Celebrating Our Family Legacy
35 Years of Spottswoode Estate Cabernet Sauvignon
By Beth Novak Milliken, Excerpt from the 2017 Newsletter

When we began the 2016 harvest, our Mom was very much with us and actively engaged with crush activities—she loved the fall season. Very, very sadly, we finished harvest without her. Mary Weber Novak died unexpectedly on the 25th of September, due to complications from the chemotherapy treatment she was undertaking for lymphoma.

Entering the new year without our mother, the true matriarch of Spottswoode, we feel both deep sorrow and profound gratitude. 2017 marks three milestone anniversaries: the 135th anniversary of the establishment of our estate, the 45th anniversary of our family’s move to St. Helena, and our 35th anniversary of making Cabernet Sauvignon from our estate vineyard. My family and our Spottswoode team know that she resides in our hearts and spirits as we move forward, continuing the legacy she started so many years ago. It is an honor to be the next generation, building on the history of this great Napa Valley wine estate.

Where to start? Our family story in Napa Valley began when we moved here in 1972. Our Dad, Dr. Jack Novak, had an adventurous spirit and wanted to raise his five children in an agricultural environment, and so the idea of moving away from San Diego County, where he had been raised, was formed. Mom was more than along for the ride—she was as excited about the change as he. She had developed an affection for Northern California as a student at Dominican College and then at Stanford, where she and my Dad met and from which they later graduated. They found St. Helena while visiting college friends who had moved here from Los Angeles.

Our parents, who knew nothing of grape growing or winemaking, had a few parameters as they looked for our new home. They needed a house large enough for five children. Dad wanted a vineyard in which to drive a tractor and work outdoors.

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And Mom was an avid gardener. And so, fortuitously, they chanced upon the historic Spottswoode Estate, with its sprawling lawn and Victorian gardens, on the west edge of town. The in-town location was serendipitous—it meant that Mom didn’t have to drive us everywhere anymore! Spottswoode was a bit run down, as growing grapes here in Napa Valley in the early ’70s was difficult, at best. The valley was still undiscovered and wine grapes did not command the same prices that they do today (the varietals planted post-Prohibition were not of the noblest pedigree, to be sure). Our parents brought the hope and energy that come with relative youth to this change in their lives and to this historic property, and so the transformation began.

In the summer of 1972, my parents’ energies were directed to fixing up the historic home, and we lived in the red tank house on the property until we were able to move in to the main house. Mom got to work in the garden, happy as she could possibly be, loving the mature plantings and happily embellishing them. Attention then turned to the old, post-Prohibition vineyard, which was replanted between 1973 and 1975. It was a great time—all was unfamiliar and exciting, and my four siblings and I really enjoyed exploring our new home and community. Which was very different back then. Very small, very rural, and quite insular—there was no fine dining, no traffic, little outside influence. There was even a Sears catalogue store downtown! Land here was, thus, quite affordable, making it possible for a family like ours to make this bold move.

By 1975, with much money being spent on this new endeavor and no income, Dad had to go back to work as a doctor. He was an Emergency Room physician at St. Helena Hospital for two years, until his unexpected death of a heart attack in 1977, at the age of 44. We had been here just five years.

Widowed with five children, our mother carried on with incredible strength and grace, keeping us here at Spottswoode, which she had already grown to love. Even with surgery and a year of chemotherapy after a diagnosis of breast cancer in 1978, she persevered, taking care of our family and the estate. She recognized that she had a livelihood here, as she and our Dad had sold grapes since their arrival, and so she determined that she would continue to do the same.

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In the earliest days, Spottswoode sold some Napa Gamay to Robert Mondavi, with the remainder of the grapes going to the Napa Valley Cooperative Winery. At that time, what mattered was not varietal, but, rather, red or white, and sugar content—in the early ‘70s, Gallo took most of the wine that was produced at the cooperative. We replanted the vineyard to Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Sauvignon Blanc, and then sold our fruit to Frog’s Leap Winery and Charlie Wagner at Caymus. After my Dad’s death, my Mom continued to sell grapes from our estate vineyard, first to people like Joe Heitz, Mike Robbins (Spring Mountain), and St. Clement, and then to our good friends, the Duckhorns and the Shafers. It was the latter two who felt our Cabernet Sauvignon fruit was special, and who encouraged her to make wine from our estate. She listened to their advice, and in 1982, ten years after our move here and five years after our Dad’s death, my Mom realized their shared dream by making the first vintage of Spottswoode Cabernet Sauvignon.

