



Chico's Hill

~ The story of transition from horse pasture and pig pens, to a remarkable Syrah.

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As many folk are already aware, Helen Turley is our wine maker and has been doing her magic at Martinelli since 1993. Someone whom has remained mostly behind the scenes is her very talented husband, John Wetlaufer, with whom we work closely in technical matters regarding the actual viticultural and farming aspects of our vineyards. His intense knowledge and passion makes Mr. Wetlaufer the guru of clones and rootstocks, and the master of locating and declaring choice planting sites for specific grape varieties. One warm spring day back in the year 2000 as my father, Lee Martinelli, Sr., and John were hiking around in Jackass Vineyard, (*I do mean hiking as it is quite steep*), John gazed along the far line of timber against the skyline and spotted a small steeply sloped green pasture. It was bordered by an old wire fence. A simple lean-to rested at the bottom of the hill. John waved his arm at the easterly facing abandoned pasture and pronounced, "That, is a Grand Cru site for Syrah." The very next week at the winery I overheard my father talking on the telephone in his adjoining office. I jumped from my chair and asked, "*You are going to plant grapes on Chico's Hill?*" Well the rest is history. But let me tell you a little about ol' Chico before I delve into the technical aspects of this new vineyard and inaugural release of the wine.

Chico was my childhood horse. I paid for him when I was ten years old with money I had made working in the vineyard and from selling my 4-H market lambs at the Sonoma County Fair. He cost a whopping \$150. I did not have a real concept of money yet, but looking back I don't think I overspent as he was the gentlest kind of soul. Chico was a skinny old retired rodeo horse and I imagine that he had very few good memories of his past, before he came to live on the little hill above Jackass Vineyard. He was bay colored, a Morgan-Quarter Horse cross, and carried a wicked permanent trail of his past imprinted on his body. A deep scar ran over his face just above his muzzle where a halter had been left on too tight and for too long. Even from the eyes of a little girl, I thought Chico was the sorriest looking horse I had ever seen, with his big furry ears, Roman nose, scrawny neck, and boney back. But, he had the largest deep brown eyes that captured me, and I loved him terribly. Chico was a great old horse. He never bit nor kicked and always stopped and stood perfectly still whenever I fell off him, so as not to step on me. Once, after a big fall, I lied on my back with the wind knocked out of me, and couldn't move for some time. He stood over me and stared me straight in the eye until I was able to stand up again. When I finally stood up he put his muzzle against my stomach and blew softly from his big soft nostrils. He shared his special hill with my market lambs and my brother's 4-H pigs. These smaller livestock often stood under Chico's belly, using him for shade and taking advantage of his swishing tail in order to keep the flies off.

The Chico's Hill vineyard has a great soil profile which consists of fractured rock. Fractured rock makes great growing conditions because the rock warms the earth by the early morning sun, stimulating vine growth. In addition, rain water penetrates the soil depth easily and is a very well drained ground. Chico's Hill is an easterly facing slope with great sun exposure and good air flow. The landscape is long and narrow, approximately a 45 degree slope, and is actually shaped like a horse's nose. Row direction is very important and will affect sunlight interception and grape quality. The rows are oriented in a north-south direction to equalize sunlight exposure on both sides of the canopy morning and afternoon. To prepare the site for planting, we used a winged tine, ripping the earth 24 inches deep to encourage root growth for the young plants. To reduce excessive disturbance to the site, the ripping follows the future vine rows exactly. The distance between the vines is one meter, equating to approximately 2000 vines per acre. For vine training we installed a vertical trellis system with fruit wire sitting 22 inches above ground level, encouraging consistent ripening of the grape clusters. This Syrah vineyard produces only 1 ½ tons of fruit per acre. The ridge runs north-south, facing the same direction as our Jackass Hill Zinfandel vineyard, but at a slightly lower elevation. The two vineyards are only 150 yards, as well as 100 years age, apart from each other and enjoy the same soil type.

Chico's last days were truly a greener pasture than what his rodeo life had been, but he never lost his spunk. He was known throughout the hills of Forestville for jumping over anything I put him up against, including fallen logs with a five foot girth. Once he even scaled a fence of his own accord because he missed his lady love, Whisper, when they had become separated. When it came to racing the other horses in town, not a one could ever beat him. When he put his head down and ran like the wind, I stuck like a bur in his thick black mane. Chico was not much to look at, but he was my Seabiscuit.

2005 Chico's Hill Syrah ~ 95 points ~ Robert M. Parker, Jr. *"... exhibits aromas and flavors of ground pepper, bacon fat, blackberries, and camphor. With terrific stuffing, a beautiful texture, and a long finish, it can be enjoyed over the next 7-8 years."*

Julianna Martinelli
Farmer's Daughter