
Name of the interviewee: Pedro Ceja
Date of the interview: October 21, 2011
Name of the interviewer: Steve Velázquez

Transcript audited by Velasquez on Aug. 27, 2020. False starts and repetitive verbalizations ("um") have been removed for overall clarity.

Pedro Ceja: – in the fruit harvest. In this case it – background –

Steve Velasquez: Very much like NPR.

Pedro Ceja: Yes.

Steve Velasquez: We don't always – we always like to have a quiet room, but sometimes it doesn't happen. But you know if we have – and when I was in Guanajuato we had the chicken and I – remember?

Pedro Ceja: Oh, yeah.

Steve Velasquez: And somebody selling – oh, the paletero guy with the **[inaudible]**
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[Crosstalk]

Pedro Ceja: Paletas?

Steve Velasquez: Yeah. Okay. Good morning, this is – my name is Steve Velasquez. I am here with Pedro Ceja on October 21, 2011 to do an interview for Latino Winemakers. Good morning, Mr. Ceja. For the record, could you please state your name?

Pedro Ceja: Good morning, Sir. My name is Pedro Ceja.

Steve Velasquez: Pedro – and when were you born?

Pedro Ceja: I was born in March 11, 1956. [1:02]

Steve Velasquez: 1956. And where were you born?

Pedro Ceja: I was born in a small town in Mexico. Aguililla is a town in the state of Michoacán in Mexico.

Steve Velasquez: Are you an only child?

Pedro Ceja: Well, one of only ten.

Steve Velasquez: Only ten?

Pedro Ceja: Yes.

Steve Velasquez: And who were your parents?

Pedro Ceja: My parents is Juana Ceja and my father is Pablo Ceja.

Steve Velasquez: And they were originally from Michoacán as well?

Pedro Ceja: Yes. They both are native to the State of Michoacán in Mexico.

Steve Velasquez: So, we're here to talk a little bit about Latinos in the wine industry, but also the journey of how you got to where your family, on the Ceja Vinyards are now. But first [2:00] we wanted to explore a little bit about your early childhood.

Pedro Ceja: Sure.

Steve Velasquez: Can you tell me a little bit about what Aguililla, Michoacán was like growing up?

Pedro Ceja: Michoacán in my opinion is a beautiful state. Part of the Sierra Madre crosses through the state of Michoacán and it has a lot of beautiful valleys and mountains and every – agriculture is very predominant. And so, I grew up in a small town of Aguililla. It'd probably be about six hours from the West Coast.

Aguililla is a – probably at that time it probably had about 8,000 individuals – 8,000 in population. And so, my childhood was spent in this small town – typical town where it had a small plaza, a large church [3:00] and a lot of donkeys, chickens, horses – a typical Mexican town.

Steve Velasquez: A typical Mexican town. Now, I understand your father was a Bracero, is that correct?

Pedro Ceja: Ahh yes. My father originally came to the United States under the Bracero Program as I recall in the early to mid '50s. In fact, probably a couple of years before I was born.

Steve Velasquez: And a couple of years before you were— we should step back. Were you – what order were you? You were the oldest? The youngest? The Middle?

Pedro Ceja: Yes, as I said I am one of ten and I'm the second overall and the oldest of the men.

Steve Velasquez: Okay.

Pedro Ceja: There are seven brothers all together, and three sisters.

Steve Velasquez: Very big family. So, your [4:00] father was pretty much then gone for many of your childhood years, is that correct?

Pedro Ceja: That part is correct. In his case he would come to the United States and spend two or three years, and then on any one given winter when work slowed down, he would go back to Mexico, spend up there a few months. I suppose have another child and start the cycle again.

Steve Velasquez: mmm-hum so what was it like growing – we're gonna pause it for one second.

Okay. We're back. So, what was it like – so we were talking about your father. He came back – what was life like then with him gone? What did you end up doing? [5:00]

Pedro Ceja: Well, it was very challenging because we obviously had an absence of a father, so my mother took the role of father and mother and basically the person responsible of the family. And as time went on the family grew and so she was very busy, and she would basically get odd jobs in different places. And also, we had a wonderful support of my grandmother, my mother's mother. She had a typical – the small tiendita where she would sell beans and rice and corn and, you know and a few things. And so I used to always go up there and assist her in as many activities as I was able at that age.

Steve Velasquez: mm ah-ha so you were busy selling [6:00] things to people at a little, early age?

Pedro Ceja: uh you know yes, I was. Besides working in the as the assisting in the small store, in Mexico there is that wonderful tradition that individual kids would basically become salesmen at a very early

age by basically getting a basket of oranges or various products and go to the plaza, go in front of the church and sell these items.

One of my aunts, she would make this typical gela- gelatinos. It was basically a gelatin. So, she would put them in this platter and we would go up and down the various streets and knocking on doors or anybody would go by and we would offer the gelatinas. At that time there were basically a salary [7:00] call it about 20 or \$0.25 a piece.

Steve Velasquez: Oh.

Pedro Ceja: And so, my aunt would put in about ten pesos worth of gelatinas in this charolas. We would go up and down the streets and throughout town and selling the products. And I started doing this at a very, very early age, probably six on up. By the time I was ten I was a better seller I can assure you, in relation to the other kids.

Steve Velasquez: And so, what was your best product that you would like to sell? Or that you sold the most of that you were so proud of?

Pedro Ceja: Well, you know I sold everything from gum to oranges, fruit in general – uhh gelatinas. I suppose I was for a while the best selling at gelatinas because I had my clients because gelatinas is basically a product – in this town the families would eat them as part of breakfast. Or [8:00] we would go – in front of the church as the parishioners would come out of church, well they would have this gelatinas, they would have somewhat of a breakfast of sorts. And we were there to provide them breakfast.

