

# CLOS DE LA TECH

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

## 2023 Wine Ratings and Scores



2017 Santa Cruz Mountains Estates	94 Points
2017 Domaine Valeta Sunny Slope ( <i>Cellar Selection</i> )	95 Points
2017 Domaine Lois Louise Côté Sud	93 Points
2017 Domaine du Docteur Rodgers	94 Points
2017 Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge	93 Points



2012 Santa Cruz Mountains Estates Pinot Noir	91 Points
2012 Domaine Lois Louise Côté Sud	92 Points
2012 Domaine Valeta Sunny Slope	90 Points



2016 Santa Cruz Mountains Estates	92 Points
2016 Domaine Valeta Sunny Slope	94 Points
2016 Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge	94 Points
2016 Domaine Lois Louise Côté Sud	96 Points
2016 Domaine du Docteur Rodgers	97 Points



2016 Santa Cruz Mountains Estates	94 Points
2016 Domaine Valeta Sunny Slope	93 Points
2016 Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge	93 Points
2016 Domaine Lois Louise Côté Sud	94 Points
2016 Domaine du Docteur Rodgers	90 Points

*"This is an exceptional vintage for the Clos de la Tech Santa Cruz Mountains wines."*

— A. Galloni

[closdelatech.com](http://closdelatech.com)



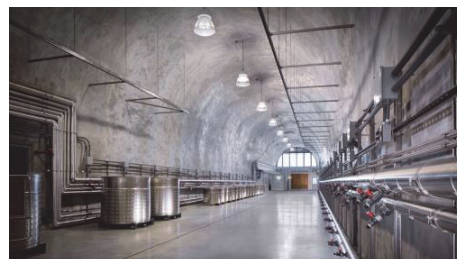
# Robb Report

## Grand Cru Goes Underground in the Santa Cruz Mountains

*A Silicon Valley executive creates Old World-style, age-worthy Pinot Noirs in a new wine cave, sans technology.*

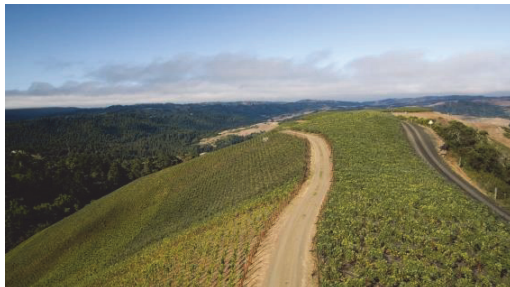
By [Sara L. Schneider](#)

You might think that a winery in the mountains above [Silicon Valley](#), founded by former titans of the semiconductor industry—and named Clos de la Tech—would sport all the high-tech bells and whistles the wine world has invented, and then some. You’d be right about just one thing: A symbolic silicon chip is affixed to each vineyard-designated bottle. Beyond that touch of technology? Not so much.



T.J. and Valeta Rodgers, owners of [Clos de la Tech](#) in the [undersung Santa Cruz Mountains](#), are passionate about old-school winemaking. Cypress Semiconductor might dominate the couple’s résumés, yet T.J. has traded in the title of founder and CEO of that company for CWO (chief winemaking officer) of CDLT, as they call their winery, and Valeta has gone from senior design engineer to winemaker. The “technology” they employ now runs along ancient lines: gravity, foot-stomping, native yeast.

The location of most of their vineyards—high in the mountains on steep slopes gruelingly exposed to the elements—combined with high-density planting results in extremely low yields (generally less than two tons per acre). It also requires an unusual tractor, which is pulled up the hill by cables and controlled by a joystick (no motor, steering wheel, or brakes). In the cellar, Clos de la Tech’s hard-won fruit gets minimal handling—whole-cluster fermentation, no pumps, and bottling without filtration.



What the owners are after in their increasingly acclaimed Pinot Noirs is a profile that embraces the Burgundian balance of savory herbs, forest floor, leather, mushroom, and earth (soil and minerality) over the dominant ripe fruit that New World [Pinot Noir](#) generally revels in. As Valeta puts it, “Our wines are compact and tannic in their youth, but with age they develop powerful bottle bouquets, expansive flavors, and great complexity.” And the Rodgers are willing to hold their bottles back until those elements evolve. The 2012 is their current release; 2014 will be coming out in early 2019, followed by 2013, which needs a little more time.

As of the 2012 vintage, Clos de la Tech has taken its winemaking underground. The new winery consists of three caves—each 30 feet wide, 30 feet high, and 300 feet long—stepped down the mountain to employ gravity to move the product from crushing to fermentation to aging in 100 percent François Frères oak. The deliberate lack of technology isn’t disingenuous; it’s a calculated means to bottles that can live long in the cellars of the winery’s lucky members.



### **Clos de la Tech 2012 Domaine Lois Louise “Twisty Ridge” Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains**

Opening with haunting pine notes, earthy mushroom, pepper, and a hint of vanilla, this Pinot wraps a layer of leather around blueberry and blackberry fruit, with taut but elegant texture and power (\$65).

### **Clos de la Tech 2012 Domaine Lois Louise “Cote Sud” Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains**

Savory crushed herbs and damp loam on the nose are balanced by warm spice and hints of vanilla and mocha; black cherry shows a hint of tobacco leaf on a long and rich mouth-filling palate (\$85).

### **Clos de la Tech 2012 Domaine Valeta “Sunny Slope” Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains**

High-toned floral aromas bring an almost feminine quality to forest notes and juicy cherry and raspberry, layered with warm cloves and a touch of pepper, in this downright pretty Pinot (\$65).

### **Clos de la Tech 2005 Domaine du Docteur Rodgers Pinot Noir San Francisco Bay**

A single acre makes up the Docteur Rodgers vineyard (around the Rodgers’ Woodside home), and this 2005 was released just a few months ago—a testimony to the aging potential of these wines. A sachet of dried petals and a hint of exotic spice—cardamom and cloves—lead to plum and sweet rhubarb flavors, complex and savory herb and red earth notes, and silky tannins (\$200).





# Antonio Galloni vinous

Reviews  
October 2022

*"I always enjoy tasting Clos de la Tech wines, as they are so highly individual. Readers will find opulent, dense Pinots that are quite different from the style most producers are going for. There is plenty of fruit, density and oak. Clos de la Tech also gives their wines a few years in bottle prior to release, which means the wines show more complexity than is typical upon release."*



## 2016 Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountain Estates

Release Price: \$65 | Color: Red | Drinking Window: 2022 - 2028 | **94**

*"Rich, deep and effusive, the 2016 Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountain Estates is a fabulous introduction to the Clos de la Tech wines. Black cherry, mocha, chocolate, licorice, leather and sweet spice are all dialed up. Readers can expect an opulent, full-throttle Pinot that is all about exuberance. This is an exceptional vintage for the Santa Cruz Mountains bottling."*



## 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine Lois Louis Côté Sud

Release Price: \$95 | Color: Red | Drinking Window: 2024 - 2031 | **94**

*"The 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine Lois Louis Côté Sud brings together all the best qualities of this wine. Effusive in its aromatics, with superb depth and tons of resonance, the Côté Sud is so expressive today. Like all these wines, it offers up plenty of dark Pinot fruit, chocolate and sweet oak flavors to match all that opulence."*



## 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine Valeta Sunny Slope

Release Price: \$95 | Color: Red | Drinking Window: 2024 - 2031 | **93**

*"The 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine Valeta Sunny Slope offers up a heady melange of dark red fruit, spice, leather, cedar, mocha, tobacco, incense and orange peel. Wild and exotic, the Sunny Slope is another terrific, full-throttle wine in this range from Clos de la Tech. Plush, silky contours round out the substantial finish."*



## 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge

Release Price: \$95 | Color: Red | Drinking Window: 2022 - 2028 | **93**

*"The 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge is the most delicate and perfumed of the Pinots. There's terrific aromatic presence that gives the 2016 its signature. The oak is a bit overpowering, which dries out the fruit just a bit while accenting the wine's mid-weight structure. I would prefer to drink this first among the 2016s."*



## 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine du Docteur Rodgers

Release Price: \$150 | Color: Red | Drinking Window: 2022 - 2028 | **90**

*"The 2016 Pinot Noir Domaine du Docteur Rodgers is dense, powerful and massively extracted. It is without question the most potent of these wines, but richness is never in short supply here, so the Docteur Rodgers feels pushed. There is just enough fruit to handle the heavy oak and torrefaction flavors."*



FOOD & DRINK

# From Foot-Stomping Grapes To Robots, Clos De La Tech Winery Embraces New And Ancient Technology

**Liz Thach, MW**

Contributor

*I write about wine business, strategy and marketing.*

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May 17, 2022, 07:00am EDT



Clos de La Tech Pinot Noir Vineyard in Santa Cruz Mountains with Pacific Ocean in Distance

In the 1990's, T.J. Rodgers visited the tiny village of Vosne-Romanée in France and fell in love with the Pinot Noir grape used to make red Burgundy



wine. Inspired by the taste of these wines, he decided to plant one acre of Pinot Noir grapes in the Santa Cruz Mountain AVA (appellation) near his home in Woodside, California. However, as the CEO of Silicon Valley based Cypress Semiconductor, he made the novel decision of combining ancient winemaking practices, such as foot-stomping of grapes, with cutting edge technologies like drones and robots in the vineyards. Thus [Clos de La Tech Winery](#) was born.

“I am a fan of the knowledge of the ancients,” explains T.J. Rodgers, now retired from Cypress, but serving as a venture capitalist for several solar companies. “My winemaking process includes the best of the ancient practices, but is enhanced by technology - after all I am a scientist,” states Rodgers.

Indeed Rodgers has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Stanford University, and has studied winemaking techniques at UC-Davis, but he believes in combining the best of ancient and new technologies. This also accounts for the name of the winery: “Clos” is a French term to describe a small walled vineyard, but “La Tech” celebrates Rodgers’s Silicon Valley heritage. Until two years ago, each bottle of Clos de La Tech pinot noir (ranging from \$65 to \$125 per bottle) was adorned with a semi-conductor chip, but due to the global shortage of chips, this practice has been discontinued.

