



### **Three Sisters & A Matriarch on the Goldi Locks Ridge**

The growing year of 2005 was like the hidden debauchery inside an old time movie. Mother Nature whisked her weighty cloaks in late spring and early summer, raining down upon the rows and rows of tilled hedges like a mistress gone mad. Grape farmers across the land looked upwards at the sky above and frowned, then began to curse solidly as June 15th appeared with its citizens running along sidewalks beneath black umbrellas. The Grand Dame was way out of date. Was this Seattle? No!! This was sunny Northern California farm country. The continued wickedry was heard in the chuckles of the Gods and Goddesses as late June finally grew hottish, and steamy July was the resulting baby of perfect camping weather. Farmers' daughters, granddaughters and nieces sat around the campfire all those final summer nights at the Charles Ranch, wearing nothing but short shorts and dampish bathing suit tops with not a chill in mind. While marshmallows and chocolate bars turned into S'mores, some falling on the bare ground beneath toddlers' feet, the grapes on the ridge tops above basked in the remaining heat of the day.

The month of August appeared with its long white cape of ethereal fog. Folks looked upwards and exclaimed, as their black umbrellas were still drying behind the front seat of their SUV's, "Where did June & July go? We didn't get a summer and now it is almost over!" August, with its cape of smoky white, shrouded the hills and dales, and the grapes nestled in their mother's arms longer than normal. "Is this normal?" I asked my father. "Normal? We don't know any longer what normal is in the farming business," he replied. This last year's harvest started a good two weeks later than it had in 2004. In '05 we began picking on September 6th and didn't finish until October 31st. It was a ghoulish extension of an already long season of anxiety for grapegrowers, but despite the sweat on a farmer's brow, the rains held and the grapes ripened beautifully.

Two days before Halloween, my brother Lee, my best buddy Christine, and I sat in a picnic circle in *Three Sisters Vineyard*. This little vineyard was planted by my mother and her two sisters and sits next to her distinguished elder, the *Charles Ranch Chardonnay* vineyard. This matriarch of the *Goldi Locks Ridge* was planted by my grandfather, George Charles, in 1982. (*The Goldi Locks Ridge is so named because of its ideal location for growing Burgundian varietals. It is the second ridge inland, lying only 1 ½ miles from the Pacific coast. The first ridge is too cold, the third ridge is too hot, but the second ridge is just right.*) Three green plastic chairs and table sit beneath the redwoods in anticipation of the three Charles Sisters regular visits. The sun was warm on my bare legs and the Chardonnay bunches hung like long golden offerings to the Gods. We three pals ate grilled prosciutto panini, a wild rice salad of dried cranberries and papaya, a bar of Scharffenberger milk chocolate, and some corn candies, with a bottle of *1999 Charles Ranch Chardonnay*. Meanwhile, Lee's two dogs raced through the vineyard looking for rabbits. As soon as the pair disappeared over the hill, a big old grandmother jack rabbit appeared not six feet from us. As she sauntered past our relaxed repast, she slightly turned her long eared head at us, as if to scoff at the inefficient job the dogs were doing. It was strange to see clusters of

grapes still hanging on the vines this late in the season, but as we sat and ate and talked, chuckling as the great rabbit lobbed past through the vineyard, we were reminded that you cannot alter the magic that Mother Nature commands. Like an old black and white movie, no matter how much color you try to add, Mother Nature will always prevail.

In these outer reaches of western Sonoma County Lee's cell phone would not connect to service. As he held the small metal device in his hand pondering the blank screen, a big black bird lighted upon a grape stake and rang out her noon time caw. Watching her shiny black wings glisten in the sun, I told Lee and Christine that I hoped cell phones would *never* work out here. Lee stuck his phone in his breast pocket, leaned back in his plastic green chair, smiled contentedly as the late October sun warmed his long legs and said, "Another day at the office."

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