

Chris Kenefick, Kenefick Ranch Vineyard and Winery - Interview with Tricia Conover, Editor, Wine Wanderings, 16 Nov 2022 Transcription

Interview can be viewed on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/wkwrTlujnoo>

Wed, Nov 16, 2022 1:27PM • 8:41

Tricia Conover, DipWSET, Editor Wine Wanderings (TC):

Welcome to Wine Wanderings. Today I'm live with second generation owner and proprietor, Chris Kenefick, of Kenefick Ranch Vineyard and Winery located in the Napa Valley, Calistoga, California. Thank you for joining us today, Chris.

Chris Kenefick, Owner/Proprietor, Kenefick Ranch Vineyard and Winery (CK):

Thank you very much for having me.

(TC):

Chris,

I know you grew up watching your late father, Dr. Tom Kenefick, MD, driving [and managing] vineyard operations in your 250 acre ranch, which I think you have about 125 acres [planted] vineyard as part of that. You've adopted his love for the world of viticulture, and I understand you're involved quite heavily, of course, in the national sales of your wines. With climate change on our minds currently, I have several questions for you about your approach to creating world class wines that "start in the vineyard." And the first one would be: Climate change has greatly affected Napa Valley the last five years, particularly for this year's harvest 2022. What were your main challenges? What have you been doing differently to adapt?

(CK):

Yes, the last couple years have been much more challenging than what I had experienced previously before that. Obviously, growing up in the area, I wasn't paying as much attention since my dad was being more hands on. But in the last few years, since I've joined on full-time in 2016, we had some pretty consistent, more or less easy, growing harvests. Really the last three years have been quite a challenge, where we've had a few different challenges -- 2020, obviously, with the fires, and with 2021 being a severe drought year. Then this year, 2022, what looked like was going to be an amazing harvest all through the summer, all of a sudden, we were hit with about six days of 105 to 118 degree weather out here. The biggest thing that we can do is to continue to use this as a learning opportunity every year, and try to make some changes. With that kind of heat spike, we're hoping that that's not a continued trend year after year. But as we move forward, it's good for us to adapt and prepare for what might happen. So this last year, we experimented a little bit more with some shade cloth over the grapes to try to protect them from that extreme afternoon sun. Moving forward, we might try to develop the canopy of the vines a little bit more, just to try to protect and keep out some of the heat that might potentially come if we have another heat spell like that.

(TC):

That makes sense. With climate change, are you considering planting different varieties, grapes, or different clones of the current varieties?

(CK):

We haven't put anything into practice yet. Obviously, like you said, with about half of our property planted, we're not able to completely replant everything at the same time. So every few years, we're pulling out a block or two and planting new varieties in those. This upcoming year, we're pulling out a couple blocks on the far side of our property. The only new variety that we're experimenting with over there is Chenin Blanc, which we actually used to have planted back in the 80s. I'm excited to revisit that and see how it does. But we're hoping that it does well in some hotter weather. After that, at some point, I know a lot of other vineyards in the area are starting to do this as well. But I think that it would be fun and interesting to kind of have an experimental block on property where we have a couple different rows of a few different varieties and rootstocks, and experiment with some different practices just to see how they all turn out in the end.

(TC):

Yes, that sounds like a great idea. So, along the lines of climate change and sustainability, can you describe what **Napa Green** is and **explain** the **Fish-Friendly Farming** initiatives, and how you've been involved?

(CK):

Our property is both "**Napa Green**" and "**Fish-Friendly Farming Certified.**" It's a little bit of a mouthful to say. But basically, in a nutshell, that's trying to make sure you're as good stewards to the land as possible, trying to do as much sustainable farming as possible, so that you leave as little footprint or impact on the actual land that we have here. Obviously, you can see behind us, we're on a little bit of a slope here, with the vineyard, [and practically] any kind of chemicals or products that we would put into the ground eventually would [hypothetically] all run off into streams leading to the Napa River leading to the bay [San Pablo]. We want to try to have as little impact on all those waterways as possible.

(TC):

I'm so glad you're involved in [those initiatives]. How do you assure the best soil possible for your vineyard?

(CK):

[We do this] a couple of different ways. We're blessed to have kind of stumbled on a great property. The soil out here is some of the best in the valley. We're kind of bookended by two canyons, one of which I'm sitting on -- here on this end. So, you can kind of see how narrow gets up here. There's a lot of soil and an alluvial fan that came off the hillside running down into the flat bottom where we have our vineyard planted. We are, every year, trying to, like I was saying before, be as sustainable as possible. So, [we are] using as little chemicals in the vineyard [as possible]. And then we're also planting in between all the rows every year to try to enrich and revive the soil while it's in its offseason like this, then when we go in and actually replant a lot of the time, we'll just let the field sit for a year just to kind of recoup and re-energize before we go back in and replant.

(TC):

All the great ideas! You're known for having well balanced wines. Tell me why you think yours are so well balanced. What are your favorites among your portfolio?

(CK):

Yes, Calistoga is a really unique area. It's one of the narrowest parts in the Napa Valley. We get a lot of heat that comes in during the day. But, then we also get a lot of cool weather that comes up over the hill from the Russian River and helps cool down the grapes at night. It gives the fruit a lot of time to recover, which makes for some really unique, bold wines, but very well-balanced wines as well. We were out here trying to take care of the land and really make the best wine that we can off what the land gives us. But we think that it starts here in the vineyard and then the other big part of it, obviously, is the winemaking side. We've been blessed to have a great winemaker since 2006; Ken Jarman has been making our wines. He really has a meticulous eye on everything happening in the winemaking process. But overall, we've been blessed with the area that our property is in, and truly the wine started in the vineyard.

(TC):

Well, thank you for sending me these two [wines]. I'm looking forward to reviewing these for our readers. You sent the Cabernet Franc and then your Chris's Cuvée, a Cabernet Sauvignon. I'm looking forward to those. I understand you've been doing wine tastings out of Fairwinds Estate [in Napa Valley] in the past, but that you're building a new wine tasting room coming up in the next year or so. Tell me about that.

(CK):

We don't have an official date for the opening of the winery and tasting room. We're in kind of the initial planning phase for that. This was a dream that my dad started many, many years ago, starting with going through the county and doing some planning to get approved to build a winery here on property. We now have that approval. It's on to the next phase of planning and developing the actual building. So hopefully within the next couple of years, we'll be able to welcome some guests out here and partake in basically this view behind us here.

(TC):

Yes, that's a beautiful site. That'll be great. Definitely let us know when that's coming up, and we'll talk again. Chris, thank you so much for joining us on *Wine Wanderings* today.

(CK):

Yes, thank you very much for having me.