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Summer 2012 REPORT >

Tom Garrett ▼

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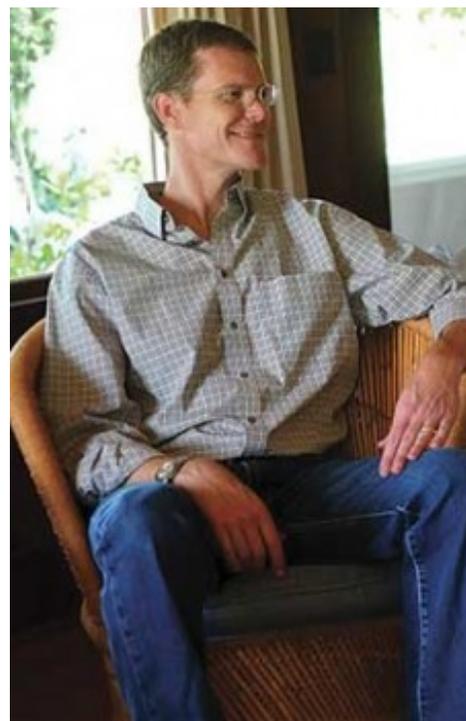
Owner and Winemaker
Detert Family Vineyards
Walnut Drive, Oakville
500 case production

Interview by Diana H. Stockton

Martin Stelling acquired what today is Detert Family Vineyards in 1943, at the same time he was buying up the surrounding vineyards of To Kalon estate developed by Hamilton W. Crabb in the 1870's and 1880's. Although the Detert vineyards were never part of Crabb's holdings, the family knows Crabb was buying fruit from it for his renowned To Kalon wines in the 1870's. After Crabb's death, his family held onto the property as it suffered the depredations of phylloxera and Prohibition until it was sold to Martin Stelling. In 1949, Martin planted 17 acres of the property to Cabernet Franc, perhaps the earliest large planting of this variety in Napa Valley.

After Martin's unexpected death in 1950, certain assets had to be sold for estate taxes. Mrs. Richard Detert was a friend of the Stelling family and had been looking for property in the area. She was very happy to buy such a beautiful spot but had only wanted a house, not one with a large vineyard. Mrs. Detert promptly gave her children the responsibility of looking after the vines (which were still too young to bear). At her death, her son Gunther received the Cabernet Franc half of the vineyard and her daughter Gabriele "Gabe" Horton, inherited its blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon.

To acquaint himself with and then improve his ability to oversee the vineyards, Gunther read all he could about vine care and winemaking. He and his wife, Marie-Louise, took the wine



Photograph: Priscilla Upton

appreciation classes offered by NWWLA, and his growing interest in the organization lead him to serve as its president for three terms. Gunther then chaired the book committee for twenty years until his death in 1994.

Michael Wolf Vineyard Services manages the Detert vineyard; Horton Vineyard is managed by Gabe's grandson, Graeme MacDonald. Fruit from both vineyards, however, is sold to Robert Mondavi Winery for its Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve program. When Gunther was once contemplating changing varieties, Robert "Bob" Mondavi made him promise to keep the Cabernet Franc. Bob said he would pay Gunther the same price for Cabernet Franc as he did for Cabernet Sauvignon. Gunther agreed and he and Bob shook hands.

Not all Gunther's fruit went to Robert Mondavi Winery, however. The legendary home winemaker Norman Mini would occasionally make a barrel of home wine for Gunther as he would for Gunther's very good friend Milton Eisele from Milton's vineyard—both wines much sought after in their day. And every year Gunther's grown daughters Cappie and Sandy would make a barrel each of a house red for Cappie Garrett's family in Santa Rosa and Sandy Cover's family in Palo Alto. Throughout Tom Garrett's childhood, every summer his mother, his Aunt Sandy, his grandparents, and all their friends would pick, sometimes gleanings, sometimes dedicated rows, and there would be a big party—a harvest lunch. Then his family would drive home over the hill to Santa Rosa to de-stem and crush the fruit with a hand-cranked de-stemmer and pour the must into food-grade garbage cans to ferment. Tom says they kept a dedicated toilet plunger on hand for punch downs, which he or his brother John might be called on to do at any time. After fermentation the new wine went through a wooden basket press into barrel, the barrel. Tom says there were usually enough carboys full of topping wine around, too. Much the same process went on in his aunt's house in Palo Alto with his cousin, Bill Cover. The first wine Gunther's daughters made in 1974 medaled at the Sonoma Harvest Fair.