Steve Velasquez: So, they were fruit flavors?

Pedro Ceja: They were fruit flavor, yes. And a lot of them, they were natural flavors. And then also there were these other gelatins that they were made with – based on milk, milk products. So, we had yes, the fruit ones and then we had the more complex –

Steve Velasquez: More complex – not really a flan, but more of a –

Pedro Ceja: It's more like – it's like a gelatin.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah, like a creamy gelatin.

Pedro Ceja: A creamy gelatin. Yes.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah. And so, you sold this stuff while your father was gone and helping – just helping to get money for yourself or –?

Pedro Ceja: Well, primarily for myself because it was kind of interesting because the way we work is that we would basically [9:00] work on commission if you will, for we only had \$0.20 for every dollar of products that we would sell. So, at the end of the week I had my nice stash of quarters and dimes and so on and so forth. And so, I always felt very proud and I was making money for myself, so – because I knew that my mother, the family did not have much money to – to give us. So, I always enjoyed the fact that I could earn my own money and use it to buy my own stuff.

Steve Velasquez: And so you were in the town until how old?

Pedro Ceja: In 1967, that's when my father decided that he wanted to immigrate the family from Mexico here to the States. So, in 1967, I was 12 years old at that time, and so [10:00] 1967, that was the first year that we arrived here in California.

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember how that experience went? Did your parents tell you we're moving? Was there a lot of discussions?

Pedro Ceja: Yeah. Well, prior to that my dad would go every couple of years, so on those trips he would say well some day, some year I'm gonna take the whole family to the United States. And he would tell us the stories about el norte. They would tell us about the big houses and buildings and the cars and so on and so forth. So, by that time we already had an idea what el norte was like. At least I thought I did. And so we were looking forward for that one day where the family would be united and travel to the United States to up el norte. [11:00]

Steve Velasquez: To el norte.

Pedro Ceja: To a dreamland.

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember what some of those dreams, visions were as a 12-year-old?

Pedro Ceja: Well, yes because by – at that time there was a small movie theater there in town. And so, I always kind of picture the United States like a lot of beautiful scenery that you will see as a backdrop in

movies. So, to me the United States, I first saw it through movies. And so, I always wanted to come here because the flashy areas, the beautiful decorations and cars and abundance of food. So, the whole glare that the movie presents, that's what I imagine or pictured in my head as the United States.

Steve Velasquez: And [12:00] so you were the second – and your – your – was it a brother? No, a sister was the oldest.

Pedro Ceja: Gloria. She's my – she's the oldest.

Steve Velasquez: She was the oldest?

Pedro Ceja: I'm the – I'm the second.

Steve Velasquez: Right. You're the second. And did Gloria also have the same visions do you know?

Pedro Ceja: I believe she did. I'm sure that the – what she saw in the movies or her imagination, I'm sure she was also enamored with idea coming to a foreign place where life would be better. We would have a father, we would have better conditions and so on and so forth. So, yes, she also was excited to make the journey.

Steve Velasquez: Make the journey. Do you remember the journey itself?

Pedro Ceja: Somewhat, yes. It was, my father – uhh [13:00]

Steve Velasquez: Must have come back.

Pedro Ceja: He went back in a – on a van – an old van, an old – older van, all beat up.

Steve Velasquez: That he bought here?

Pedro Ceja: That he bought here. Yes. With the intention of bringing the family –

Steve Velasquez: The family in the van.

Pedro Ceja: Absolutely. And he was kind of a – kind of interesting because there was seven kids. My sister at that time, she was 14 all the way down to a baby, literally months. And so, here's seven kids, my parents and one dog. I don't know what got into us, but we

needed to have our little El Dukey was our small little dog and let me assure you that traveling several thousand miles with seven kids and a dog in a tight van, and it was – it was an experience to say the least. [14:00]

Steve Velasquez: And so, did you guys come to California first? Is that – or did you go other places?

Pedro Ceja: No, we first arrived here in California.

Steve Velasquez: Okay.

Pedro Ceja: By that time my dad had several contacts in agriculture, and friends for support, so on and so forth. So, yes, we arrived here in the Napa Valley. In fact, our first evening we spent it in this small town of Yountville here in the Napa Valley. And of all places it was in a good old cow's barn if you will. And so, we spent the evening there.

Steve Velasquez: In – in Yountville.

Pedro Ceja: In Yountville, yes.

Steve Velasquez: Wow. Were there other – at that point were there a lot of other Mexican families who were migrating here to stay?

Pedro Ceja: I think that throughout the country, there must – that was probably the [15:00] overall beginning of families migrating from Mexico into the States. But we did not know any other family. My uncles, they started the same journey five, six months later. But at that time, we were the only ones here in the Valley.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, wow. So, no other cousins, primos –

Pedro Ceja: No. No, there was no one else. We were the first ones here.

Steve Velasquez: Just some friends your father knew?

Pedro Ceja: Yes. And a lot of them they were basically a lot of single men, migrant farm workers.

Steve Velasquez: So no families to **[inaudible]** –

Pedro Ceja: There weren't any families. We were obviously not the first family – but we were one of the first migrant families that arrived to the Valley. In fact, at school, I went to elementary school in St. Helena. [16:00] In the [inaudible] there must have been maybe three or four families that kids – those families attended the entire school.

Steve Velasquez: Oh.

Pedro Ceja: I arrived – well, we arrived in St. Helena in – about a week or so once we kind of settled down, my father enrolled us in school, and let me tell you, what an experience. They placed me in fourth grade, and I think I probably belonged in fifth grade, but based on the fact that I did not – know English or the culture, so on and so forth, somehow the principal decided well, you fit fine in fourth grade. And so that was my –

Steve Velasquez: That was where they put you?