Tony Soter joined Spottswoode in 1982 as winemaker, and he took over the farming of the estate vineyard three years later. Tony set the tone for our wines—he recognized the intimate connection between grape growing and winemaking, and introduced the idea of organic farming. We were the first in Napa Valley to employ these forward-looking practices, and the second winery to be certified by the CCOF. There are many, many things that I admire about my Mom, among them her willingness to adopt organics based upon her trust in Tony. As you can imagine, farming organically in 1985 must have sounded a bit like voodoo, particularly to a person born in 1932. Yet Mom was open to and supportive of Tony’s pursuit of stewarding our land respectfully and responsibly. We are very proud of this. And we are passionate about caring for our land.

We custom crushed for our first 17 years, bringing the wine home for barrel aging. From 1982 through 1990 our barrels were kept in the basement cellar in our home—everything smelled so good there in those days! Our offices were upstairs. Things were busy. And then they got busier. With the increased activity, Mom realized that she wanted her house back, and so we sought a new location for our winery.

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An incredible opportunity presented itself in 1990. We were fortunate enough to be able to purchase an historic winery property literally across the street from our vineyard. We seized upon this, moving our barrels to the pre-Prohibition stone cellar. We restored the old farmhouse on the property which later became our winery office and tasting room. Our plan to build a production facility was delayed by the discovery of Phylloxera in the late '80s, which compelled us to focus our financial resources on a vineyard replant, a process that started in 1991 and finished in 1998. We were finally able to build the new winery facility in time for the 1999 harvest, thus becoming a true estate winery. It was a major milestone for Spottswoode and momentous accomplishment to realize the dream we had held for so many years.

I first came to work with my Mom in the fall of 1987. I had attended UCLA and had not considered returning to St. Helena, but spending my junior year abroad in Salzburg, Austria had planted a small seed, and a sense that wine might be my passion took root. After college, I lived in San Francisco selling wine for a broker that represented wines from both Napa and Sonoma. Based upon this work experience and my love for wine, Mom called me and asked if I might be willing to help her out a few days a week at Spottswoode. Two days a week quickly turned into full time, so my husband, John, and I moved to St. Helena in the spring of 1988. I have been here ever since, helping my Mom build Spottswoode. It has been an incredibly rewarding experience. Finding one's passion and being able to give energy and enthusiasm to something one believes in wholeheartedly is a true gift. I feel very, very grateful for this opportunity, and for the fact that I was able to work so well and so closely with my Mom for 29 years. 2017 marks my 30th anniversary of working at Spottswoode.

My sister, Lindy, joined us at the winery in 1992. She had been working in the apparel business and the idea of putting her sales knowledge and skill toward selling our wines in the wholesale sector was both daunting and intriguing to her. Lindy has done a remarkable job at Spottswoode for many years now, building lasting relationships with our accounts and forging strong partnerships that enable our wines to be placed thoughtfully around the country in a market that has become increasingly crowded.
This year marks her 25th anniversary of working at Spottswoode. Mom, Lindy and I have loved working together to nurture Spottswoode, along with the help of our truly incredible winery and office team (I wish to note Peah Armstrong, our Vice President & CFO, who joined my Mom and me very early on. She has been an integral part of Spottswoode’s success since 1988). The make-up of our group has changed some over the years, but we have always been cohesive and collaborative, and we are now stronger than ever. The experience has been and remains exceptionally rewarding.

We have an amazing legacy in Spottswoode. Our parents brought us here without a grand plan—just a vision for a more land-based, rural environment in which to live and raise their family. Had anyone penciled this move out, they might have considered it pure folly—yet our Dad was among those who had this innate sense that things would work out. And our Mom was very strong and determined. And kind. And deeply loved.

My two sisters, Lindy and Kelley, my two brothers, Mike and Matt, and I recognize how special Spottswoode is—something extraordinary has been created here. And we are committed to working together to continue to honor our parents’ dream so that our children have the chance to carry it forward to future generations. We are truly fortunate to have this common bond, a family legacy to collectively nurture in honor of our parents, Jack and Mary Novak.

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