## **Cutting Edge Technology in Clos de La Tech Vineyards**

Over the years Clos de La Tech has expanded to include 40 acres of prime pinot noir vineyards, spread across three sites. The traditional French tight spacing of one meter by one meter is used between the vines (around 4150 vines per acre), and the highest vineyard sits on top of the mountains at 1800

feet with a 180 degree view of the Pacific Ocean. The vineyards are organically farmed, but not certified organic.

If you are fortunate enough to secure an appointment to visit the private mountain top vineyard with three caves dug deep into the hillside, make sure to use a four-wheel drive vehicle. The twisting dirt road to the top of the mountain is very steep with hair-pin turns, and can bring on a case of car sickness.

“We have 22 full-time employees here to tend the vineyards and work in the cellars,” announces David Goldfarb, Winegrower for Clos de La Tech, a role that incorporates both vineyard and cellar operations. He gestures to the very steep vineyard hillside where employees balance themselves on the slope as they carefully sucker (pull extra leaves) off the vines. “We do a lot of hand-work here, but we also use drones to map the vineyard,” he states.

“The drones,” Rodgers explains, “will map the vineyard and use artificial intelligence to store the memory of the vineyard.” This allows Clos de La Tech to create a very reliable computer database of vineyard conditions by season and vintage. Combined with ground probe technology that monitors ground water status, Rodgers is moving towards a goal of precision viticulture, where each vine can eventually be monitored. Rodgers’ team at FarmX has also figured out a way to equip the drones to spray the vines by attaching a second tanker drone to a pilot drone.

“We are very efficient with water,” states Rodgers. “We use less than one-fourth of an equivalent vineyard.”

In addition to ground probes and drones, Rodgers has designed an over the row tractor that can transverse the incredibly steep hillsides and tend the



vines by riding in between them. It is pulled up the hill by cables and therefore does not need a motor. Manufactured by German agriculture firm, Clemens GmbH, it is the only tractor in the world that can handle vertical and steep side slopes in such a closely spaced vineyard. “This tractor,” states Rodgers, “is a pre-cursor to what the vineyard robot of the future might look like.”



### Specially Designed Tractor to Work in Steep Vineyards of Clos de La Tech

CLOS DE LA TECH

With investments in several solar companies, it is not surprising to find that Rodgers has installed solar panels in the vineyard. “We have designed them to be all black,” reports Rodgers, “so this way neighbors do not complain about solar panel reflection.”

## Foot-Stomping Grapes Deep in the Caves of Clos de La Tech

If technology and the human hand work side by side in the vineyard, once the grapes arrive in the deep caves of Clos de La Tech, the human foot takes over. “There’s an aesthetic beauty about foot-crushing,” says Rodgers, “but it is also beneficial to the wine because it is a more gentle process than using a destemmer/crusher. We use 100% whole grape clusters, and because the seeds do not get crushed and stems do not get scarred, we can control the tannin structure better, resulting in a better wine.”

The winemaker at Clos de La Tech is Valeta Massey - also T.J. Rodgers’ wife and co-owner. She participates in foot-treading the grapes along with the cellar team. First the grape clusters are sorted by hand, and then gently placed in a small open-topped stainless steel tank that holds around 800 pounds of grapes – enough to make one 60 gallon barrel of wine, or 300 bottles. Then one person stands in the short tank and starts stomping, their feet covered by food-grade plastic booties.

“It takes six workers approximately one hour to perform the sorting and foot-stomping to fill up one tank,” reports Goldfarb, who also assists during crush. “The beauty of the design of these small tanks, developed by T.J., is that we foot stomp, ferment, and press off the skins all in the same tank.”

The wine is fermented using natural yeast, and once finished, it is gently transported in a gravity flow system to the next cave, which serves as the barrel aging room. Here the wine is aged 16 to 18 months in French oak, before being gently moved by gravity to the third cave, reserved for bottling and storage. Here it rests for 3 to 4 more years in bottle, before being released 5 to 6 years after harvest.





## Wines of Clos de La Tech Winery

THACH

### Pinot Noirs That Exhibit Complex Fruit and Santa Cruz Soil

So what do the Pinot Noir wines of Clos de La Tech taste like? Rodgers' dream of bringing a small part of Burgundy to the Santa Cruz Mountains seems to have paid off in the complex fruit and earthiness that can be found in most of the vintages of Clos de La Tech.

The wines, coming from five separate vineyard blocks, such as *Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge* (produced from the oldest vines on top of the mountain) to the *Domaine du Docteur Rodgers* (produced from the original one acre plot near Woodside), all seem to have a taste of the Santa Cruz Mountain AVA soil,

along with complex fruit. Some are more full-bodied with notes of black cherry, spice, potting soil and truffle, while others are more elegant with plum, rose petal, raspberry, granite and slate.

Producing less than 5000 cases per year, vintages are frequently sold out. Customers usually have to join the wine club, or journey to the Half Moon Bay Wine & Cheese Shop to purchase Clos de La Tech wines. The journey to the top of the mountain to the actual winemaking facility is only by rare appointment, or to attend occasional wine club events.

In the end, Rodgers' vision of combining the best of ancient technology with the cutting edge science of the modern era seems to have created a wine that straddles the New and Old worlds. But it is also a wine that takes much labor, time, and money to produce. Many hands, minds, hearts, and feet go into its creation, along with technological knowhow.

“So many vineyard and winery operations do not want to put in the time it takes to create great wine,” states Goldfarb. “Fortunately Clos de La Tech has the financial patience to make wine that takes time to be great.”





## T. J. Rodgers, Founder of Clos de La Tech Winery and Retired CEO of Cypress Semiconductors

MO SAITO

I had a chance to visit Clos de La Tech vineyard high on the top of the Santa Cruz Mountains with a view of the ocean. It is truly a unique vineyard in California, with tight vine spacing like Burgundy, but with hillsides as steep as the Mosel in Germany. It is also filled with wildlife, with hawks and eagles soaring overhead, and rabbits, foxes, and an occasional mountain lion said to be roaming the slopes.



**Liz Thach, MW**

I am a Professor, Wine Writer and Consultant based in Napa and Sonoma, California. As an award-winning author and educator, I specialize in wine business strategy, marketing, leadership/executive development, and wine lifestyle. My passion is wine, and I have visited most of the major wine regions of the world and more than 65 countries. I teach part-time in the Wine MBA program at Sonoma State University, and also teach a wine business class for Stanford Continuing Education. My publications number over 200 articles and 9 books, including *Call of the Vine*, *Best Practices in Global Wine Tourism* and *Luxury Wine Marketing*. I completed my Ph.D. at Texas A&M University in Human Resources, and became a Master of Wine (MW) in May 2011, after passing the most rigorous wine exam in the world. In my free time, I enjoy hiking, golf, reading, and wine dinners with family and friends, as well as serving on several non-profit wine boards and being a wine judge.

# The Billionaire Boys' Club

**CLOS DE LA TECH AND ALEJANDRO BULGHERONI ESTATE**  
ARE WORTH THE SPLURGE **by Anthony Dias Blue**

**The typical California** winery story goes something like this: A retired, semi-successful dentist buys a small plot of land and moves there with his wife with the aim of becoming a “gentleman farmer.”

By contrast, the not-so-typical California winery story:

A billionaire buys a prime plot of land, constructs a state-of-the-art winery, and begins producing expensive, world-class wine (sometimes without actually moving there).

Two elite members of the latter group are T.J. Rodgers and Alejandro Bulgheroni. Rodgers—the founder and, until recently, owner of Cypress Semiconductor as well as the principal of several other Silicon Valley operations—began growing Pinot Noir in the 1-acre vineyard surrounding his home in the Santa Cruz area in 1996. The

resulting wine, called Clos de la Tech, was so remarkable that he bought more vineyard land. Each bottle sports a working computer chip on its neck.

Bulgheroni, meanwhile, owns the second-largest oil and gas company in Argentina as well as 13 winery properties in Argentina, Australia, Italy, Uruguay, and California. The biggest is Bodega Garzón, a 10,000-acre Uruguayan paradise I visited several years ago that not only produces wine but raises cattle. Winemaking for his California operation is overseen by Philippe Melka and Michel Rolland.

We start with a surprising vertical of Rodgers’ best wine, followed by a selection of bottlings from Alejandro Bulgheroni Estate in Napa Valley:

**Clos de la Tech 2003 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$250)** Amazing, deep, and velvety; intense, seamless, and layered. Generous, elegant, and youthful, it’s remarkable for a 17-year-old wine. **97**

**Clos de la Tech 2006 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$225)** Aromas of mint and herbs. Smooth, lush, and juicy; rich with good length. **95**

**Clos de la Tech 2008 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$225)**

Luscious, refined, and ripe, with notes of mint, spice, and dried cherries; elegant and long. **96**

**Clos de la Tech 2010 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$225)** Rich and smooth, with bright raspberry and spice, warm notes of red fruits, and tangy acidity culminating in a long finish. **95**

**Clos de la Tech 2012 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$120)** Luscious notes of bright cherry, blackberry, spice, mint, and clove; seamless and lovely. **96**

**Clos de la Tech 2015 Pinot Noir, Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, San Francisco Bay (\$150)** Floral nose with scents of berry. Smooth, juicy, and tangy, with a hint of clove and rich cherry as well as a tangy acid structure; long and delicious. **96**

**Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$166)** Vanilla-inflected nose, silky texture, and lush notes of plum, blackberry, earth, and spice; complex and layered with bright hints of vanilla and new oak. Not bad for an “entry-level” wine. **96**

**Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon, Dr. Crane Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$295)**

Originally planted in 1858 and replanted by Andy Beckstoffer in 1998, this vineyard has yielded a glowing garnet wine with a plum nose and crisp acidity; ripe blackberry, cherry, and plum; and nuances of vanilla, spice, and licorice. It’s long and generous. **98**

**Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon, Las Piedras Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$295)** Lovely plum and blueberry nose; smooth, luscious, and complex, with hints of mocha, black olive, and chocolate. Graceful, soft, and beautiful, it reveals itself slowly but dramatically. **98**



**Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Lithology Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon, To Kalon Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$295)** Scents of vanilla and herbs, velvety texture, and deep and rich notes of graphite, vanilla, tangy plum, and berries as well as soft herbs and spices. All components are in their rightful place in this remarkably balanced wine from a historic vineyard. **98**

**Alejandro Bulgheroni 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$395)** Deep and dark, this miraculous wine stays with you—the finish seems to last for hours. Before that comes ripe plum, blueberry, and cassia followed by fresh herbs, smooth vanilla, new oak, and spices; creamy, juicy, and balanced. **99** *LT*

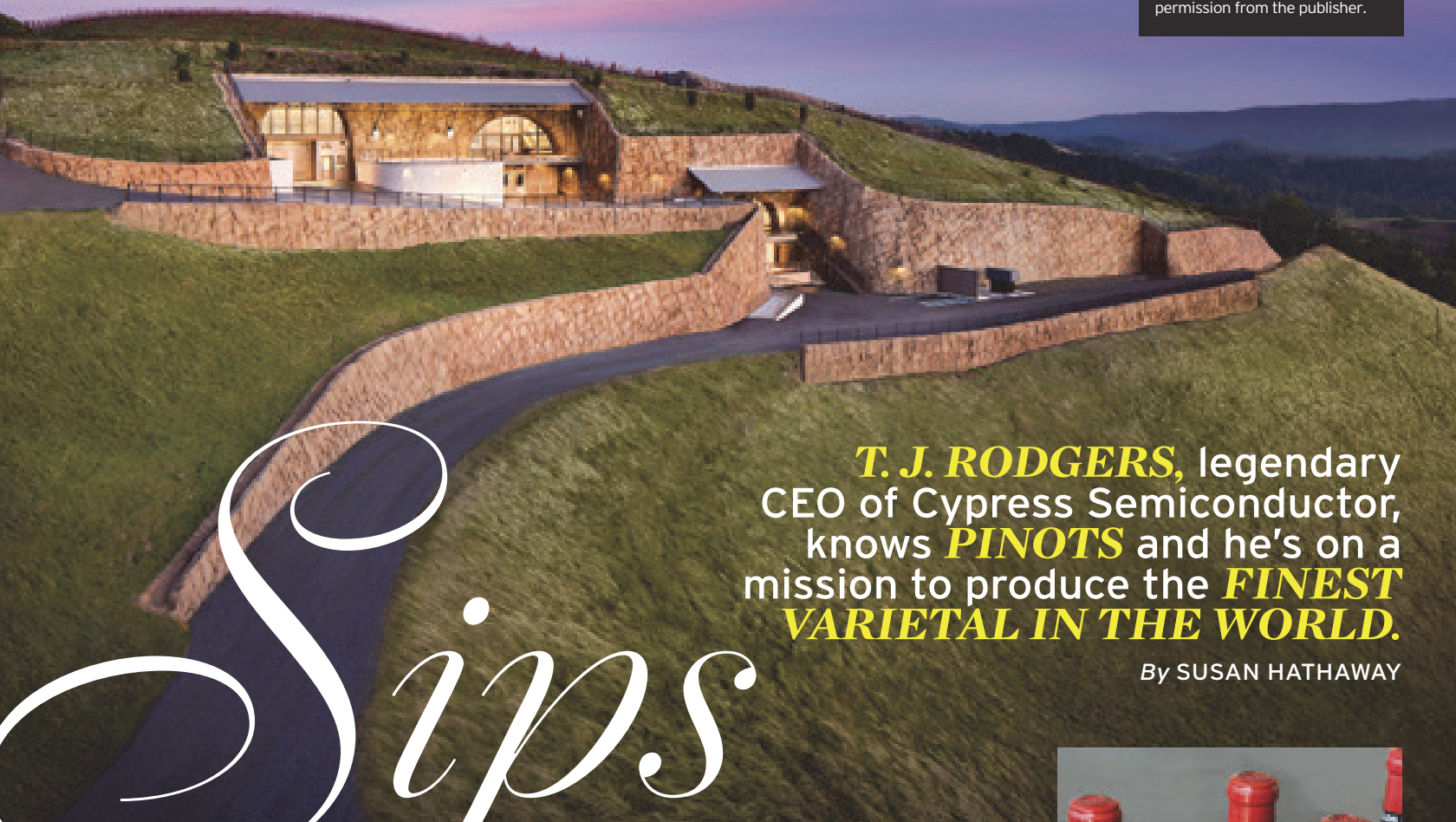




# *Silicon Chips &*







**T. J. RODGERS**, legendary CEO of Cypress Semiconductor, knows **PINOTS** and he's on a mission to produce the **FINEST VARIETAL IN THE WORLD.**

By SUSAN HATHAWAY

# Sips

**IN SILICON VALLEY** management vernacular, it's one heck of a stretch goal: Make the best pinot noir in the world. This persnickety grape typically creates apoplexy for wineries striving to bend it to their will, but to chip czar T.J. Rodgers, it's just another task to be researched, planned and executed—like designing the programmable circuits his San Jose company, Cypress Semiconductor, has been making since 1982.

To his earlier titles such as “doctor”—he earned a Stanford Ph.D in electrical engineering in 1975—“founder” and “CEO,” he added “winemaker” upon creating Clos de la Tech, encompassing his vineyards and winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains that started as landscaping around his Woodside home and turned into a passion. “Once you get to eight figures (of investment), it's no longer a hobby,” he states in his usual forthright manner.

Like attracting magnets, Rodgers instantly adheres to huge challenges. Reading, doing experiments and looking for new solutions to solve problems are in his DNA. “That's how I do everything in my life—everything,” emphasizes the muscular blond. “I like studying. I like learning. I like knowledge. Winemaking was a natural for me. The thing I discovered was that wine is an extraordinarily complicated topic.” That makes it all the better.

Rodgers' wine quest is a story that mirrors his business career and is the stereotypical Silicon Valley script: Smart, driven individual comes to the promised land to make a mark, then deals with adversities and rivals but keeps pushing forward toward the brass ring. In neither case—business nor winemaking—has the end chapter been written, which just makes the tale more fascinating. »



**Clockwise from top left:** Domaine Lois Louise Cote Sud; the gravity flow winery at Domaine Lois Louise, with three adjacent 300-foot-long caves; Clos de la Tech pinot noir with signature silicon chip embedded in bottle neck; Rodgers checks a cluster of grapes for a cooling experiment with an on-site air conditioner.



## DRIVEN FROM THE GET-GO

Thurman John Rodgers is one of the valley's quintessential tech figures, a self-made multimillionaire who rarely elicits neutral reactions in the business community. Liberal journalists have called him things like "the bad boy of Silicon Valley" for his outspoken belief in Ayn Randian capitalism and the wrongness of protectionist government policies.

Originally from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Rodgers inherited his love of science from his mother, Lois Louise Rodgers, who had a master's degree in radio electronics. Relentless in achieving goals, he played nose guard on both his high school and Dartmouth football teams even though, at 5 feet, 8 inches tall, he was one of the smallest players. Nor did he slow down after arriving at Stanford, inventing and patenting an important semiconductor technology before graduating.

Ask Rodgers a question and be prepared for a long, complex, minutely detailed answer—like a science textbook written by Henry James. When it comes to wine, he might dive into topics like tannin management, leaf pulling, a natural sunscreen in grapes called quercetin and countless other viticulture and enology subjects, explaining precisely, in depth and with copious statistics until the question's answer finally emerges.

Given his current body of knowledge, it's interesting to note that, "The only wine I'd had, honest to god, when I got out of Dartmouth when I was 21, was Ripple or sangria," Rodgers admits. Later, as a valley up-and-comer, he was reluctantly talked into trying a case of different French wines by a local wine shop.

Like many CEOs, Rodgers makes decisions quickly, then he's all in. That's what happened when he first sampled a French

red Burgundy in that fateful mixed case. "I fell in love with Burgundy, and that became my wine," he recalls. So when it came time to landscape around the home he had built in Woodside in 1992, he opted for an acre of pinot noir grapes rather than decorative plantings.

With assistance from a local winery and best-of-breed consultants, Rodgers' home vineyard began producing wine in 1996. Only two vintages among the first five were good enough to share; before Clos de la Tech's first commercial vintage of 2000, Rodgers gave the acceptable vintages away "to my CEO buddies," he says. Nevertheless, the wine bug had bitten him so deeply that he was ready to expand. "I saw the kind of complexity—I would use the word interdisciplinary requirements—in wine that I saw in electronics. That's what drew me to it and got me passionate about it," he explains.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PAUL SAKUMA; COURTESY OF CLOS DE LA TECH (2); DAN SULLIVAN; COURTESY OF CLOS DE LA TECH; CHIP ALLEN





**Clockwise from top left:** The one-of-a-kind tractor invented in Germany and modified by Rodgers to farm the slopes at Domaine Lois Louise is capable of operating at a 45-degree grade; chips on the Clos de la Tech bottles are all placed by hand; Rodgers' custom-built press functions like a French Melior coffee pot and is so gentle on the pumice that the press wine doesn't need to be separated; Domaine Lois Louise Twisty Ridge; foot-crushing all the winery's grapes requires a wetsuit for Massey during cold soak when it's chilly; the barrel-aging cave, designed to accommodate 1,052 barrels stacked two-high.



He dove headfirst into wine research journals, traveled to France for input and consulted with experts at UC Davis. Says Rodgers, "I've read as many articles on wine and winemaking as I did on electrical engineering before I got my Ph.D."

#### PAIR WITH A WINE PASSION

However, it hasn't been a solo effort. Whippet-slim, blonde, pretty-without-makeup Valeta Massey has been there for the whole ride and is officially the assistant winemaker. Rodgers' companion of 29 years and his wife since 2008, Massey oversees much of the day-to-day work. "My joke is, he's the wine thinker, and I'm the wine doer," she laughs. "He does all the smart stuff, but I execute it really well."