Pedro Ceja: That's where they placed me. And that whole experience, I think that it helped to [17:00] – I don't know somehow set a direction for the rest of my life, I mean in a way. Because arriving at that age it was basically – well, the United States was not speaking the language, being unfamiliar with the food, the culture, so on and so forth. We basically arrived as far as I was concerned into a whole other planet. Because the food was different, the people, they were somewhat different, and the culture and I felt somewhat uncomfortable to a large extent.

I felt at the beginning that oh, what have we done here. I came here to a totally different place and it was very challenging. And so that was the dreams that I had [18:00] of coming to a wonderful place that was everything was glitter and beautiful houses and beautiful cars, so on and so forth. All of a sudden that whole dream kind of collapsed. It crumbled into, boy, you have – what am I doing here? And I felt somehow like I did not fit in. That it was a place that was not what I was dreaming.

So, all of a sudden reality set in. And it took a while to – for us to settle down and start learning English, so on and so forth. The schools back then, they were not prepared to basically provide a good beginning to kids. My elementary school, they did not have a formal program to teach kids English.

So, I remember therefore, the first two, three months [19:00] I was just sitting there in this one school just twiddling my thumbs, having no idea what this teacher was talking about. And at the same time, he – I sensed that the teacher was getting kind of impatient with me because the lack of communication. And it came a point where he decided well, this kid here is not catching it. So, he decided to place me in the – in the classroom with the handicapped kids.

Because suddenly I was – obviously I had nothing wrong physically or mentally, but I did not fit the norm of the class. And that was kind of big shock for me because all of a sudden, I went from being a normal kid to finding myself along with kids with handicap and mental disorder. And I figured well, how in the hell did I go from being a normal child to graduating into this state. And so, [20:00] that was an experience.

But I suppose the system was not ready. It was not to a fault of anyone. It was the system, it was the timing and so on and so forth. But those were experiences that in my opinion created certain desires, certain ambitions to move forward and to empower myself.

Steve Velasquez: And so, what was – so you guys lived in Yountville for a time? Or did you move away from there to another little town?

Pedro Ceja: No, at that point it was very difficult for a family of seven kids to find housing. One, because my dad – we just had kind of side jobs in agriculture and in agriculture as we know, it's basically temporary work. So, [21:00] money was always tight. And so, we always lived in some interesting dilapidated housing and because nobody would want to rent to a family with seven kids because – you know. Too many kids and they're gonna destroy the place. They're gonna make a – so on and so forth.

So, it seemed like every two, three months we would be just going from one place to the next, to the next, to the next. And there actually was one charming – well, I select to be this like charming story where my father desperate, one time because they were gonna kick us out from this apartment. He went over to this other section in town and he noticed that there was this apartment for rent. And he told the – the lady asked – he tells this – my father tells the story in a very charming way.

So, the landlord [22:00] asked my father, well, how many kids do you have? Well, he answered I guess in a very – with a straight face he says well I only have one daughter. And that was true, but he's not telling him he also had seven boys. And so somehow my dad – my father out of desperation he managed to rent the apartment.

We moved in like the following day or that evening. And so, here's seven kids just running around in this apartment and it was in second floor, so the tenants at the first level, they were actually complaining. So, they called the landlord and says well, what have you done? I mean these kids are making too much noise, so on and so forth.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, boy.

Pedro Ceja: And this was early in the morning, and we heard them knock on the door. And I went to open the door [23:00] and so there was this lady, and I will never forget that impression on her face. When I opened the door, the door basically faced the very one – single bed apartment into the living room. And there were six kids, the place was a mess because we had just moved in there. And blankets and – and on the floor, and so she has this facial impression like, oh my God, what is going on in there.

And sure enough, that was – she gave us one month to move out. So anyway, that is repeated itself for about a year or so. But finally, we were lucky enough to find a proper house later on and here in Napa.

Steve Velasquez: Here in Napa. So, once you guys came to Napa, you didn't – did you [24:00] follow the grape crops or did you just – did your father just wanna stay in Napa? Did you follow other crops? What –?

Pedro Ceja: No, here basically since my dad was accustomed to following the crops, we stayed here for about a year. Then I do not know the reason, but back then there was some kind of an immigration requirement that basically the families would come into California, get their green cards and then would have to go back to Mexico for a period of time. And so we stayed here for a little bit under a year and then went back to Mexico for about a year plus – almost two years. And then we came back later on.

Steve Velasquez: And then you came back –

- Pedro Ceja: Yes.
- Steve Velasquez: – to the same – the same –?
- Pedro Ceja: To the same general area. Yes. Yes.
- Steve Velasquez: So then once you came [25:00] back, did you – what kind of work was your father doing?
- Pedro Ceja: He was still primarily working in agriculture, but by that time he had worked at Kaiser – Kaiser Steel. There was a company here in the Napa Valley that would make basically metal pipes, conduits for water systems and drainage. And by the time we came here the second time around he had that job as somewhat of a part time. Eventually it became a full-time job. But at the beginning of the second cycle he was part time then. And we would still go out to different towns and harvest various fruits primarily.
- Steve Velasquez: Okay. So, there were other fruits in the Valley at that time? Are there –?
- Pedro Ceja: Well, there were here [26:00] at that time, in fact the predominant crops here in the Valley was walnuts and prunes. A little bit cherries, a little bit of pears. But walnuts and prunes that were predominant here in the valley.
- Steve Velasquez: Does that still – it's not the case anymore?
- Pedro Ceja: No. No. I think economically it's not viable anymore. The whole Napa Valley is somewhat like a monoculture. We cater here primarily to wine grapes. All of the other fruits and vegetables, they have been long gone.
- Steve Velasquez: Long gone. So, did you – I know we're gonna talk a little bit about you met Amelia, but did you have to help your father in some cases with these odd jobs – agriculture jobs?
- Pedro Ceja: Oh, absolutely. [27:00] I was one of the oldest at that time. The first time I was 12 years old. Then the next brother, he was ten years old. So typically, I would go with him and sometimes, Nacho, my youngest brother. So yes, during the harvest here in the Napa Valley, here comes in some cases after school, but primarily
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over the weekends, Saturdays and Sundays he would get up and let's go and help in harvesting grapes.

