

Producer profile

# Heitz Cellar

As Heitz Cellar celebrates the 50th anniversary of its renowned Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, William Kelley tells the fascinating story of one of California wine's true first growths

THE GRAPES THAT produced Heitz Cellar's 1966 Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley's first vineyard-designate wine (see box, p75), were sold on a handshake.

'I don't want a contract', the late Joe Heitz insisted. 'The only people who win with contracts are the lawyers'. A contract has been signed in the intervening 50 years, but not much else has changed; certainly not the mutual respect between the Heitz family and the Mays, the owners of Martha's Vineyard. As we sit in the Mays' cottage, in the foothills of the Mayacamas mountains, I hear the story of two families whose collaboration has given rise to Napa's most consistently brilliant wine.

Born into an Illinois farming family, Joe Heitz arrived in California thanks to the US

Air Force, and it was chance that introduced him to wine: stationed in Fresno during World War II, Heitz took a part-time evening job with Italian Swiss Colony winery. When the war ended, after studies at University of California at Davis, Joe and his wife Alice moved to the Napa Valley. There he worked for almost a decade at Beaulieu Vineyards as right-hand man to André Tchelistcheff, the legendary Russian-émigré winemaker who did so much to restore Napa's post-Prohibition fortunes.

With Tchelistcheff at the height of his fame, there was little prospect of promotion at Beaulieu. So in 1961, after Heitz's brief stint as founder and head of Fresno State University's oenology programme, Joe and Alice purchased a small and idiosyncratic winery that made

## Heitz Cellar at a glance

**Founded**  
1961  
**President & CEO**  
Kathleen Heitz Myers  
**Winemaker**  
David Heitz  
**Estate**  
472ha, of which 172ha are planted to vineyards  
**Location**  
Napa Valley, California  
**Varieties**  
Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Grignolino, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel  
**Farming practices**  
Sustainable and certified organic (California Certified Organic Farmers)  
**Annual production**  
40,000 cases



only one wine: Grignolino. This lesser-known Piedmontese variety was an incongruous beginning for what many today regard as a Cabernet Sauvignon house. But in fact Heitz Cellar's reputation was initially founded upon Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, purchased from Sonoma pioneer Hanzell Winery and released while Heitz's early vintages of Cabernet were maturing in the cellar.

While Joe and Alice Heitz were establishing

their fledgling winery, Tom and Martha May were upping stakes and moving to the Napa Valley. Tom had been initiated into wine at college by a fraternity brother – a naval attaché stationed in Paris who always returned with a suitcase full of wine. Martha's family grew lemons and avocados, as well as raising cattle. In the early 1960s, the Mays were living in Santa Barbara, but they both hankered after a more rural lifestyle. >

Above: the 19th-century Heitz Cellar building is part of a 472ha estate on Taplin Rd in Napa, of which 172ha are vineyards

## Heitz – a timeline



**1951**  
Joe Heitz begins working for André Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyards in Napa Valley

**1958**  
Heitz founds and heads Fresno State University's oenology programme

**1961**  
Heitz Cellar founded

**1963**  
Tom and Martha May move to Napa Valley, purchasing a cottage and vineyard which Tom names Martha's Vineyard



**1964**  
Joe (above) and Alice Heitz purchase a 65ha ranch on Taplin Road, including the 19th-century buildings that house the winery

**1965**  
The Mays begin to sell the grapes from Martha's Vineyard to Joe Heitz

**1966**  
Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon becomes the first vineyard-designated Cabernet produced in Napa Valley

**1974**  
David Heitz graduates in oenology and makes Heitz Cellar's 1974 vintage while his father Joe is recovering from a back injury