The pair acquired and had planted a 3½-acre mountain parcel a hilltop away from famous Ridge Vineyards, naming it Domaine Valeta. Of her namesake vineyard,

Massey says, "It's a beast. It's like taming a lion. I used to call it Caber-noir. We're finally getting a handle on it, and it's starting to become a very special wine."

But this vineyard was just a warm-up for the main event. In 2000, the couple bought a 165-acre plot of land located two miles down a dirt road off Skyline Boulevard, where the 30-acre Domaine Lois Louise vineyard—named for Rodgers' mother—was planted to the same French pinot noir clones as their other vineyards. With the steepest slopes in California, this land gave Rodgers the kind of colossal challenge he relishes. Here, he would create a winery reflecting his well-researched beliefs about how to make world-class pinot noir.

Placed in the middle of the sprawling vineyard, the winery consists of three adjacent 300-foot-long caves designed with help from a French cave builder that han-

dle, respectively, production, barrel aging and bottling and storage. Stair-stepped into the hill, the caves make possible gravity-flow operations from juice to bottling, thus ensuring gentle treatment of this finicky grape.

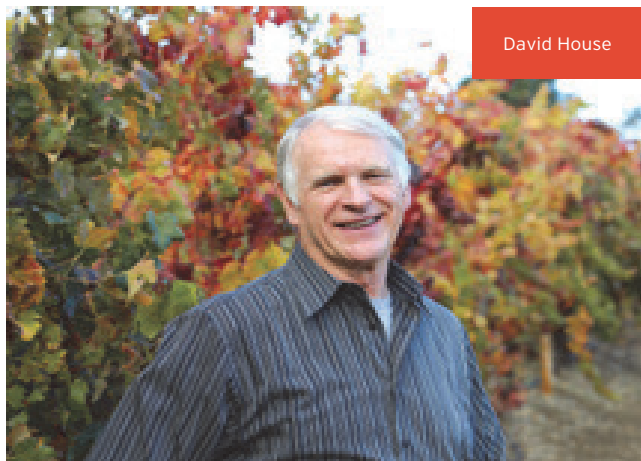
But the ambitious project hit some stumbling blocks. Months of blasting with dynamite enraged some of the area's few inhabitants while neighbors also complained about possible erosion and contamination of the water supply. Thus it took several years to get permits and complete the winery. Along the way, there was a construction mishap that caused a large chunk of the vineyard to tumble into one of the caves, so Rodgers and Massey turned this \$1 million mistake into "the world's most expensive skylight," explains Massey.

However, such setbacks were trivial when compared to Rodgers' overall ob-

# WINE BIZ DRAWS VALLEY NOTABLES

**A MUCH-REPEATED PHRASE** about the wine business is that it's the best way to turn a large fortune into a small fortune. This doesn't seem to dissuade famous and wealthy—or just wealthy—individuals from planting vineyards and sometimes launching wineries. A partial list of celebrities who moonlight in the wine biz includes Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Joe Montana, Madonna, rocker Mick Fleetwood, Wayne Gretzky, Pixar chief John Lasseter and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

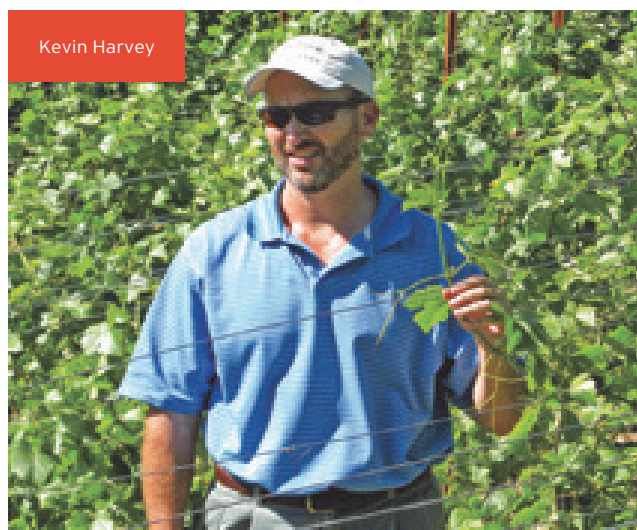
Our region is particularly teeming with well-heeled wine entrepreneurs. Given its great climate for grape growing, the Santa Cruz Mountains region is home to wine operations from high-tech titans in addition to the one T.J. Rodgers founded. The most notable enterprise is Rhys Vineyards, owned by venture capitalist **KEVIN HARVEY**. Rhys pinot noirs have inspired rapture among wine critics, but the Los Gatos winery—which operates several vineyards



spread across the mountains—also makes chardonnay and syrah. According to the New York Times, Rhys produces “among the best American pinot noirs, a beacon for those who value grace, balance, structure and distinctiveness in wine.”

Another serious operation is House Family Vineyards above Saratoga, owned by former Intel executive **DAVID HOUSE**. Cabernet sauvignon is the winery's focus, but House is also the managing partner of the historic Mountain Winery in Saratoga, which he and his colleagues rescued from financial turmoil and refurbished into a premier event and winemaking operation, replanting and extending vineyards on the undulating hills. During earlier incarnations, the former Paul Masson winery had lost focus on winemaking in favor of performances, but under House's tutelage, grape production was brought back to glorious life.

Such is the broad appeal of wine and the wine lifestyle that many other well-heeled valley residents are keen to buy a piece of it—if only as vineyard owners or home winemakers. In fact, a percolating consumer trend is planting home vineyards in the wealthier enclaves of suburbia, paying for the work and potential winemaking to be done by others. Nicknamed “vanity vineyards,” this concept inspired a second company for Clos LaChance Wines founder **BILL MURPHY**, a former high-tech executive himself.



CK Vines is a subsidiary of Clos LaChance that provides installation and maintenance of small-scale vineyards on a homeowner's property in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Far from a landscaping company, CK Vines takes special care of more than 25 local home vineyards and offers to buy the fruit for use in Clos LaChance wines.

What's clear is that the grapes from well-tended, intelligently chosen vineyards have a market. For example, the pinot noir from the home vineyard in Los Altos of well-known former networking CEO **BILL KRAUSE** has appeared in at least two well-received commercial wines. Having a vineyard in the front yard surely beats looking at a lawn, which produces no income and definitely isn't a conversation starter.



jective for Clos de la Tech—namely, to produce a pinot noir to rival the greatest in the world, the flagship wine from Burgundy’s magnificent Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Presently selling for as much as \$13,500 for a single bottle of the 2011 vintage, this iconic wine is the culmination of a few centuries of greatness. Whether Rodgers’ goal shows inspiration or delusion, Massey has a point when she explains the reason for their winery’s mission: “They’re the best. Who else can be your role model but the best?”

Great, spare-no-expense effort has been invested toward this goal, with Rodgers’ winery having adopted many of the French operation’s vineyard and wine-making practices while loosely copying its packaging, label and style. However, the famous French wine doesn’t include a Cypress silicon chip embedded in the neck of most bottles—a Clos de la Tech hallmark. “Putting the chip on the bottle is really labor intensive, but he loves doing it,” reports Massey.

“Labor intensive” should be the definition of the entire operation. The cold, fog-laden hills where the Domaine Lois Louise vineyard struggles to produce grapes demand ongoing ministrations. Rodgers modified a German tractor so that it could traverse the vineyard’s 35-degree slope—“so damn steep that you can barely walk up and down it,” he says. Running on cables and controlled with a joystick, this invention won an award in Europe for being the most innovative new piece of farm equipment.

#### INNOVATION AMONG THE VINES

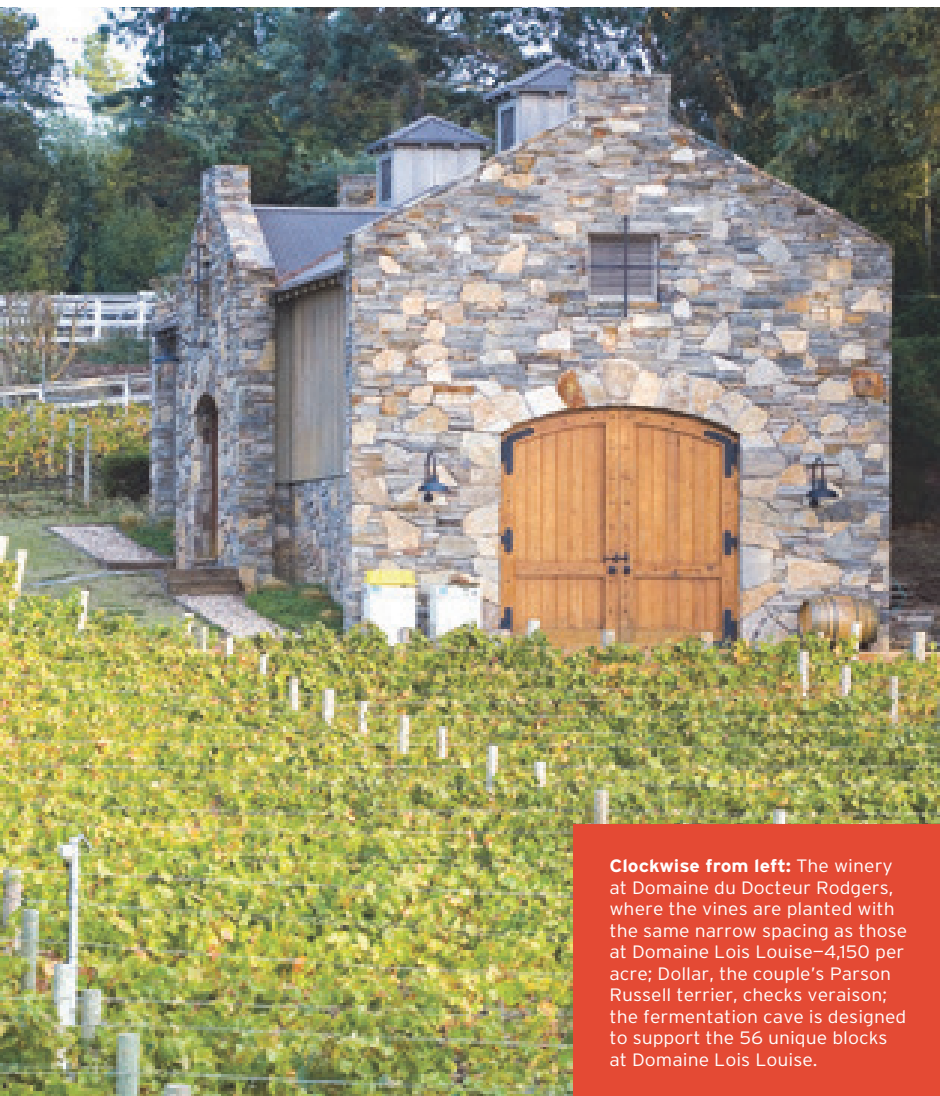
Ceaselessly reviewing viticulture literature, Rodgers constantly tries out new vineyard techniques. To protect the flowering vines during cold, wet, windy weather, he borrowed an idea from grape growers in British Columbia who use strips of plastic wrap along each row of vines to minimize the effect of flower-destroying conditions. He had done costly earlier experiments that weren’t as successful, such as an electronically monitored portable plastic greenhouse that would have been prohibitive if fully implemented throughout the large vineyard.

