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TALES OF AN
HONORED VINTNER'S
STEEP CLIMB TO
SUCCESS

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Husic Vineyards, the Signature Vintner of the 2013 Southwest Florida Wine & Food Fest, is known as one of the last hillside vineyards in Napa.

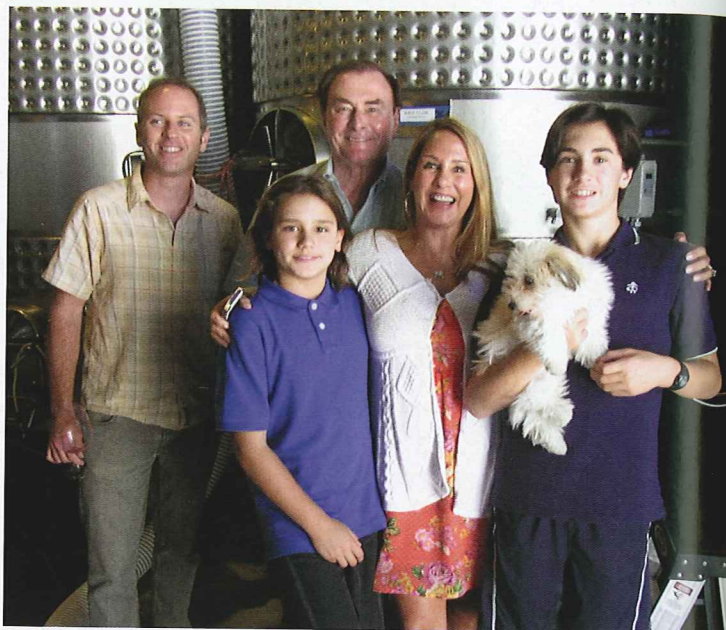
BY ELIZABETH KELLAR

YOU DON'T NEED to journey all the way to California to visit Husic Vineyards.

Instead, just one look at a bottle of Husic Vineyards cabernet sauvignon will bring a bit of Napa Valley directly to you. The intricately illustrated label reveals the vineyard's steep terraces and the property's main house, home to vintners Frank and Julie Husic and their two sons, FJ and Paris. Also shown is the Husic guesthouse, which has welcomed many wine-loving visitors, including Hollywood actor George Clooney.

"All the ladies love to giggle when they say, 'Is that where George slept,'" Frank says.

Below this scene sit two palms, a nod to a time in California's history when it was customary to plant two palm trees outside your home to indicate ownership. The many personal touches on the label are meant to draw wine drinkers in, as if they were symbolically entering the Husic property, Frank explains.



It's this sort of attention to detail that has helped launch Husic to new heights within the wine world. The 2006 Husic Vineyards cabernet sauvignon earned a double gold medal in the 2010 American Fine Wine Competition, and the 2008 vintage took a gold medal in 2012.

Next, Husic Vineyards will appear as the Signature Vintner at the 2013 Southwest Florida Wine & Food Fest on Feb. 22 and 23 at Miromar Lakes Beach and Golf Club. Marshall Hanno, chairman of the fest's food and chefs committee, praises the Husics for their passion as vintners.

He describes the annual festival as having a history of being able to attract smaller, boutique winemakers that boast excellent reputations for their wines.

Winemaker Michael Hirby, left, has helped the Husic family create the award-winning Napa Valley wines that made them the 2013 honored vintner for the Southwest Florida Wine & Food Fest.

"Husic is in that class as well," Hanno says.

Vine of the times

For the Husics, entering the winemaking business was a question of timing—perfect timing.

In 1995, a year after the couple met, the California real estate market was going through a downturn. In that buyer's market, the Husics decided to purchase property in the northern part of the state. Within 30 days, they snapped up a new home in San Francisco and 120 acres in Napa Valley's Stag's Leap district with the intention of starting a vineyard.



The property's appeal was its uniqueness, Frank explains.

"It runs from nearly the valley floor to 1,000 feet. And down at the valley floor it's immediately south of Stag's Leap wine cellars. They are the ones who produced the red wines that won the '76 Paris competition," Frank says. "So unbelievably, 19 years later, we were moving next to hallowed ground."

Just as exciting, previous access to the land had been restricted. But those issues were resolved in the months prior to the couple's purchase

of the property. Because no humans had ever lived on the land or farmed it, the soil was rich and fertile. Frank jokes that it was like a bank into which animals had been making deposits for hundreds of years.

As the Husics began to inquire into what would be needed to cultivate a vineyard on their new property, the couple learned that the county was preparing to pass an anti-hillside planting ordinance. With an eye to environmental concerns, the ordinance would restrict

vineyards from planting on slopes of a certain degree.

The Husics' new property ascended from the valley floor at a dramatic slant, well more than 45 degrees in many places. With their window of winemaking opportunity closing, the Husics knew they needed to move swiftly to secure their permitting.

Originally, the couple planned to have two separate vineyards, but when they went before the planning commission to request the permits for their property, the

Husic Vineyards, in the Stag's Leap district, are so hilly that the grapes must be harvested by hand each year.



The 2010 Husic pinot noir is the latest edition to the winery's output.

“There’s a Darwinism that takes place at our vineyard, in that only the really strong survive.”

—FRANK HUSIC

commission instructed them to leave a 100-foot-wide preserve area for wildlife to use when passing through the vineyard.

