

Erich and Joanne Russell

Erich began making wine as an amateur while teaching track and field at San Diego High in the early 1970's. During his summers from teaching, Erich worked in the cellar fueling his love for wine. In 1979 he was offered a cellar job at Chateau St. Jean after the winemaker tasted his wine in an amateur winemaking contest. Erich soon retired from teaching and began working for Chateau St. Jean, then Simi, then eventually Belvedere before starting his own winery.

In 1981, Erich opened Rabbit Ridge Winery and Vineyards in Healdsburg, named after his college track nickname, "The Rabbit". Rabbit Ridge continued growing and producing wine in Sonoma County until 2007 when the facility was sold and all operations were consolidated in Paso Robles on the Central Coast.

Erich began purchasing vineyard acreage in 1996 after becoming enamored by the ideal grape growing climate and soils west of highway 101 in the Templeton Gap. This steep hilly region with limestone soils and a maritime cooling influence keeps it 10 to 15 degrees cooler than in the town of Paso Robles to the east. Once in Paso, Erich planted over 300 acres of vineyard and built a 55,000 square foot winery that could produce up to 100,000 cases per year.

In 1998, Erich met his wife, Joanne James, a lifelong resident of St. Petersburg, Florida while promoting Rabbit Ridge wines at one of Disney's top restaurants. Joanne was interviewing with Rabbit Ridge's wine distributor at the same time and the two met. Having graduated from Northeast High School and Eckerd College, Joanne was running her own catering business, working as a runway model, as well as having a fledgling interest in good wine. Erich and Joanne were married in 1999 and maintained a residence in Florida until early in 2011 when Joanne's only daughter went to College.

Joanne joined Erich in the business putting her marketing degree to work in an assortment of duties including: direct sales, wine club coordinator, government compliance, marketing and designing all of the wine labels and occasionally pouring wine in the tasting room. In her spare time she published her own cookbook in 2004, "A Cooks Tour of Rabbit Ridge Winery". True to the Italian use of vineyard land, it was a natural step for Joanne and Erich to begin planting both olive trees and lavender. Joanne and Erich produce extra virgin olive oil under their *Passione Divina* and *Olive Diva* labels. Their olive trees are oil producing Italian varietals. Over the years, Joanne's oil has won Best in Class, two gold medals and silver at the California Mid State Fair.

Three Rabbit Ridge wines have been named to the 'Top 100 Wines of the World' by Wine Spectator. Food and Wine Magazine named Rabbit Ridge Zinfandel as the 'Best Red Wine Value of the Year' in 1999. Additionally, Rabbit Ridge wines have been poured at the White House, and our Chardonnay was the house wine at the French Laundry Restaurant in Yountville, California one year. Continued....

In October 2020, Erich sold Rabbit Ridge as numerous years of drought and crop losses made it impossible to survive. Even though the Russell's owned large acreage, they were still a small family business that started from scratch with no investors or family money. Every dime they made went into the business. Without rain they could not keep the vines healthy without drilling wells and pumping water, which is not good for anyone.

In November 2020, Joanne and Erich created Passione Divina wines with Daniele Rosti from Tuscany. The Russell's are now putting all their efforts into the Passione Divina brand and will source fruit from Tuscany and California to create the wines their customers have grown to love. Salute and Cheers!