With Clos de la Tech functioning as a laboratory for his inventions, some impressive results have emerged. There’s what Massey calls “the wonder press,” which sets new standards for gentle pressing and has reduced the winery’s press time from



T.J. Rodgers and his wife Valeta Massey strike a pose in front of their store, The Half Moon Bay Wine and Cheese Company.





**Clockwise from left:** The winery at Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, where the vines are planted with the same narrow spacing as those at Domaine Lois Louise—4,150 per acre; Dollar, the couple's Parson Russell terrier, checks veraison; the fermentation cave is designed to support the 56 unique blocks at Domaine Lois Louise.

half a day to 20 minutes. Rodgers also invented a chip-controlled fermentation system with wireless monitoring. He built and donated a 152-tank, \$3.5 million version of this system to UC Davis and also uses it in his own winery.

As part of his ongoing efforts in tannin management, Rodgers has always insisted on foot-crushing the grapes—an arduous task that falls to wetsuit-clad Massey. Thus he is working on an ingenious device that can crush grapes via prosthetic feet. “It will be as close as we can get to human foot stomps,” he explains.

Nothing is too esoteric for Rodgers to tackle, such as an aroma recovery project now underway aimed at capturing the droplets of bouquet that are blown out of the liquid during fermentation by carbon dioxide. Nevertheless, “I’m not interested in the commercial wine business,” Rodgers insists. “There’s no money to be made in winemaking equipment. I’d rather run

an \$800 million chip company.”

With so much passion and investment in Clos de la Tech, the obvious questions involve whether it’s profitable and has reached its lofty goal of making pinot noir for the ages. The profitability question seems beside the point; as a consummate intellectual and challenge-seeker, Rodgers is clearly enjoying every minute of the quest and can afford what is spent along the way. However, Massey—who oversees a 20-person crew and recently hired a wine marketing firm—is sensitive about the topic. “I’d love to make a profit for T.J. because I know how hard he works for the money he brings in to help us lose some in the winery,” she says. “I guess we’re doing (Clos de la Tech) 100 percent out of love.”

As for whether the wine has hit the bull’s-eye yet as measured against Planet Earth’s best, Rodgers demurs. “It’s difficult to measure, and it’s certainly arrogant for me to say anything and I won’t,” he com-

ments, but adds, “We always show well (when tasted against) the best pinots in the world.”

Massey—who knows her partner better than anyone—has a different take: “He never thinks we’re there because there’s always something more you can do. That’s a goal, and it’s always going to be a goal. He thinks that the moment you rest on your laurels, you’re done.”

Clos de la Tech now produces just 2,000 cases annually but intends to increase that fivefold by expanding the main vineyard and continuing techniques to increase yield. The current release encompasses five pinot noirs from the 2009 vintage that cost from \$42 to \$102 each. They can be tasted and purchased at the Half Moon Bay Wine & Cheese Company (owned by Rodgers) and are also sold at the three Draeger’s Markets on the Peninsula, Robert’s Markets (Woodside and Portola Valley) and Vinocruz in Santa Cruz, as well as some restaurants. ■

# Robb Report

FOOD & DRINK / WINE

## Grand Cru Goes Underground in the Santa Cruz Mountains

A Silicon Valley executive creates Old World–style, age-worthy Pinot Noirs in a new wine cave, sans technology.

By [Sara L. Schneider](#) on December 7, 2018



Photo: Courtesy of Clos de la Tech/Chip Allen

You might think that a winery in the mountains above [Silicon Valley](#), founded by former titans of the semiconductor industry—and named Clos de la Tech—would sport all the high-tech bells and whistles the wine world has invented, and then some. You’d be right about just one thing: A symbolic silicon chip is affixed to each vineyard-designated bottle. Beyond that touch of technology? Not so much.



T.J. and Valeta Rodgers, owners of [Clos de la Tech](#) in the [undersung Santa Cruz Mountains](#), are passionate about old-school winemaking. Cypress Semiconductor might dominate the couple's résumés, yet T.J. has traded in the title of founder and CEO of that company for CWO (chief winemaking officer) of CDLT, as they call their winery, and Valeta has gone from senior design engineer to winemaker. The “technology” they employ now runs along ancient lines: gravity, foot-stomping, native yeast.

The location of most of their vineyards—high in the mountains on steep slopes gruelingly exposed to the elements—combined with high-density planting results in extremely low yields (generally less than two tons per acre). It also requires an unusual tractor, which is pulled up the hill by cables and controlled by a joystick (no motor, steering wheel, or brakes). In the cellar, Clos de la Tech's hard-won fruit gets minimal handling—whole-cluster fermentation, no pumps, and bottling without filtration.



Vineyard Photo: Courtesy of Clos de la Tech/Dan Sullivan

What the owners are after in their increasingly acclaimed Pinot Noirs is a profile that embraces the Burgundian balance of savory herbs, forest floor, leather, mushroom, and earth (soil and minerality) over the dominant ripe fruit that New World [Pinot Noir](#) generally revels in. As Valeta puts it, “Our wines are compact and tannic in their youth, but with age they develop powerful bottle bouquets, expansive flavors, and great complexity.” And the Rodgers are willing to hold their bottles back until those elements evolve. The 2012 is their current release; 2014 will be coming out in early 2019, followed by 2013, which needs a little more time.





Clos De La Tech wines Photo: Courtesy of Clos De La Tech

### **Clos de la Tech 2012 Domaine Lois Louise “Twisty Ridge” Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains**

Opening with haunting pine notes, earthy mushroom, pepper, and a hint of vanilla, this Pinot wraps a layer of leather around blueberry and blackberry fruit, with taut but elegant texture and power (\$65).

### **Clos de la Tech 2012 Domaine Lois Louise “Cote Sud” Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains**

Savory crushed herbs and damp loam on the nose are balanced by warm spice and hints of vanilla and mocha; black cherry shows a hint of tobacco leaf on a long and rich mouth-filling palate (\$85).

### **Clos de la Tech 2012 Domaine Valeta “Sunny Slope” Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains**

High-toned floral aromas bring an almost feminine quality to forest notes and juicy cherry and raspberry, layered with warm cloves and a touch of pepper, in this downright pretty Pinot (\$65).

### **Clos de la Tech 2005 Domaine du Docteur Rodgers Pinot Noir San Francisco Bay**

A single acre makes up the Docteur Rodgers vineyard (around the Rodgers' Woodside home), and this 2005 was released just a few months ago—a testimony to the aging potential of these wines. A sachet of dried petals and a hint of exotic spice—cardamom and cloves—lead to plum and sweet rhubarb flavors, complex and savory herb and red earth notes, and silky tannins (\$200).

As of the 2012 vintage, Clos de la Tech has taken its winemaking underground. The new winery consists of three caves—each 30 feet wide, 30 feet high, and 300 feet long—stepped down the mountain to employ gravity to move the product from crushing to fermentation to aging in 100 percent François Frères oak. The deliberate lack of technology isn't disingenuous; it's a calculated means to bottles that can live long in the cellars of the winery's lucky members.

If Silicon Valley Pinot isn't enough for you, be sure to investigate [Pinot Noir from Willamette Valley](#) as well.

## *Clos de la Tech pursues pinot perfection*

**W**hat will a man do in his quest to make the perfect pinot noir?

In the case of Cypress Semiconductor Corp. founder T.J. Rodgers, it means sparing no expense in blending ancient techniques with the newest of technology, often invented by Rodgers, to make world-class Clos de la Tech pinot noir.

That includes building three caves in the hills above La Honda, inventing a tractor that can traverse a 35-degree slope and foot-stomping every cluster that comes out of the vineyard.

Rodgers applies the same drive that made him a world-

recognized engineer to making pinot noir. Absolute perfection is the goal, and Rodgers lets nothing get in the way. Not a mountainside and certainly not San Mateo County planners. Saying “it can’t be done” is gasoline to Rodgers inventive pinot-perfecting fire.

You might say a little bit of stubborn is the magic ingredient in every bottle.

Rodgers began his quest in 1996 with his first wine from Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, the one-acre vineyard surrounding his home in Woodside. Though it only



**STACEY  
VREEKEN**

*Wine Press*



PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY

**T.J. Rodgers at his winery — Clos De La Tech — in Woodside on July 20.**

SEE CLOS ON D5

— Continued on reverse —



# CLOS

Continued from **D1**

produces around 100 cases, it's the one closest to Rodgers' heart and what he selects as an example of his label's best.

But Rodgers doesn't go halfway on a project. When the blond-haired, blue-eyed dynamo decided to make wine, he committed, putting his physics, chemistry and electrical engineering degrees to work.

"Once you get into (spending) eight figures, you're into wine," says Rodgers.

Four acres were purchased just west of Ridge Winery's storied Monte Bello vineyard for Domaine Valeta, named for Rodgers wife, and another 160 acres (40 planted) facing the Pacific Ocean just above La Honda for Domaine Lois Louise, in honor of Rodgers' mother ("intellectual, blond and difficult, like me"), whose image graces every bottle.

