

Grower Feature:

FLORENCE VINEYARD, ROCKPILE



Carol has a standing "hot" date with Jack Florence, Sr., every year at sunrise on the day they harvest his vineyard in Rockpile. This "mad affair" started back in 2000, the year Carol started the winery and first purchased Zinfandel from Jack. They were connected by Kent Rosenblum, a mutual friend and a winemaker also purchasing Jack's Zin fruit. Jack and other growers in the as-yet-undefined Rockpile area were in the process of getting government approval of Rockpile as an American Viticultural Area (AVA), and they needed noteworthy winemakers to use their high elevation grapes for some stellar wines that would get a lot of publicity for the quality of the region. A part of the approval process is that wines made from the proposed AVA must be shown to have "distinctly different character" from the wines of nearby appellations, like Dry Creek Valley, which Rockpile overlaps. Carol's 2000 Rocky Reserve Zin won a unanimous 5-Star Gold medal from the prestigious Orange County Fair judging, which all but guaranteed Rockpile a spot on the appellation map!

Certainly the wine is outstanding, but who is Jack Florence, Sr., and why is his vineyard in Rockpile so special? Before he started growing grapes in Sonoma County, Jack Florence, Sr. was a born and raised New Yorker, with a degree in Nuclear Engineering from Brooklyn Polytechnic University. He spent over 20 years in that industry, developing nuclear energy as a resource, with most of his time spent traveling to and from Asia. Over the years, it was increasingly difficult to spend so much time away from his wife Fran and their three kids. "It was in the early 1970's when a very important client in South Korea insisted on a face-to-face meeting on Easter Sunday. I attended the meeting that morning and left quickly to board a plane back to California so I could celebrate Easter Sunday dinner with my family." He made it just in time, thanks to the International Dateline, but he arrived home exhausted. "That was the day Fran and I decided it was time to make some changes."

We Want to Buy a Vineyard...

After their enlightening Easter Sunday, they shifted priorities from career and money to finding a home where their family could feel more connected to the land, but still make a living. They researched citrus and other farming options, until Jack came across an article in the LA Times about growing grapes in Napa Valley. The article was written by Andy Beckstoffer, founder of the legendary Beckstoffer Vineyards. Jack and Fran knew nothing about wine, but they were sure that growing grapes was the change they sought for their family. Never impulsive, Jack started researching grape-growing and the wine industry. He and Fran started visiting wineries and tasting rooms, asking lots of questions that he is now (forty years later) embarrassed to have asked, like "how do you pronounce this?" ...but he had to start somewhere. While they were researching their new direction, Jack was offered a big promotion, but it was a job that would

take them away from California to the corporate office in Cleveland. He turned it down, and immediately set his course for Sonoma County wine country.

After struggling to find their dream property in Sonoma County, they decided to take an ad out in the paper. It was titled, "WE WANT TO BUY A VINEYARD," and it worked! A broker contacted them and showed them a vineyard in Dry Creek Valley. They took one look and decided to buy what is now Florence Vineyard in Dry Creek Valley, currently the source of Carol's Dry Creek Petite Sirah. Their second vineyard located in Rockpile was to follow over two decades later.

The adVINature begins...

At the beginning in Dry Creek they hired a vineyard manager, and according to Jack it was "not a happy marriage". In what has become quite a stereotypical relationship, the absentee owner versus vineyard manager, the owner doesn't know what's going on but he keeps getting big bills, and the manager is doing work the owner thinks is easy but is definitely not.

When their first vintage came around, Jack was extremely excited, and he even invited Fran's dad to come work the harvest with him and his sons. The four of them rode up to the vineyard in Jack's sporty blue Mazda and planned to pick grapes alongside the vineyard crew. He drove his car into the vineyard and opened the trunk to load bins as the boys and his father-in-law filled them with grapes. At the end of the first row, exhausted and ready to quit, they looked up and the vineyard crew was rows ahead of them, almost finished picking the entire vineyard...and his vineyard manager was laughing at him.

