

Name of the interviewee: Amelia Ceja
Date of the interview: October 21, 2011
Name of the interviewer: Steve Velasquez

Transcript audited by Velasquez on July 29, 2020. False starts and repetitive verbalizations ("um") have been removed for overall clarity.

Steve Velasquez: I know you have, it's almost, it is what 1:00, 1:15. It's 1:20. I don't know how much time you have.

Amelia Ceja: Ohh umm...at 2:30 we have Charlene who is going to come and meet you know with us just to make sure – that's part of the approval process, okay.

Steve Velasquez: Okay.

Amelia Ceja: I am also available tomorrow if you're interested and during pretty much from 11:00 till 3:30, I am free tomorrow.

Steve Velasquez: Tomorrow I already have another scheduled thing.

Amelia Ceja: Okay.

Steve Velasquez: [1:00] Okay, my name is Steve Velasquez, and I am here with Amelia Ceja. It is October 21, 2011 and I am here to interview Amelia and the Ceja family for the Latino Winemakers.

Good afternoon Ms. Ceja. Can you please state your name for the record?

Amelia Ceja: Hi, my name is Amelia Moran Ceja I am the President and Founder of Ceja Vineyards.

Steve Velasquez: Ms. Ceja can you let us know when and where you were born.

Amelia Ceja: I was born in the State of Jalisco in a little village called Las Flores in 1955.

Steve Velasquez: Can you tell us the name of your parents.

Amelia Ceja: My father's name is Felipe Moran and my mother's name is Francisca Fuentes Moran.

Steve Velasquez: And do you have any brothers or sisters? [2:00]

Amelia Ceja: I have an older sister and a younger brother and my sister's name is Maria **de la luz Aguilera** and my brother's name is Antonia Moran.

Steve Velasquez: Can you tell me a little bit about what your parents did in Las Flores.

Amelia Ceja: My parents in Las Flores, they were farmers. They grew different legumes, corn and vegetables. As well, they raised chickens, cows, pigs and - for milk, I mean the cows were for milk.

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember life in Las Flores a little bit?

Amelia Ceja: Life in Las Flores was ideal. I would never change you know spending my childhood there. [3:00] I was twelve years old when I left Las Flores and it was very hard because I lived in such a warm, very embracing environment you know with, not only my family, but extended family and the whole village. They were part of our extended family.

There was no water or electricity but I never missed what I didn't have. It was the most idealic life and I would never change it for the world.

The food- our meals were composed of all the ingredients that my family grew and raised and I didn't know it at the time but I was eating gourmet food. I didn't know it, it was an amazing experience that I will never trade.

Steve Velasquez: Do you remember some of your most favorite dishes or maybe a comfort food that you had growing up?

Amelia Ceja: Well my grandmother [4:00] was an amazing cook and since a very young age at seven I made my first mole and you know from potatoes, it was a vegetarian mole. It was potatoes and cacti

My grandmother knew how to pick wild mushrooms and we used a lot of wild berries and we used a lot of ingredients also that just grew wild on my grandparent's farm.

So, one of my favorite dishes is actually mole and that's one of the reasons I made my first mole at that age. My mother had raised

chickens, turkeys and pigs, so we have different types of mole's depending upon what was available.

I also love fresh corn tamales; [5:00] I love fresh corn tortillas that we grounded the corn every day. That was actually one of my jobs sometimes. Also beans, I love beans and fresh squash, anything like the quesadillas.

Making cheese with my grandmother was the best though, because we made goat cheese and we made also, from cow's milk cheese. Then we would grind it in a metate and then have it with freshly made corn tortillas and a fire roasted tomato salsa all from her garden.

Food was such a labor of love because it took a lot longer to prepare a meal because all of the ingredients have to be processed there. The corn had to be made into masa, the beans – oh, you have to taste freshly harvested beans. [6:00] There's nothing in the world, I miss that so much. [noise]

Steve Velasquez: So there was always a labor of love. Did your siblings also involved in the food and preparing food or was it mainly just you?

Amelia Ceja: My brother was born in the United States after we came here. So, my sister, she was involved in doing a lot of sewing. In my little village there is a tradition of making manteles made out of cotton they're absolutely beautiful.

She wanted to make some money so, [7:00] and she had gone to school actually to La Paz, Institute La Paz, a school that later years after her, I also went there after I came to the United States.

And my sister is eight years older than me. So she was a teenager when I was making my first mole and now she's an amazing cook, but at that time she wasn't really the interested in cooking because she had her job, you know, she was making this beautiful *manteles* to sell so that she could have her own money.

