

Napa Valley matriarchs

Three women remain inspirational family figureheads at the Chappellet, Novak and Duckhorn wineries, which played central roles in the early development of the St Helena winelands. Linda Murphy tells their story

WHEN MOLLY AND Donn Chappellet arrived in Napa Valley in 1967, it was a sleepy farm community with only a handful of wineries, very few art or music opportunities, and nowhere exciting to eat – a far cry from their former home in fashionable Rancho Santa Fe in southern California. Yet like so many transplants to Napa in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chappellets wanted to start over, to leave urban life behind and find a more authentic and down-to-earth home for themselves and their children.

‘Donn’s interest was waning in his business,’ Molly Chappellet recalls of his company, Interstate United Corporation, a distributor of vending machines. ‘I was working at the Los Angeles County Museum. I asked him, “Donn, do you really want to keep doing this for the rest of your life? Why don’t you do what you love?”’

‘He told me he wanted to move out of the city. He’d worked summers on his family ranch in California and enjoyed it. He wrote his college thesis on cattle ranching. But his passion turned out to be wine: his mother was French and his father had French roots. Most of the wines in our cellar were from Bordeaux. Moving to Napa seemed natural.’

As it did for Mary and Jack Novak, who purchased the

Below: Molly and Donn Chappellet in 1968, the year after they moved to Napa Valley



1882-founded Spottswoode vineyard and farmhouse in 1972 and relocated their family to St Helena from San Diego. ‘The wine craze was just beginning,’ Mary recalls. ‘Robert Mondavi had opened his winery and others were following suit. We knew very little about growing grapes or making fine wine, but we planned to study and learn by doing, and we were eager to embrace an agricultural lifestyle in a rural town.’

Margaret and Dan Duckhorn followed, in 1976, seeking a similar escape from big-city pressures – in their case, the San Francisco Bay area. They brought a group of investors to their party. ‘The industry was so small then that our competitors became our friends and we shared ideas and equipment just to make it,’ says Margaret. ‘Dan went to work in San Francisco at Heublein and I focused on the permits that we needed to establish the winery. I was a school nurse at the time. We hired Tom Rinaldi as winemaker. The next three years, we were involved at the winery on a day-to-day basis. Dan was involved helping to develop the strategy and focus we wanted, through his work at Heublein.’

Full commitment

We’re chatting on the wrap-around porch at Mary Novak’s St Helena house, overlooking her lush garden, and later during lunch at her Spottswoode winery just down the road. Novak, Molly Chappellet and Margaret



Above from left: Margaret Duckhorn, Molly Chappellet and Mary Novak, photographed at the Spottswoode winery in St Helena

Duckhorn talk, as long-time friends do, about anything and everything. Their kids join in, adding detail and different interpretations of what happened in the 1970s and 1980s, when the families landed in Napa and embarked on wine-growing. The women laugh together and finish each other’s sentences; if one’s memory has faded, another’s kicks in.

Jack Novak died suddenly in 1977, at age 44, of a heart attack; Mary, after contemplating a return to southern California, decided to soldier on with Spottswoode. The Duckhorns divorced years after they founded Duckhorn Vineyards, yet remain business partners. Donn Chappellet passed away in 2016, aged 84, though Molly is as involved as ever in Chappellet Vineyards, her famous gardens there, and in upholding the Pritchard Hill trademark Donn established long ago for the viticultural area they founded in eastern Napa Valley, and which is now inhabited by Colgin, Bryant Family Vineyards, Tim and Marcia Mondavi’s Continuum and others.

Photograph: Rob Adler/Getty Images

The three women remain fast friends and active forces in Napa. Not only are they credited with helping to form the backbone of what would go on to become one of the world’s most recognised wine regions, but they also continue their involvement into their ripe old age. Now in their late 70s and early 80s, they remain focused, still overseeing their

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companies, chairing auctions, hosting events and advising their adult children.

Their bond was cemented in the mid-1970s, before the so-called Judgement of Paris and the anointment by Robert Parker of Napa Valley as a world-class wine producer. These families didn’t come to Napa to produce first growth-quality wines; they relocated for a simpler, more organic life, and to rear their families in a wholesome environment. Growing grapes and making wine wasn’t the primary driver, though it was the obvious way to make a living.

Following their restless husbands to Napa, Chappellet, Novak and Duckhorn were not only wives and mothers, they were entrenched in the business. They pruned and picked, sorted and stomped, as did their children, learning as they went and getting advice – and equipment, when needed – from established producers such as Beaulieu, Beringer, Inglenook, Robert Mondavi and Schramsberg.

‘After Jack died, I had to decide whether >

At a glance

- Chappellet Vineyards**
Founded 1967 by Molly and Donn Chappellet
Current owner
 Chappellet family
Key varieties Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon
Flagship wine Chappellet, Pritchard Hill, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon
Current winemaker
 Phillip Corallo-Titus
Past winemakers Philip Togni, Joe Cafaro, Tony Soter, Cathy Corison
Affiliated label
 Sonoma-Loeb
- Duckhorn Vineyards**
Founded 1976 by Margaret and Dan Duckhorn, plus investors
New owner TSG Consumer Partners (acquisition from GI Partners announced 29 August 2016)
Key varieties Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon
Flagship wine Three Palms Vineyard, Napa Valley Merlot
Current winemaker
 Renée Ary
Past winemakers
 Tom Rinaldi, Mark Beringer, Bill Nancarrow
Affiliated labels Canvasback, Decoy, Goldeneye, Migration, Paraduxx
- Spottswode Estate**
Founded 1972 by Mary and Jack Novak
Current owner Novak family
Key varieties Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon
Flagship wine Spottswode Estate, St Helena Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon
Current winemaker
 Aron Weinkauff
Past winemakers Tony Soter, Pam Starr, Mia Klein, Rosemary Cakebread, Jennifer Williams
Affiliated label Lydenhurst

to move back south, or stay in St Helena and make a go of it,' says Novak, whose vineyard was one of the first in Napa to be grown organically. She zips around the estate in an environmentally friendly electric Smart Car. 'I was 45 years old with five young children and felt settled in the community, with good friends. So I did what I had to do and continued the business.'

