

Amelia Morán Ceja: Award-winning winery rises from humble roots, perseverance

By Jeff Quackenbush, North Bay Business Journal - June 30, 2008

Passionate and fearless could equally describe Amelia Morán Ceja, president of small upscale wine producer Ceja Vineyards.

The first Mexican-American woman to run a wine production company, Ms. Ceja is proud of her cultural and culinary heritage. But it took determination for the family to move from working as immigrant farmworkers with meager means to owning vineyards and making wine.

Inc. Magazine named Ms. Ceja among seven business people nationwide as the publication's Entrepreneur of the Year for 2004. In 2006, Ms. Ceja was named Woman of the Year for the state's Second Senate District, which covers Napa, Lake, Mendocino, Humboldt and northern Sonoma counties.

She was born in the mid-1950s in Las Flores, a small farming village without utilities in the western Mexican state of Jalisco. From age 3, Ms. Ceja started developing her love of cooking with fresh local ingredients from her grandmother.

"I was eating gourmet food all my life and did not know it," she said.

In 1967 at 12 years old, her father, who had been working as a migrant farmworker in the U.S. for 12 years, obtained travel documents to settle the Morán family in the Napa Valley.

Fatefully, it was the same week in September that the Cejas moved to the valley with their sons, including her future husband, Pedro, and Armando, Ceja's winemaker and viticulturist.

She picked up English readily in middle school in St. Helena. On weekends and during summers she would spend time in the vineyards with her family or tagging along with her father as he delivered grapes to wineries. At age 14, she returned to Mexico to attend an exclusive boarding high school for girls her older sister had attended. During vacations, she went to the homes of classmates around the country and developed a love for the land of her birth.

"I realized that I came from such a rich culture that was started thousands of years ago," she recalled. "Dad wanted me to learn to be comfortable in my own skin."

At U.C. San Diego she had an academic scholarship and was far ahead in her coursework, so she pursued degrees in literature and history and had enough time for a bevy of electives, such as genetics, numerous cooking classes, biology and Mandarin.

She also worked three nights a week as a server at a fine restaurant in La Jolla and eventually, at age 20, was put in charge of working with alcoholic beverage representatives.



Ms. Ceja graduated in 1978 and landed an unpaid internship as a nutritionist at Eisenhower Medical Center. Pedro Ceja studied engineering at Napa Valley College then got a job in Silicon Valley.

In 1980, these longtime family friends were married, and Ms. Ceja went to work for The Grapevine Inn, a Napa Valley restaurant now called Brix.

The Ceja family pooled its resources and purchased 15 acres of property at the site of the current visitor's center in 1983, with a \$280,000 mortgage at an adjustable interest rate starting at 21 percent.

By 1985, the financial strain was too much.

In a deal with Domaine Chandon, for whom five Ceja sons had worked, the Cejas could get rootstock to plant the vineyard in exchange for sale of the grapes. The first grapes were planted in 1986, and Armando Ceja started making a barrel of wine a year in 1988.

In the mid-1990s, Ms. Ceja took a hospitality and administrative job for Rutherford Hill Winery. Three years later she joined Jaeger Vineyards to learn vineyard administration.

By the time the Cejas were ready to start the wine company, Ms. Ceja was working, raising three teenagers and attending wine business classes at Napa Valley College. In fact, in one of her classes on writing business plans she had help from other participants to develop a 10-year plan and architectural drawings for the winery, documents that are referenced today.

The winery produced 750 cases with the first release in September 2001. For the first two years, Ms. Ceja was primarily the one selling the wine at shops and restaurants in Sonoma and Napa counties. The brand got a boost the following year when nearly 100 of the country's best wine writers voted Ceja the Best New Winery at

The Wine Appreciation Guild's annual press tasting.

In 2003, the winery made 2,000 cases, and Ms. Ceja began courting distributors to take the brand outside the North Bay. The following year, when 4,000 cases were produced, the wine club started. Last year Ceja Vineyards made 10,800 cases and plans to produce 12,000 cases from this year's crush.

"To grow to a 10,000-case winery this rapidly shows you need to have good grapes and wine, but the whole marketing scenario is one of the toughest things to drive," said Will Nord, who was vineyard manager at Domaine Chandon when the Cejas needed help. "She pulled that out of the hat after talking to a lot of people on how to do that."

Ceja Vineyards opened a tasting salon in downtown Napa in March and is planning to build a winery and culinary center on the original Carneros property.