The vineyard manager didn't last much longer after that, because Jack and Fran moved their family up to Dry Creek Valley, and Jack left his career to work the vineyard himself full-time. It was quite a leap to go from nuclear engineer to grape farmer, but Jack made the transition at the age of 49. He started pulling

weeds...tons of weeds on cold, foggy mornings, and then he moved on to pruning and tying the canes onto trellises, and stripping suckers off of the trunks while he was on his hands and knees. He would rope his sons into helping as much as they could, ultimately sparking a passion for the vineyard in Jack, Jr. that eventually would take them all up to Rockpile.

Rockpile officially became an AVA in 2002, thanks to the collaboration of the Florence and Park families who spent 2 years putting together a proposal for the government to recognize Rockpile as a very unique and special place.

Carol and Jack continue to meet for their harvest

rendezvous up at Jack's vineyard every year, both doing their part to spread a passion for the AVA. Carol's Rocky Reserve Zin, Rockpile Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, and Rockpile Reserve Petite Sirah are great examples of the elegant style that Rockpile fruit can produce.



Carol & Jack Florence, Sr. during Harvest 2013.



Rockpile Welcome. Photo by Carol Shelton.

ROCKPILE AVA

There is one road to Rockpile, and if you ever get the chance you should take it. There are no wineries or tasting rooms, so if you want to taste wine you will have to stop in Dry Creek Valley on your way up or down (yes, it's tough work!). The terrain is just as the name says – steep, rocky slopes that are literally a rock-pile, albeit a pile that is mountain-sized. The southern end, which overlaps the Dry Creek Valley AVA, is wrapped by Lake Sonoma (see map), which brings cooling breezes to the higher elevations during the hot afternoons that can roast the vineyards in Dry Creek Valley below. Rockpile Road crosses a bridge over the lake, then as you drive up and up, and around and up some more, it becomes clear that you are headed to a very special grape-growing region, whose vineyards must be planted at elevations no lower than 800 feet.

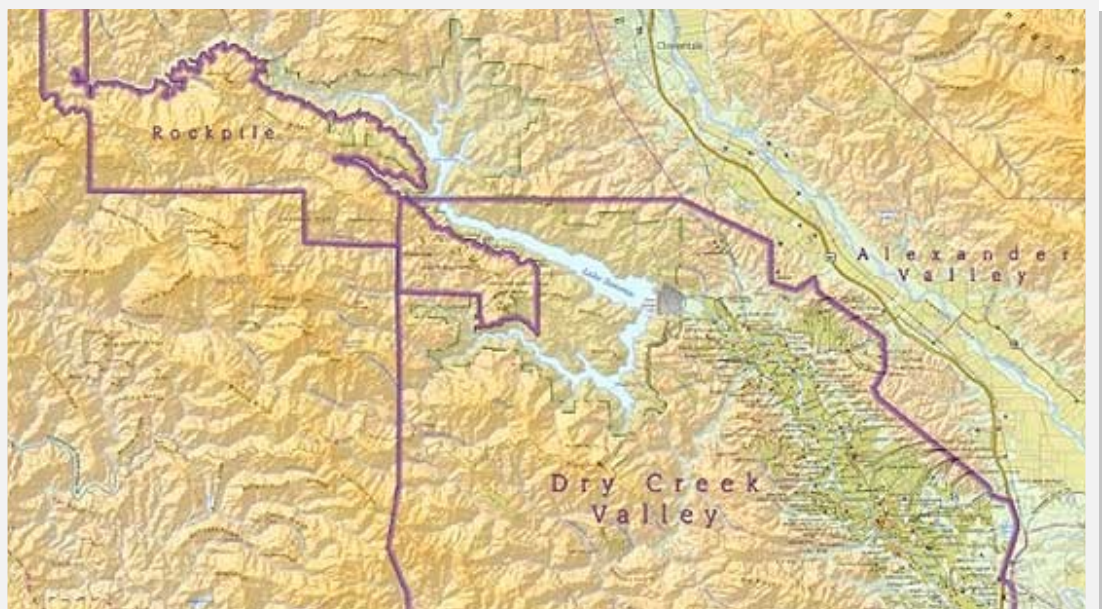
Rockpile sounds like an unromantic name for this prestigious grape growing region, but the rugged name can be traced to that of a Pomo Indian village which thrived over 200 years ago at the base of Rockpile Peak. The colorful history of the region continues with controversial Sonoma County Sheriff, Tennessee Carter Bishop, who founded Rockpile Ranch in 1867, and is said to have used prisoners from the county jail to carve out a road along the mountain ridge above Dry Creek Valley for over 15 miles up to his front door, which they called "working on the Rockpile." Bishop actually planted some vineyards here in 1872, but they died off when he found out how much work viticulture is! Other denizens of Rockpile have included an infamous outlaw from the Jesse James gang, and actors from the Bonanza television series, who briefly invested in a sheep and cattle ranch on the site of the Sheriff's Ranch.

