



Merry Edwards Winery

RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

Biography

Merry Edwards approaches life with graceful intensity. When sampling grapes in the vineyard, hand pruning her cherished roses, preparing dinner for her family, practicing Bikram yoga — in whatever she does, Merry balances intellect with intuition. Each wine she makes benefits from her precision and perception of subtlety and elegance.

Now in the fifth decade of her winemaking career, Merry has earned the universal respect of winemaking peers, grape growers and academicians. A self-described perfectionist, she has constantly refined her vineyard practices, wines and techniques. Merry does not rest on her laurels — she grows. “People frequently ask what is the best wine I have ever made. I tell them it’s not made yet!”

Food was Merry’s gateway to wine. She recalls, “When I was a teenager, my mother had cookbooks produced by the California Wine Advisory Board. Wine was an ingredient in every recipe, so I started cooking with wine.”

Fascinated with food chemistry and fermentation in particular, Merry brewed beer as a simple extension of making bread and working with yeast. Then she purchased a book on home winemaking and began to ferment fruit wines. In 1970, when Merry earned her B.S. degree in Physiology from the University of California at Berkeley, her friends knew her as the accomplished amateur who made *The Merry Vintners* wines.

In 1971, while attending graduate school in nutrition at UC Berkeley, Merry met Andy Quady, who was studying winemaking at the University of California at Davis. “Looking through Andy’s books, I became fascinated,” Merry recalls. “I was surprised to learn one could study winemaking as a discipline.” Within a month, Merry shifted her graduate studies to wine at UC Davis. In the winter of 1973, she earned a master’s degree in Food Science with an emphasis in Enology. Of the three women in the master’s program, only Merry became a winemaker.

While seeking her first winemaking position, Merry encountered gender discrimination time and again. Supported by her mentor, Dr. Maynard Amerine, she stayed the course, pursuing a career as a winemaker, rejecting positions as a laboratory technician, the traditional role of women in the wine industry at that time. Merry’s perseverance precipitated changes in recruitment at UC Davis and beyond, paving the way for future generations of women to take charge in the cellar. For her master’s thesis, she devised a method for the analysis of lead in wine. She then undertook a large-scale survey — her findings caused the industry to discontinue the production and use of lead capsules.



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RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

Consulting Winemaker Richard Graf and the owners of Mount Eden Vineyards selected Merry to be their winemaker in February 1974. She made three vintages while at Mount Eden and earned a reputation as a rising star in the California wine industry. In 1975, Merry selected cuttings from Mount Eden's Pinot Noir vineyard and sent them to UC Davis for heat treatment (to remove virus) and propagation. This field selection became UCD clone 37, also known as the "Merry Edwards selection" and a star performer in the Russian River Valley today.

During the mid-1970s, she made many trips to Sonoma County, inspired by the pioneering Pinot Noirs made by her good friend and mentor Joe Swan. Merry was taken with the area, particularly the distinctive grapes grown here. "The fruit from Sonoma County was recognizable to me. I could pick out the juicy, rich fruit character in a blind tasting." When a friend proposed a joint venture with Merry as winemaker, she left Mount Eden and eagerly relocated to Sonoma County.

The project fell apart before she was able to make wine, but not before Merry became acquainted with some winegrowers, including David and Sandra Steiner (now Sandra McIver). In summer 1977, Sandra hired Merry to help build Matanzas Creek Winery from scratch. Merry produced seven acclaimed vintages at Matanzas Creek, catapulting the brand to national prominence. She also developed a unique style of Sauvignon Blanc, the model for her own wildly successful and highly regarded varietal wine today.

Prior to Merry's first vintage at Matanzas Creek Winery, Sandra McIver sent her to France on reconnaissance. Intrigued by clonal research described to her by Dr. Harold Olmo at UC Davis, Merry traveled to the University of Beaune, where a major study of Pinot Noir clones was under way. She surveyed the experimental vineyards, where the nuances of clonal variation captured Merry's attention.

The importance of clones was not recognized in California at the time; vintners and farmers alike considered Merry's focus heretical. "Joe Swan, a primary mentor for me, was one of few who recognized the importance of clones. He and Dr. Olmo encouraged my research," Merry says. She planted seven different clones in Matanzas Creek's Chardonnay vineyard. Harvesting and segregating the fruit in barrel trials, Merry's pioneering work forever changed the California wine industry. In 1985, Merry and Dr. Olmo presented the first clonal seminar offered at UC Davis, where she substantiated clonal significance to formerly skeptical vintners and growers.