And in fact, that's how we met – that's how I met Amelia, my wife. Her father coincidentally also brought the family in 1967, and they – my father and her father they met each other years before. And they used to cross paths at various towns [28:00] harvesting various fruits. And this time it was here in the Napa Valley, they both had their families here. Felipe Moran, my father-in-law, well he was a foreman at this one ranch, and –

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember the ranch?

Pedro Ceja: In fact, yes. In fact, this ranch belonged to what is now part of the Robert Mondavi Vineyard. It was a vineyard planted with Merlot at the time in Oakville, California, here in the valley.

Steve Velasquez: In Oakville. So, Felipe Moran was a foreman?

Pedro Ceja: He was a foreman. He was basically driving the crew. He used to drive this tractor. He was in charge of organizing the crews and the way he used to work, [29:00] at least with this particular crew, each family or individual would be assigned a particular number. So that individual would fill out harvest the fruit into this bucket. And so, once the bucket is full with grapes, he would walk up to this gondola being pulled by the tractor and he would call a number. So, I could have been number five.

So, every time that I fill my bucket I would walk up and say number five, dump the fruit and Felipe or the tractor driver would put another line indicating that I have just dumped another unit of grapes. So, at the end of the day they would count the number of buckets and we would get paid by the amount of fruit that we would harvest.

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember how many buckets you would pick in a –? [30:00]

Pedro Ceja: You know actually I took, I take great pride that I was actually, if I may say so, I was good at it. It really was a lot of effort and as I remember we used to actually do well at that time making 20, \$25 actually that was – that was pretty good.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, wow.

- Pedro Ceja: Yes.
- Steve Velasquez: So, you were paid by the –
- Pedro Ceja: By the container, by the bucket if you will. Yes.
- Steve Velasquez: Yeah. Yeah, and so you did this at many different ranches? Do you remember about how many different –?
- Pedro Ceja: Oh, oh, yes. Because any – the harvest at any one of these sites would probably last from a few days to a week or so and then you just go and find work at some other ranch. So, yeah, it was literally you were moving around throughout the valley looking for work every weekend.
- Steve Velasquez: Every weekend? [31:00]
- Pedro Ceja: Yes.
- Steve Velasquez: Did – so did your father go to particular places that he liked or that people would hire him based on previous years? Do you remember any of that?
- Pedro Ceja: I think it was a combination of all. He had been working here prior to our arrival for a number of years, so he knew a number of ranchers. And the way it works in agriculture, you always know by talking to your friends, and you go to the store and who's hiring and where are you working, so on and so forth. So, the word goes around as to who is harvesting at any one time. And so, when you finish that you go up there and you look for work on the next town or on the next vineyard.
- Steve Velasquez: But so, at that time then, did you – it was still primarily just single men? [32:00] So, you didn't see the families come in – the Mexican-American families – Mexican – Mexican-American families come in until much later? Is that –?
- Pedro Ceja: That's right, there were not too many of them. Like I said, I met Amelia. That's where I – it was Amelia, ourselves, and there was this other family. But there weren't too many families with kids. Primarily 90 plus percent if not higher, they were single men that were doing the farm labor.
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Steve Velasquez: The picking. Now, did you get any training or did your father just give you the clippers and say cut.

Pedro Ceja: Pretty much, that's it. The training consists of well, here's a knife, here's a bucket and cut them as fast as you can and try not to cut yourself. Some jobs they do require actually training and so on and so forth. But [33:00] harvesting fruit is fundamentally a very basic process and I think that one needs to be a little bit careful. But it's straight forward work. I think it simply requires minimal training and we just need to become aware about certain things, but no extended training is necessary.

Steve Velasquez: No extended training. So, was that the only job you did, was just harvest –?

Pedro Ceja: Well... well, harvesting various fruits. I mean we harvested from prunes, walnuts, almonds, peaches, apricots – you name it, we harvested them. Then I also worked a little bit in some restaurants later on, as we were – I'm talking about as we were growing up. But [34:00] that was – I did not enjoy working in washing dishes, so on and so forth.

The interesting thing – one interesting job that we had, my father had a part time job cleaning some buildings here in Napa for the Napa State Hospital, which is basically a place that would house a lot of individuals with mental disorders and, you know that type of – a mental hospital. So, on certain days and weekends we would go out there and help my dad and clean this place. And to me it was interesting because I mean you walk into this mental hospital and they're always interesting people walking around. And that was kind of unique and different.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah. As a teenager –

Pedro Ceja: Yeah, as a teenager [35:00] – yeah, it was kind of okay.

Steve Velasquez: So, okay, moving to sort of the late teen years, what happened – what happened next? Your late teens, high school and then after that?

Pedro Ceja: Yes. When we came back from Mexico, I went into 7th grade, junior high here. And from that point on – well, the first year of 7th grade I had still a hard time dealing with this business of language. Because here again, the school system did not have a formal

program or system set [36:00] up to teach – to educate kids English and so I kind of struggled through the whole 7th and 8th grade. By the time I got to high school, I mean I already had the basics of the language and it became a little bit easier. But the first time around, and then 7th and 8th grades, they were challenging.

Steve Velasquez: So, we'll jump back to Amelia. So, you were still in contact with Amelia through high school?

Pedro Ceja: Definitely. In fact, we went through the same junior high.

Steve Velasquez: The same junior high.