**1976**  
First bottling of Bella Oaks Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon; produced until 2007



**1978**  
Kathleen Heitz (below) develops a global market for Heitz wines

**1984**  
Heitz family purchases the Trailside Vineyard in Rutherford and begins to convert to organic farming

**1989**  
Heitz family purchases the Ink Grade Vineyard. First vintage of Trailside Cabernet Sauvignon made



**2000**  
Joe Heitz (above) dies

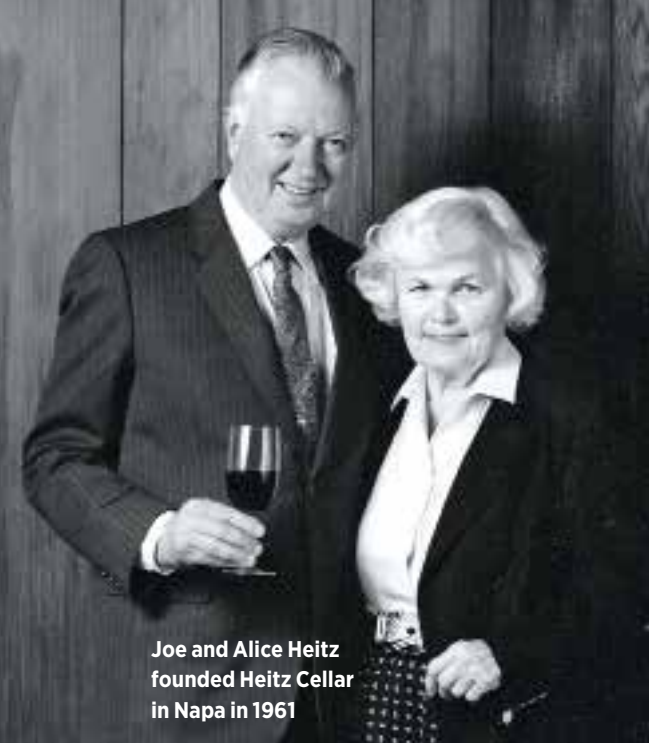
**1998**  
Kathleen Heitz Myers named winery president and CEO

**2012**  
Harrison Heitz, third generation (right), joins the winery



**2016**  
Heitz Cellar celebrates 50th anniversary of Martha's Vineyard

Photographs: M.J. Wickham, photos@ultraclay.com, Robert Holmes



Joe and Alice Heitz  
founded Heitz Cellar  
in Napa in 1961

When a local realtor showed them a small cottage not far from the sleepy town of Oakville, they were smitten; and what was more, the property came with a vineyard, recently planted and yet to bear fruit. The Mays moved in, with two Cutty Sark tea chests as coffee tables. Six months later, much to their delight, they were able to add a few contiguous hectares to their vineyard site.

## Martha's Vineyard

In 1964, the two families' stories would intersect. The Mays had been advised to seek out a small winery to buy their fruit, and a chance encounter with a Heitz wine led them to Joe and Alice, who were pleased to purchase the vines' first fruit in 1965. Everyone was impressed by the quality in that unheralded vintage, and Tom May asked for a barrel of his own in the following year. Joe Heitz's response was to offer to bottle the whole vineyard separately, under a name of Tom's choosing.

'We were driving south on the Silverado Trail,' May remembers, when he happened upon the name Martha's Vineyard. 'There was a heavy traffic of boats being towed north to Lake County, and I asked "why are all the boats named after women?"' He then turned to Martha and exclaimed: 'Martha's Vineyard!' Despite her initial refusal, the name stuck. And with the 1966 vintage, Heitz Cellar's Martha's Vineyard became Napa Valley's first vineyard-designate Cabernet Sauvignon.

In 1966, California wine was still reeling from Prohibition. There were only 15 wineries in the Napa Valley, and if their best cuvées were bottled separately, they were invariably labelled as 'reserves' – selected in the cellar, not the vineyard. The decision to distinguish Martha's Vineyard as a site both singular and superior – 'distinctly different and distinctly better', as Joe Heitz put it – thus marked an important departure in the valley's history.

Beginning with the release of the inaugural 1966 vintage, priced at an ambitious \$7 (about £2.50 at the time), Martha's Vineyard immediately became the cornerstone of Heitz Cellar's portfolio. It soon became clear that this 14-hectare parcel, hugging the foothills of the Mayacamas range and fringed by towering eucalyptus trees, produced a wine that amply justified a bottling of its own. Well-drained, rocky alluvial soils combine with cooler-than-average evening temperatures to make this an ideal spot for Cabernet Sauvignon, producing powerful wines with bright acidity – and often a distinctive signature of mint, which many attribute to the trees that line its western border. Year after year, this site has produced one of Napa's most compelling wines; a record of consistency simply unrivalled in the valley.

## No-nonsense

'I'm not much for artsy-craftsy sorts of things,' was Joe Heitz's response when asked about his winemaking philosophy in the early 1970s:

'I make my wine by science and common sense.' Though it is now Joe's son David, and his team, who makes the Heitz wines, that no-nonsense approach, so characteristic of Heitz Cellar's fiercely independent-minded founder, is still very much the order of the day.

For Chardonnay, that means no malolactic fermentation and maturation in oak, much of it used. This is the old style of Napa Chardonnay, perpetuated elsewhere by the likes of Stony Hill and Ric Forman, but seldom seen today: crisp, cellarworthy wines, underpinned by vibrant acidity despite the valley's warm climate, and never dominated by the aromas and flavours of oak.

By contrast, Heitz Cabernet Sauvignons spend the first year of their lives in large, upright, old oak foudres (3,800 litres) before moving to French oak barrels for at least another two years' maturation. 'You simply can't make a fine old-aged wine if you sell it when it's young and fruity,' Joe Heitz was wont to say. And like the Chardonnay, Heitz Cellar's Cabernet Sauvignon does not go through malolactic fermentation – unusual for a red.

First in the Cabernet portfolio to be released is the generic Napa Valley bottling, which until the late 1980s was made entirely from purchased grapes, showcasing the Heitz family's talents as master blenders. These days this wine is made exclusively from estate fruit, much of it certified organic, and it ranks as one of the best-value ageworthy Cabernet Sauvignons in California, dependably seeing out its 30th birthday in style.

