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Fall Bounty

Club Members Michael Oravec and Loretta DiChiro celebrate a happy harvest at their Mila Family Vineyards.

Image courtesy of Mila Family Vineyards



A Tale of Terroir

Exclusive Resorts Members and Mila Family Vineyards owners **Michael Oravec and Loretta DiChiro** find prime pickings in the Alexander Valley.

WRITTEN BY **MARK ELLWOOD**

Above: Loretta DiChiro and Michael Oravec at Mila Family Vineyards, which produces four stellar red wines and an Alexander Valley rosé.

WHEN OHIO-BASED real estate developer Michael Oravec bought some land just outside Healdsburg in Sonoma with his wife and business partner Loretta DiChiro, he didn't hurry to market with his first Mila Family Vineyards wine. In fact, it took 16 years for them to release their commercial vintages, which have just become available: a quartet of reds, heavy

on Grenache and classic Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as an Alexander Valley rosé. Oravec is proud of the painstaking approach they took to the winemaking. "You can go out there and buy grapes from someone else's vineyard, hire a winemaker, and make wine relatively quickly," he says, "but we wanted to control what and where we planted—the entire farming process."

He approached the vineyard exactly as he would have tackled a development project. "It's part of our mindset," he says. "When you buy a property, as a developer, you do a lot of due diligence." The great vineyards of Europe, Oravec points out, are hundreds of years old, so finessing a site in California that aimed to alter them in any way required patience. "It won't happen overnight if you want to do it right. We don't want to replant or refigure things, so we did upfront homework to get it right the first time."

One overarching inspiration is DiChiro's Italian family heritage, which included many farmers who tended their land in traditional methods, without chemicals. The couple knew that biodynamic winegrowing would be a much pricier approach, mostly since hand-weeding and hoeing replaces a truck trundling across the property and spraying weed-killer. Overall, the premium on operating costs hits roughly 25 percent. Yet to achieve the goal of working the land the old-fashioned way, they didn't shun modern science at the outset. Rather, they embraced it.

The couple tapped Dr. Susan Hubbard of the Berkeley Lab to survey every inch of land before even considering planting a single vine (an apt approach, from a man who named his real estate firm Terra). Hubbard used an arsenal of high-tech methods—electromagnetic data and ground-penetrating radar, among others—to produce 15 different classifications for the soil, which are categorized on the basis of physical and chemical properties in their horizons, or layers. It was an almost forensic analysis of conditions, and

on the basis of that work, the couple pivoted between a half dozen or so rootstocks (from which new, above-ground growth can be produced), varying whichever would thrive best in the micro-conditions.

It proved a canny combination of old world ethos and new world know-how. The duo is now beginning to travel expressly to sell their wine, and utilizes their Exclusive Resorts Membership and Portfolio access as their base when in cities like San Francisco or New York. Having visited most of the Grenache-growing hotbeds around the world, Oravec is hoping to take a holiday to the last two he's yet to sample in situ—vineyards in Australia and Sardinia, which tussles with Spain for producing Grenache.

The developer-turned-winemaker might have finally launched his passion project for wide distribution, but he still wants to pick up tips from various global sites. "A major part of wine is the experience and the story," he says. "I always say there's over 100 decisions that go into making any wine. And you're always learning."

—milafamilyvineyards.com

Getting There

Located nine miles northeast of Healdsburg (about a 1.5-hour drive from San Francisco), and nestled between the Russian River and Gird Creek, Mila Family Vineyard's 54-acre wine farm is surrounded by forest and neighboring vineyards.

Planning Your Visit

Interested in a private wine tasting at Mila Family Vineyards? Call 330.730.5985 for an appointment, or visit MilaFamilyVineyards.com.

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From left: Source to sip at Mila Family Vineyards; Mila's Rosé of Grenache is a standout among boutique wineries.