

Learning the vintner's art from the ground up

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Amelia Morán Ceja met her husband, Pedro Ceja, when both of them were Mexican-born teenagers whose families had immigrated to Napa Valley. As Hollywood might have it, both were working in the same vineyard as teens. Today, Amelia is president and chief ambassador for Ceja Vineyards, and Pedro and his winemaker brother, Armando, are co-owners.

But the Ceja story is more than just an Oprah moment.

Located in the Carneros region of Napa and Sonoma, Ceja is a serious winery making excellent wines for high-end prices. Although they have been growing their own grapes since 1988, winemaking did not start until 1999.

Energetic and fast-talking, Amelia told participants in a wine dinner at Corner Bistro in Brandywine Hundred recently that as a 12-year-old just arrived from Mexico, she "fell in love with merlot grapes being harvested near what is now the Robert Mondavi property" and knew she wanted to some day be in the wine business.

Having lived in a village in Jalisco state with no electricity or running water, she went on to graduate from college, as did the Ceja brothers. Husband Pedro studied engineering - still his day job - while Armando took up enology and became a vineyard manager. In the early 1980s, the family bought its first 15-acre plot for \$400,000 and planted its first grapes.

Today, Ceja makes a Vino de Casa house white blend and a red blend (each about \$25 locally), merlot (\$35), pinot noir (\$50), syrah (\$40), plus a chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon not featured at the tasting.

My favorite was the delicious pinot noir - ripe, pungent, earthy, full-bodied, with lots of texture. The merlot was more in the traditional Bordeaux style - restrained fruit, brambly flavors, and tones of ground coffee.

The grapes come from the 113 producing acres of the four Ceja vineyards, all located in the Carneros-Petaluma area, but they sell about 90 percent of the fruit to other wineries such as Rombauer and La Crema.

"We've grown from making 750 cases in our first vintage three years ago to 5,600 cases currently," she says, noting that the enterprise is moving towards "sustainable agriculture," as are many wineries in the region. Feedback from the critics has been very favorable, and "people are going nuts for the pinot noir," Amelia beams. "But it's difficult to have a flagship wine when everything is selling well."

