

VINE HILL WINERY™

The History of Vine Hill

By Nick Guerrero and Laura Ness

The property that today bears the name Vine Hill Winery has a long and fascinating history going back to the days of early California statehood. Located off Vine Hill Road, the Vine Hill District was established by George M. and John W. Jarvis and a host of fellow land and timber speculators during the land grab that occurred in the area during the 1850s and 1860s. Gold had caught speculators' eyes but gold turned to green as timber rights quickly became the attraction in the Santa Cruz Mountains area.

The Jarvis brothers are credited with creating what is today called the Vine Hill District. While several properties were bought and sold during the 1860s, the earliest land transaction in the Vine Hill area occurred in August 1863 between George Jarvis and A.J. Cloud. Jarvis purchased 160 acres for “\$750 lawful money of the United States of America” from Cloud, or about \$4.69/acre. This parcel became part of the original Vine Hill. By 1867 the Jarvis Brothers and their associates collectively owned 2,000 acres. The Vine Hill District, as described in a letter to the editor of the Santa Cruz Sentinel newspaper on April 6, 1867, by George Jarvis, told how the area received its name, “The name we have chosen for this locality, by unanimous consent, is Vine Hill. It is situated on the headwaters of the Branciforte Creek (Black Burn Gulch) and about two miles N. E. of Scott’s Valley. It embraces about two thousand acres of land, and is owned by ten or a dozen persons, nearly all of whom have vineyards.”

By the 1870s the Jarvis brothers were making 33,000 gallons of wine a year and nine of the county's 16 winemakers were located on Vine Hill. The area became a prolific source of fruit — more than could be handled by the small number of winery facilities. Overproduction was followed by a general depression in 1876 which brought hard times to the infant wine industry in California. It would be the first of many boom-bust cycles that lay ahead.

John Jarvis stayed on at Vine Hill, but his brother George sold his share, and moved his "Jarvis Wine & Brandy Co." to Santa Clara. Subsequently, banks foreclosed on much of the Vine Hill properties. John had some of his holdings repossessed by the bank at this point, but in 1877, managed to buy back some land from a business associate, Alfred Lay. He named the land Union Vineyard, which is today's Vine Hill Winery.

The Directory of Grape Growers of 1891 listed John Jarvis's Union Vineyard production as Zinfandel, Riesling, Sémillon, Mataro (Mourvedre), Petite Pinot, Sauvignon Blanc, Malvoisie and Balaret, totaling 63 acres, five of which were table grapes. By 1884, Jarvis and other Santa Cruz producers were winning awards for their wines. Santa Cruz County vineyards were held up as examples to the rest of the state and vine acres increased fivefold in the Santa Cruz Mountains in the 1880s as a result. In the 1890s, the Vine Hill vintners decided to put their efforts into making limited production premium wines. Unfortunately, this shift coincided with the arrival of the deadly Phylloxera root louse, which had already devastated the vineyards of Europe. This was followed by a disastrous fire in the area in 1899, which destroyed many vineyards and wineries.

John Jarvis died in 1892 at the age of 60 and left his Union Vineyard to his son Henry. Henry planted hardy Zinfandel vines on the property in 1914 with the help of a local farmer named Frank Locatelli. The mountain vineyard was continuously farmed before and after prohibition and the vines planted by Jarvis and Locatelli in the early 1900s survived until David Bruce replanted the vineyard in 1968.

In 1935 the Pesenti-Locatelli family became the new owners of the mountain vineyard. The name Pesenti came from the marriage of Felicita Locatelli to Anthony Pesenti in 1924 after her husband Frank passed away in 1921. The family managed the vineyard until 1965 when Joe, the oldest Locatelli son, and his mother sold the property to a land speculator. Joe had been selling grapes on the property for nearly 30 years when David Bruce expressed an interest in the property. Winemaker David Bruce began purchasing Zinfandel from Joe in the early 1960s. After purchasing the property in 1968, he pulled out the old Zinfandel vines the next year and replanted the vineyard in Pinot Noir.

During this same time, a young restaurateur from Los Angeles with a passion for great wine, Ken Burnap was on a mission to find the perfect Pinot Noir site in Northern California. He hadn't exactly planned on purchasing a site: he just wanted to find the ideal place from which to source the ideal Pinot Noir. He was exceedingly fond of David Bruce's wine and especially liked David's 1968 vintage Zinfandel from the mountain vineyard (today's Vine Hill). Of course David Bruce is world famous for his Pinot Noir and one afternoon while David and Ken sipped Pinot Noir at the mountain vineyard, they began to discuss Ken's passion for Pinot Noir. As they looked out from the mountaintop to the horizon and the Monterey Bay below, David mentioned that he was going to sell his mountain top vineyard. The vineyard was planted to Pinot Noir and it was going to produce its first harvest in 1975. After doing soil samples and climate research, Ken concluded David's site was indeed the perfect spot, and he acquired the 26 acre Vine Hill property in 1974. The vines David planted in 1969 and 1970 were the Wente clone, own rooted. Ken later related the story of how he shared the results of his first vintage from the property, the 1975, with David: "I always knew this would be a great place to grow Pinot," Bruce remarked as he tasted the 1975 Pinot Ken had made. It did indeed garner much critical acclaim, and in fact, wine writer Jerry Mead told Ken his first Pinot was his best.

After years of growing and producing Pinot Noir at the Vine Hill property, Ken sold it to a group of people in 2004. The new owners — Nick and Celeste Guerrero and Nat and Laura Simons, and an additional 9 couples — are now working at being good stewards of the land and the winery. Their intent is to carry on the long and storied legacy of grape growing and winemaking in this historic and venerable Pinot Noir region of California. They are proud to be part of the vanguard that is assisting in the endeavor to raise Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir to the recognition of other renowned California regions such as Russian River, Los Carneros, Santa Lucia and Santa Rita. The Santa Cruz Mountains region has its own rich wine history, and Nick and company hope to participate in writing the next chapter.