



Francis Mahoney's Saga

He pioneered California Pinot Noir 35 years ago and is still going strong.

QRW STAFF

Thirty-five years ago, Francis Mahoney stood on his newly purchased land southwest of the city of Napa and looked out upon rolling, emerald-green Carneros Valley pasture dotted with cattle and sheep. Then he planted Pinot Noir and soon broke ground for the first new winery in the region since before Prohibition.

From the same place today, Mahoney sees a landscape lined with vineyards, including his own Mahoney Ranch vines clinging to the undulating ridgeline on the valley's north side. Now he farms 160 acres of family vineyards, both here in this northeastern quadrant of the Carneros appellation, and on the Sonoma side, down close to the wetlands of San Pablo Bay.

With Pinot Noir the red-hot red in the marketplace, Mahoney espouses a "back to the future" expression of the grape. "We hit our stride with Pinot Noir about 1977-78," he recalls. "It was New World wine, but not in a Cabernet Sauvignon style. Carneros was all about bright, rich, cherry fruit, spice, a mid-palate textural reward and good acidity."

But Pinot producers lost their way in the 1980s, he says, embracing new oak to make wines that overpowered food. "We made Cabernet-like wines to please the critics rather than defining our style in terms of soil and climate. And all that oak sucked the fruit out."

San Francisco born, Francis enjoyed an upbringing befitting a Mahoney, attending St. Agnes Elementary School, St. Ignatius High School and the University of San Francisco. He left college to travel in Europe where he developed a lifelong love for red Burgundies, then honed his palate working at Connoisseur Wine Imports back home.

"What attracted me to Burgundies was their statement of silkiness," he remembers. "They were not big or forceful, but totally balanced and elegant."

Classes in oenology and viticulture at U.C. Davis and a job at Mayacamas Vineyards followed. In 1972, Francis and his wife, Kathy, bought land along Carneros Creek, and the next year, built a winery named for it.

Not long after, working with U.C. Davis, he planted 1.5 acres with 20 Pinot Noir clones and selections, 11 from the university and nine noncertified industry selections. In three major phases, that clonal study has continued to this day, and it established Mahoney not only as a Pinot pioneer, but as a resident authority as well.

Mahoney laughs at such notions, relating how when he first employed drip irrigation, he handled the lines like rigid pipe, dutifully moving them from row to row. Then he recalls waiting impatiently for celebrated grower Nathan Fay to deliver Cabernet Sauvignon from the Stags Leap District. In a time long before cell phones, Francis worried about the overdue load until a tow truck appeared pulling Fay's disabled grape truck up to the scale.

Mahoney still considers Carneros Creek's 1977 Truchard and 1978 Fay Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignons among the best wines he ever made. When the conversation turns to Pinot, Francis reflects on his first encounter with a wine industry legend.

He had phoned André Tchelistcheff, asking for advice. André appeared on his doorstep, and they talked, tasted and whiled away the day. Tchelistcheff proved as generous with his knowledge as with his time. A few days later, a handwritten note from

André arrived in the mail, thanking Francis for his gracious hospitality. "Today that would likely be a hefty consulting invoice," Francis offers, "but I know a fee never occurred to him. That was Carneros in those days."

These days Mahoney focuses on the future as he travels between his estate vineyards. Mahoney Ranch comprises 44 convoluted acres of vines 180 feet above Carneros Valley. Here the warmer climate and steep exposures produce intense, perfumed Pinot with black cherry and strawberry fruit.

Consistent Pinot is not easy to come by on this terrain; the north wind can play havoc with fruit set on hilltop vines, while results are more abundant and less erratic in protected swales. "Hillside plantings are romantic, but it's a love/hate relationship," says Mahoney. "There can be no crop on top, some in the middle and a lot at the bottom, making it hard to achieve uniform ripeness."

Hard to predict, this vineyard can produce stunning results. At its warmest reaches, the western exposure yields dark Syrah that exudes blackberry and black tea characters. Francis notes that his winemaker, Ken Foster, a 15-year Pinot Noir veteran from David Bruce, told him the site "demanded" Syrah.

Gavin Vineyards carries Kathy's maiden name and consists of six acres on the valley floor planted in 1973 on alluvial clay soils near Carneros Creek. Shy-yielding vines produce a Chardonnay that Foster does not put through malolactic fermentation nor into new oak. The result is a bright, lemony, supple wine with a refreshing mineral finish. Mahoney's comment: "Before Ken made this style, I hadn't drunk our Chardonnay in years."

At the opposite extreme of Carneros, the Las Brisas Vineyard is 110 acres swept by cool bay and Pacific Ocean breezes — the latter from a gap in the coastal range — that gives the property its name. A decade ago, Mahoney began planting over 80 acres of Pinot Noir in a mosaic of 15 clones and selections on six rootstocks.

"This is an old stream bed laid in with decomposed sandstone, silt and gravel, plus black clay in one corner. It's unusual

soil for Carneros," Mahoney comments. "Across the vineyard, the elevation drops a mere 50 feet, flowing downward so gently that both ends of a 105-vine row yield virtually identical fruit." He says Pinot Noir loves the lighter, well-drained soils.

Ever the pioneer, just as Pinot has become so popular, Mahoney is eagerly exploring exotic varieties at Las Brisas, including the following:

Vermentino is a principal white grape of Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily and Liguria, where the Mahoneys discovered it while visiting a branch of Kathy's family in 2000. "It presents a bright, floral, white peach nose," Francis comments, "and a crisp, clean Sauvignon Blanc finish, perfect for fresh seafood."

Montepulciano, widely planted in the hills of central Italy along the Adriatic, distinguishes itself in Carneros, producing a deeply scented red wine with blackberry, plum and violet aromas, firm acidity and pleasant tannins.

Tempranillo, the versatile Spanish red grape, caught Francis's interest when he visited his daughter at school in Madrid. It offers a "brighter, more refreshing wine" than he had anticipated, and displays good depth of rich cherry and berry fruit, supple textures and structure without hard tannins.

In 2001, Mahoney stepped away from the winery to concentrate on Las Brisas. When sales lagged, he returned to management in 2003 and began working with Ken Foster. The next year, he sold the Carneros Creek label and launched his "best of the best from estate vines" project. The artisanal Mahoney Vineyards released its first wines in 2005. Finally, last year, Francis reversed roles with custom crush client Michael Mondavi's Folio Wines, selling his winemaking facility but still making his wines there.

Now in his fourth decade of redefining his role and his craft, Mahoney partners with Foster to make well-balanced wines that express site and varietal character with fruit foremost and oak restrained. And Mahoney Vineyards is extending that style to a host of exciting new varieties. ♁