



A GROTH VINEYARDS & WINERY HISTORY

You might say Groth is a story of right time, right place. Dennis and Judy Groth came very close to realizing a dream — buying a premium vineyard in the heart of wine country. The vineyard had a reputation for world-class grapes, and at the last moment ... the deal fell through. The vineyard was Les Pierres in Sonoma, known for its premium Chardonnay.

“The moment that everything changed,” recalls Dennis “was when the phone rang and Napa realtor and grape farmer, Ren Harris, told me I had to drive over the hill before I made any final decision. Judy and I took his advice, and we drove from Sonoma to Napa via the Oakville Grade. When we reached the top, we stopped and looked down on spectacular sea of vineyards. Curiously, the vineyard we bought from Ren is one that we saw that moment, and every time we drive over the grade we think of that day.”

The year was 1981. The 121-acre purchase was the Oakcross Vineyard planted by Justin Meyer and Ray Duncan from 1972 to 1974, in the heart of the Oakville appellation. It was prime Cabernet Sauvignon land, planted by masters. The grapes found their way to Justin’s Silver Oak wines in the ’70s and to other successful Napa Valley wineries.

“It was a life changing investment for Judy and me,” Dennis recalls. “We were not grape farmers, but we were serious wine consumers who loved and had consumed our fair share of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon over the years. The greatest wine I had ever tasted in 1981 was the 1968 Beaulieu Private Reserve. Before we committed, we needed confirmation that the land would produce something possibly that special.”

In 1978, a neighboring winery, Villa Mt. Eden had made a Cabernet Sauvignon from the MacWilliams’ vineyard. “We had tasted that wine, and when Ren Harris pointed out that it was from a neighboring property, we began to feel we could make a great Cabernet Sauvignon here. We knew that if we could make a wine that good, we’d be happy.”

Dennis and Judy, natives of the Santa Clara Valley, had been married for 20 years when they bought the vineyard in 1981. Dennis had worked up the ladder to partner at Arthur Young & Co., and was one of the key architects that built Atari, a consumer electronic company, into a \$2 billion company. In 1984, Atari was sold. In 1985, Dennis, Judy and their three children moved from the Santa Clara Valley to Napa Valley and never looked back.

“We wanted to keep the business family-owned and operated,” says Judy Groth. “What we couldn’t have anticipated is how much the kids would play a role in our business.” Daughter Suzanne Groth joined the winery in 1998, and in 2017, she took the helm as president. “I hope that those who visit the winery in Oakville feel the element of family,” says Suzanne. “The family works actively in the business every day. We live and are raising the next generation in the vineyard.”

Looking back, Dennis admits, “Groth’s first vintages of Cabernet Sauvignons immediately put us on the map. Our first Cabernet was the top wine in its Class at the Orange County Fair, as was our Chardonnay. Robert Parker gave our 1985 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon the distinction of California’s first 100-point wine. Despite the acclaim, we have worked very hard to fine tune the quality of each of our wines over the last three decades.”

Michael Weis served as Groth’s winemaker for 23 years and was integral in the replanting of the vineyard, expansion of the winery and re-launch of the winery’s Reserve Cabernet. In 2014, Cameron Parry joined as the winery’s third winemaker, working closely with Weis, who stepped into a Winemaker Emeritus role. Parry was promoted to Director of Winegrowing in 2016, signaling the family’s intrinsic understanding of the vineyard’s tie to making the best wine. “Great wines,” says Parry, “need the influence of an experienced winemaking team. But they really need great vineyards.”

Over three decades, the family dramatically changed how they grow grapes, replanting in the 1990s and becoming one of sustainability’s early adopters. Dennis served as chairman of The California Wine Institute when it embarked on what became the Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices, adopted in 2002.

From the start, they were in for the long haul. “Making great wine takes a large investment of patience, experience and dedication, not to mention dollars,” says Dennis. “Between 1999 and 2003, we replanted all 54 acres of our Cabernet Sauvignon in Oakville.” Each block was replanted with new clones, rootstocks, and trellising techniques based on the family’s 22 years of experience, and the experience of world-class

viticulturists. In 2007, the winery completed the expansion of the winery’s barrel cellar, crush and fermentation areas. “All this is toward one purpose — to make the best wine the vintage will allow,” added Suzanne.

“These changes also made us re-evaluate our commitment to quality,” says Dennis. “For instance, we decided that we would not make a Reserve bottling of Cabernet Sauvignon from our property until the new vines were on line and proved themselves.”

“We passed over the 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 vintages for the Reserve program. The lost income to the winery exceeded \$5 million. Yes, we could have labeled our best wine ‘Reserve’ those years,” he admits, “but that wasn’t what the family wanted. They wanted a site-specific wine and were willing to make the sacrifices to get there.”

Dennis’s commitment to the winery’s success extended to his industry’s welfare as well. He served as President of the Napa Valley Vintners and Chairman of The Wine Institute. This service included years as a board member of both trade groups, as well as a Trustee of the Queen of the Valley Hospital in Napa. Suzanne also sees this as useful, taking over her father’s seat as a Board member on the Oakville Winegrowers Association in 2015, as well representing Napa, as a District Board member of The Wine Institute in 2008.

Established in 1982, Groth Vineyards & Winery produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay from Napa Valley’s Oakville AVA. In special years, Groth produces a Reserve bottling of Cabernet Sauvignon from a small lot in their 121-acre Oakville Estate. They also own and operate the 44-acre Hillview Vineyard south of the winery in Yountville, the source for the winery’s Chardonnay and Merlot. The winery remains family-owned and operated, and is led by Suzanne Groth, who is preparing the winery for the next generation.

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