To chase the dream of making a pinot noir to rival Burgundy — considered since the 13th century as the best pinot noir-producing region in the world — Rodgers visited the iconic Domaine de la Romanee Conti and took its 200-year-old winemaking techniques as the start for Clos de la Tech wines.

"We make wine the old-fashioned way, because it works," says Rodgers of his whole cluster-pressed, native yeast-fermented wine, aged in traditional French oak barrels.

But Rodgers isn't averse to using the latest technology to get there, even if he has to invent it. A recent tour, with UC Davis wine officials in tow, demonstrated the lengths the man was willing to go to make great wine.

In anyone else's mouth, Rodger's claims would be considered arrogant, but when he explains what he's invented, admiration is the result.

It meant designing a tractor, which runs on cables to traverse not only the 1,000-foot, 35-degree vertical slope but the steep 25-degree side slope of the close-planted vineyard at Domaine Lois Louise.

It meant an entirely gravity-fed, temperature controlled process, no pumping, from tank to barrel to bottle.

It meant treating the grapes as gently as possible, so Valeta and an assistant hand sort and foot-

stomp 25 tons of grapes.

It meant designing three 30-foot-high, 30-foot-wide, 300-foot-long caves under the vineyard — with help from a French cave builder — and fighting the planning commission ("they pissed off the wrong guy") every step of the way.

These caves are precision designed with heating, cooling and argon pipes lining the walls; floors sloped for drainage; and connecting passages. Over the course of four years, wine flows down almost 29 feet from tank to barrel to bottle.

It also meant inventing fermenters with chips to monitor temperature and sugar levels and a patented steel wine press that squeezes the grapes more gently and at a quicker rate than wooden models of old.

TJ and Valeta constantly test and track winemaking results, and TJ has invented a single-barrel fermenter to make their efforts every more measurable.

"We are scientists.

Experimenting with a single barrel test is time-consuming but so satisfying," says Valeta, who has a degree in electrical engineering and computer science and worked at Cypress as senior SRAM design engineer before taking over management of the vineyard.

In addition to the individual fermenters, the results from the larger fermentations are kept unique and tracked so that grapes from different rows or regions of the vineyard — Twisty Ridge, Cote Sud — can be assessed for quality and develop their own profile.

The caves, the tractor and all the inventions go to applying ancient winemaking techniques inspired by France to creating modern, California vintages to rival the very best wines in the world.

Clos de la Tech wines are concentrated, intense and meant to last for decades. They come with floral perfumes, dark fruit and earthy flavors. These are premium, limited-release, sought-after wines.

But Rodgers doesn't need a cult wine rating from critic Robert Parker.

"I'd rather be a hidden treasure," he says.

*Wine Press appears monthly. Contact Stacey Vreeken, the Sentinel's former Food & Wine editor, at staceyvreeken@gmail.com.*



PHOTOS BY PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY

**T.J. Rodgers' Clos De La Tech Vineyard and Winery in Woodside. Rodgers has built three caves in the hills above La Honda to create his world-class pinot noir.**



**T.J. Rodgers invented a tractor that can traverse a 35-degree slope for his winery.**



**T.J. Rodgers' Clos De La Tech Vineyard and Winery in Woodside is known for its pinot noir.**

## AT A GLANCE

CLOS DE LA TECH

**WHAT:** Winery owned by Cypress Semiconductor Corp. founder T.J. Rodgers and Valeta Massey Rodgers. Currently produces 1,800 cases, specializing in pinot noir, much of it in limited quantities. Hopes to achieve 10,000 cases upon full vineyard development.

**TASTING ROOM:** Limited release and tasting offered at Half Moon Bay Wine and Cheese Company, 421 Main St., Half Moon Bay, owned by Rodgers and his wife. Check out breadth of its extensive wine collection.

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Wednesday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday

**WINES:** Produces pinot noir, exclusively, from three Santa Cruz Mountains vineyards  
**FAMILY:** Wife Valeta Massey Rodgers  
**OUTSIDE THE WINERY:** Film, cooking, collecting wine, and running 10-20 miles per week.

**CHIP OFF THE BLOCK:** A computer chip, the best designed that year from Cypress Semiconductor, is attached to the shoulders of the bottles of the best wine from the three vineyards.

**WINEMAKER SELECTION:** 2006 Domaine du Docteur Rodgers Pinot Noir. Notes: 'bouquet: black fruit, floral perfume, spice. Flavor: full (California) body, red fruit. Tanin: sweet (very soft, mouth filling).' \$102

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EQUIPMENT, SUPPLIES & SERVICES ISSUE

# WINES & VINES

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# The Winemaker's Cave Dwelling

Traditional wines with a high-tech twist in the Santa Cruz Mountains

By Kate Lavin



PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY

The barrel cave at Clos de la Tech is set 80 inches below the fermentation cave, allowing for gravity flow from the wine press into French oak barrels from François Frères.

**T**J Rodgers was already six years and three properties into his winemaking hobby when he began designing the hillside structure that would eventually become a state-of-the-art production facility for his Pinot Noir label, Clos de la Tech. By the time he finished the design three years later, it's safe to say the venture was no longer a hobby.

The Santa Cruz Mountains winemaker has been a force of innovation since he launched Cypress Semiconductor in 1982; still, he refers to building the winery as “the biggest project I’ve ever undertaken.”

Along the way, Rodgers has drawn upon his engineering background to develop equipment that combines time-saving technology with time-honored winemaking traditions. Some of these designs have patents pending with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and others are currently in use at the University of California, Davis, teaching winery.

## The evolution

Rodgers planted his first vineyard, a 1-acre hobby site at his home in Woodside, Calif.,

in 1994, dubbing it Domaine du Docteur Rodgers. Within a few years his friends’ and colleagues’ demand for the wine outpaced the 100 cases his small vineyard could produce, so he purchased a second property: a 4-acre parcel at 2,350 feet elevation, and planted it to Pinot Noir. The vineyard, Domaine Valeta, is named after TJ’s wife, Clos de la Tech co-owner and assistant winemaker Valeta Rodgers.

Finally, in 2000, the couple purchased a 163-acre property and named it Domaine Lois Louise, after TJ’s mother. The three vineyards are located directly west of Silicon Valley, all within about 20 miles of each other, with Domaine du Docteur Rodgers the farthest north and Domaine Valeta the farthest south and facing the San Francisco Bay (see map at right).

Two vineyard blocks at Domaine Lois Louise are harvested separately to create vineyard designate wines: Cote Sud and Twisty Ridge. Eventually Rodgers wants to have 80 acres of the site under vine. Domaine Lois Louise produced its first vintage in 2004, but Rodgers says candidly, “2006 was the first vintage that looked good; 2008 was the first that tasted good.”

## Vineyard development

Clos de la Tech’s wines are all Pinot Noir. Domaine Lois Louise is planted with phylloxera-resistant French rootstocks grafted to seven different Pinot Noir clones certified by the French agency ENTAV-INRA.

Unlike Domaine du Docteur Rodgers, where it is a challenge to keep sugars in check, “This vineyard is right on the edge for producing ripe grapes—even for Pinot Noir,” Rodgers tells *Wines & Vines* of Domaine Lois Louise, where it is not uncommon for the valley area to be





shrouded in fog from the Pacific Ocean until 11 a.m. “The slope on the top vineyard (Twisty Ridge) gets maximum sun all day long, and it needs it.”

Rodgers says the planting density at Domaine Lois Louise is about 2,500 vines per acre, and a relief valve is installed every 50 feet of the irrigation system to control pressure buildup. A weather monitor created by Adcon delivers information to the Rodgers’ home in Woodside.

Between the vineyard climate, planting choices and farming practices (Rodgers calls for cluster thinning when yields approach the 2 tons per acre mark), Domaine

Lois Louise produces just 1 ton of fruit per acre, resulting in what Rodgers calls “an intensely concentrated wine.”

#### **Sustainable, organic and Biodynamic**

With the Rodgers’ backgrounds in the high-tech sector (Valeta was a senior SRAM design engineer before taking over day-to-day operations at the winery), Clos de la Tech seems an unlikely candidate for vineyard practices that some would consider the domain of Northern

California hippies. But Valeta Rodgers tells *Wines & Vines* she has been leading an experiment in Biodynamic growing for the past five years.

“We do the whole thing, we do the moon calendar,” she says, “and we’ve seen no difference at all.” In fact, Rodgers adds that in order to see the results from a product approved for Biodynamic use, she has to use a lot more of it than a product deemed fit for sustainable vineyards.

## **“Fifteen years straight, 40 fermentations a year, without a bad fermentation with native yeast.”**

—TJ Rodgers

#### **A foray into customization**

Standing atop the ridge that overlooks Domaine Lois Louise, farming and harvesting the steep, closely spaced rows below appears daunting if not impossible.

There is a 966-foot climb in elevation at the site, combined with a side slope of around 25°. Nano tractors can be unstable at such steep inclines, causing them to tip over, TJ Rodgers says. He worked with Clemens GmbH to design a multi-row tractor that would fit the narrow rows at Domaine Lois Louise. The result functions

like a cable car: At the top of the vineyard the tractor is hooked to cables that pull it up and down the rows as well as around corners. A driver sits on top and controls the machine using a joystick.

#### **Winery design**

When TJ Rodgers first started making wine, he crushed and stored his wine at Woodside Vineyards in nearby Menlo Park, Calif. But after purchasing Domaine

Lois Louise, he knew that trucking grapes to a flatlands winery would be awkward and expensive. For three years, Rodgers spent three hours every Saturday and Sunday design-

ing the winery. He solicited the advice of architects and professors, contractors and even a 1950s textbook written in Russian. In the end, he got what he wanted: a gravity-flow winery with three separate caves: one for crush and fermentation, another for barrel aging and a third for bottling and case storage.

The winemaker calculated the width of the first tunnel by determining the space necessary to accommodate two fermentors side by side. Much of the floor area goes unused now (production currently stands



Each utility station is outfitted with cool and warm water, compressed air, argon and electricity. TJ Rodgers’ company Cypress Semiconductor designed and donated 152 fermentation units like the one at far right for the teaching winery at the University of California, Davis. This year Clos de la Tech will use the technology in its own fermentors.

PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY

at 2,000 cases per year), but Rodgers designed the space to accommodate up to 10,000 cases per year.

A train brought steel ribs for the cave from North Carolina to California, and during construction, a cement plant was set up in front of the caves. “When you cut that wall,” Rodgers says, “you want to put concrete on it almost immediately—like within 10 minutes.”

Rodgers says that on paper building a cave is cheaper than a standalone building. In reality it proved more expensive, but he is pleased with the outcome. A wine lab and an 1,800-square-foot apartment are built into the cave above the barrel-storage area.



### Sorting and natural fermentations

Clos de la Tech uses whole clusters for Pinot Noir fermentation, but the hand-sorting process is rigorous nonetheless. “The sort is two times more labor intensive than the pick,” Rodgers says, explaining that all the leaves must come out.

Additionally, the winemaker adheres to 100% native fermentation. Yeast strains are a part of the vineyard ecosystem, he says. “If you want to express *terroir*, you have to use native yeasts.



Clemens GmbH helped TJ Rodgers create an over-the-row tractor guided by cables that can handle the steep vertical and horizontal slopes at the Domaine Lois Louise vineyard.

“I haven’t had a bad fermentation since 1998; 15 years straight, 40 fermentations a year, without a bad fermentation with native yeast.”

### More inventions

Early on Rodgers purchased tanks from traditional wine industry vendors, but eventually he designed his own 54-inch-diameter model and had it fabricated by T&C Stainless of Mt. Vernon, Mo.

Two sets of pipes line either side of the cave, which is equipped with 56 utility stations: One pipe delivers cool water to the jacketed stainless steel tanks used during day cold soaks; the other conveys



## Foot crushing: A modern twist on an old recipe

As with gravity-flow winemaking and natural fermentation, TJ Rodgers adheres to traditional methods when it comes to crushing grapes for his brand Clos de la Tech, and this includes foot crushing.

“Over the years I started to understand there is a genius to it,” Rodgers tells *Wines & Vines* of how he adopted the process for his first vintage. “When you do foot crushing, you never crush all the grapes...and the result is the (bitter) tannin gets left behind in the seeds.”

### An idea with staying power

More than 15 years later, Clos de la Tech co-owner Valeta Rodgers still dons rubber boots and a wetsuit every fall and spends weeks stomping Pinot Noir during crush and cold soak.

“When Valeta’s foot crushing, I watch the color and tannins build up in the wine,” winemaker TJ Rodgers says. “Over the years we’ve gotten a profile of how much color should be in

the wine on day two, day three, etc.” A full week can yield full tannin extraction.

### A bike with legs

As more vineyard blocks reach full maturity, and production at Clos de la Tech increases, the number of tanks requiring foot crushing grows accordingly, and the volume of footwork is starting to resemble a marathon.

“This year I’m making a set of prosthetic limbs, fake legs, something like a bicycle,” Rodgers says. “And you’ll be able to lower it down on a machine and be able to do foot crushing without having Valeta be in the tanks all the time.”

Rodgers hopes to have the contraption ready for use this year or next. “It’s kind of turning winemaking around, saying: I want a modern view of making wine, but I want to make it the old-fashioned way.”

K.L.



warm water for heating the grapes back up. Each station also provides compressed air, argon/nitrogen and electricity, with the electricity serving to regulate tank temperature.

Frustrated by the amount of time necessary to press wine, Rodgers set about customizing a solution. He collaborated with



Winemaker TJ Rodgers discusses the wine press he designed. The press moves between utility stations in the fermentation cave, pressing each tank in as little as 25 minutes.

PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY

Therma Corp. of San Jose, Calif., to design a custom piece of equipment that presses wine right in the fermentation tank. Rodgers likens the design to a French coffee press in reverse: The press is rolled over to the fermentor, the plate is fixed in place, and the tank rises up to meet it.

The press can be set from 0.1 to 3 bars, and what previously took four hours to accomplish can be finished in 25 minutes, Rodgers says. Better yet, he has found the press wine to be less bitter than traditionally pressed wine. "It wasn't that different from the free-run wine, so the press wine was of a higher quality than if you beat it up the old-fashioned way," he says.

And because the floor is set 80 inches lower in the barrel cave next door, wine from the press flows through sterile hoses directly into barrels in the adjacent cave without the use of a pump.

"We don't own a filter, and we don't own a pump," Rodgers tells *Wines & Vines*. "The winery is meant to be a gravity winery, and we're true to it by not having any pumps. Wine flows from tank to barrels to bottling."

#### Barrel and bottle aging

Barrels are treated with ozone gas once per month before filling. Each stainless fermentor fills four barrels. Wines are barrel aged

for 18 months in François Frères barrels, and Rodgers is partial to those from France's Bertrange forest. Early vintages were aged in 100% new oak, but the wine-maker now uses 70%.



View video in the *Wines & Vines* Digital Edition. Watch co-owner Valeta Rodgers discuss the sorting, foot crushing and pressing processes at Clos de la Tech.



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## WINEMAKER

TJ Rodgers

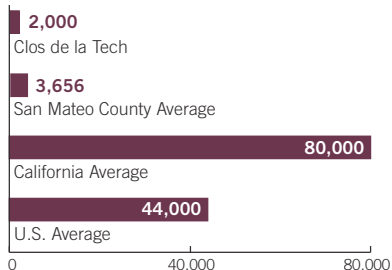
## WINERY MANAGER

Valeta Rodgers

## WINERY AVA

Santa Cruz Mountains

Winery Case Production

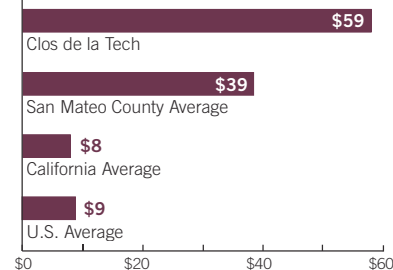


YEAR  
BONDED  
**2006**

DTC  
SALES  
**99%**

VINEYARD  
ACREAGE  
**168**

Winery Average Bottle Price



Source: Wines Vines Analytics



## THE CHALLENGE

With a goal of making the best Pinot Noir in the New World, TJ and Valeta Rodgers set the bar as high as the altitude at their vineyard site in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The founder of Cypress Semiconductor, TJ Rodgers used his knowledge as an electrical engineer to design Clos de la Tech in a way that blends cutting-edge technology with time-honored winemaking traditions.

## Building the Winery

Architect	<b>Rick Guidice &amp; Associates</b> , guidicer@gte.net
Excavation	<b>Lou Bordi General Engineering; Benchmark Civil Construction</b> , benchmarkcivilconstruction.com
General Contractor	Caves: <b>Drill Tech Drilling and Shoring</b> , drilltechdrilling.com; Building: <b>Sierra View Co.</b> , sierraview.com
Interior design	<b>In-Design One</b> , indesignon@aol.com; <b>Rick Guidice &amp; Associates</b>
Metal fabrication	<b>LB Construction Inc.</b> , lbconstructioninc.com; Panels/Roofing: <b>Kodiak Roofing &amp; Waterproofing Co.</b> , kodiakroofing.com; Doors/Frames: <b>Cooper Co.</b> , (916) 257-9529; Windows: <b>Architectural Glass Systems</b> , (916) 374-0376
Concrete	<b>Marr B. Olsen Inc.</b> , (707) 763-9707
HVAC	<b>Therma Corp.</b> , therma.com, (408) 347-3400
Winery refrigeration	Install: <b>Solecon Industrial</b> , soleconindustrial.com, (209) 572-7390; Design: <b>Therma Corp.</b> , therma.com
Plumbing	<b>Baskerville-Parsons</b> , baskervilleparsons.com
Drains	TJ Rodgers and <b>Therma Corp.</b> , therma.com
Flooring	Sealer on concrete: <b>Global Village Construction</b> , globalvillageconstruction.com, (925) 689-8949
Walls	<b>LB Construction Inc.</b> , lbconstructioninc.com; Cabinets: <b>Rucker Mill &amp; Cabinet Works Inc.</b> , (530) 621-0236

## Winery Services

Lab services	<b>Enartis Vinquiry</b> , enartisvinquiry.com
Case storage	<b>California Wine Transport</b> , californiawinetransport.com
Compliance	<b>Coastal Compliance Corp.</b> , coastalcompliance@comcast.net
Distribution	<b>CS Wine Imports</b> , cswineimports.com; <b>Onereddot Fine Wines</b> , onereddot.com (Hong Kong)
Sales software	<b>Authorize.Net</b>
Financing	<b>Silicon Valley Bank</b> , Wine Division, svb.com

## Making the Wine

Press	TJ Rodgers custom-designed press
Fermentation tanks	TJ Rodgers custom-designed tanks; Mfr: <b>T&amp;C Stainless</b> , tc-stainless.com
Blending tanks	<b>T&amp;C Stainless</b> , tc-stainless.com, (417) 466-4704
Barrels	<b>François Frères</b> , francoisfreres.com; <b>Mel Knox Barrel Broker</b> , knoxbarrels.com, (415) 751-6306
Barrel washing	<b>Gamajet</b> , gamajet.com
Barrel racking	Bulldog Pup, <b>Bulldog Manufacturing</b> , bulldogmfg.com
Bottling line	The Compleat Winemaker seven-nuzzle manual filler, <b>TCW Equipment</b> , tcw-web.com
Winemaking software	<b>Cypress Semiconductor</b> , cypress.com

## Packaging

Bottles	<b>Demptos Glass</b> , demptos.com, (707) 422-9999; <b>Diablo Valley Packaging</b> , dvpackaging.com, (707) 422-4300
Corks	<b>Scott Laboratories</b> , scottlab.com, (707) 765-6666
Label design	<b>Energy Energy Design</b> , nrgdesign.com, (408) 395-5911
Label printing	<b>Multi Packaging Solutions</b> , multipkg.com, (800) 748-0517
Capsules	<b>Ramondin USA</b> , ramondin.com, dryan@ramondinusa.com

## Growing the Grapes

Rootstock/vine sourcing	<b>Duarte Nursery</b> , duartenursery.com; <b>Mercier California</b> , mercier-california.com
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In keeping with the gravity-flow tradition, Clos de la Tech's third cave is set 22 feet below the second. There is a blending tank on the second floor so that wine can flow down to bottling.

