

FEATURED

# A wine that helped create Napa Valley: the legacy of Heitz Cellars

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Submitted photo

Heitz cabernet sauvignon is one of the Napa Valley's most famous wines.

Now in its third generation, Heitz Wine Cellars has helped define modern-day Napa Valley. Founded in 1961 by the late Joe and Alice Heitz, the winery has built a reputation for producing world-class wines of distinction, including one of Napa's benchmark cabernet sauvignons, the Martha's Vineyard, a wine that James Laube from the Wine Spectator has referred to as one of California's "grands crus."

"My parents believed in the American dream," said Kathleen Heitz Myers, daughter of Joe and Alice. Myers has lived or worked at the winery for nearly her entire life, becoming its president and CEO in 1998.

Before that dream could be realized, the Heitzes needed to find their way to the Napa Valley.

“Both of my parents were from the Midwest originally, and they met in California during World War II,” Kathleen said. “Dad was an inspector in the Air Force, stationed in the Central Valley and he got a night job at a winery near Fresno for some extra spending money. He’d always said that that experience had opened his horizons.”

After the war, having become interested in winemaking, Joe headed to UC Davis, where he graduated with his master’s degree in enology in 1951. He worked at wineries in Lodi and Fresno before heading north, where he caught the eye of Napa Valley’s pre-eminent winemaker, Andre Tchelistcheff. He eventually joined Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard and became his right-hand man.

By the late 1950s, Joe had bottled wine under the Heitz name, but not until they purchased a vineyard and pressed their own grapes did Heitz Wine Cellars begin in earnest. In 1961, when Joe and Alice founded their winery, there were only a handful of wineries in the Napa Valley. At the time, the belief that this sleepy agricultural place could become a globally recognized wine region had not yet taken hold.

“My father’s focus was always on quality first — from the grapes he worked with to every step in the winemaking process,” Kathleen said.

A central feature of Joe’s search for quality wine was finding the best grapes possible.

Meanwhile, Tom and Martha May, who had just purchased a Napa Valley vineyard, were seeking to sell the grapes from their new aquired land.

“When Dad and Mom bought the vineyard, the previous owners had left of bottle of the Heitzes’ wine as a gift,” said Laura May Everett, daughter of the Mays and co-owner of the Martha’s Vineyard. “My parents loved the wine and went to go get more. That’s when they met Joe and Alice and became fast friends.”

Joe Heitz first bought the Mays’ fruit in 1965 with the intention of adding it to his other cabernet wine.

“Dad liked the fruit and approached Tom and Martha and asked if they’d like to make this a longer relationship,” Kathleen said. “Tom said ‘yes’ but asked if he could have a barrel of the wine for his family. My father responded, ‘Let’s even do better than that, let’s put your name on the label.’”

“My wife and I were going to a luncheon one day and were following a few cars with sailboats on trailers headed to Clearlake,” Tom said. “Each of the boats had a girl’s name on it. And I thought, ‘There’s an idea,’ how about naming the vineyard after my wife, Martha? She objected wildly, but I overruled her on that one.”

In that moment, the course of Napa Valley wine-labeling shifted, not based on a slick marketing plan but instead based on friendship.

“Sometimes things are planned out, but sometimes you have to just believe in fate,” Kathleen said. “This was done as a way to honor the grapes and to honor a friendship.”

## Family winemaking

David Heitz received his degree in enology from Fresno State University in 1974. That same year, he was called upon to step into his father’s shoes at harvest when Joe was sidelined by an injury. As winemaker, David did more than just keep things afloat: The teamwork he fostered crafted the 1974 Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet, one of the most highly collected Napa Valley wines of all time.

Third-generation Heitz, David’s son, Harrison, joined the winery team in 2012, with a focus on sales and marketing for the moment. He has also helped develop the winery’s solar-energy plan, but he hasn’t decided yet if he’ll eventually be involved on the winemaking side of the business.

The Heitzes were also some of the first to farm grapes organically.

