

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

MICHAUD VINEYARD AND THE CHALONE APPELLATION

“Our goal is to produce pleasurable and inviting, world-class wines that communicate the unique qualities of the Chalone Appellation”

- Michael Michaud.

In the world of wine, the land below Chalone Peak in Monterey County’s Gabilan range is universally respected for beautiful Chardonnays made there in the crisp, clean style of Burgundy. It was a Frenchman, Curtis Tamm, who planted the first documented vineyard in the region in 1919. William Silvear planted Chalone Vineyard, first in the mid ‘20s and then again after Prohibition in the mid-‘40s. Richard Graff bought the property in the late ‘60s. Under the visionary leadership of the charismatic Graff, Chalone Vineyard, by the late 1980s had arguably established the benchmark for California Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The influential Robert Parker deemed Chalone the “the Montrachet of California.” The winemaker—Michael Michaud.

Michael Michaud became assistant winemaker at Chalone Vineyards in 1979, and winemaker in 1983. He was living in the windswept farm town of Soledad 10 miles down the mountain from the winery in the Salinas Valley. No restaurants, no theaters. “Even on calm days Soledad is windy,” jokes Michael, “and there are no calm days.”

By chance he noticed a property for sale just 3 miles from the Chalone Vineyard; 10 acres, an old house and most importantly, an owner willing to finance. The \$350 per acre price was a stretch but Michael saw in the wild chaparral the same thing Curtis Tamm had more than a century before—an ideal terroir for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

It is said that Tamm searched the hills with a vial of acid, in order to test the soil for limestone. It is rare in the United States that limestone occurs in areas suitable for vineyards. Limestone is a key component in the mineral flavors of great Burgundies and it is because of the region’s dramatic geologic history that limestone occurs in today’s Gabilan mountains. The Chalone Appellation sits adjacent to the San Andreas Fault, the tectonic meeting of the North American Plate and the Pacific Plate. The great Pacific Plate that is west of the fault line was once and for eons the bed of the ocean. Countless generations of sea life formed a marine sediment that eventually compacted and became limestone, only to be thrust above the surface of the ocean by the great force of the grinding plates. The limestone combined with granite from the North American plate to form the ideal soil type; well-drained decomposed granite and limestone with some clay.

Michael knew that the soil, combined with cooling Pacific Ocean fogs, 300 or more sunny days a year, less than 12 inches of rainfall annually and an ideal elevation of 1500 feet, made for a textbook perfect vineyard site. But with serious obstacles. The place was even more remote than Chalone Vineyard. That was miles from Soledad and Soledad was miles from anywhere. While he was gathering awards and accolades for his wines at Chalone, he worked nights and weekends, when he could, on his own place.

“The first planting was the Pinot Blanc in ‘81,” Michael recalls, “about a third of an acre. Then about 13 acres of Chardonnay over 4 years. I kept adding as I went, so now we also have Sangiovese, Pinot Noir, Syrah and a little Marsanne. Basically, I’m making the wines I like to drink.”

By 1998, he decided to devote his full attention to what is now 28 acres of vineyard planted on almost 267 acres of land he gradually acquired. For more than 17 years the wines he made at Chalone Vineyards were awarded countless honors; *Wine Spectator* “Cellar Selections”, point scores of 90 and higher, inclusion in Jim Laube’s “Great Chardonnays of California”. Since 1990, Michael had been selling his grapes to Chalone Vineyards and from farming them himself knew their qualities.

“It’s the farming that matters most,” he says, “being totally involved with the vines.” Michael farms the place himself with the help of Edrulfo Agustin and the seasonal crews required at harvest and at pruning. “The more I do in the vineyard, the less I need to do in the winery.”

While the object of his passion resides in Monterey County, he resides with his wife Carol Hastings Michaud, two hours north, in the town of Woodside. Carol is co-proprietor of Michaud Vineyard and also vice-president of sales and marketing for Chambers & Chambers, Wine Distributors in San Francisco.

“It’s a crazy commute, no doubt about it,” says Michael. “But I know from my years at Chalone and from the vintages from our own property that the Chalone Appellation can produce wines of the very highest caliber. That makes it all worthwhile.”

Contact: Gabriela Knubis, Knubis Communications, 707-265-7783, gabriela@knubis.com