

# HIDDEN RIDGE

## The History of Hidden Ridge Vineyards



In 1990, we - Casidy Ward and Lynn Hofacket - purchased 164 acres of Sonoma County wilderness. The property had been for sale for some time and had previously been a private hunting club, *The Hidden Valley Beer Club*. The road was in such bad condition at the time that you had to walk in the last mile. The listing realtor refused to show us the property personally, but faxed us directions. For Lynn – it was love at first sight. I was a little less sure.

For several years we had the best campsite in the area – in the morning, the fog would come in the valleys between the ridge tops creating an “island in the sky” effect. Originally we planned to improve the road, put in the well and septic system and prepare the building site and then resell the property as an estate country home site. Market forces intervened and the aerospace recession reduced demand for California real estate – especially remote country property.

However, wine demand began to increase with the television program on the French paradox – who wouldn't want to eat more rich foods and drink more wine like the French? Wineries quit going bankrupt. We made a trip to Europe and visited the steep mountain vineyards there. Lynn started taking classes at SRJC in viticulture and having soil, grape and wine experts out to the property.



In 1995 we began to seriously think about planting a small vineyard on the property. We also took care of some legal access issues. Our neighbors, we found out, had been feuding like the Hatfields and McCoys over some border issues. Our road crosses several neighbors' properties before reaching Hidden Ridge and they had three gates across the road, one of which was on a very steep hill. After several years of litigation we can now drive out there directly. We tried to negotiate a road maintenance agreement, but found that our

neighbors preferred the road in bad shape to prevent explorers from venturing down it.

Since it was covered with madrone, manzanita, oak and bay trees in addition to chemise and brush, one of the first tasks was to clear the land for planting, including removing all of the oak roots. Securing a source of water for the plants would also be important. The first year Lynn worked alone on the clearing with a small John Deere tractor and progress was slow. This was before the widespread use of the internet, so using “My Little Salesman,” Lynn researched heavy equipment throughout the nation and finally selected a Komatsu to help with the clearing. Lynn hired his first employee, an older gentleman named Ralph with lots of heavy equipment operating experience. Lynn drove the pad foot which compacted the keyways and dam, while Ralph drove the tractor. Because it is nearly impossible to get water rights in California, our engineer advised us to build the reservoir on top of one of the ridges in order to avoid any legal issues with runoff. After thirty days, Hidden Ridge had a reservoir awaiting the winter rains.



Over time it became obvious that you had to match the machine to the job so we ended up with several tractors and an excavator. It was better to buy than to rent because of the high daily rental prices and the length of the project. Some equipment could be found quite inexpensively at auction during the 90's. Many construction projects in Asia were shutting down at that time and the equipment was coming to the US at fire sale prices.

In those early years, most (if not all) of the agricultural workers we hired were from Mexico or Guatemala. Since Lynn didn't speak Spanish and the workers didn't speak English, it was essential to have one or two bilingual employees to translate, but Lynn built much of the vineyard by pantomiming what he needed done. Somehow it worked!

We originally had planned to plant 20 acres, but because we were required to have a timber harvest/timber conversion plan (even though very few if any of the trees were timber grade) we decided to apply for the maximum 60 acres. Part of the vineyard development occurred during an El Nino year when there were heavy storms of short duration. One of these storms occurred during the dirt work on the lower ridge before the cover crop was fully established. This experience showed us that the practice of ripping is a bad idea in the mountains. It also attracted the attention of the Water Quality Board requiring us to submit an erosion control plan. Over the next several years we saw way too much of Water Quality Board people as they seemed to focus efforts exclusively on new vineyard development and not on existing structures such as the failing dam site on our neighbor's property.



Area by area, the vineyard began to take shape over the next few years. First the land was cleared, then terraced or graded, the drainage installed and that area winterized. The next year the irrigation went in and the vines were planted. We researched what varieties would grow best in the area and finally decided to specialize in cabernet sauvignon, a grape and a wine that never goes out of style.



We talked to growers and winemakers about the rootstocks and varieties. Originally we bought bench grafted plants, where the rootstock and the variety are combined at the nursery. Because preparation work took longer than expected, these bench grafts were planted in a nursery block on the property. Due to the delay, we decided to have the plants tested for what was then called "black goo", but today is known as phaeoacromonium. We were stunned to find that virtually 100% of our plants that were tested had it. We were able to get part of our money back and we decided to buy rootstock and have it field grafted in order to get cleaner plant material. We hired field grafting crews to graft the bud wood in the field to our jumbo rootstock. Because of the hot dry conditions in the summer, we wanted to avoid the rootstocks that required a lot of water (the *V. riparia* crosses) but first and foremost we were concerned with getting healthy rootstocks. We chose three different rootstocks and four different clones or types of cabernet sauvignon.

