



Bev Stenehjelm is a local wine enthusiast, author and freelance writer focused on the wineries of Santa Clara Valley. Bev wrote "The Wineries of Santa Clara Valley," a historical photo book published by Arcadia Publishing in 2015.

Martin Ranch



Dan and Thérèse, Owners

The two of you are the sweethearts of our wine region. How did you meet?

Dan: Back in 1983, I owned a couple of grocery stores, "Harvest Moon Markets" (one in Watsonville and one in Corralitos). Thérèse was hired while I was away.

Thérèse: I was going to Cabrillo College, living with my parents nearby and wanted a part-time job. I started out as a checker and very quickly was promoted to a manager. Dan mentored me in business management and the wine and flower business. We moved from selling jug wine to specific varietals and invested heavily in a flower department. Dan was a confirmed bachelor who didn't believe in dating the hired help. One day, after eight years of working side-by-side, it just hit me – I realized I had deep feelings for Dan. So I asked him, "Have you ever had feelings for someone but didn't know how to express it to them?" Dan replied, "yes." So I asked him who it was that he had these feelings for. I was shocked when he replied, "you!" Our courtship began and one year later we were married. Although our families and friends thought it would never work, we've been happily married for 26 years.

How did you get started in a winery?

Dan: I saw the need to diversify after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake caused major damage to my grocery stores. So in 1992, I decided to plant grapes on my property and sell them to other Santa Cruz Mountains wineries. While I managed the vineyard, Thérèse continued to manage the markets. And for the next ten years, we did very well with the Santa Cruz Mountains 'sweetheart' contracts that were in place which not only required a three-year notice of cancellation and automatically renewed – but which also paid a premium for our region's grapes. But one year, when one of our major customers backed out of their agreement to purchase a large order of our grapes – the same year there was an overabundance of grapes— we panicked, thinking, what are we going to do with all these grapes? It was our "aha" moment. We didn't like the feeling of losing control of our business. So that's when we decided to open our own winery.

Martin Ranch Winery, owned by Dan and Thérèse Martin, is located at the Southeastern tip of the Santa Cruz Mountains Appellation.

The lushest and most scenic of our region, Martin Ranch Winery is a South Bay paradise in our own back yard. Complete with its own lake, vegetable garden and acres of vineyards, the winery is tucked among the rolling green hills which surround them.

Like their award-winning wines, winemakers Thérèse and Dan Martin have a well-balanced partnership of working together. They each produce wine under their own unique label: Thérèse's label is Thérèse Vineyards and Dan's wine is under the J.D. Hurley label. With their intoxicating bouquets, Thérèse's wines have a refined elegance; fruit forward and dry. In contrast, Dan's wines are easy-drinking, rich and bold. Recently, they created a third label called Soulmate; a joint effort that celebrates their devotion to each other.

Martin Ranch Winery is open for wine tasting every first and third weekend (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) of the month.

You have one of the most beckoning wineries in the business. With lush views of the vineyards and surrounding hills, a vegetable garden and a picturesque lake. Was this planned from the beginning?

Thérèse: No, it just sort of happened! We figured it out along the way. We were totally broke for years. Had we been more structured with a master plan, we would have had a lot less stress.

Dan: In 2002, we got bonded and started making our wine in a rented space at Matt's (Fernwood Cellars, the winery next door). In 2004 we met Pasquale Benedetto who built our winery. At first we only produced Cabernet. But soon, we realized that we needed a white wine. We went from harvesting five tons to fifty tons of grapes in the span of three years.

Martin Ranch is located on the border of Santa Clara and Santa Cruz – which appellation do you identify with? What are the benefits of your location?

Dan: We are a solid Santa Cruz Mountains winery and also belong to the Wineries of Santa Clara Valley. Being on the east side of the mountains allows our Cabernet to do very well.

Thérèse is a super smeller and Dan; a super taster. Give us an example of what this means and how important these skills are in wine making.

Thérèse's ability as a super-smeller is invaluable when we do wine barrel work at the beginning of the winemaking process. At 58-62 degrees Fahrenheit, I can't smell anything at that cold temperature. But, Thérèse can. She can take a bung out of a barrel and immediately smell if there is any issue or problem that needs to be addressed. The first thing you do when you drink a glass of wine is smell it – so it is critical that the wine's aromas are pleasing.

Thérèse: Dan uses his super-tasting skills to accentuate the flavors in his blended wines – he can taste the nuances between a ¼ and a ½ percent.

