



### Where the Paved Road Ends

Things are different out there where the paved road ends. Golden eagles fly overhead, with keen eyes scouting out the small scurrying possibilities of the incoming day. A small green tractor starts its cranky engine and begins moving slowly between the rows. My mother, Carolyn Charles, and her two sisters, Charlotte and Donna, have taken their heritage land on the Sonoma Coast and established two petite vineyards of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Their family first settled in these steep hills during the Homestead Act sometime in the late 1850's. Eventually, the Charles ranch became the largest sheep ranch in Sonoma County; raising 2,000 head of sheep annually. This same mountain range is where their father, George Charles, planted the *Charles Ranch Chardonnay* two decades ago, becoming a pioneer of grape growing in this region. When George first announced his conversion plans from sheep ranching to grape growing, his three daughters tried to talk their elderly father out of an undertaking of such magnitude. He was in his 70's, forever scheming on a new project and working the hard hours of a man half his age. Plus, my grandmother was tired of living a million miles from civilization and wanted to move to town. We tease my mother and aunts about how angry they were at their father when, twenty-two years ago, he followed his vision and planted 14 acres of sheep pasture to vineyard despite his family's protest. Back then, in my grandfather's typical fashion, he had nodded and smiled in agreement when his three daughters voiced their concerns. After he waved good-bye as their car rounded the bend, he strode out to the barn, grabbed a shovel, and began digging holes to plant the grapevines.

Several times a year the three Charles sisters make a sojourn together to their special *Three Sisters Vineyards* on the Ranch. They begin the trip by packing a picnic lunch that always includes a couple bottles of vino and a few plump *Cohibas*. Having donned wide brimmed hats and hiking boots, (*except Aunt Charlotte, whom has never been spotted wearing anything on her feet but a pair of mules*), they hop in the car and head towards the coast. Leaving the Russian River Valley, the three sisters travel the winding country roads westward and hail farewell to the valley's morning fog as they ascend the clear skied hills above the small town of Cazadero. Clear, cold running creeks run the curved course of a snake's back at the bottom of steep canyons. Shadowed woods are thick with wild pigs and shy porcupines. An hour and a half later the car stops in a cloud of dust. Where the paved road ends is where the vineyards and another type of lifestyle begins. A pristine landscape filled with tall trees as far as the eye can see, the very same which has now supported six generations of Charles, greets them in maternal fashion.

The sisters hike through their vineyards, noting the progress of the young vines and calculate the crop load for the upcoming vintage. Followed by a little discussion of how many payments are remaining on their Agri-loan, they sit down beneath the shade of a lofty redwood grove to enjoy their lunch. From a nearby thicket a doe and her twin fawns silently watch the three intruders. The soft sound of a cork leaving its bottle sighs distinguished over the din of blue jays screeching in the trees overhead. The feathered friends are not thrilled by the prospect of a picnic so near their nests. The sisters see now that it was a blessing that their father made the conversion from sheep ranching to viticulture, as these

vintners picnics are much more enchanting than having to grapple with 100 pound spring lambs in dust shrouded corrals while forcing worming pills down their throats. Plus, livestock never stay where you put them.

The end of one generation can lend a certain charm to the next. The customs out there have not changed much in so many decades and part of my grandfather's charm lies in his succinct timing of delivering humor. This along with his love for fun is probably why he and our wine maker, Helen Turley, get along so well. One day my grandfather had gone out for a drive through the countryside, paying visits to his neighbors living off of the main dirt road which runs directly atop the ridge. He stopped in at the Marcassin vineyard hoping to catch a visit with Helen. While turning his 2-wheel-drive pick-up around, it got stuck on the steep gravelly slope above the gate. Having been born and raised in these hills my grandfather still managed quite well at balancing his 87-year-old

*Cheers, Julianna Martinelli Spring 2003*