Jamie is born in San Francisco on April 17. On October 17, Michael's Australian Shepherd dog, Wanda, is born. Michael sells his Chardonnay grapes to Chalone and they are included in the Reserve Blend. For Chalone, the year brings a good vintage but not as expressive as the previous year.

1992

Michaud Vineyard's first Sangiovese is grafted onto the St. George root stock planted in 1990. Winter storms again wash out the road crossing at Lopez Canyon. Perfect spring weather sets a record sized harvest at Chalone.

1993

Michael builds a 6-inch diameter water line to Michaud Vineyard, connecting his water service to the Chalone Vineyard's pipeline. A very small harvest yields excellent quality. 10 years later the Chalone Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are drinking beautifully.

1994

Michael and Garlin Ivy, a retired PG&E lineman, build 1.5 miles of power line over the rugged terrain to connect Michaud Vineyard to electrical service. Michael sells half interest in his 1955 Cessna 180 to Jack Chambers, former vice president of Chalone and founder of Chambers & Chambers Wine Distributors in San Francisco, to pay for the power lines.

1995

Mowing weeds on the side of remote Highway 46, Cal Trans accidentally starts a grass fire that burns more than 2000 acres into the Pinnacles National Monument. A lot of birds displaced by the fire relocate to Michaud Vineyard and console themselves by eating grapes. Michael sells a few tons of Chardonnay grapes to Testarossa.

1996

Noticing the great increase in the popularity of Pinot Noir, and with the income from his vineyard's crop, Michael decides to begin planting Pinot Noir, his favorite grape. Ideal weather yields an excellent harvest for Pinot Noir.

1997

The Lopez crossing washes out again. Also washed out by winter rain is the dam below, causing a 25-foot high, 65 foot wide wall of water to flow down the canyon and wash away part of the Michaud Vineyard telephone line. The year provides a bountiful harvest of quality Chardonnay. The first 6 barrels of Michaud Vineyard Chardonnay are produced. Michael continues planting Pinot Noir. For some reason, maybe due to heavy rain, this is the year of the tarantula. They seem to be everywhere.

1998

Michael leaves Chalone to work full-time developing his own wine. Early in the year, Dick Graff dies while trying to make an emergency landing at Salinas Airport. It is the coldest, wettest growing season in years. Despite the challenge, his first wine proves to be of excellent quality, a rich, opulent vintage. Carl Doumani offers Michael use of his new winery, Quixote, for the '98 vintage.

1999

Drier and warmer than 1998 but still cool, the year produces a rich, complex Chardonnay. Michael continues to expand his vineyard, planting another 5 acres of Pinot Noir and 2 acres of Syrah. He commissions designer Chuck House to design wine labels, which draw upon the natural colors from the lichens found on the area's rocks and trees.

2000

The first bottles of Michaud Vineyard wine, the 1997 and 1998 Chardonnay, go on sale. That year Michaud develops an additional 10 acres of land for eventual planting. The growing season is more normal and a very good vintage is harvested.

2001

Michael plants another acre of Pinot Noir, just under an acre of Marsanne and half an acre of Syrah.

2002

An additional half-acre of Pinot Noir is planted while sales begin of the 2001 Syrah, the 2000 Pinot Noir, and the 1999 Sangiovese. The Sangiovese sells out in two weeks and the 2000 Sangiovese is released. Joanie Horen joins Michaud Vineyard assisting with business administration, finance and sales support.

2003

Thomas Brocker joins Michaud Vineyard as a winegrowing assistant working both in the vineyard and at the winery. The 2001 Pinot Noir is released. A very cool spring results in late bud break. The growing season is punctuated by alternating hot and cool weather. Michael and Carol travel to the Mosel region in Germany in May, and notice that the German vines are already several inches ahead of their vines. In France, Burgundy has the earliest harvest since the 1800s. In September, Michaud begins his 25th harvest in the Chalone Appellation, with harvest of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir continuing into October at Michaud Vineyard.