

Robledo Oral History Transcript

Reynaldo Robledo, Sr. first came from Michoacan, Mexico to the Napa-Sonoma area with his father to work in the orchards and vineyards in 1968 at the age of 16. With incredible fortitude and ambition, Reynaldo took advantage of every opportunity to learn the craft of viticulture and acquire business acumen. While supporting a family of nine children, he started his own vineyard management business. His company now manages 700 acres plus 200 of his own. Reynaldo Robledo, Sr. is the first Mexican migrant worker in the United States to open his own tasting room and winery.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

My name is Reynaldo Robledo. I was born in Zamora, Michoacan, Mexico. I came to the United States when I was sixteen years old. I came with my father. I was the oldest of 13 brothers and I had to help support the family, we were very poor. Later on I brought, one by one, the rest of my brothers and sisters to California. I worked with my father in the fields for two years in 1968 and '69. I came first to Calistoga and started pruning vineyards. When I came, I was use to tropical weather, and it was 38 degrees in the morning, I didn't expect that. The first two weeks were very difficult for me. I lived in a labor camp. There was no insulation, there was a wood stove for heat. Conditions have changed a lot now. When I came, there was no training at all, because nobody had the space for it. Right now, there is a lot of training in pruning techniques and such, and we get much better results. The pay is much better now too. When I started working in 1968 I was making \$1.10 an hour and on Sundays I would get overtime and make \$1.50 an hour. I worked every Sunday, and every other day, as long as it wasn't raining, and I would work at least ten hours a day. When I started having more responsibilities I worked even longer hours. But, I never looked at my watch to see when I could go home. One time I remember, during harvest, I worked twenty-nine hours straight, I was the foreman in charge of three work shifts.

I was here only three months before I started having more responsibilities; I was the boss of my father and my uncles and cousins. My boss spoke Spanish, I followed him around, and after everyone went home I would stay on my own time so I could learn more. I helped the workers get better pay and I helped a lot with training the workers. I started offering classes twenty-five years ago, because, for those who want to make more money they have to learn more. Now I have people who are responsible for a few companies; and those people come to me and ask me a lot of questions. I train them on making cost analysis and

budgets and everything that is important for the vineyards, including the pruning and the grafting.

When I pruned the first plant, and when I planted the first vine, I wanted to know why there were two kinds of this one plant and three of that one. I began to study pruning and I found out that you can control a plant and you can predict how many tons you might get, if you are pruning the plants correctly. In 1982, I went to France to teach the French people grafting techniques. I think I am the first Mexican to go to France because everyone was surprised to see a Mexican there. The Marshall, here in Sonoma, recognized me for being the first Mexican migrant worker in California to establish a tasting room and winery.

I started my own management company in 1994. I managed two hundred acres then and now we manage 700 acres for a number of clients, plus my own 200 acres. The first ranch I bought was in 1984 and I named it Rancho Rincon, after my initials—Reynaldo Robledo. Rancho Rincon means small corner, it is an historical reference to General Vallejo. I investigated my roots, where Robledo comes from and found out that there is a town in Spain named Robledo and everyone who lives there are Robledos. I have nine children, seven sons and two daughters and everyone helps out in the business. I think that they will want to work together forever. My sons and my daughters designed a special label for me, in memory of when my wife and I married in 1970. After that, the second label is for everyone in the family, and each successive one thereafter is named in honor of the children from the first one to the last one. I married Maria in 1970, I dedicated one ranch to her that grows chardonnay and it is called Rancho Maria. Also, for the port we will have, I designed a label for her sixtieth birthday.

To have my family together all the time, that was my wish, that is what I wanted to do. They went to school and when they came home they always helped in the vineyards, and I think that is why they are still working with me. They have known since they were as young as seven that this is our work and that hard work pays off. Vanessa represents the winery, she is the President of the winery; Heldaldo represents Robledo Vineyards; and Everardo represents Robledo Vineyard Management. Everyone has some responsibilities. In the office and fields during winter we employ thirty to forty people, and during harvest season we employ over one hundred.

We have seven varietals—Sauvignon Blanc and Barbera from Lake County, in the Carneros appellation we have Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Merlot, and in Napa we have the Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Sonoma County has good wines. I planted every one of my vineyards. I chose the best combination of rootstock for the type of soil and climate, and the clone (the grape) I wanted to use. My wines have won gold medals. My Sauvignon Blanc competed with 166 wineries and I won the gold medal. At the California Fair I won a double gold medal for my Chardonnay. I received over 90 points on my Merlot, and also my Pinot

Noir won a gold medal in New York. And I have gotten good results with the other varieties too.

The important thing is that you must carefully select the rootstocks according to climate and type of soil for the clone you want to use, because, for example, there are hundreds of different kinds of Chardonnay and you need to pick out one. I learned through the years, I went to a lot of meetings, I also went to U. C. Davis, and also I donated my time teaching people at other wineries. When you want to learn, you need to work. This is what I did, I worked and I never stopped--and I continue to do the same thing. The reason I like to teach people is because I want them to know that if they want to do something, they can do it. Especially now, the pay is good, much better than years ago.