Pedro Ceja: 7th and 8th grade. Amelia, she always has had this – she's book smart, if I would say so. She always had this wonderful affinity to remember things and she's always studied hard, so on and so forth. So, she definitely learned [37:00] the English language much faster than I did and she adapted I think better than I did. And so, I think that she had less of challenges later on in high school. But at the time I got into high school, by now it was two years later, I was able to get the hang of this new language, English, which is still again challenges, but it was much better.

Steve Velasquez: It was much better. So then when did you guys get married?

Pedro Ceja: Well, I met Amelia at the age of 12 years, then I was still in school, you know in junior high. And then during high school, she went back to Mexico for a few years. And in fact during high school I would only see her on – on the summers [38:00] for a week or so when she would come and visit her parents. But we always kept in contact I guess it was – it was obvious now that I liked her because there was some affinity between the two of us. And so, we always kept in touch. Then after high school she went to San Diego to school for the university, and we always kept in contact.

Steve Velasquez: And so, what did you do at that point?

Pedro Ceja: Well, after high school I went to a local college here. I went to Napa Valley College.

Steve Velasquez: Napa Valley College.

Pedro Ceja: I went there for three years and I study electronics and telecommunications. After my three years of study there, I got a job in the Silicon Valley area and then Santa Clara.

Steve Velasquez: Wow. So, you moved south?

Pedro Ceja: I did, [39:00] which is here from Napa, it's a good two hours from here. And I worked there for a couple of years and at that point the relationship with Amelia got serious to the point that we got – we engaged, and we got married.

Steve Velasquez: Okay. So, you got married. That must have been at that point, 19 – late '70s, early '80s?

Pedro Ceja: That was – let me see –

Steve Velasquez: When you got married?

Pedro Ceja: Yes, that was – let me see. I should know remember – if Amelia listens to me that I – I tried to guess when we got married, she's going to absolutely kill me.

Steve Velasquez: No, I – trust me I know. And so, then you – did you move down to San Diego or did she move up to Santa Clara, or –

Pedro Ceja: No –

Steve Velasquez: – did you decide to move?

Pedro Ceja: Amelia, after she finished in San Diego, she decided to come [40:00] and live here in the Napa Valley and that's how we met. And when we got married, we moved into the Santa Clara Valley.

Steve Velasquez: Okay.

Pedro Ceja: And we lived up there for about five years. And in fact, we have three kids, the oldest – two boys, and the youngest a girl, Navek, Ariel and Dalia, and when the – when Dalia was born, at that point there was the opportunity to come back to Napa Valley. And so, I –

Steve Velasquez: What was that opportunity?

Pedro Ceja: Well, the opportunity was in the sense – since I – Amelia and I, we grew up here in the Valley, the opportunity of perhaps purchasing a small vineyard, a farm if you will, with the dream, with the idea of growing grapes here in the Valley. [41:00] Having been raised in Mexico in a small town and then growing up here in the Valley, living in the big city, that was not for me. I always felt that on the first opportunity I wanna go back to a farm, to a small town. I enjoy a big city, but I'm a small-town person.

Steve Velasquez: A small town person. And so – so both of you had the dream of coming back to a small town?

Pedro Ceja: Well, I did for sure. Amelia, I think she also had that because her parents, they still live – I mean both of our parents are still here in Napa.

Steve Velasquez: And they've been here the whole time –

Pedro Ceja: Yes.

Steve Velasquez: – you guys were –?

Pedro Ceja: So, there was always the sense, well yeah, I wanna go back home. And so, yes, when the opportunity came to purchase [42:00] a small piece of land here in the Napa Valley, then we basically relocated back to the Napa Valley. I should have known better, but I suppose it runs in the blood of – perhaps not being quite prepared. The way we move here to the Napa Valley was my father, myself and my brother Armando, we basically collaborated to purchase 15 acres of land here in the Napa Valley. Which, by the way this is part of that.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, this is part of the 15 acres?

Pedro Ceja: Part of that initial purchase of land that we made here. So, we bought the land, everybody was kind of struggling to make payments, so on and so forth. And about a year after we purchased the property, my father loses [43:00] his job and all heck kind of broke loose because there was no way that I could support my family up there in the Santa Clara Valley and still be making payments here without my dad working.

So, it came a point where we actually decided to put the land up for sale because we could not afford the 15 acres. But now we talk

about here, back during the Jimmy Carter era where inflation was very high, and nobody was buying anything. So, we placed the property for sale and nobody even – I believe no one came even to take a look at it –

Steve Velasquez: No.

Pedro Ceja: – because money was tight, interest, it was very high, so on and so forth. But all during this time I was trying to come up with ideas, **[inaudible]** [44:00] to how we could make this farming Napa work and keep it in – fulfill some of our dreams.

So, I suppose one day under too much caffeine or whatever, I decided well, what if I moved to Napa. And instead of making payments here on the – on my apartment, this money will go a long way to make the payment for the 15 acres. And I talked to Amelia and she wasn't too crazy about the idea of moving back to Napa and so on and so forth. That meant that I would have to commute from Napa to San Jose every day, but I was willing to make that commitment.

And so somehow, I convinced her, and she agreed, and we moved into my parents' house. Attached to the house is a small room in there, so we moved [45:00] in there with our three kids and it was tough. But with – still with the vision that we needed to make it work. And I commuted between Napa and San Jose for almost six years.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, my gosh.

Pedro Ceja: Yeah. It was –

Steve Velasquez: Wow. That is a long commute for six years.

Pedro Ceja: You – it was – it was not trivial. At the end of the day that I was driving me absolutely insane. But things got better, my parents were able to get employment and now by that time my brother finished college and he got a job, so things, they turned for the better. And so – but that was the whole idea, the opportunity, the dream of having our own – a small farm for potentially some day we could grow some grapes and who knows.