“We now have over 1,000 acres of land we farm in the Napa Valley, 425 acres planted in vine,” Kathleen said. “To do what we do we know we must be stewards of the land. We don’t bring grapes in from outside the Napa Valley and we practice sustainable and certified organic farming.”

As a part of their commitment to the land, the Heitzes have also granted a conservation easement to the Land Trust of Napa County, restored riparian areas and provided wildlife corridors in their vineyards.

“We were some of the first to start farming organically in the valley,” Kathleen said. “Mark (the vineyard manager) has done a wonderful job continuing what he and his father started.”

Mark Neal farms the Heitzes’ vineyards as well as the Martha’s Vineyard for the Mays.

“My father established our business in 1968, and we began working with the Heitz family just two years later,” said Neal, president of Jack Neal and Son, vineyard management. “I was only 9 years old when I started working in the vineyards alongside my dad, so I feel a real sense of pride about what we have accomplished. In the 1980s, I proposed that we begin farming organically. That idea was ahead of the trend at the time, but it was completely compatible with the Heitz and May philosophies of building family businesses that are sustainable for generations to come.”

One element of the Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet is a distinct flavor profile, often including a minty element that has been attributed to the many eucalyptus trees that line the vineyard.

“The Martha’s Vineyard is its own unique clone of cabernet,” Laura said. “There are many theories as to why the wine has a certain flavor profile, but it probably has to do with the unique clone and its interaction with the soil.”

To determine that the clone was, indeed, unique it has been studied at UC Davis, but the information remains guarded.

“We didn’t want others to just plant the Martha’s clone everywhere,” she said. “Then we wouldn’t be special anymore.”

To make the wine business work, Joe was not only a fine winemaker, he was also an innovative businessman.

“The first vintage of our cabernet, the ’61, was priced at \$1.99 a bottle, whereas the chardonnay was \$2.25,” Kathleen said. “At the time, chardonnay grapes cost about the same as cabernet, but the demand for chardonnay was stronger. Also, my father had won his first ‘Best of Show’ award at the Los Angeles Fair for his chardonnay.”

By the time the 1966 Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet went to market in the early 1970s the price per bottle had risen to \$7, but Joe had begun another innovation.

“My father would hold back some of each vintage every year and then sell it in the subsequent year at a higher price, so by the third vintage of Martha’s Vineyard the pricing had gone to \$9.50,” Kathleen said. “There was so much demand in that third year he decided to release a little more in the same year at \$11.50 to keep his customers happy. So it was better to buy the wine in the first year of its release and just age it yourself. But if customers really liked the wine, we still had more, albeit at a higher price. We still do this, releasing our wines over a five-year period.”

Another Heitz first was to personalize each bottle.

“It has been copied a lot, but we were the first to put individual numbers on the bottles,” she said. “We still do this for our single-vineyard cabernets. So for the Martha’s label you know the vintage, the bottle number, the total number of bottles made and when it was bottled. There’s a lot of information on these labels.”

## Tasting the wines

The Heitz lineup of wines includes three cabernets, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, a zinfandel and a grignolino. All of the wines have their own special signature, but there is nothing quite like the Heitz Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet. The current release is the 2010 (the winery will skip the 2011 vintage as it did not meet their standards. The next Martha’s will be the 2012 released sometime in early 2017). Each bottle is \$225, and there were 208 cases (25,000 bottles) made. The color is opaque dark ruby with a magenta-tinged edge. The aromas are of blackberries soaked in Chambord, sweet pipe tobacco smoke and licorice. The minty aroma typically associated with this wine is subtle in this vintage, but it’s there for those who search.

In the mouth, this wine is full of texture and weight, with grippy tannins that portend long life and hidden stories. Cinnamon and butterscotch complement the dark-cherry flavors that accompany the long, pleasant finish.

For the future, the Heitzes are intent on protecting and advancing their legacy.

“No matter how much your heritage sparkles, ‘automatic pilot’ does not work,” Kathleen said. “Our business is thriving today because the Heitz team actively pursues and implements innovative farming and production practices without losing sight of our signature winemaking traditions.”

Tom May is hopeful about the future of the vineyard.