But I hung out with my grandmother and I helped her to prepare our meals and I helped her to gather all the different ingredients for our meals. So, I love making tortillas - helping her making tortillas.

And I remember my grandfather, Papa Ines he would love my tortillas more than anyone is because I made them smaller [8:00] and they're all plumped up and they were thin and they were pretty

symmetrical. When you have to make for an entire family, you just want to make them bigger - and so people would only eat one or two.

My grandfather is so funny, I have such great memories from him - because making exactly the tortillas that he loved.

Steve Velasquez: Do you think he would have been able to tell your tortillas from your mother's or your grandmother?

Amelia Ceja: Oh absolutely, because they were perfect. I mean they were perfectly round and I still do, even now when I make tortillas and my mother-in-law makes tortillas, she also makes them bigger and - because it's very easy to make tortillas and it's very easy to make them very symmetrical, perfect circles [9:00] and then to have the way you press and then to have the air, you know so that they become inflated and that's a sign that it's a really good tortillas.

Steve Velasquez: Was your father around as a child for you or was here in the United States?

Amelia Ceja: My father was in the United States. I was, I grew up in my grandparents' home, my Mama, Josefa, Papa Ines and as you can tell, I don't call my grandparents Abuel or Abuela, that doesn't exist in my village. We called our grandparents mama and papa, just like my mother and my father.

My father came to the United States in the late 40s. He married my mother in 1947 and [10:00] soon after he went to *El Norte* seeking you know, to find a job to make the life of my mother better in Mexico.

She remained with my grandparents then a year later my sister was born and he went back and it was very helpful for my mother but then came back to El Norte again and he would work up and down the West Coast, you know, California, Oregon, Washington, all the way up to Canada picking different agricultural products.

And umm fortunately when he decided he was going to bring his family to the United States, he fell in love with the Napa Valley and so it's lucky for us that he brought us to the Napa Valley in 1967.

Steve Velasquez: [11:00] Did he spend a lot of time in Napa or was it just when it was more favorites?

Amelia Ceja: Since he arrive here in the late 40s, at that time he spent more time in the San Joaquin Valley and the Coachella Valley picking melons and lettuce and then near Stockton and it was from there that he ventured to other places. My father is awesome, he's 87 and is such a great story teller so I know all of his stories and he ventured as a very young man and I guess he had a 42 blue car. Obviously I never saw it, but he ventured into the Napa Valley and he really liked it so he found a job picking grapes and doing harvest. The he would return pretty much every year for harvest time. But [12:00] then when he finally just settled just near Stockton on a more permanent basis, he really felt that Napa Valley was a much better place for him and there was pretty much a job all year round because vineyards require pretty much constant attention.

And he moved full time to the Napa Valley in the late 50s early 60s and he fell madly in love with the beauty but also he knew that when and if he would bring his family, it would only be to Napa Valley. Could have been in Fresno, but I'm lucky it's Napa. [lauging]

Steve Velasquez: Well Fresno is okay.

Amelia Ceja: No, I like Fresno, it's just hotter. In Napa usually the quality of the grapes – because he was in Fresno too picking grapes, [13:00] table grapes, yes. The Napa Valley if you're a grape, Napa Valley, it's Eden, you want to be in Napa Valley.

When I arrive here in the late 60s after living in this very sheltered village where every person there, they were so nurturing and warm, I really miss my family terribly and I didn't speak English. Most importantly, I miss the food.

In the late 60s the food at least in Napa Valley, it was at the height of processed food, it was horrible. I made my own lunch because I hated the food at the school.

When I arrived here I went into seventh grade because I was twelve years old. I made my lunch daily because I was already used to cooking with my grandmother so my father took me [14:00] grocery shopping and it was fun because I found access to a lot of vegetables, and so I did, I made my own lunch.

It was different because I love warm food so my dad bought a thermos and I make fideo with a lot of vegetables and really

savoring them with chiles or I make stews - and I was an anomaly at the school because everyone was eating this cardboard pizza lookalike pizza or sandwiches that were like wonder bread which I detest. I was not used to any of that so I did I brought my thermos with all of this savory tasty food.

And what's interesting is that when I had children and they [15:00] went to school I made them their lunches and they were also on an anomaly because I made them all the food that I had at home. They would often trade it for like, lunchables or whatever they are called. You know what's so cool is now is there are so appreciative of the food that they were raised with and how they were helpful also making our meals just like I helped my grandmother. I brought that tradition to our household and that's why my children really love food and also they love to cook.

