





A Fine Ride

THIS CALIFORNIA WINERY HAS A
UNIQUELY EQUINE COMPONENT.

By Jordan Mackay

*Photography courtesy of
Shadybrook Estate*

In March 2019, Doriane Woolley was driving up an oak-studded country road just outside Napa, California, a place she'd never been, on the way to a job interview, when something made her stop. An experienced rider and barn manager, Doriane was on the run from a Michigan winter in the icy grip of a -45-degree polar vortex. The New Mexico native was cursing the day she had left Texas horse country for a job in the icy Midwest. It was that Texas horse connection that caused her to stop. Suspended over the road was a large wooden plank carved with the words "Rapp Lane." A sign embedded in the stone pillars flanking the drive read "Rapp Quarter Horse Ranch."

"I stopped and stared at it and said, 'No way!'" Doriane recalls. "I had worked with the Rapps, who were very dear friends of mine, in Texas. And this was where Phil, who is a leading cutting horse trainer, grew up."

Through this gate was Shadybrook Estate, a winery and horse operation that was looking for an equestrian center manager. Doriane was there to interview for the job. She knew Phil had grown up in Napa but had no idea she was headed to the very site where his career began. Phil and his wife, Mary Ann, sold the Napa ranch and relocated the family to Weatherford, Texas, in 1994. Even though the ranch and the valley in general have been transformed by the advent of global wine fame, the Rapp spirit in this property lives on. Doriane got the job at Shadybrook and found respite from the cold. She also found an unusual combination of vineyards and Quarter Horses—Napa past and Napa present.



RAPP
RANCH

2014
PINOT
CHARDONNAY

CONTRIBUTOR ANDERSON



New Life for a Historic Ranch

I was thinking about Doriane's story as I swung my leg over "Chief," an 11-year-old Quarter Horse plucked from a ranch in Montana to live a new life in Napa. Doriane had fitted me with boots and a helmet, part of the routine at this most unusual wine estate. This is where a wine-tasting experience can have a uniquely equine component that provides a different look at a winery than that enjoyed by tourists on the tasting-room crawl along the main road. I had come to have the full experience and see how it all fit together. Doriane was beside me on "Cash," another Big Sky native registered as AV Montoyas Scotts.

"I go to Montana to find them," Doriane says of the horses owned by Shadybrook, "because you can often come across these blue-collar horses with a great work ethic and a warm, agreeable demeanor."

We head slowly out of the pen and onto a soft dirt trail that winds out and around the perimeter of the vineyards surrounding the extensive winemaking and horse facilities. Doriane points out the western barn for the trail-ride horses and the English barn, which serves as a boarding facility. No horse breeding goes on here anymore, but the old Rapp Ranch breeding barns are being

carefully restored and turned into barrel storage for the ever-growing winery. The trails don't lead us into the wilderness or outside of the 25 acres Shadybrook now occupies, but they offer exquisite views of the picturesque foothills of the Vaca Mountains, which form Napa Valley's eastern border. While it's a slow and steady ride, the hills we climb and descend allow me, a novice rider, to feel the balance and power in these former ranch horses.

We're in a hilly enclave known as Coombsville, just east of Napa. While just minutes from the bustling tourist destination and the vine-carpeted expanses of Napa's valley floor, Coombsville feels like a different place. It's still a bit sleepy and scenic. Cell phones don't always manage a signal, and grapevines haven't taken over to the extent that they've crowded out all the livestock and ranching life. Of course, the signs of Napa's transformation are here: there's the back nine of the Napa Valley Country Club's golf course spilling down a slope, and well-groomed vineyards dot the hillsides. It wasn't always this way.

The grand opening for Shadybrook Estate was held on Kentucky Derby Day 2017 to celebrate horses the Shadybrook- and Rapp Ranch-labeled wine, and their event-hosting facilities.

“Once my dad built that ranch, the city fathers told him something like that would never be built again in Napa.”

“In the ’70s and ’80s, Napa was really the country. It was really agricultural and still pretty rural,” Phil says. “The vineyards were starting to take hold, but there were still big cattle ranches and a lot going on horse wise.”

His family bought the ranch in the late 1970s and built a house, while his father, Jerry, divested from his San Francisco business and got neck deep into horses. But change was in the air. The Paris Wine Tasting of 1976, which saw wines from California best the greats of France in a blind tasting by French critics, upended the global wine power dynamic and set Napa on a new course.

“Once my dad built that ranch, the city fathers told him something like that would never be built again in Napa,” Phil says. In its heyday, though, it was one of the most important Quarter Horse operations in the country. The Rapps owned American Quarter Horse Hall of Famer Mr Gun Smoke, whom Phil competed on during high school. The legendary sire is buried on the ranch.

The ranch was also home to Tapeppyyoka Peppy, a mare Phil’s dad purchased for him in the early 1980s that served first as a show horse and then as a foundation mare who produced one of the premiere families of cutting horses.

“Ol’ Tap’ was a vital part of many rides that were important to me,” Phil says. “Winning the (National Cutting Horse Association) finals and the AQHA youth championship. Marking my first 75. Taking me to my first NCHA open finals. We shared a lot of firsts. She got me going and kicked things off for me in the cutting pen. Ol’ Tap was gritty and cow-smart and tough. The tougher the cow, the better Ol’ Tap was.”

A 1985 sale attracted more than 800 buyers from across the country, with Jerry Rapp estimating that more than \$30 million worth of horses had been at the ranch over the weekend (around \$70 million in today’s dollars). Things were changing, though.

In 1994, Jerry died, and Phil married Mary Ann, another cutting horse champion. By then, the epicenter of the cutting-horse business had clearly become Texas, while Napa’s hills were ever more covered by vines.