That preserve effectively sliced one of the two planned vineyards in half, creating three vineyards divided over nine acres. After two years of permitting and preparing the property for planting—a process that including clearing and dynamiting the land—those vineyards are now terraced and planted with cabernet sauvignon.

Sometimes referred to as “one of the last of the hillside vineyards” in Napa, the Husic vineyard presents its own winemaking challenges. All the grapes must be harvested by hand, Julie explains, as the sharp slope does not permit the use of heavy machinery.

But the perks far outweigh the perils, and the couple credits the source.

“Great wines aren’t made, they’re grown,” Frank says.

“You cannot make good wine from bad grapes,” Julie adds.

Frank observes how the extra angle of the hillside allows additional sunshine to penetrate their plants and promotes ripening. In the summer, the high Husic vineyards receive full

sunshine from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. There’s also a natural atmospheric phenomenon that occurs in the Stag’s Leap district, Julie adds. After the grapes bake in the warm sun all day, a gentle breeze comes in by afternoon to cool them off again.

The result is that the Husics’ grapes tend to be ready early in the harvest season.

“We’re always at the front end of it. We’re always among the first to pick. And in part, it’s due to this steepness because the grapes ripen more quickly,” Frank says.

The angle of the vineyard also means the vines are being grown in rocky conditions with minimal soil. Other plants would struggle in such a landscape, but grapes thrive.

“The lucky thing in nature and in science is that grapes love stressful environments,” Frank says. “So there’s a Darwinism that takes place at our vineyard, in that only the really strong survive.”

In turn, the Husics harvest a naturally low yield of the grapes they seek—about two to three tons per acre as compared to a vineyard on the valley floor, which might harvest as many as eight to 10 tons per acre. Always, Husic wines seek to offer a combi-

nation of balance, structure, elegance and finesse, or what Frank describes as being “the iron fist in the velvet glove.”

“What we hope you’ll find in the bottle is a marriage between intense mountain fruit and the soft silk that is characteristic of the Stag’s Leap district,” Frank says.

Early accolades

The Husics harvested their first mature crop in 2001 and sold their inaugural bottles in 2004. Many of their first bottles were sold to friends or acquaintances, people who knew about their venture and wanted to support them.

Then, in December 2004, they received an invitation to the “Cult Cabernets of California 2001,” a wine tasting sponsored by auction house Bonhams and Butterfields. Frank called a wine buyer he knew and said he and Julie planned to attend. He also asked if the wine buyer would consider entering the Husics’ wine as a mystery wine, and the wine buyer agreed.

There were 39 wines entered in the event, including some of California’s heaviest hitters, such as Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estate. Unexpectedly, the Husics took second place.

“I almost had a heart

attack," Frank recalls. "It was unbelievable."

The event's organizers posted the results to the website of wine guru Robert Parker. Within two to three weeks, the Husics had sold out of their 2004 cabernet sauvignon.

"We could barely get the orders out," Frank says. "That was big for us. It launched us, really."

It also served as a moment of validation for the couple. Of course, they always believed their wine was something special, but they also knew they couldn't be entirely objective. Now, the wine world was confirming it for them as well.

"We produce phenomenal wines," Julie says. "We truly wouldn't say that if we didn't think it."

As the vineyard evolved, so, too, did the Husics' offerings. In 2005, they purchased grapes to produce a Sonoma chardonnay, which Frank describes as "the non-chardonnay chardonnay" for its well-balanced, Burgundian style.

The couple works with winemaker Michael Hirby, whom they describe as a rising star in the wine world. They especially praise what Frank calls Hirby's "phenomenal talent" for making pinot noir, which they began producing in 2010. The Husic pinot is available in limited quantities and a vintage will be released again in 2014; it's one of the couple's goals to be able to produce and offer more of this popular wine.

In 2003, they introduced Palm Terrace, which Julie describes as a more value-oriented wine that is produced with cabernet sauvignon from their own vineyards.



Palm Terrace retails for almost half the cost of a bottle of Husic cabernet sauvignon.

"The grapes come from our land, so they're obviously premium grapes and they still (age in) 100 percent new oak barrels. They go through the same process," Julie says of Palm Terrace.

Palm Terrace has performed well, catching the attention of Las Vegas casinos. In 2005, The Palms and Wynn Resorts offered the wine, selling out of it. That same year, the Husics met a customer who loved the wine and bought the entire 2006 vintage before it had even been produced.

"He said, 'there's no better wine at this price,'" Frank recalls.

Now, the Husics are preparing to release the 2008 Palm Terrace vintage through their usual distribution channels and into new markets, including Florida.

They're also preparing to move forward to the next

stage of their winemaking life, which may or may not someday involve turning the business over to their young sons. Paris and FJ are already involved with their parents' business, Julie explains.

"The boys have grown up knowing about harvest and crush and picking and they participated in all of it. They help with the bottling, they put labels on all the boxes. So they're very integrated into our little wine business. But what they end up doing mostly is help us entertain," she says. "Everybody wants to meet the boys, and everybody loves them."

If that transition happens someday, Paris and FJ have a fine example to follow.

"One of our overriding missions is to bring the New World and the Old World together as much as possible," Frank says. "So we have grapes in California, but we would like to produce wine that reflects or mirrors the greatest of Europe's wines." ♣

Southwest Florida Wine and Food Fest emissaries Steve and Ester Machiz and Lori Hanno check out the production with Frank and Julie Husic.