In 1984, Merry left Matanzas Creek to devote herself full time to consulting and Merry Vintners, a small winery she and her family founded in Russian River Valley. Dedicated exclusively to Chardonnay, Merry Vintners enjoyed widespread recognition. Unfortunately, the family business



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RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

was caught in the industry's downward cycle in the late 1980s. Lenders called back the loans of many small wineries, including Merry Vintners', and it ceased production in 1989.

Financial restraints interrupted Merry's career once again when Vintech, an ill-fated investment company, filed for bankruptcy late in 1990. Vintech had recruited Merry as vice president and winemaker of Laurier Winery in 1989. She produced two vintages in the new, state-of-the-art winery (now operated as Hartford Family) she helped to build before the bankruptcy pre-empted their release.

Merry's successful consulting business then became her full-time profession. Her esteemed reputation and expertise defined a new breed of winemaker: the consultant superstar whose name enhanced the reputation of her client's brand.

The most exciting and absorbing chapter of Merry's professional career is her current passion.

At home in the Russian River Valley since 1977, Merry has explored its hills, pockets, slopes and hollows, discovering small sites where choosing the right rootstock, clone and farming techniques can produce exceptional grapes. This led her in 1996 to purchase land in the Sebastopol Hills region of Russian River Valley.

In 1997, she parlayed that property into a business venture allowing her to produce *Merry Edwards* wines from select Pinot Noir grapes in Russian River Valley. In this same year, she met her future husband and partner, Ken Coopersmith, while rafting in the Grand Canyon.

Ken was her helpmate in the installation of that first vineyard, Meredith Estate, in 1998. This was followed by Coopersmith in 2001. Long-term leases were then negotiated for Warren's Hill, Flax Vineyard and Georganne. Although most of those earlier plantings were Pinot Noir, in 2014 new Sauvignon Blanc developments got under way at a new property in Forestville and on the lower slope of Meredith Estate.

At Merry and Ken's new home property in Sebastopol, a Pinot Noir vineyard is being planted to *Merry's Clone*, UCD 37. "I have always wanted to make wine from the ground up, and we are on our way to achieving our goal of being 100 percent estate-based."

An acknowledged expert in viticulture as well as winemaking, Merry also maintains close working relationships with the dedicated property owners, allowing her to influence the farming of Olivet Lane, Klopp Ranch and a small stable of excellent Sauvignon Blanc vineyards.



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RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

In 2006, after many years as a guest in other wineries, Merry and Ken began construction of their own Merry Edwards Winery, located at Coopersmith Vineyard. “This building project has been a necessary evolution toward attaining control over all aspects of our production, from grape to glass, following an estate model.” The 2007 harvest was entirely produced on site, and the winery formally opened for visitors in 2008. In 2010, the winery was expanded in order to accommodate the growing success of her barrel-fermentation program for Sauvignon Blanc, an important partner to her Pinot Noir.

In 2013, Merry’s 40th year as a winemaker, she was not only inducted into the Culinary Institute of America’s Vintners Hall of Fame, she also won the coveted James Beard Award for Best Wine, Beer or Spirits Professional in the United States, just the fourth woman to be so honored.

Reflecting on her many accomplishments, Merry advises novice winemakers to begin their careers with a dual degree in viticulture and enology. “Through experience and study, I have earned my ‘viticulture degree’ in the field. It is very important to me to do everything possible to obtain quality, and that begins in the vineyard, from the ground up,” she says.

Gardening, cooking, exercise and family balance Merry’s life. She is devoted to her country properties, where she and Ken nurture roses, fruit trees and a large vegetable garden. “I love beauty around me and enjoy creating my own environment,” she explains. Merry enjoys reading and likens favorite authors to favorite wines — they are each unique and too numerous to mention. Merry raised two sons while successfully managing her career. Now she shares quiet moments and collaborative projects with Ken.

In many ways, Merry Edwards is like her wines — complex, balanced and memorable. An intricate blend of artistic vision, scientific training, spirit and grace, she leaves a lasting impression.