“Laura’s farming interest and passion for organic farming is wonderful,” Tom said. “I told both of our children that they can sell the vineyard as soon as we die — I don’t believe in leaving them something they don’t want — and both of them are being nice to us, both are interested in carrying on the vineyard.”

When asked how subsequent generations might talk about his legacy as a vineyard man, Tom laughed before answering.

“You mean that’s all he did? He went there not knowing anything about fruit. He was crazy,” he said and then paused and gazed over the vineyard before looking at his daughter, his tone turning more serious. “But look what happened,” he said and paused a moment more before adding, “Here we are.”



Tim Carl photo

Tom May and his daughter, Laura, stand at the entrance to their Martha's Vineyard in the Napa Valley. Some believe the many eucalyptus trees that line the property have something to do with the famously minty flavor profile of the Heitz Martha's Vineyard Cabernet.



Tim Carl photos

Kathleen Heitz Myers, who came back to the family winery in 1978, became president and CEO in 1998.

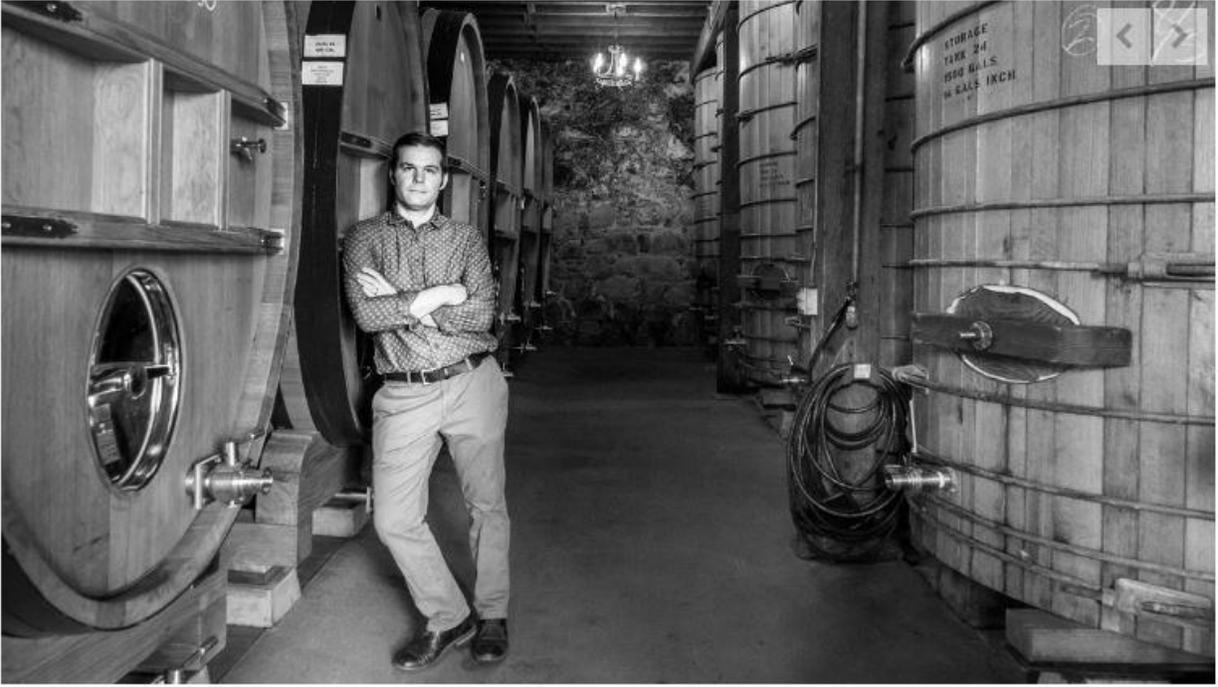


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Laura May Harris, daughter of Tom and Martha May, owners of Martha's Vineyard, hand-delivers grapes to Harrison Heitz, the third generation of Heitzes working at the winery.



Joe Heitz founded the tradition of numbering the bottles of his now famed cabernet sauvignon.



Harrison Heitz, the third generation of Heitzes, works at the winery.