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DeLoach Vineyards' Cyndicy Coudray can make Sonoma County tourists feel right at home.

By Richard Paul Hinkle

If you're going to be saddled with the title "The Face of Sonoma County Hospitality," you would decidedly wish to have the quick and open smile of Cyndicy Coudray. This ebullient woman has seen to the culinary and hospitality needs of our visitors—at John Ash & Co., with Lisa Hemenway and now at DeLoach Vineyards—for some 30 years. And in that time, everyone who's encountered Ms. Coudray has left the experience feeling better about themselves and about their lives.

Cyndicy Coudray
[Duncan Garrett Photography]



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The bounty of the garden at DeLoach Vineyards (Duncan Garrett Photography)

"She has that remarkable quality of opening her arms and just bringing you *in*, enveloping you in a world of wit, friendly conversation and a marvelous sense of humor," says former restaurateur Lisa Hemenway. "I worked with Cyndicy at John Ash, and she later worked for me at my restaurant. That was *way* back. Cyndicy makes conversation interesting, and she's wonderfully creative in the kitchen. She's definitely a leader. She puts things together, gets them going and makes it look easy—which it definitely is *not*."

"She worked as bartender at my restaurant around 1986, and it was a treat to watch her bring people into the place, into the conversation. She has a phenomenal grasp of wines, so she did my wine list, too. She's a real self-starter. She spearheaded a reunion of all the John Ash people a few years ago and did a terrific job."

That's entertainment

Born at San Francisco's Children's Hospital in the 1950s, Coudray spent her early years on the Peninsula and in Marin County ("I remember one house, in Ross, where we were right across from Mount Tamalpais; the view was stunning!"). When her high school years came, she was in Sonoma County. "Santa Rosa High, class of '69," she says with pride. "My father was a banker—a trust officer—and part of his job involved entertaining rather often. My two sisters and I were pressed into service offering appetizers and refreshing drinks: 'Can I

"She's able to capture the essence of the land and transform that into natural and delicious cuisine. Her commitment to sustainability complements DeLoach's movement toward biodynamics."

— Jean Charles Boisset

get you anything?' We had a house on the Russian River for the summer and, in those days, it was common for folks to get together after work for a cocktail and some conversation. Entertaining friends was a big part of my life from the beginning."

With a notion of going into journalism, Coudray studied English at UC Berkeley. "I loved interviewing people for the school newspaper and the yearbook. In those days, there were a number of very interesting startup restaurants and hotels in North Berkeley—The Cheese Board, Peet's Coffee, Chez Panisse—and I worked in several of them to help pay my way through school. As you know, the early 1970s in Berkeley was a time of social unrest, what with Vietnam and Cambodia. I gradually lost interest in school and never graduated."

Returning to Santa Rosa in 1983, Coudray took a job at John Ash & Co. and began attending the wine marketing class at the Santa Rosa Junior College. "That class covered *everything*," she says in mock wonder. "We went into sales and marketing, we studied viticulture and enology, we tasted a great many wines. Heck, we even studied welding! Ha! That was Rich Thomas, of course. So I worked the back room for most of the wine competitions he organized, and that was something of an education in itself. As class secretary, I booked all our tours of wineries so I could see what was going on firsthand."

The John Ash years

I'm pretty sure I first met Cyndicy at a special dinner at John Ash & Co.'s original Montgomery Village site, the first dinner in my memory that heralded the efforts of a grape grower. The dinner honored Robert Young, an extraordinary man and grower from Alexander Valley. I was asked



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to emcee the event. I recall clearly the graciousness of the honoree...and Cyndicy and her crew's smooth, almost effortless job of putting on the dinner. It's always enchanting to watch a true professional at work, to see a job accomplished so seamlessly you have the mistaken notion you could do as well yourself (note the word "mistaken").

"I belonged to three tasting groups," she continues, her eyes alight with contagious enthusiasm. "I got to meet all the important winemakers, like Joe Heitz and Al Brounstein [Diamond Creek]. In those days, Napa didn't yet have top flight restaurants, so John Ash—even though it was in a shopping center—was *the* spot for wine people. Before I came to work for John, I worked at restaurants in Petaluma and Santa Rosa and had run a couple of Round Table Pizza restaurants [in Sebastopol and Napa]. I often worked two jobs. My father passed away when I was 18, so any education I wanted, I paid for. And I knew I wanted to learn more, especially about wine and food.