For decades, Rockpile was a popular hunting spot, but vineyards made a big return to Rockpile in 1992, when Rod and Cathy Park planted their Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard in the northwest end of the appellation, at 2000 foot elevation and far from the lake, but closer to the Pacific Ocean. Carol's

Rockpile AVA Quick Facts:

- ◇ Total Acreage: 15,000; 160 planted to vineyards
- ◇ Elevation: 800' minimum to nearly 2100'
- ◇ Average Temperature: 10-15° cooler than Dry Creek Valley
- ◇ Average rainfall: 50-73"
- ◇ Wind Influence: Constant breezes of 3-5 mph; more commonly, the onshore flow feeds the area with sustained gusts of 10-15 mph.
- ◇ Soil composition: Generally loam to clay loam with a red brown color due to the higher oxidation. It is only 12 to 24 inches deep in the best of viticultural locations.
- ◇ Varietals Grown: Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petite Verdot, and several heritage Porto varieties.

Quick Facts are from
www.rockpileappellation.com





first vintage from their Rockpile Vineyard was 2006, when she made Rockpile Reserve Petite Sirah, and a year later she added the 2007 Rockpile Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon to her lineup of outstanding Rockpile wines. These wines are true to the elegance and minerality that is a hallmark of all Rockpile wines.

Two years later in 1994, Jack Florence, Jr. planted his Zinfandel vineyards in the southeastern end of the appellation at 1400 feet. Ironically, the Zin used to bud Jack's vines came from a vineyard planted during the 1870's, making it a contemporary to the first planting by Sheriff Bishop up in Rockpile. That Cloverdale vineyard is called St. Peter's Church, and is one of the oldest surviving vineyards in California today, providing the scion wood for most of Rockpile's Zin vines. Jack's parents,

Jack and Fran Florence, planted their vineyard with these same cuttings shortly after their son in 1997; their vineyard has been the source for Carol's Rocky Reserve Zin since the first crop of fruit off the vines in 2000.

One day late in 1999, Jack Sr. and Jack, Jr. tasted their Zinfandel and knew they had something special. They decided that if ever a region deserved to have its own appellation, it was here. That day they made it their goal to get the Federal government to create a Rockpile AVA, a process that is time consuming and requires coordination and agreement among all the vineyard owners and growers in the region. They believed in the quality of their grapes and went to work with their neighbors.

It took exactly 24 months for Rockpile to become an official American Viticultural Area (AVA), starting in the spring of 2000 and becoming official on April 29, 2002. Jack, Jr gathered all the information and data on the soil, topography, climate and maps of the region. Cathy Park researched the history of Rockpile, and Jack Sr. was the liaison with the government and the coordinator of all the growers in the area. Kent Rosenblum and Carol each made wines from the Florences' fruit that brought great attention in the press...and voilà!...the Rockpile AVA was approved! The region sprawls over 15,000 acres, but most of that is so steep and rocky that it is not farmable—currently only about 160 acres are planted with vines.

It is an AVA defined by shallow, rocky soils, and high elevation that places it above the fog line and affords full exposure to the more gentle morning sun. Its proximity to both Lake Sonoma and the Pacific Ocean gives it a cooler, more temperate climate, making grape hang-time average a couple of weeks longer than the nearby Dry Creek Valley. As a result, the grapes are more evenly ripe in both flavor and tannins. The red wines that come from Rockpile are complex, elegant and dense, with supple, cocoa powder-like tannins and a sense of minerality that is very typical of high elevation fruit on shallow soils. Carol's Zin, Petite & Cabernet from Rockpile have these qualities in abundance!