“What I wanted to fulfill in the horse business was going to be difficult to do in Napa Valley,” Phil says. “We were spending more and more time in Texas; there weren’t as many cuttings in California. But we left a state-of-the-art facility there, and I often wished we could take what we built in Napa and put it up here in Weatherford, because we had all the stalls and the indoor arena, and it was just wonderful.”

As we head back into the barn, Doriane and I pass near those facilities that have been lovingly restored to mint condition by Shadybrook Estate’s owners, David and Alice Alkossers, who purchased Rapp Ranch in 2016. According to Alice, the intermediate owners who bought out the Rapps hadn’t prioritized the horses or facilities. Their main interest was Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, which they planted 12 acres of in 1996. Quarter Horses were an afterthought.

“When they were selling it to us,” Alice recalls, “they said, ‘Just tear down that arena and make it into a barrel room.’”

But Alice had other ideas.

A Foray Into Wine

David and Alice, originally an engineer and a food scientist, never intended to enter the wine trade. Their initial foray into business was real estate in the 1980s, which did very well. By the late 2000s, they were in Napa looking for a weekend home overlooking someone else’s picturesque vineyards. But an enterprising real estate agent showed them a much grander, but devalued, property in Coombsville containing acres of vineyards and outbuildings. This property, the original Shadybrook Estate, is just a mile or so as the crow flies from the Rapp Ranch. Unable to resist the good deal, they bit and suddenly found themselves in the grape business, which neither of them knew anything about. Alice took charge of the new responsibility.

Above: Some might have torn down barns, but the Alkossers saw the potential to incorporate horses into their love of the land. Below: Their vision turned the former horse ranch into a fruitful winery.







“The best education is applied learning,” she says.

At a Napa fundraiser, she purchased the opportunity to make a barrel of wine under the guidance of celebrated winemaker Rudy Zuidema. Not only did Alice learn from him, she hired him. Zuidema brought with him biodynamic farming practices (an extreme, holistic form beyond organic) and a great touch.

As the Shadybrook label began to take off, the Alkossers knew that they needed a bigger winery with tasting and hospitality facilities, a key aspect to being profitable (or at least solvent) in the California wine business. Just a stone’s throw away, the Rapp Ranch was for sale, and Alice saw an opportunity in its complete winery, sprawling tasting veranda, beautiful commercial kitchen and all the requisite permitting. The horse facilities and connection to the area’s history were added bonuses.

“It makes no sense to let that history go away,” Alice says, who grew up riding in southern California and had her kids horseback from an early age. “It was a big part of the Napa Valley. We’re not interested in changing the culture; we want to preserve it.”

To her, the vision became clear. The beautiful tasting veranda and its sweeping views of the valley became home to the Shadybrook and Rapp Ranch wines, while the veranda and commercial kitchen allowed the Alkossers to entertain and build their brands through hospitality.

Beautiful Experiences

After our ride through the vines, Doriane and I venture to the main building to sit down with Alice and Rudy to taste the wines and talk more about their history. We are joined by hospitality and marketing director Kimberly Bothwell, who arrives with a cutting board laden with meticulously curated cheeses and meats. Before visiting Shadybrook, I was nervous that the wines wouldn’t be good. The somewhat generic-sounding name (it’s actually the street on which the original property is located) and the horseback riding angle suggested to me that this wasn’t a serious winemaking outfit. However, seeing Zuidema’s name began to alleviate that worry, as did the fit and finish on everything else I encountered. Now, the quality in the glass was telling the rest of the story.

As we chat, Kimberly pours the 2016 Rapp Ranch Chardonnay. The Alkossers have two brands. The Shadybrook Estate is the higher end, with all wines coming from that original property.

Trail rides past Shadybrook Estate vines on warm days hail the American Quarter Horse history of former Rapp Ranch, while also celebrating the growth of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. Celebrated winemaker Rudy Zuidema leaves his masterful touch on the wines produced at Shadybrook and Rapp Ranch, and he guided the Alkossers as they journeyed into biodynamic farming practices.

“I don’t think there’s anything on the planet quite like riding a horse. I don’t think there’s anything quite as beautiful. It transcends another time and place.”

The Rapp Ranch brand was created to go along with the purchase of that property in 2016. It highlights grapes from the Quarter Horse ranch, supplemented with other fruit, both purchased and homegrown, and sits at a lower price point. The Chardonnay proved delicious, elegant and lively, displaying hallmarks of Zuidema’s style I would find across all the wines we tasted: balance, grace and sheer drinkability.

Many wines in Napa are made simply to impress, showing off with intensity, concentration and overt oakiness, as if to justify high price points. Zuidema’s Rapp Ranch and Shadybrook wines are clearly made to drink and enjoy (an underrated quality, honestly). The wines have intensity, but it’s elegantly distributed across the palate. Oak, often a crutch in Napa, is restrained, deployed with finesse to achieve a layered complexity. This exquisite dance was replicated in all the wines, from the Rapp Ranch Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and red blend, on through the more powerful and polished Shadybrook white, Cabernet, red blend and Malbec. By uniting those great wines with Quarter Horses, trail rides and the Rapp family legacy, there’s a sense that the Alkossers have interwoven disparate, dangling threads into a harmonious whole that offers resolution between Napa’s older identity and its new one.

“I don’t think there’s anything on the planet quite like riding a horse,” Doriane said to me, when we were on the trail, perched on Chief and Cash. “I don’t think there’s anything quite as beautiful. It transcends another time and place.”

Wine lovers might say the same thing about a great bottle of Napa Cabernet. U

A carefully chosen charcuterie board pairs immaculately with the stunning variety of crisp wines bottled under the Shadybrook and Rapp Ranch labels, perfect for sharing on a sun-warmed veranda in the afternoon.



