

## KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

### History in the Vineyards: THE CARTER VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

You think you've heard every butterfly story, and then this one comes along. Like any good butterfly story, there's more to it than larva and cocoons and bright splashes of color. This particular story starts 44 years ago, in 1974, all the way across the country in Washington, D.C. when Jack and Kathleen Carter decided to chuck their government jobs and move to Oregon to raise a family. They settled in Salem and got jobs with the state government – Kathleen in land conservation and development; Jack with the state Executive Department.

Farming was about the last thing they considered doing as a hobby, but in 1978, Kathleen's parents took them on a trip to Beaune, in the heart of Burgundy, and the couple fell in love with Pinot Noir. "We drank different wines every night and I thought, 'Maybe we should look into this,'" recalls Jack. They knew that the hills outside of Salem had begun producing surprisingly good Pinot Noir wines, so, like butterflies preparing to take flight, they prudently took classes at the local community college in grape-growing and business management in order to prepare themselves for the next stage of their lives. They would plant and grow a vineyard.

Kathleen happened to know Bill Blosser, who a few years earlier had helped start the Sokol Blosser Winery in Dundee, and with his assistance and more from new friends in the nearby Casteel family, the Carters found a 42-acre parcel of land that was being subdivided by owner Patricia Repetto, who stayed with her family on 12 acres and sold the remaining 30 to the Carters. The Repetto property changed hands a few times since and is now the site of a dog-grooming business, with horses grazing in corrals.

Hang on; the butterflies are coming.

The property was mostly a mess when the Carters arrived. Half of it had been a cherry orchard, but only four acres of cherry trees were still serviceable and producing fruit; the rest of the trees were dead, dying or wild. The rest of it was a grain field that had been fallow for years. "We'll practice on the four acres of cherries," Jack said to Kathleen (or possibly vice-versa), so they tore the rest of the cherries out, planted oats and wheat and grew those things for a few years. They also planted a test acre of wine grapes: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah.

“Well,” says Jack, “the Pinot Noir did well, but the other stuff didn’t.”

The Pinot Noir did spectacularly well, in fact, and in 1983 the Carters took the big step of planting five acres of it – half to Pommard, half to Wadenswil – with the advice of the Casteels and the assistance of Dan Dusschee, who had planted his Freedom Hill vineyard two years earlier near Monmouth. They sold the first fruit three years later to a winemaker who couldn’t or wouldn’t pay them for three more years, sold more fruit the second year to Dick Erath, and in the third year, 1989, the harvest was purchased by a California winery who had contracted with a young, up-and-coming Oregon winemaker named Ken Wright to process the fruit. Wright, who had founded Panther Creek Cellars in an old power station in McMinnville, purchased the entire crop the following year, in 1990, and has cornered the Carter crop ever since, right up to and including last year, when he purchased the vineyard outright from the Carters. “I think Ken thought we had a contract all those years,” laughs Jack. “But after we started the first two-year deal with him, we just didn’t talk about it. We never negotiated another contract.”

Jack and Kathleen quickly found that vineyard management was way more arduous than they had imagined, so Dick Daniel of nearby Canary Hill Vineyard farmed it for them for several years. A deal was struck with the hazelnut farm that wrapped around the western and northern edges of the vineyard to keep the dust down at harvest time, and portions of Carter Vineyard were utilized for experiments by Ken Wright Cellars in conjunction with the Carters and scientists from Oregon State University to research management practices like trellising and thinning of fruit. As the years went on and Carter grew to 22 acres under cultivation, besides producing exquisite fruit for bold, powerful, expressive Pinot Noir wines, the vineyard became an important research hub for the study of vineyard practices.

Still no butterflies, but we’re getting there. In 1998, Mark Gould began to manage the vineyard as Ken Wright Cellars’ expert field man, and he liked Carter so much that he was married there, in 2001, but only after taking on the massive job of clearing and cleaning up a one-acre piece of the property on the north side that had become the requisite junk area for the farm. There were tractor parts, farm trash, household trash and lots of weeds and junk to move, Mark recalls. Among other things, he moved rocks to create a raised stage of sorts. When Seth Miller joined the team a few years later, he also grew to love the Carter landscape, and in 2010 he too married there.

And Seth had a bit of a bee (not a butterfly) in his bonnet. An avid hiker and outdoorsman, he noticed a sign at the nearby Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge, which you can see from the crest of the vineyard, looking west, that pointed out that only two percent of the native oak upland prairie landscape still existed in the Willamette Valley. Only two percent! Furthermore, the Fender’s Blue butterfly (we promised you a butterfly, and here it is) depended on that ecosystem for its very survival, was endangered, and could only be found, and rarely at that, at Baskett Slough. In fact, the Fender’s Blue was thought to be extinct from the end of the 1930’s until it was rediscovered in 1989.

This was because the Fender’s Blue butterfly can only exist in the presence of Kincaid’s lupine, a rare subspecies of the common sulphur lupine. Its larva winters in the root system of the plant, it undergoes its amazing metamorphosis on the Kincaid’s lupine, and during its brief – ten days tops! – lifespan as a gorgeous blue butterfly, it mates and the female lays her ova on the Kincaid’s lupine.

Now, Seth Miller, Mark Gould and Ken Wright, in a project begun with the blessing and support of the Carter family, are trying to recreate native habitat for the Fender's Blue butterfly on the Carter vineyard. The acre of land that Mark had cleared on which to be married has been planted with Roemers Fescue grass, also known as Idaho fescue or blue bunchgrass, with the assistance of the Oregon Department of Forestry, and Seth works hard to keep the grass from being overrun by invasive species of ground covers and weeds...lots of weeds. As the grass gets good and healthy, more native plants are being added: Camas bulbs (which the Native Americans who lived in this valley for millennia used as a principal food source), yarrow, flowering currant shrubs and madrone trees. And when all of that is in place, Kincaid's lupine will be introduced. And finally, butterflies.

"The idea is to get the habitat returned," says Seth. "It has really been a challenge."

Find us another butterfly story that begins and ends at a vineyard! Most of the stories we've told in this vineyard series have looked at the past, and pioneers who worked the lands that now serve as our source of fruit. This one too is every bit about pioneers, but they are pioneers who are preparing a future. And maybe one day years from now, when another young couple decides to marry at the Carter Vineyard, they will be accompanied down the aisle by butterflies that almost ceased to exist, but were brought back to life by the vineyard and its stewards.

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