Each of you makes wine under your own, unique label— Dan’s is J.D. Hurley and Thérèse has Thérèse Vineyards. Most recently, you’ve added a new label called Soulmate. What are the differences?

Dan: I like to say that I make cocktail wines – wines that are ready to drink now. They are softer and consumed at an earlier stage.

Thérèse: I make my wines to pair with foods. They have more acidity and can age for a longer period of time. Dan and I share in the winemaking process of our Soulmate wine. This wine is a classic Bordeaux style - containing the very best grapes from the Santa Cruz Mountains. Our Soulmate wines are to be shared with the most important people in your life. Savored with love and laughter, you’ll create an experience around the wine.

Thérèse is one of the first of women winemakers in the Santa Clara Valley to have her own label. Any insights for woman interested in the wine industry?

Thérèse: Kathryn Kennedy was the first female grower and winemaker in the Santa Cruz Mountains and then came Pam Storrs. I feel privileged to be in the company of these women. When I started winemaking it was more of a male dominated business. But now, there are many young female winemakers coming out of Davis. We’re also seeing a more balanced vineyard crew with more women on the team.

How did you learn to make wine?

Dan: My neighbor, Rob Fladeboe (a KRON4 newscaster), taught me the basics of making wine.

Thérèse: In those early days I used to tease Dan by saying it was just a bunch of guys getting drunk in our garage.

Dan: We started to get serious and that’s when I went to UC Davis. Therese and I exhausted all the wine courses they offered.

Martin Ranch Winery is one of the region’s top wineries; having received numerous awards and accolades. Which award means the most to you?

Thérèse: Among the many awards and accolades we’ve received over the years, the best ones are the compliments our customers give us about our wines and the people who serve them.

Dan: My favorite accolade is when people say, ‘I usually only like one or two wines at a winery – but here at Martin Ranch, ‘I like them all!’

We heard that Thérèse enjoys a vegan diet. What are some favorite pairings?

Thérèse: For health reasons, Dan recently joined me in eating a vegan diet. We eat a whole food, plant-based diet – with the least amount of processed foods. We don’t eat meat, dairy or fish. A white bean hummus with roasted pimento has a soft mouthfeel and pairs really well with wines with similar mouthfeels – like a Chardonnay or Viognier. Also, my recipe for Santa Cruz Mountains Bean Stew pairs perfectly with our recent Wine Club shipment which contains our Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignane and Pinot Noir. I like to match up the spices of the barrel and vineyard with the spices in the food.

Dan: A shitake mushroom risotto and a Cabernet is a great pairing.

You are both committed to giving back to the community. Any favorite organizations that you like to support?

Thérèse: We have a strong relationship with Community Solutions. It feels so good to be a part of a community that brings people up from the lows in their life. We’re privileged to support them and it is a great feeling to help people. Lisa DeSilva, one of our employees, is an amazing leader in this organization.

You recently made some significant improvements to your tasting room. Are any other changes planned for this year?

Dan: We’re transitioning to organic growing in the vineyard. This will allow us to use more of the wild yeast which helps create a sense of place or terroir, in the wine.

You have a dedicated crew of passionate people that help out around the winery. What are your team-building tips?

Dan: We have a dream team!

Thérèse: The best thing we’ve learned is to find out everybody’s strengths and then let them shine doing what they love best. We have open meetings with our employees where we share our business plans and revenue numbers. We sit and talk as equals. Every single person on the team is important - each one contributes to the final bottle of wine.

What should people know about Martin Ranch Winery?

Thérèse: When they come to Martin Ranch they know it is a place where they can be themselves. Our winery is a little retreat and a slice of paradise where people can enjoy nature and great wine.

Dan: We’re not snooty. Our employees are trained to respect everyone. We are customer service oriented to deliver 5-star hospitality.

Why are your club members so loyal, what does club membership offer them?

When Michele Swensen, our director of hospitality, came on board, that’s when things became fine-tuned. Michele brought her hospitality experience from Air France, Club Med and her own event company in New York. Michele helps make each visitor’s experience the best that it can be. We’ve built a community of people with our Wine Club. Friends see other friends in the club and it has become a viral thing. Some of our Wine Club Members have been with us for thirteen years – from the very start.

Any new goals you would like to accomplish in your winemaking or business?

Dan: We want to stay at our current level of producing 8,000 cases of wine per year and provide a good living for our staff. The question for us is how do we live and survive now? Everybody has good wine – so our focus is to have the best wine. Also, people want an experience when they visit wineries and hospitality is what the wine business has become.