Steve Velasquez: So –

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- Pedro Ceja: Maybe even grow – make a bottle of wine. [46:00]
- Steve Velasquez: So even from the very beginning it was always about growing grapes and maybe making some wine? Or was it more having land for you and your – with you and your brother?
- Pedro Ceja: You know I think it was the combination of both. I think that when we – when the fact came to acquire a small piece of land, yeah, we did not know exactly where or how, but the final objective was to grow grapes. Absolutely. Yes.
- Obviously, we did not plan it very well. I mean if we would have planned everything, the numbers – big success says don't do anything because you're not ready, you have no money, you have no experience. But I think in this case our abundance of ignorance assists us to jump into something [47:00] that we really had any idea of what we were doing. But – so in this case ignorance was a blessing.
- Steve Velasquez: So, nobody came to help? Was there a vintner's association at that point? Was there groups to help new winemakers, or was it – or did the bank say you're crazy, what's –?
- Pedro Ceja: I think it was all of the above. The – you're crazy did come very loud and clear and obvious. But no, I think that the Cejas in here are a little bit of success that we have had has not occurred in a vacuum. From the beginning there has always been a lot of wonderful people that have given us a hand. No one ever gave us a free dollar if you will, but they [48:00] gave us something that in turn you cannot buy.
- I mean a lot of people believed in the hard work that we were doing. They lent us support, they believed, so on and so forth. And that's something that you cannot buy, the goodwill from a lot of people here in the Valley. You – we talked about people that gave us jobs, that suggested to ideas – try that, individuals – family like the Duckhorn's, Jack Neill, and the one entity that definitely went out of their way to assist us was the winery Domaine Chandon.
- Steve Velasquez: The –?
- Pedro Ceja: Domaine Chandon.
- Steve Velasquez: Oh, Domaine Chandon.
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Pedro Ceja: Yeah. And a lot of it thanks to the – at that point, Will Nord. He basically – he [49:00] was in charge of the farming operation. And my brother – well, several of my brothers worked at the winery for summers and he wanted to help us. So, this one year, 1982, Domaine Chandon, they actually had a nursery where this one year they had an excess of vines that they did not utilize for the purpose of that winery growing their own grapes. And so, they knew that we had this 15 acres and that we were – we were looking for the opportunity to, you know plant a vineyard. So, they basically decided to give us a hand by lending us – giving us the vines –

Steve Velasquez: The vines.

Pedro Ceja: – and in turn we would pay them [50:00] once the vineyard was in production. Because at that point Domaine Chandon, they were in the growing phase, so they needed more grapes, more vineyards. And so that was a tremendous help for us. So, they provided the vineyards and they – once the vineyards, they were in production they give us a seven-year purchase contract.

Steve Velasquez: Wow.

Pedro Ceja: And so basically as soon as we could, we paid for the vines and we move on from there.

Steve Velasquez: Do you know – do you remember how many – was this area already planted with vines?

Pedro Ceja: No. No. This area here, in fact we were one of the first vineyards – not the very first one obviously, Domaine Chandon had already started planting here, vineyards here in the Carneros area, like three years before that. [51:00] And prior to that there were a very, very few vineyards scattered throughout the Carneros area. This is the southern part of the Napa Valley. Most of the vineyards that were up valley, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena.

The Carneros area, that was always, for the longest time the other side of the tracks. The undesirable part of the Napa Valley. That was one of the reasons that we were able to purchase a piece of land because the prices they were relatively low, and nobody really had paid much interest in the Carneros area.

But this French company, Domaine Chandon, when they came down to look for land to grow grapes for their own production, they look at the Carneros area and they said well, you know this is a pretty good area. And so [52:00] they were very instrumental to establish this area as a great grape growing region. And so, we follow up with the assist – their direct assistance in providing plants to develop our own vineyard.

Steve Velasquez: So, they provided all 15 acres?

Pedro Ceja: They – at that time I think there was enough for about 12 acres really.

Steve Velasquez: Twelve acres of –

Pedro Ceja: Twelve acres, yeah.

Steve Velasquez: – of plants?

Pedro Ceja: Yeah.

Steve Velasquez: And all of the person – all the crew plant and –?

Pedro Ceja: No, that's not what –

[Crosstalk]

Steve Velasquez: **[Inaudible]**.

Pedro Ceja: – they provided the vines, we provide all the sweat equity. Yes.

Steve Velasquez: Wow. So that must have been a tough challenge.

Pedro Ceja: You know it was tough that, but it is – for us it was kind of imagine yourself walking – I can only imagine walking through the middle of the desert and then all of a sudden somebody offers you a glass of water. And for us, [53:00] that desert, that was those years that we were – that we put the land for sale, those years that the land was vacant. Those years where – we had nothing but negative experiences. Then here comes Domaine Chandon and they gave us that glass of water. They extended that friendly hand and provided help.

Then at that point it was kind of like a second wind where we saw the – not the light at the end of the tunnel because that was the beginning, but we saw the opportunity. And so, we got excited. We got truly behind the idea of like yes, finally we could develop a vineyard. And so – at that point it was a function of getting excited and from that point on you could never be tired. All you had to do is look forward [54:00] for the opportunity.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah.

Pedro Ceja: And so we – now at that point, obviously the rest of the kids are growing up, [inaudible] and so on and so forth. So, we had extended family that would come and help us and lend support.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah. And so, you said you had several brothers who worked for them during the summers?

Pedro Ceja: Well, there are seven – seven boys in the family. So, as they came of age they would come and help and drive the tractor for [inaudible] –

[Crosstalk]

Steve Velasquez: No, I'm sorry. They worked for Domaine Chandon, and –?