Over the years, a number of vineyard-designate bottlings have bridged the gap between Heitz Cellar's Napa Valley >

*'Two families' collaboration has given rise to Napa Valley's most consistently brilliant wine'*

## Vineyard-designate wines?

These are effectively the US equivalent of 'lieu-dit' in French – a wine for which the vineyard that the grapes come from is specified on the label. The usage is quite widespread in the US, and Heitz was the first in Napa Valley to adopt the practice of naming its vineyard sources – preceded in all of California only by Ridge with its Monte Bello Cabernet, just a few years before the first vintage of Martha's Vineyard.

Cabernet Sauvignon and the Martha's Vineyard. Between 1976 and 2007, a bottling from the Bella Oaks Vineyard was a reliable fixture in the portfolio. And, in 1984, the Trailside Vineyard in eastern Rutherford was also granted a vineyard-designate bottling of its own. Today, it's the Trailside bottling that serves as understudy to Martha's Vineyard, producing a more fruit-driven wine that is never as brooding as its more senior sibling.

## Family values

Since its inception, Heitz Cellar has been very much a family company. Joe and Alice started small, with borrowed capital. 'We began this business,' Heitz once observed, 'knowing that we would have fewer dollars to spend than if I continued working for somebody else.' Over the years, the family has gradually expanded its production to the present level – and the limit for the foreseeable future – of about 40,000 cases a year.

Their children were involved with the winery from the beginning, and now have the helm. Son David was thrown in at the deep end as winemaker in 1974, just after graduating, when Joe was incapacitated by a back injury. As that 1974 Heitz Martha's Vineyard has long been acclaimed as one of California's greatest 20th-century Cabernet Sauvignons, it was clear that the keys to the cellar had landed in a safe pair of hands.



Since 1978, David's younger sister Kathleen Heitz Myers has played an integral leadership role in diversifying and modernising the business, keeping the winery in the world's spotlight while maintaining the commitment to quality. So although Joe Heitz died in 2000, his legacy is carefully preserved.

Tom and Martha May have also been joined by their children, Richard and Laura, who are both committed to farming and conserving their family's famous vineyard and its heritage. Laura reflects that growing up in the Napa Valley instilled in her and her brother an enduring love for nature.

The partnership between two families that began with a handshake in 1964, and which has given California one of its greatest wines, looks set to endure long into the future. **D**

**Tom and Martha May have been joined by their children, Laura and Richard, in farming and conserving the family's famous Martha's Vineyard**

*William Kelley is a writer and aspiring winemaker who lives and works in Napa Valley, California*

## Heitz of achievement: Martha's Vineyard



**Heitz, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2010** 95  
£125-£156 (ib) **Christopher Keiller, Justerini & Brooks**

The most recent release of Martha's Vineyard, this opens up to reveal fragrant black fruit, mint chocolate and rich soil tones, structured around supple, layered tannins and bright acidity on the palate.

While this is youthfully extrovert, patience will be rewarded by more profundity. **Drink** 2020-2060 **Alc** 14.5%

**Heitz, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1997** 96

£130 **Bordeaux Vintners**

One of the modern-day icons from Martha's Vineyard, and only the second vintage to be produced after the 1993 replanting. A rich, expressive nose of ripe black cherry, dark chocolate, cassis,

eucalypt and mocha is the prelude to a plush, broad wine with amazing volume and intensity. Ripe but impeccably balanced. **Drink** 2016-2040 **Alc** 14.5%

**Heitz, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1991** 94

N/A UK [www.heitzcellar.com](http://www.heitzcellar.com)

A strong mint signature, mingling with notes of dark chocolate, black cherry, loamy soil and a subtle frame of cedary new oak. On the palate, it's youthful, with fresh acidity and ripe, layered tannins. A compelling wine ageing gracefully. **Drink** 2016-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

**Heitz, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1981** 95

£192 **Hedonism**

A rather underrated vintage, bursting from the glass with expressive black cherry, mint, dark chocolate, anise and loamy soil. On the palate the wine is

youthful, intense and authoritative, with a spine of bright acidity. Drinking well now, but will cruise along for decades.

**Drink** 2016-2040 **Alc** 13.5%



**Heitz, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1975** 99

N/A UK [www.heitzcellar.com](http://www.heitzcellar.com)

While the 1974 tends to win all the attention, the 1975 is also one of the most thrilling Napa Cabs produced in the 20th century. Complex red and black fruit, cedarwood, dried rose and cocoa aromas are followed by a powerful, beautifully balanced palate with a firm core of tannin, fruit and fresh acidity. Decanting for a few hours will help this still-youthful Cabernet to open up.

**Drink** 2016-2050 **Alc** 13.5%

*For full details of UK stockists, see p133*