~ HISTORY OF THE FORT ROSS VINEYARD ~

*L*ester and Linda met when they were both students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa in the 1960s. Lester, the son of a lawyer and a farmer, was studying geology at the time while Linda, a pianist and composer, was studying music. They spent their limited budget and leisure hours eating at restaurants and drinking the local wine. Subsequently, Lester graduated as an attorney and Linda completed her degree in music composition and music theory. On graduation, Linda joined the Music Department of Pretoria Boys High where she became head of the five year academic music program and the 3rd woman to be awarded tenure since the school was founded at the turn of the 19th Century. They were married in 1967. Nine years later the couple moved to California where Lester practiced law as an attorney in San Francisco and Linda studied Arts Administration and soon joined her professor's arts oriented consulting group that advised non–profit arts organizations. One of the important successes the group had was petitioning the State of California to permit live/work space for artists in areas that were not zoned for residential use.

In 1988, Lester, longing for the country life he had experienced as a young boy, found a large acreage of virgin property in the high coastal ridges overlooking the Pacific Ocean, above the old Russian Settlement of Fort Ross. He and Linda purchased the land and built an African inspired home, featuring the round and oval rooms common in tribal architecture that offered dramatic views of the surrounding terrain.

The vineyard project began in 1991 with Lester ordering two dozen dormant rootstocks. When these initial plantings proved successful, Linda enrolled in the Viticulture Program at Santa Rosa Junior College in Sonoma County and attended classes at U.C. Davis. Linda discovered she had a green thumb and an affinity for heavy machinery. She bought an old backhoe, a bulldozer and other heavy equipment and, with Lester as the operator, they decided to plant a test vineyard with 16 different varieties, three different trellis systems, assorted clones and different rootstocks. After four years, they concluded that the area was ideal for growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and in 1994 began installing the first seven vineyard blocks.

Over the next ten years, with the help of their small crew, they installed sub–surface drainage systems, built a reservoir and drip irrigation system, designed and erected a trellis system with additional foliage wires to minimize unwanted shade from the vines, constructed seven miles of fencing to keep out the deer and wild boar and finally, after planting selected rootstocks, field grafted scion budwood of those field selections and clones that they had carefully chosen to best reflect the terroir of each vineyard block.

Lester and Linda remembered the Pinotage from their early years in South Africa. They sourced bud wood from two of the best blocks in South Africa and were the first private growers to import grapevine cuttings through the Foundation Plant Services that operates alongside the U.C. Davis School of Viticulture and Enology.

In 2009, Lester and Linda were introduced to Jeff Pisoni, the gifted winemaker of Pisoni Vineyards in the Santa Lucia Highlands, who is known for his extraordinary wines produced from the family's estate property. According to Jeff, "I tasted the Fort Ross Vineyard Pinot Noir and Chardonnay at the Ritz Carlton and was struck by the luscious fruit, fine minerality and crisp acidity in each wine. The cool climate and the strong character of the vineyard were clearly evident from wine to wine and vintage to vintage. My goal is to continue to express the personality of the vineyard and the wonderful style the winery has worked so hard to establish over the last decade." In 2009, the first vintage that Fort Ross and Jeff Pisoni worked together, the 2009 Fort Ross Vineyard Chardonnay was chosen as one of the TOP 100 WINES of 2011 by the Wine Enthusiast.