And now Dalia has her own blog and she's on a lot of our videos and my son Navek when he was in college, he actually lived in a co-op in Berkley and he elected to be – if you live in a co-op, you have to cook. You [16:00] have to contribute like some many hours per week and he elected to cook for that club. It's fun. And one day a week, and that's when everyone stays to eat because his food is awesome.

Steve Velasquez: Well that's fantastic.

I want to go back a little bit. You father in the 50s and early 60's was living in Napa full time, working almost entirely with the vineyards and grapes?

Amelia Ceja: My father when he moved permanently to the Napa Valley in the late 50s early 60s, he was entirely working in the vineyards. He's really bright. I mean he never went to school one day in his life but you don't need to go to school to me emotionally intelligent. He speaks English pretty okay and he became actually a vineyard foreman and you know because [17:00] he could speak English and he actually – people recognize that he had leadership skills and people really respected him, other workers.

He knew, because coming here for so long even though not permanently, he knew so much about viticulture and the vineyard owners recognized his talent and also speaking some English, he actually had really good jobs. When I arrived here he was in charge of a very large and famous vineyards, To-Kalon Vineyard that were being farmed at that time by Oakville Vineyard

Management Company and so a lot of the vineyards around Mondavi's Winery, he actually planted. [18:00]

Oh and I forgot to – you have to go back to our tasting room. There is an aerial photograph of Robert Mondavi's Winery taking in the 60s that I was allow to borrow it by the CEO of the Winery because I was there a few weeks ago and I was showing, I was mentioning how I remember the Winery when I saw it the first time, it didn't even have a roof.

I was invited to see this aerial photograph and it was taken in 1967 and we have it on exhibit in our tasting room in downtown Napa. That's history, that's how the Napa Valley was when I arrived here.

Steve Velasquez: Tell me a little bit about the Napa Valley, when you arrived. What do you remember about it? What do you remember about the wineries?

Amelia Ceja: Napa Valley in 1967 has less than two dozen wineries. It was during harvest, it was actually now a bitter sweet day. I arrived here on [19:00] September 11, 1967. It was during the weekday and my dad had already enrolled me in Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School in St. Helena. My dad had rented a little cottage right on Highway 29 in Rutherford, he had a one bedroom and a little kitchen and a little bathroom, but I loved it. Tiny but very warm.

And we arrived in the late afternoon and my dad said, well I have already enrolled you in school and I'm going to take you the first day, but then you're going to take the bus. I didn't speak a word of English so the first day it was great because he took me to school and then when went into the office and the principle didn't know where to place me or the administration because [20:00] – I had finished my sixth grade in Mexico in my little village and my little village by the way only had up to sixth grade.

If I would have remained in Mexico I would have had to gone to another, bigger village to go to secondary school. I knew I would've gone because my grandmother's sister lived there and that's what my sister did because she's older so I know I would've gone to secondary school there.

Then I knew I would have gone to prep school to another bigger town because we also had family members living there, so

regardless, I knew I was going to go to school. I did very well academically. I liked school.

So when I came here, even though I knew I was more math and science than most other students, I didn't speak English so I was place in a special ed class until I learned English and I know that that's pretty discriminatory but I mean, [21:00] I did care, I was intent on learning English, but they did because they had no idea. There was one teacher that spoke a little Spanish and I obviously gravitate towards her. See now, almost over 30 percent of the population of Napa Valley is Mexican American. Either the immigrated here or they were born here.

Well at that time you could count the number of Mexican American children here because in the 60s it was mostly men that came. They didn't bring their families. We were one of the very first families who arrived in Napa Valley so no spoke Spanish, no one.

It sort of forced me to learn English by after winter break, suddenly I could sort of understand these very long [22:00] sentences that I didn't know where one word ended and one began. I said, ha, I mean this is neat, by the end of that school year I was completely fluent. I

Steve Velasquez: Wow.

Amelia Ceja: From being in the special ed class in the beginning of the school year in 1967, by the end of my seventh grade, I was in the most challenging classes. They had a seven, 7a, 7b, 7c, and 7d, "a" being the easiest, "b" a little bit more challenging, well I was in "d" which was the most challenging. It's pretty cool, I was very proud.

Steve Velasquez: Yes, that's fantastic. I wish I could have that sort of academic ability.

So, You're one of the first Mexican families in the Valley.

Amelia Ceja: Yes. [23:00]

Steve Velasquez: What was that like growing up?

Amelia Ceja: Growing up, well I was here for two years first and foremost, from when I was 12 to when I was 14. I went back to Mexico, but those

two years, it was very hard because I missed my family and then I made friends very easily especially because I like sports and it transcends language and I play sports. I did very well academically by the time I finished 7th grade, I was in the honor role, I had every outstanding, this, this this for every subject. I forgot about it, my mom just found them and she has them. I'm very happy that I saw them again.