"Food was just starting to get interesting. There were some excellent bakeries opening up, like Good Earth here, and people were beginning to take an interest in local foods, especially those that were farmed sustainably. In 1983, John Ash hired me, and I soon became his wine buyer. I'm sure I was the first female sommelier in the county. That was so much fun! You have to recall what it was like then: We had the tasting bar up front, we had the restaurant in the back and we had the retail shop on one side. So I could help our customers find a wine they liked at the tasting bar, serve it to them at a table in the restaurant and then sell them a case or two on their way out."

Ash was one of the first to host vertical tastings, whereby clients tasted several vintages of the same wine to discover the



Pairings here include nicoise salad with seared ahi and asparagus with Chardonnay; seared liberty duck breast with fig compote and baby vegetables with Pinot Noir; and creme fraiche panna cotta with honey and berries with Late Harvest Gewürtztraminer. (Duncan Garrett Photography)

differences from year to year. A bit of an archeological excursion, vertical tastings are—and a marvelous means of learning about wine. "That was a great way for people to learn about how wines age," agrees Cyndicy. "We put on some of the first component tastings, to learn where all those various flavors were coming from. We did tastings of wines aged in different oaks. We tasted Pinot Noirs from different regions. We did beer tastings!

"We were buying 'futures,' too, getting the great Bordeaux and Portuguese Ports before they were generally available. The doctors

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“We went into sales and marketing, we studied viticulture and enology, we tasted a great many wines. Heck, we even studied welding! Ha! That was Rich Thomas, of course.”

—Cyndicy Coudray

about. If we want to give our out-of-town clients a good impression of Sonoma County, we take them to DeLoach. We take them to Cyndicy.”

She’s always been good at that. “My job at John Ash gave me a prime opportunity to learn how to *read* people,” she says, ever modestly. “When you learn how to do that, it becomes much easier to work with them. I really enjoy that. That was a time, too, when I had the best handle on what was going on in the county. It seemed as if I knew everybody and what they were up to. Now, there are so many new [wine] brands that it’s hard to keep up.”

Down to earth

In September of 1987, John Ash & Co. moved to its present location at the intersection of River Road and Barnes Road (just off Highway 101 on the north side of Santa Rosa). “I liked the new location—and especially liked the full bar—but when they pared the wine list to just Sonoma County wines, well, I felt that was just a little too narrow for me.

“In January 1988, I left. I worked for a wine wholesaler for a year, then went to work for Chappellet [now celebrating its 40th year] over in Napa Valley. The only non-family members there were the receptionist and I. I worked with Cyril [Chappellet] to help them go direct in the marketing program. I also helped in public relations, hospitality and even began to cook a little, since Molly was busy working on her first book. So I had to source out good food items—there were some great bakeries over there—and I began to learn how good wine draws food after it.”

In 1992, she came back over the hill to work at Lisa Hemenway’s eponymous Montgomery Village restaurant. A year later, she had just started helping Dan Berman set up a wine program at Mixx when she was offered a wonderful opportunity by former firefighter Cecil



A selection of wines at the tasting room bar. (Duncan Garrett Photography)

DeLoach and his wife Christine. The title was special events coordinator; it didn't take her long to add such roles as chef, gardener and hostess (all of which eventually evolved into her present title, hospitality and culinary director).

"I get to spend a lot of time in the garden," she says, giving those words extra weight. "A fair amount of my time is in planning, of course, and in cooking. But I couldn't handle a job where I was cooking all day—or doing any one thing all day. I'm increasingly convinced some sense of balance is a primary source of happiness, so I delight in having the time to go out into my raised beds and dig potatoes or carrots."

Digging potatoes may not be at the top of the karmic list of happiness sources—or even mentioned in *The Secret*—but you can easily see where Cyndicy's going with this. "You can just *feel* yourself coming into balance, digging out those potatoes," she says. "Or sitting over by the koi pond behind the house after a good day's work. We're lucky to have, as our new owner, a charming, delightful, quintessential Frenchman, Jean Charles Boisset, who brings a real energy to our hospitality events. Cecil, bless his soul, wasn't big on parties. He was a farmer to the core: up at dawn and to bed at eight."