Pedro Ceja: Oh, yes. At that point my brother, Armando, throughout high school and college he worked for Domaine Chandon. Long summers – and weekends. And then Martinos would work for them – another brother. I would work there every now and then, but it was primarily Armando and Martino [55:00] worked there. So, they were the main connection and they were more visible with the winery place.

Steve Velasquez: And they're doing summer work, so –?

Pedro Ceja: Yes. And Armando also he went to Davis after – after high school to study – enology and viticulture

Steve Velasquez: Okay.

Pedro Ceja: – a knowledge in viticulture, and that was another reason why they took the interest –

Steve Velasquez: Okay.

Pedro Ceja: – to help us out. Because they knew that it was not an accident, that the family was focused on trying to achieve that objective. We had the land we have someone here going to the university to study enology, to study viticulture. And so –

Steve Velasquez: So, everything came together at that point? And that was in 1982?

Pedro Ceja: That was in '82, yes.

Steve Velasquez: And then so three years later you have grapes for them?

Pedro Ceja: Basically [56:00] yes.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah?

Pedro Ceja: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Velasquez: And then, so –

Pedro Ceja: Could be that year or the following year, yes.

Steve Velasquez: Okay. And so, the seven years purchase contract went through? Did they renew? Did they –?

Pedro Ceja: They did renew, yes. Absolutely. The – they basically gave us these vines that were conducive to make wonderful champagne.

Steve Velasquez: Champagne?

Pedro Ceja: These were – yes. Domaine Chandon initially started out making – or being a champagne –

Steve Velasquez: Oh. Okay.

Pedro Ceja: – house – champagne winery. And there are certain vines, certain types of plants that are utilized specifically for the production of champagne. So, what [57:00] they gave us were these plants that would make wonderful champagne products. And so, they had the need for that type of specific fruit that would facilitate their quality of champagnes.

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- Steve Velasquez: And so, was – was this – were these vines, these grapes, were they already proven elsewhere or were they kind of a new development that maybe Davis had –?
- Pedro Ceja: No. In fact, this Domaine Chandon, they are a French company, a French corporation. And so, when they come over and they look at the Carneros area, they had a specific vine in mind that they wanted to plant here in the Carneros area. [58:00] And these are plants that they brought in from France.
- Steve Velasquez: Okay.
- Pedro Ceja: Yes. And so, no, they have had years and years of experience farming this specific varietal, and this specific clone –
- Steve Velasquez: Okay.
- Pedro Ceja: – that has proven to be a good champagne vine.
- Steve Velasquez: So, your first few – so your first seven years were just for Domaine Chandon?
- Pedro Ceja: Exactly. And then, you know what else – a second contract. So, we provided Domaine Chandon grapes for about 13 or 14 years.
- Steve Velasquez: And was it primarily Armando who was overseeing –?
- Pedro Ceja: It has always been Armando when it comes down to the farm and to the production, yes.
- Steve Velasquez: So, 13 or 14 years with Domaine Chandon. [59:00] Then what? Was it always the same varietal for those 13 or 14 –?
- Pedro Ceja: Well, in the case of a vineyard, a vine can literally be alive for a few hundred years. However, farming a particular vine vineyard commercially in the Napa Valley's typically down for about 20 to 30 years. And so yes, once you plant a particular vineyard, you are committed to it for a long time.
- Steve Velasquez: For a long time, yeah.
- Pedro Ceja: Like I said 20, 25. Now, generalizing – there are some vineyards that can be for much longer, but the typical vineyard is farmed commercially for about 20 to 25 years. So, for those 20 to – in our
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case it was more like 27 years we were committed to work [1:00:00] that particular vineyard, that clone. That is specific plant. Yes.

Steve Velasquez: And so – so the whole – at that point then, the whole 15 acres – or did you have more acres at the end of that?

Pedro Ceja: At the end of – at the end of that, yes. We had other – we bought other small plots of land. But those 15 acres, then 15, 16 years later we had already paid Domaine Chandon and there were other wineries also in need of fruit. Obviously, our commitment was always to support Domaine Chandon, but at some point, they had enough fruit of their own. And so, then we found a new home for our grapes at other wineries.

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember some of those wineries?

Pedro Ceja: Oh, yeah, yes. Absolutely. In fact, I was still working with Mumms [1:01] here, another champagne house here in the valley. So, we have provided grapes for Mumms, for Acacia, Rombauer, the Benzingers, and a great number of other wineries throughout the years of course.

Steve Velasquez: Throughout the years. How has it changed in terms of just what fruits, what aspects they're looking for or techniques of plantings or picking? What has changed since those first years that you have seen?

Pedro Ceja: Thee- a lot has changed. In this case I believe that the – in the case of vineyards, in the case of wine, this agriculture farming [1:02] products practices have really been influenced by technology. Back 100 years, as you know here in the Napa Valley, in California, we had this tremendous problem of phylloxera, where there's basically this virus affected the plants in a very negative way and would basically kill the vines.

So, thanks to technology, the University of California – University of California at Davis, they have done a lot of work to improve the quality of the plants. And as well they have studies there to promote and improve the winemaking, the enology program.

So, from there they have come out new yeasts, new temperatures, new tanks. New methods – practices to improve [1:03] the

vineyard development and to also improve the quality of the wine by utilizing new products, new techniques, new technology.

Steve Velasquez: And so you're – are you always keeping up with the technology here? Or are you sticking to one particular method that seems to work?

Pedro Ceja: Well, farming per say, nowadays is complicated. But at the end of the day, you're still farming. The basics of farming is basically a plot of soil, a particular seed or plant and then the rest is a lot of love, a lot of sweat equity. But there are techniques to make those – the sweat a bit more efficient that makes the overall quality better. And that is thanks to the efforts of UC Davis and other entities [1:04] like them.

