

VINE HILL WINERY™

El Jardinero de las Montañas de Santa Cruz

By Laura Ness

Sal Godinez is one of those great success stories that highlights how critically important a sensible immigration policy is to the viability of this country's agricultural industry. Born in the small mountain town of Zamora, Michoacan (Mexico), Sal first came to California in 1980 as a teenager. He ended up in Lompoc, then a vast sea of flower fields, interspersed with row crops that blanketed the fog-kissed hillsides all the way to the coast. "We did contract work by the piece, picking lettuce, broccoli, and many kinds of crops. With all the nursery fields, it was breathtakingly beautiful," recalls Sal. "I remember the walnut orchards and going to the ocean to fish. It was very appealing." After returning to Mexico to finish high school, he returned in 1985 to California at the behest of his sister, who was married and living in Rutherford. Her husband worked in the vineyard at Freemark Abbey, and that connection led to Sal's first job at the winery. "I was a gardener and was paid \$6/hour which wasn't much but it paid off. Fifteen months later, a cellar opening became available and I asked for the opportunity to be involved in winemaking. That was my dream." He interviewed with Managing Partner Chuck Carpy, who told him "Sal, if you come to work in the winery, it will be very different than landscaping. If you make a mistake in the garden, I can replace a plant or bush for \$15, but if you make a mistake in the cellar, it's going to cost me plenty!" Sal was ready for the task and told Chuck in no uncertain terms, "I want to learn and I am willing to take the risk!" To this day, Sal says he can hear Chuck's voice every time he is in a position to take a risk. "He's my spiritual influence. He was good to me." Sal worked at Freemark Abbey until 1996. Chuck Carpy passed away later that year.

In 1988, Sal married his wife Lorena, who he'd known growing up in Mexico. "I came back for Christmas in 1987 and wow! This young woman had really changed. We were married in 1988." His first child, a daughter, was born in

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1989, and is currently at USC in Los Angeles studying journalism. To say he and Lorena are proud of Neidy is an understatement of the tallest order. Neidy and their son Jeffrey are their greatest accomplishments. Jeffrey is the typical teenager. He plays baseball and soccer, excelling in the latter and starting for the varsity at St. Helena High. Both siblings enjoy spending time with their friends and interacting at school and via computer and cell phones.

While working in the cellar at Freemark Abbey, Sal enrolled in the Enology program at Napa Valley Junior College. It was hard going to school at night and working a labor intensive day job, "During harvest, I'd leave the winery at 6:30PM to take my classes which lasted until 10PM. Then I'd go back to the winery and work until two in the morning. Then up at dawn to do it again. It was worth it. Napa JC has a great hands-on program. If you really want to learn winemaking, I definitely recommend the school. They have a small winery there, so you are doing everything first-hand."

In June of 1996, Sal was contacted by the winemaker at Saintsbury. The winemaker, Byron Kosuge, had discovered Sal's resume left on a desk by a friend who was helping him put it together. Sal recalls, he got a call from his future mentor and Byron asked, "I have your resume. Are you looking for a job?" Byron, who was promoted to winemaker when Bill Knuttel left to take the job at Chalk Hill, was looking for a cellar master and Sal was awarded the position. "I'd never made Pinot Noir, and I really didn't have any appreciation for it. I was strictly a Cab guy, being at Freemark Abbey. It was a big learning opportunity for me," confesses Sal. "Saintsbury was so committed to Pinot Noir. It was an ideal learning environment. They were very much on the leading edge of Pinot clonal experimentation. They were the first winery in California to make a Pinot totally from Dijon clones."

In producing fine Pinot Noir, much of the emphasis is on the integration of different clones in the bottle. Coincident with his new job, Sal embarked on another educational journey, this time, studying viticulture at Napa Valley Junior College. During his studies he was able to rely on his natural skills as a gardener and enhance his knowledge of the importance of vineyard management.

He was also able to apply his new education and build on industry knowledge regarding the best use of Pinot clones and grape rootstocks. “I realized that the more I new about vineyard practices, the better winemaker I would be. The importance of vineyard work cannot be overstated. Much of the final product of a wine is made in the vineyard. You can make excellent or poor wine from great grapes but you can not make great wine from bad grapes. The less we have to do in the cellar, the better.” Studying viticulture was truly enlightening and a necessity for someone in what was rapidly becoming a house of Pinot. “With Cabernet, you have 6 clones, max. With Pinot, you have 50 or more widely used clones and the rootstocks play an enormous role. The possible combinations are vast. I developed what I call ‘the pyramid of consistency,’ to help make consistently good wine. You pick three clones, say 115, 667, and 777 and you put them each on two or three different rootstocks. You ferment each clone-rootstock combination separately and you use two different yeasts. That gives you 12 to 18 unique combinations to play with. It’s a very small way to ‘enhance nature,’ although we all know nature does the heavy lifting.”

Back to the career path: How did Sal come to be the winemaker at Vine Hill in the Santa Cruz Mountains? Sal was approached by Nick Guerrero of Vine Hill who was looking for a Pinot master to handle his Cumbre and Gatos Locos brands. Nick and Sal had known each other for about eight years when Nick first asked Sal for some advice regarding his first Santa Cruz Mountains vintage. One conversation led to another and finally Nick and Sal started discussing “what ifs”. What if Sal came to work in Santa Cruz? What if Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir is on a par with the best that California has to offer? Nick contended that the Santa Cruz winery site, with its perfect Region I fog-influenced climate, was ideal for Pinot Noir. As Sal reviewed the opportunity further he quickly became enthusiastic. Sal remembers, “I was really excited about the chance to make wine here as I had followed Nick’s progress with the ’04 vintage. I was sure we could make great wine: the grapes have such wonderful tannins, acidity and spice.” Sal now has responsibility for three product lines including Cumbre of Vine Hill, the high-end brand focused primarily on Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir, the new “Vine Hill” brand, made from Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah, and Gatos Locos of Vine Hill, a larger production brand consisting of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah and made from grapes outside the Santa Cruz appellation.

We talked about what it's like to go from a totally Carneros Pinot program to a completely different climate and growing region all together. Sal enthused, "I'm a big believer in chemistry. I rely on it because numbers don't lie. When I sent harvest samples to the lab, I was amazed at how perfectly balanced the fruit was based on the numbers reflected in the chemical analysis. I mean, it was astonishing! The chemistry of many lots was absolutely perfect. For the first time in making Pinot, I didn't have to do anything. I just monitored the fermentation and kept the temperatures even. In Carneros, I always had to make adjustments during fermentation which carry more risk down the road. Santa Cruz Mountains wines are naturally balanced, which is pleasantly surprising. I am seeing big, big potential for these wines."

Sal's experiences at Vine Hill have been nothing but positive and when the estate comes to maturity in 2009 – watch out! If the first four appellation vintages are any indication of what a Pinot expert can do with truly spectacular fruit, Sal Godinez is destined to achieve greatness in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Not bad for the humble gardener who is becoming a winemaker of note.

Cumbre
of VINE HILL

VINE HILL™

Gatos Locos
of VINE HILL