You could count the Mexican American students [24:00] with one hand, maybe six or eight at the most so it was literally; if you're a Mexican you were the daughter or son of a farm worker. I have never been embarrassed of my parent's jobs ever, but it was different. It was the vineyard owner's children or some other agricultural crowd because at that time acreage planted to vineyards was less than acreage planted to other agricultural products.

Steve Velasquez: Um hum.

Amelia Ceja: Yeah there were more plums planted than vineyards when I arrived here.

When I arrived here, every weekend I worked, because I liked to earn my own money like my sister had in Mexico so I begged my father that [25:00] I really wanted to – in whatever, I didn't care, I'd picked plums, I picked walnuts, I picked pears.

I actually picked pears there were a lot of pear orchards here in Carneros I picked pears on Las Amigas Road. I remember we had to leave really early because it seemed so far away and I was picking pears nearby where we now have our vineyard.

I loved it, that was my escape and I was always translating if I made \$3.00 or \$4.00 because you see when you pick agricultural products, it typically by piece, so the harder you work the more money you make.

Steve Velasquez: Um hum.

Amelia Ceja: I was - didn't have too much time to really think about - sort of my school. I mean I did very well, I spent, and my parents have always emphasized [26:00] education, so I had my time to do my homework but I was so happy I couldn't wait for the weekends because then I would make money. Translating it into pesos, well it was a lot, for me at 12 years old, it was great.

By the time I finished seventh grade, I had a lot of friend and because I did very well academically and I played sports, I also excelled in sports; I had a lot of friends.

Then that summer between seventh and eighth, I spoke English, but you really can't get a job when you're 13, but in farm working you can. So I begged my dad, I wanted to learn how to plant, I wanted to learn how to do sucker and he would allow me to go and work. I mean I wasn't paid as much as other [27:00] regular workers and my sister was working there so it was fun.

Then during plum season, my dad had a friend who's family went also went picking plums, so I sort of, I said oh please please please, and I actually made quite a bit of money that summer to buy all of my school clothes and you know go to the movies. Well, Amelia, my name, it means very industrious. My dad always says that that describes me perfectly.

Steve Velasquez: Of course. Okay. You father worked almost exclusively for one vineyard?

Amelia Ceja: It was the Oakville Vineyard Management Company.

My father worked for the first few years exclusively with Oakville Vineyard Management Company which managed most of the now most famous vineyards including To Kalon in and around Oakville, [28:00] Yountville, Rutherford.

But then in late 1969 he started working for Napa Valley Vineyard Company which was based in Rutherford so very near where we lived. He moved there and he has always loved cars so he actually became a mechanic and so he worked – because the Vineyard Management Company had a lot of equipment so you need very specific skills and he actually became a mechanic and it was wonderful for him because he loved it, but nonetheless, there was still vineyards and I worked in the vineyards and that's when he became – in the early 70s, [29:00] the United Farm Workers Union got a couple of contracts in the Napa Valley. [interrupted]

In the late 60s early 70s, the United Farm Workers Union came to the Napa Valley and the company that my dad moved to, all of the workers voted to have the union so my father was one of the presidents of the Farm Workers Union and I am very fortunate to

actually have worked under the United Farm Workers Union as well.

My dad became friends with César Chávez and on some of the events and there were some *huelgas* too, I'd picketed with my dad on Highway 29, BV, [30:00] for a long time and even when I learned English I still really wanted to learn everything about viticulture, so still I could have worked - later when I was in high school and I came back, I could've work anywhere, because I spoke English flawless. I still elected to work in the vineyard and so I did work under the United Farm Workers Union and it was awesome because it really gave the workers some power. You know, unity is power.

César Chávez and my dad indirectly, there were instrumental in changing the lives of the farm workers in the Napa Valley. Prior to the Union, farm workers, like if they were laid off, there was no law that they could claim unemployment benefits and it was because of the hard work [31:00] of the United Farmers Workers Union and César Chávez vision that this will change in California and it really changed for the rest of the Country and I'm just very very proud to have met – he is my hero because his actions were instrumental in farm workers being treated more fairly and also to be able to actually have benefits, not only unemployment benefits, but also in other areas such as healthcare.

I think we really need to continue this conversation because it's very important to really pay tribute to that true artist of the wine industry and those are the labors and primarily 98.9 percent they are Mexican American. [32:00]

Great wine happens because of all of the contribution of Mexican American farm workers.

Steve Velasquez: I think we're going to pause this right here.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 32 minutes

See 10/24/2011 Amelia Ceja interview for second part