

Vineyard of the year hails from Amador County

A scientist responsible for discovering the family ties of several varieties of wine grapes and a vineyard responsible for the rediscovery of the Sierra foothills as prime viticulture territory are receiving the California State Fair's top wine and viticulture honors.

Carole Meredith, professor emerita of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at UC Davis, is receiving the State Fair's Wine Lifetime Achievement Award. She was among early researchers to develop DNA markers for grapes, then used them to identify the genetic and geographic origins of numerous varieties.

A native of Wales who spent her formative years in Canada and California, Meredith joined UC Davis as an assistant professor in 1980 where she oversaw research in grapevine genetics, including the creation of a genome map now used internationally to identify genes that control disease resistance and fruit quality in wine grapes. Her use of DNA profiling has been instrumental in solving several longstanding vineyard mysteries, such as tracing the origin of the Zinfandel grape to Croatia.

The State Fair's 2013 Vineyard of the Year is being awarded to the Deaver Vineyard. The 300 acres of rolling hills is located in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley outside Plymouth.

Fifty years ago this coming harvest a Sacramento home winemaker bought some of the vineyard's Zinfandel and made a wine that caught the attention of key players on California's wine scene, setting in motion a revival of the region's wine trade, largely dormant since the end of the Gold Rush about a century earlier.

The first vines on the Deaver Vineyard site are believed to have been planted in the 1860s by John James Davis, a cooper whose son Joseph Davis married the widowed school teacher Amy Elizabeth Deaver in 1927 and continued to farm the spread. Her son Kenneth Deaver gradually took over the Davis farm, now tended by his son, Ken Deaver.

In 1963, Sacramento home winemaker Charles Myers visited the Deaver Vineyard in search of mission grapes, spotted an old stand of Zinfandel on the property, and began to make wine with its fruit. In 1968, one of his early wines caught the attention of Bob Trinchero of Sutter Home Winery in Napa Valley. Trinchero liked the wine so much he bought 20 tons of Deaver Zinfandel that fall.

The critical and popular success of Sutter Home's 1968 Deaver Zinfandel touched off a new rush to the foothills by aspiring growers and established vintners alike. Trinchero ended up buying one of the early modern wineries in the valley, Montevina, now known as Terra d'Oro, which continues to buy much of the fruit from Deaver Vineyard. Ken Deaver also uses grapes from the vineyard for his own eponymous brand.