

Grower Profile: Frank Leeds



Vineyard: Chavez & Leeds Family Vineyard

Owners: Frank Leeds & Lauren Pesch

AVA: Rutherford

Varietals we use: Petite Sirah for Jacob Franklin

Back Story: When asked how he met Ray and Nancy Coursen, Frank Leeds can't remember. Ray isn't completely sure, either, but he thinks it might have been while he was the winemaker at Whitehall Lane Winery, which borders the Chavez-Leeds vineyard. What they do agree on, maybe thanks to the ancient paper file tucked away in the old foreman's house, now serving as the vineyard's office, is that the first purchase Ray and Nancy ever made from Frank was two tons of Petite Sirah. The transaction took place on September 16, 1990. Frank remembers it was the start of a tradition of handshake deals that lasted for years. Today, the Coursens buy four tons of Petite Sirah from vines that are 45 years old. The grapes are used for the Jacob Franklin label. "We've always had a little piece of vineyard here for Ray," Frank said.

Why It's Unique: The Chavez & Leeds Family Vineyard, which is made up of 40 acres of Rutherford Bench soil, is all organic and completely dry farmed. While Frank feels the most important part of cultivating wine grapes is terroir, he acknowledges that the grower can maximize or minimize the vines' potential. Part of this, he said, is knowing which varieties to plant in which soil, and part is working *with* nature, not against it.

In the Chavez & Leeds vineyard that means planting Cabernet Sauvignon in the property's mid-fertility bale loam soil in the southern part of the vineyard, Cabernet Franc in the loam and clay, Sauvignon Blanc in the clay and Petite Sirah in the strongest soil of all because it is a weaker vine. He also believes that organic and dry farming makes the vines stronger and more sustainable because the roots are trained to dig deep to find the water and nutrients they need. Because of this they are heartier, more vigorous and more self-sufficient, making them less susceptible to disease and drought. His family's vineyard has

always been farmed this way, a practice passed down to each generation and revered throughout the valley. In April 2013 Frank was named Napa Valley Grower of the Year for his commitment to and leadership in sustainable practices, agricultural preservation and community focus.

Deep Roots: The ranch was purchased in 1878 by a man named Theron Ink, who planted the original vineyard in 1880 and 1881. In 1926 Frank's grandparents, Apolonio and Emily Chavez acquired it and added to the vineyard with Petite Sirah and Zinfandel. Over the next several decades the ranch saw some changes as many of the vines were replaced with walnut trees during prohibition, only to be returned to grapes starting in the 1930s and continuing through the 1950s. In 1984 Frank's Uncle George, who had been overseeing the vineyard operations, passed away and Frank, his brother, David, and sister, Victoria, formed a partnership and took over the property with Frank acting as managing partner. For the next six years, Frank maintained his job as an aircraft mechanic while learning everything he could about dry and organic farming from his venerable Uncle Roy.

Frank and his eldest daughter, Lauren Pesch, now manage the ranch together, following the same practices as the generations before them and improving upon them whenever they can. Because they are recognized as a family of organic grape growing pioneers, they are often looked to for guidance by others in the industry. Frank and Lauren manage many vineyards beyond their own through their company, Leeds and Pesch Vineyard Consulting.

Fun Fact: Despite being grape growers, Frank's grandmother was in favor of prohibition and wanted to pull out the entire vineyard and plant it to walnut trees.

Ray Says: Frank Leeds and I have been working together since 1990 and Frank has become known as one of the premier organic growers in Napa Valley.

What the critics say about our most recently scored vintage from the Chavez & Leeds Family Vineyard:



92 Jacob Franklin 2009 Chavez-Leeds Vineyard Petite Sirah (Napa Valley)

Reviewed by Steve Heimoff, Wine Enthusiast Magazine

The vineyard is in Rutherford, and the wine shows the dusty tannins that this commune is famous for. They're an integral part of the palate experience, along with lush, plush blackberry, plum, charred meat, dark chocolate, black pepper and anise flavors. Impressive for the way it tackles Petite Sirah's rustic character and imposes true Napa elegance. Drink now—2017