Day after day, week after week, year after year work continued and the vineyard began to take shape. Terraces followed the mountain contours and where possible blocks were planted up and down the slopes. Using a clinometer, Lynn and the crews laid out the terraces with a 5% or less grade. We visited many mountain vineyards with wide terraces and tall terrace faces. In order to create a denser vineyard, our goal was 1000 vines per acre; we used smaller equipment which made smaller terrace widths. We spaced the terraces closer together and waited until the following year to finish the terrace face. This allowed the top soil to fall off into the inner terrace so that the vineyard grew more evenly on the outside of the terrace and on the inside. Dirt terraces became grasslands over the winters and were planted to vineyard in the spring.

The baby vines were enclosed in grow tubes and we found out the hard way that these can also be called vole condos – a nice warm spot to nap with nice green leaves to eat. We got a deer depredation permit so that we could dispatch the deer from the vineyard as it was fenced. Not an easy thing as most of the land is still wilderness and the deer didn't want to leave.



Around 2000, Marco DiGiulio, our winemaker, visited the vineyard for the first time. I had been contacting the high end cabernet winemakers to assess their interest in grapes from the property. Marco was one of winemakers that stayed interested throughout the project.

Year after year the vineyard grew and in 2001 produced almost a ton of grapes from the oldest blocks. We made a test barrel of wine and were pleased with the results. In 2002 more vines were producing but the canopy, or green leaf coverage, was light because the vines were young. There wasn't enough shade for the grapes to survive the heat spells that year unscathed and we sold the wine produced into the bulk market. That year we learned that the VSP, or vertical shoot positioning, trellis system wasn't the best for mountain vineyard. Hidden Ridge gets so much sunshine that we had to add cross bars to the trellis and move to a modified sprawl system, creating afternoon shading for the grapes to prevent sun burning and/or raisining.



Hidden Ridge prunes relatively late in the first quarter of the year. Ideally we want to finish up just before the vines start pushing in the middle of March. This timing prevents the vines from budding earlier and that limits the potential frost damage. Temperatures can be low up until the vines start to grow and then any frost damage will reduce the fruitfulness of the vines that year. We started the vineyard out with a unilateral cordon, but found that this training regime was prone to missing canes, so several years into the growing process we trained the vines to grow bilaterally. While this change reduced vineyard production one or two years, it will result in an overall increase in quality and quantity over time.



Our original business plan was to sell grapes, but to have a vineyard designate on the bottle to build publicity for the vineyard and then to have a small wine label. Because we aren't located in one of Sonoma County's sub appellations such as Sonoma Valley or Alexander Valley, we learned that Sonoma County winemakers weren't interested in our grapes. We had better luck selling to Napa winemakers, who used our intense mountain fruit as a blender for their valley floor fruit. We received better prices from them, but as part of a blend we weren't eligible for a vineyard designation on the bottle. In 2003 we picked the remainder of our fruit that our customers didn't buy and Marco created the first vintage of Hidden Ridge from fruit on both ridges, a combination of two of our cabernet clones: the clone 4 for the structure and 337 for the fruit up front. Lynn and I had different definitions of a "small brand," but settled on about 1000 cases of the 2003 vintage and another 1,000 of the 2004.

Over time, if a customer didn't want to purchase grapes the following year, we no longer tried to replace them with another grape customer. Because of the high quality of the 03 & 04 vintages, we began to increase the brand in size. Marco introduced us to two national wine brokers and we hired Vintage Point to help sell our wine into other states. There will be about 1800 cases of the 2005 vintage available.

We look forward to the future of our Hidden Ridge Vineyard with pride and anticipation. Our 2003 and 2004 vintage Cabernet Sauvignon was awarded back to back 92 points by Wine Spectator, as well as named "One of Twenty Exciting New Cabernet Labels to Watch" and featured in that prestigious publication's Ultimate Buying Guide 2008. The acknowledged high quality of the mountain cabernet sauvignon we have produced in the initial vintages is providing us the incentive to not sell our grapes as originally planned. We have come to realize that the best use of our fruit is to produce our own wine under the Hidden Ridge name, keeping production small and exclusively estate grown. In certain vintages we will isolate special "hidden lots" we feel provide a very special expression of the vintage. In this way we can secure for a long time to come the future of this unique and exceptional vineyard.