Family influence

When she moved to Pritchard Hill with Donn and their five children – and one on the way – Molly Chappellet had a university degree in art and expertise in curation. She unleashed her talents at the Chappellet property, turning it into an oasis of flowers, produce and sculpture. Her recognition that Napa wine could be paired with food, gardens and art was an eye-opener – a notion now de rigueur.

Following the advice of Beaulieu Vineyard's André Tchelistcheff, the Chappellets settled on Pritchard Hill, becoming the first to plant grapevines on its rocky, high-elevation hillsides. Their Cabernet Sauvignons, Chardonnays and Chenin Blancs have been made by an all-star cast of Philip Togni, Joe Cafaro, Tony Soter, Cathy Corison and, since 1989, Phillip Corallo-Titus.

'Donn told me when we started, "We don't have enough kids to bring in the harvest",' Molly recalls. 'I replied, well, you're going to need another six wives. Our children worked on the property, like most Napa Valley kids, and school didn't start until after the harvest was complete.' Today, one son, Cyril, is chairman of the board. Another son, Jon-Mark, became involved in wine-growing, and a daughter, Carissa, is the family attorney. Her younger sister, Lygia, remembers driving up Pritchard Hill for the first time, when she was 14. 'My father turned to us and said, "The only way this will work is if we work it together".' She took that to heart. An artist, she has designed many of the Chappellet labels.

Early on, Molly entertained the likes of Julia Child, Danny Kaye, Dinah Shore, Clint Eastwood and Martha Stewart in her home. Of her three books, *A Vineyard Garden* won a James Beard Award. She started the Napa Valley Cooking Class, where culinary legends Wolfgang Puck, Alice

'Molly Chappellet's recognition that Napa wine could be paired with food, gardens and art was an eye-opener'

Waters and Charlie Trotter were instructors during its 22-year stint; and with Jamie Davies of Schramsberg, she was among the first to connect the dots between wine and food, setting the course for a concept that's now embraced throughout Napa.

Chappellet alum Tony Soter was Spottswode's first winemaker, followed by Pam Starr, Mia Klein, Rosemary Cakebread, Jennifer Williams and now Aron Weinkauff. Mary Novak's oldest daughter, Lindy Novak, is the national marketing director; youngest daughter Beth Milliken is president and CEO of Spottswode, an 'Energizer Bunny' traveller to international markets. The middle daughter, restaurateur/caterer Kelley Novak feeds those attending the winery's special events.

'Dad was looking for a *Green Acres* TV show experience,' Lindy says of her family's relocation to Napa. 'We weren't happy about moving to St Helena,' Beth adds. 'But we got over it.'

Changing hands

Margaret Duckhorn's children, Kellie and David, worked at Duckhorn Vineyards before going off on their own. Now general manager of Baldacci Family Vineyards in Napa, Kellie headed sales and marketing for Duckhorn, until Duckhorn Wine Co was sold to GI Partners in 2007 [it was sold again recently to TSG Consumer Partners of San Francisco – see *Decanter.com*]. David, former Duckhorn CFO, is president of Via Pacifica Selections, exporting wines to China.

Duckhorn made its mark with Merlot as a standalone variety, while also producing Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. In the 1970s and 1980s, Merlot was viewed as a blending grape, and Margaret and Dan stood apart with their endorsement of Merlot. Their decision, vindicated in large part by the high-quality grapes they purchased from Three Palms Vineyard (ultimately purchased by



Above: Margaret Duckhorn during harvest at Duckhorn Vineyards in the 1970s
 Left: winemaking at Spottswode in the 1970s, the Novak family all pitching in

'I couldn't imagine what a beautiful future we were building back then'

Mary Novak

dinners at her Chutney Kitchen – it was the only place to go for good food. She later opened The French Laundry with her husband, Don. 'The Triple S Ranch in Calistoga was also good for steaks,' adds Novak, 'but there wasn't much else. We invited friends to our homes for dinner. That's how we lived.'

'It was a big deal in Los Angeles to go out at night,' Chappellet says. 'But in Napa back then? Nada. No theatres. Donn and I asked our friends, "Where do you eat here?" And everyone said they cooked at home.'

They also attended square dances at the farm centre on Lodi Lane in St Helena and bumped into one another at Keller's Market downtown – long before chef Thomas Keller's time at The French Laundry, which he took over in 1994, or his Restaurant at Meadowood and Tra Vigne (now closed) in St Helena.

If Chappellet, Novak and Duckhorn have issues with what has become of Napa Valley today, they don't grumble a lot, though they do express some dismay for the traffic congestion along Highway 129 and the Silverado Trail, and the proliferation of tasting rooms that have no connection to Napa Valley vineyards.

'I worry a bit about over-expansion and excessive traffic through the area, especially on the weekends,' Duckhorn says. 'At the same time, we will continue to have to be competitive, as other industries would like to take away some of our market share.'

'Looking back,' adds Novak, 'I couldn't imagine what a beautiful future we were building back then.' ■

Linda Murphy is a Sonoma-based wine, food and travel writer, and co-author of *American Wine: The Ultimate Companion* to the Wines and Wineries of the United States