"When Christine moved her horses from the pasture next to the house, I got to plant my garden. It's a half-acre, it's fenced and we have more than 60 raised beds with gravel walkways in-between. It's a marvelous place to experiment with new flavors and colors. When our guests come out, dig up a purple potato and then taste the difference it brings to the table, well, their experience is that much enhanced from what it would be merely sitting down to eat with us. When they can see first hand that seasonable harvesting provides better flavors, their experience is more memorable. My job is to create dishes that show off our wines at their best."

"That's one of the most important things going on right now in the hospitality business: We're focusing on locally grown, seasonally harvested fruits and vegetables, and locally grown meats and dairy products. AVA is a Marin County restaurant that really hones in on the locally grown angle, and there are several [restaurants] here in Sonoma County that are doing the very same thing. [At DeLoach], we're moving from organic and French-intensive to biodynamic in our gardening and vineyard practices, and that translates into more distinct flavors in the food and in the wines. In the garden, it means every week we have something different—something distinct—to put on the table. We have so much that we've created a small farmers' market right here at the winery in the summer months to sell off what we don't use ourselves from the garden. Our neighbors love it!"



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Cyndicy says DeLoach has added 17 hives this year, so fresh honey will be on tap as well. "We just bought 17 chick hens, too: Dark Brahmins, Cocoa Marans—they lay chocolate colored eggs—Buff Orpingtons, and Salmon Faverolles. The French, you see, love their fresh eggs...and they really do taste better. I'll do custards, crème Anglaise. They're not for meat. Plucking 'em is just too darned much work."

DeLoach's new owner, Jean Charles Boisset, is clearly pleased to have Ms. Coudray onboard: "Cyndicy is a talented chef who truly understands and feels the terroir of Sonoma. She's able to capture the essence of the land and transform that into natural and delicious cuisine. Her commitment to sustainability—shown through the garden she oversees at the winery and her relationships with local farmers and artisans—complements DeLoach's movement toward biodynamics."

Recipe for success

Asked about the status of tourism in Sonoma County, Coudray is upbeat and positive. "If we take the fullest opportunity to show visitors who we really are, we come off very well. It's easy for people to feel comfortable in Sonoma County. We're pretty relaxed here, and we know how to have fun without being pretentious. Twenty years ago, people tended to be a little stuffy about wine. Now we know it's better if we suggest that people drink what they like...and then show them our best so they can investigate their own palates in a cozy, warm atmosphere.

"Hospitality drives sales. If we do a good job entertaining folks—some wineries use games and contests, others draw people in with Wine Club events—they're going to want to be in Sonoma County. And they'll want to drink Sonoma wines when they're not here so they can relive their best experiences.

"The half-dozen wineries here along Olivet Lane [off Guerneville Road west of Santa Rosa] are working to market ourselves as a group. So we have events together, and we send folks down the road to one another's wineries. At DeLoach, we do tastings and dinners for our growers and their families so they have a better understanding of what their end-product is and how that affects us all. When you share time and a meal with people, you really come to understand each other. The [wine and hospitality] business is so competitive that we really need to know what people are looking for in the marketplace.

"I'm a gardener at home, too. I have older trees—a cedar, a Japanese maple—and I've planted olive trees and herbs. I found just the house I was looking for, built prior to the 1950s, so it has *real* wood, and it has large windows so there's lots of light. It's just a short walk to the local farmers market, so that's perfect."

An obsessive reader who loves to bike ride and hike, Coudray says joint wine-and-food events and wine clubs are two strategies that seem to be paying off for wineries today. "This year we did Winter Wineland, and that was wildly successful, bringing almost 1,000 people to our winery for each of two successive weekends. Anything that makes a visitor feel special is going to help you create a more solid marketplace for your wines."

The recipe for that is easy: You start with a special person, and... ■

Hinkle's first non-wine book, Arming Our Kids for LIFE: The Quotesmeister Talks with his Teens, will be published by Arnica Publishing (Portland, Ore.) late this year.

Please email comments to editor@northbaybiz.com