Photograph: Priscilla Upton

After college in Vermont, Tom came back to California to work for the Wine Spectator as an intern in its Tasting Department in San Francisco. It proved to be a tremendous experience for Tom— the department continually tasting new wines from Washington, Oregon, Australia, and New Zealand as well as California. After the internship, Tom became tasting coordinator for the editorial staff's weekly tastings and began writing about California wine industry events for the magazine, in print and on-line.

From the tastings, Tom developed his preference for a certain wine style he calls halfway between Old World and New World. The wines he had first found most exciting were big and jammy ones from Barossa Valley, Australia and the b-i-g Napa Cabs. Then his preferences changed. Taste was now more about balance and structure. The secondary characteristics of soil, minerality—the non-fruit flavors, became appealing and important. Tom recalls the energy of those wines he tasted at work. He liked the wonderfully ripe quality of wine made from California fruit, but says, "focus must be on balance, on an elegance in the wine."

And in 1999, that focus persuaded Tom to leave Wine Spectator, move to Napa Valley and go to work for Ehren Jordan, the winemaker at Turley Wine Cellars assisted by Thomas Brown. After two years at Turley, Tom spent harvest and the winter of 2001-2002 with Joseph Phelps Vineyards, and the rest of 2002 with Robert Mondavi Winery. In the fall of 2003 he was hired by Revana Family Vineyard, where he is now its managing winemaker, with Thomas Brown consulting.

Tom made his own Cabernet Franc from Detert fruit in 1996. An acre of the vineyard was planted to Cabernet Sauvignon in 1997 and

Tom continued to make wine from the family and other vineyards in the valley. In the year 2000, Tom, his brother John, and their cousin Bill started Detert Family Vineyards “as our pledge to continue the traditions of the Detert family name and its association with the wine variety, Cabernet Franc.”

Their wine label was designed by Kristen Throop, with Combustion Creative in Santa Rosa—Kristen's very first wine label. The Detert family requested it be done in an old wood block, etched style. In her design, Kristen incorporated an image inspired by the head-trained vines from an original group planted in 1949 and still growing.

Tom says he has learned much more about the Detert vineyard, in understanding all its different parts since 2000. Sadly, when his grandfather died in 1994, he had taken his knowledge of it with him. The vineyard is on the alluvial fan that forms Oakville Bench. Like To Kalon, the Detert and Horton vineyards are renowned for their drainage. Mike Wolf says Detert Family is the first vineyard of those he manages to dry out every year. Tom says you just need to knock the weeds down once with an in-line hoe plow. They don't grow back. The vineyard is farmed sustainably—they do spray for the European grapevine moth, and the vines are in excellent health.

When asked about the characteristics of Cabernet Franc, Tom readily answers that it is herbaceous, smelling of ripe, sweet tobacco and ripe sage. With its aromatics come forward fruit and savory qualities not found in Cabernet Sauvignon (Detert Family makes an estate wine from each variety). Cab Franc differs from Cab in its tannin structure and is different on the palate. Tom feels the wine also handles a greater variety of foods, like the sweet spices of Indian cuisine.

From 2000 to 2007, Detert Family Vineyards was a custom crush client of Copain Wine Cellars in Santa Rosa because Wills Guthrie, Copain's proprietor, is a friend of Tom's from Wine Spectator days, and Tom and his family were living in Santa Rosa. In 2008 and 2009 the wines were made at Raymond, and since 2010 Detert Family Vineyard wine has been made at Revana Family Vineyards.

Because Tom, John, and Bill all have day jobs—John works for a data recovery company in San Francisco and Bill is with a family real estate business in Petaluma (after working for Premier Pacific Vineyards)—a 500 case-production suits the three just fine. Their wine is sold to a mailing list and has distribution in a few states, “the ones the three of us like to visit,” laughs Tom. He and his wife KC have three boys aged nine, five and two. Tom says the boys are definitely interested in the family business and that there is even a clone of Detert Family Cabernet Franc under discussion with the Department of Plant Sciences at UC Davis. The legacy of Detert Cabernet Franc appears to be flourishing.

