



THE STORY OF VINE CLIFF

Vine Cliff Winery has made a name for itself in contemporary winemaking in relatively few years. However, the label carries with it the legacy of Napa Valley's winemaking history, and has its beginnings in the excitement of the wine boom of the late 1800s. Vine Cliff Winery was often the meeting ground of the agricultural, business and social worlds of turn-of-the-century Napa Valley and San Francisco.

The Vine Cliff Winery Estate of today is an exquisite mountainside property located on land which was once part of the original George C. Yount estate. Noteworthy locals George Burrage and Thomas Tucker purchased the site for Vine Cliff Winery from the Yount Estate in 1870 (five years after Yount's death). They started wine production a year later. At the time, one of Yount's three vineyards – now covered by Rector Dam – lay in close proximity to the planned site of Vine Cliff Winery. Since acreage in vines northeast of Yountville at that time was limited, it is likely that the duo counted on purchasing all the grapes produced on Yount's ranch and vineyard. Burrage and Tucker built Vine Cliff into what appears to be the largest winery in the Napa Valley.

Though Burrage and Tucker did not live long enough to establish a reputation for Vine Cliff, they did construct an impressive winery and tunnels, one of which remains to the present. Records of the winery itself are scarce. However, the *Historical and Descriptive Sketch Book of Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino Counties*, published around 1873, offers the following description of the Estate:

'A semi-circle of inaccessible rocky side-hills, in the canyon in which nestle the buildings, has, by the energy of man, been turned into a useful and picturesque piece of property. Hundreds of tons of rock have been patiently gathered off the hillsides, which now team with grapevines.

Truly does it look to one who saw it years ago as though the finger of enchantment has been pointed at its frowning, rocky surface, and changed into a thing of beauty and joy forever. This vineyard, which now contains 65,000 vines, only 10,000 of which are native or mission, was commenced seven years ago. A bull tongue and cultivator have done nearly all the 'irritating' (sic.) for this flourishing vineyard, which in the last two years, has turned off (sic.) 19,000 gallons of wine.

THE STORY OF VINE CLIFF
PAGE TWO

The wine cellar is four stories high, the lower story of masonry, the construction of which seventy barrels of cement were used. The stories above are built of lumber, 50,000 feet having been used in their construction. The cellar is so built into the precipitous hillside that every floor is approachable by wagons save the upper, where a truck is used to haul the boxes of grapes into the building along a platform just the right height onto which to unload a wagon easily.

The grapes are thus crushed in the upper story, without any hoisting process, by a crusher worked by two men that crushes a ton of grapes per day; the juice of which amounts to about 140 gallons. Through this floor the juice falls into the fermenting vats on the floor beneath, where it can be either lowered in casks, or by hose, to the floors below, or loaded into wagons at the door.

In the second story a furnace stands, used to keep the wine at even temperature or to generate steam with which to cleanse the casks, that powerful agent being the best-known purifier of wine vessels.

From every floor of this cellar a beautiful view greets the thankful eye of the beholder, no matter which way he may happen to look.'

After the deaths of Burrage and Tucker, wealthy San Franciscan, John Fry purchased the property and immediately set out to achieve his vision for the winery, which he did by the 1890's. Fry had made a fortune in Nevada silver and invested heavily in San Francisco real estate. He served on the board of directors of a dozen major companies, including the Bank of California and the Napa Valley Wine Company, a connection, which proved particularly fruitful for Vine Cliff.

A half dozen wineries were affiliated with the Napa Valley Wine Company, the leaders of which wanted to build name recognition for the company by setting a quality standard with its wines unmatched in California. E.C. Prober, NVWC's general manager, had a reputation second to none in Napa Valley for his knowledge of wine. He was selected by the Board of State Viticultural Commissioners, (a State agency formed in 1880) to oversee a critical survey of Phylloxera damage in the Valley in 1892-93.

In 1886 the company began building a huge wine cellar in Napa - 60 by 150 feet - which was to be the principal cellar for the allied producers of wine.

As Vine Cliff Winery prospered, it attracted the elite social set of San Francisco. Prominent San Franciscans visiting Vine Cliff included William Ralston, the founder of

THE STORY OF VINE CLIFF PAGE THREE

the Bank of California. Col. Fry's early business and personal relationship with Ralston was enhanced further when Ralston married Fry's niece.

During Vine Cliff's heydays in the 1890's, the winery and Fry ranch were model farms in the Napa Valley. In addition to the vineyards, the property also encompassed a water wheel functioning as a gristmill, and Yount Mill, home to a range of wild birds. Trees and formal gardens greeted guests arriving at the estate, which featured the stately 18-room Fry mansion.

Amazingly, the early history of Vine Cliff is contained within a short thirty years. Phylloxera destroyed the vineyards and supporting wine production by about 1900. After Fry's death in 1901, most of the winery structure disappeared in a matter of a few years, except for the stone first floor and tunnels.

No published report of that era mentions the winery being demolished or burned in one of the frequent firestorms, which swept the eastern flanks of the Napa Valley, and the destruction of the top floors of the once impressive winery remains a mystery.

It took close to 85 years before Vine Cliff, like the Phoenix in its seal, rose from the ashes. In 1985, Charles and Nell Sweeney purchased the estate. The vineyards became alive again with new plantings of cabernet sauvignon. The Sweeneys introduced ecological farming practices to Vine Cliff.

The original Vine Cliff winery stone first floor was resurrected in 1990 and 1991 with the construction of a barrel chaise. In 1995 a new gravity fed production facility was completed. It is considered one of the top and most innovative production facilities in California. Additional vineyards were purchased by the family in Calistoga and Carneros achieving over 40 acres of estate vineyards by 1999. In June of 2000, the present day much acclaimed cave was completed, providing 15,000 square feet of barrel aging capability. In 2014, the Sweeneys opened the Vine Cliff Cellars St. Helena Tasting Room to accommodate a greater number of Vine Cliff wine lovers flocking to Napa Valley for an exclusive tasting experience. At the St. Helena Vine Cliff Tasting Room, a seasonal culinary menu complements the Vine Cliff wine tasting program.

The Sweeney Family continues the vision of Vine Cliff founders Burrage and Tucker, and that of Col. Fry - to produce outstanding and distinctive wines and to create a landmark where the incredible beauty of this historic hillside setting is to be enjoyed and where the legacy of Vine Cliff lives on.

Updated November 2016.