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CHARLIE CHENOWETH OWNER AND VINEYARD MANAGER, CHENOWETH VINEYARDS

When he was just eight years old, young Charlie Chenoweth was tasked by his father to uproot his granddad's cherry trees. With dynamite. Thus, started his career in farming.

Fast-forward a couple decades and the boy who “grew up farming unwillingly” on the family farm had morphed into one of the most talented farmers in the business. The man who can coax from a grape vine what is arguably planet Earth's finest example of Pinot Noir.

Charlie, 54, is known to the handful of master winemakers responsible for the most sought-after “cult” wines as one of Wine Country's elite growers, whose vast knowledge and fanatical attention to detail yields fruit of surpassing quality.

Whether he's managing someone else's vineyard or working on his own, it's Charlie who decides what piece of land is best suited for a vineyard, what row alignment and spacing will work best, and which clones are likely to prosper on a given rootstock. Once the vines are in, he is the one who makes the countless decisions about pruning, tying, irrigating, and harvesting—each seemingly small in isolation but when taken together absolutely determinative to wine quality.

Charlie won't say just how many acres encompass the Chenoweth ranch, which has been in the family since the mid-1800s. Suffice to say it takes a while to drive across it, passing the house where his grandfather was born, and the one where his father was, too. Farther on is the house where Charlie was born, and past that the cabin he built when he and Amy were newly married, and where their two boys were born. Though vast by Wine Country standards, Charlie can recount a story about nearly every inch of the ranch, from its thick redwood groves to the deep ravine crowded with cypress trees, to the rocky hilltops planted exclusively to Pinot Noir.

It was Charlie's idea in 2000 to tear out the apple orchard his father had planted to make way for Pinot Noir grapes, perhaps the varietal best suited to the cooler



microclimate of the Russian River Valley in western Sonoma County. Since then the vineyards have multiplied threefold, with the addition of the Treehouse vineyard in 2006 and Bootlegger's Hill in 2009, so named for the allegedly nefarious activity that occurred there during Prohibition. This year Charlie is considering planting another vineyard, perhaps to Riesling or Chardonnay, on a distant corner of the ranch. Whatever he decides to plant, rest assured that it will be done meticulously, because that's how Charlie does it: with the eye of an architect and the hand of the sculptor, every vine, leaf, spur and cluster just so. As Amy, the Chenoweth family winemaker, says about her husband's ferocious attention to the minutest detail, "you can taste it in the wine."

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