[outside sounds]

Steve Velasquez: I'm gonna pause it for a second.

Okay, we're back. There was a truck. So at the end of the day its love and a little bit of luck too. So how and why did you decide to start making your own wine? Was it one of your crazy ideas? Or did Armando and you guys all sit down and say we can do this?

Pedro Ceja: I think it's been the combination of a lot of variables. The decision did not come from [1:05] a single individual in what is Ceja Vineyards is now is basically a partnership of my brother and my immediate family. On the wine itself, the vineyards, each side is basically a partnership of the rest of the family. But I suppose it's not a new – the idea of making our own wine is not a new idea. Somehow its roots go back when we were 12 years old.

Because, you know we came here and one of our first experiences was to pick grapes and when I moved out of the area to working for this company, high technology, obviously I made the decision to come back to Napa and somehow reconnect myself with land with grapes. So, yeah, I think all along in the back [1:06] of my mind was to somehow be bold with the final product.

But now, 30-some years later, or more than that, 40 years, I think we have walked through the various parts of the process if you will, farming, then as farm workers, then as farmers growing grapes, and then the opportunity to create our own bottle of wine. I think we basically, not so much from the egotistical point of I wanna have my name on a bottle of wine, I think it has come more

from a natural evolution of yes, we know how to work the land. Now we have the grapes. [1:07] But now let's see what kind of final products we can make.

And I think all of these experiences, all of this knowledge that we have acquired throughout the years from our childhood, they're really bottled into a – into a product that has a lot of history, a lot of emotions, a lot of like experience. And it's truly the flavors, the aromas; I think they represent our effort, our style and our dreams too, to an extent.

In the winemaking process you can use different barrels, you can use different yeasts, different temperatures. So, at the end of the day some expression of what we feel, what we have gone through, a little bit of our life journey.

Steve Velasquez: A little bit of a life journey. And quite a journey [1:08] it has been. So, let's talk a little bit then about your new facility you're building. The wine – does the winemaking process happen here, or – and you're just enlarging it with the new building? Is –?

Pedro Ceja: The way – the Ceja Vineyards was basically founded back in 1998, so it's been a few years now. And from the beginning we have made the wine. However, to date we do not have our own production facilities, so we have always rented space – different wineries to produce our wine.

Steve Velasquez: What places?

Pedro Ceja: We're talking about places like Macrostie, Enkidu [?], and a number of other places where we have made our wines.

Steve Velasquez: And [1:09] so, now you're creating a new facility to produce your own – your own wines, where you don't have to rent, you don't have to rely on other people's equipment, and –

Pedro Ceja: That is great. When you look at the numbers, the economics of wine, it is recommended – suggested from the industry point of view that any one producer that produces less than 10,000 cases, 12 bottles per case, that should focus on making wines without a production facility. Because the amount of wine under 10,000 cases does not economically justify the big expenses of the land, of the buildings, of taxes, [1:10] maintenance, so on and so forth. So, it's best to make the wines at an alternative site.

But now we have basically – we’re approaching that threshold of 10,000 cases, and I believe that it merits the process of getting our own production facility. And after all of these years I think that the future for Ceja – we need to have such a production facility where we can provide better services, better experience for our customers, our distributors. So, yes, at this point we are in the middle of developing – of creating this commercial production facility.

Steve Velasquez: And where is it located?

Pedro Ceja: In fact, it’s gonna be – when we look in this direction north, it’s gonna be here [1:11] in the Carneros Area.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, it the Carneros Area.

Pedro Ceja: Yes. And in fact, as we speak, we are working with grading the pad for the buildings. So, I’m – I have the jitters.

Steve Velasquez: Yeah. Yeah.

Pedro Ceja: All the responsibility and the economic load and so on and so forth.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, of course.

Pedro Ceja: But I’m embracing it as much as we have embraced all of these steps throughout our journey.

Steve Velasquez: So, what – let me see if I can put this the right way – what lessons – or looking back at your history of what you’ve been doing, what are you incorporating that you’ve learned? Well, not that you’ve learned, but is there something looking back that say yes, we need – we’re gonna have it – we’re gonna do it this way or we’re gonna have this? Or is it a completely new facility [1:12] with new ways of doing things?

Pedro Ceja: I think what we are engaged in at this point is simply a continuation of that – of that dream really. And at this point, yes, it is the American dream, but it goes beyond an American dream. I think it goes into that human dream, that desire to empower – empower ourselves into creating something that is well done and something that would empower the new generations.

I am absolutely convinced that our kids, they are in a better position to take whatever we have started, whatever we have done, and take it up to the next stage. I think they are better prepared through education and they have better tools. So [1:13] I feel very strong that this business of a winery, we're the one who started and we're gonna get our kids involved because I know that they will take Ceja Vineyards to the next level.

Not to sound pretentious, but Ceja Vineyards, our family the Cejas, have a wonderful opportunity here to truly have a world-class production facility, world-class services and world-class products short of none.

One, because I think that we have a lifetime of experiences, we have through my brother, knowledge from one of the best universities in the world, which is UC Davis. And we farm grapes in an area that is Napa Valley and Sonoma, the envy of the world. [1:14] So, we have given the opportunity and we're taking advantage of it and we're not gonna stop until we get to the next stage, and the future is full of next steps.

Steve Velasquez: Well, I know you're busy and you need to go check on your building, so we can stop here. It will be one of many more conversations I hope to have. And I hope to see you in Washington DC at some point and –

Pedro Ceja: Well, I'm honored that you have taken the interest in the Ceja family, and a pleasure talking to you and I look forward to see you here again and at some point we definitely need to share a glass of wine with you.

Steve Velasquez: Oh, lovely. Please. I hope so. All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Ceja.

[End of Audio] [1:14:53]

Duration: 75 minutes