The Pinot Noir is aged in bottles for two years or more. Rodgers describes his wines as being "very tight in their youth. They don't open up for six to eight years."

#### Packaging and wine sales

Bottles of Clos de la Tech are emblazoned with a dab of red sealing wax on the front, but instead of being stamped with initials or a design, the wax is used to hold a silicon chip. According to Rodgers, engineering teams at Cypress work all year to create the chip featured on that year's wine.

Ninety-nine percent of Clos de la Tech's production is sold direct to consumer, although bottles are available at a handful of nearby restaurants and Roberts Market in Woodside.

In 2010 the Rodgers opened the Half Moon Bay Cheese Co., which serves mostly local products as well as some international wines. The shop, located in the surf city's downtown area, doubles as a tasting room for Clos de la Tech, which is not accessible to visitors due to its mountaintop location. The tasting bar has 60 wines available for tasting each day, including Clos de la Tech Pinot Noir. Purchased on-site or directly from closdelatech.com, the wines sell for between \$42 and \$102 per bottle.

As for TJ Rodgers' winemaking hobby, he's replaced it with a goal. "Once you get to eight figures it's no longer a hobby," Rodgers says earnestly. These days the winemaker boils down his ambition succinctly: to make the best Pinot Noir in the New World. And who knows? He's certainly got the right tools. **W&V**



The chip that adorns Clos de la Tech is capable of downloading 500,000 pages per second.

PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY



TJ and Valeta Rodgers stand at the highest point of Domaine Lois Louise, the grapegrowing site that is home to their winery.

PAUL SAKUMA PHOTOGRAPHY

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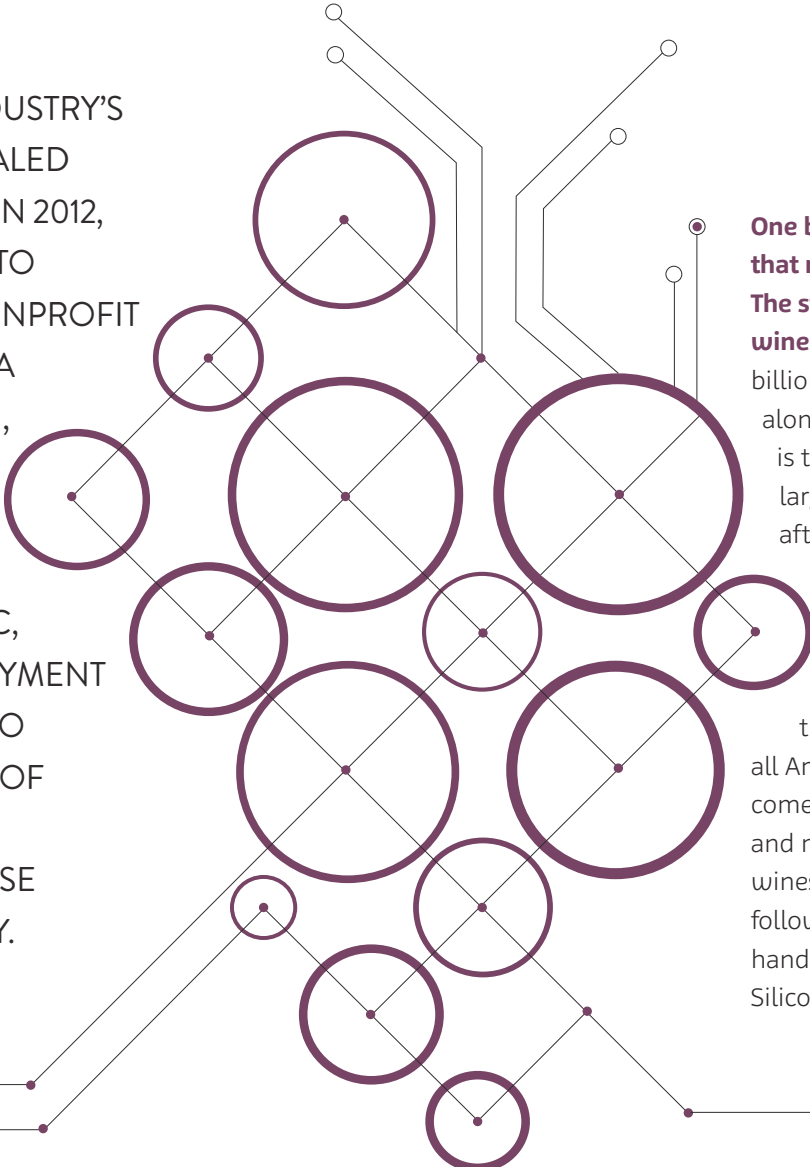
## WINEMAKING IS YOUR ART; TANK AND BARREL CLEANING IS OURS.

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[www.gamajet.com](http://www.gamajet.com)  
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# THE WINES

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## THAT TECH BUILT



THE TECH INDUSTRY'S PAYROLL TOTALED \$558 BILLION IN 2012, ACCORDING TO INDUSTRY NONPROFIT TECHAMERICA FOUNDATION, AND CALIFORNIA LED TECH IN EVERY METRIC, FROM EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES TO THE NUMBER OF COMPANIES THAT COMPRISE THE INDUSTRY.

**One beneficiary of all that money and talent? The state's booming wine industry.** With \$23.1 billion in sales in the U.S. alone last year, California is the world's fourth-largest wine producer after France, Italy and Spain, according to the Wine Institute, a trade organization. More than 90 percent of all American-made wine comes from California—and many of the best wines, like the ones that follow, were built with handsome profits from Silicon Valley ventures.

BY KAREN MACNEIL



LIVE

GROW

MAKE

THE WINES THAT TECH BUILT

By Karen MacNeil



ROBB MCDONOUGH

A CONCRETE FERMENTATION TANK AT OVID. WINERY

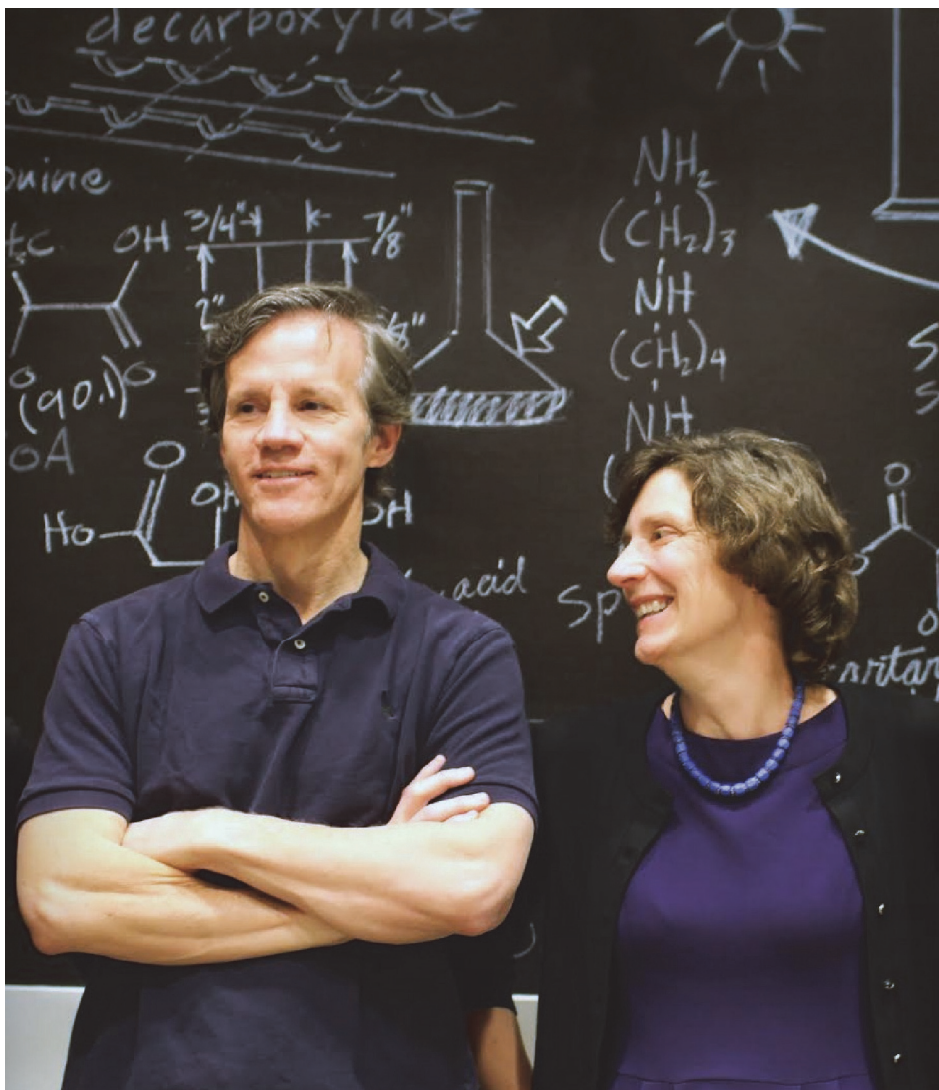


# IVID.

NAPA VALLEY

## OWNERS »

Mark Nelson and Dana Johnson



## TOP WINE, CURRENT VINTAGE »



## WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED »

"Software, however complex, is an entirely human creation, whereas winemaking integrates human intelligence and creativity with the infinite variability, beauty and complexity of nature."

—DANA JOHNSON

## SILICON VALLEY ROOTS »

Nelson founded Ovid Technologies, which specializes in software and databases for the medical and academic communities. Johnson, who is married to Nelson, was a software designer.

## BEHIND THE WINES »

Ovid (43 BC-17 AD), a Roman poet whose best-known work, *Metamorphoses*, is a narrative poem about transformation, was the inspiration for Ovid Technologies, which Nelson founded in 1988. He sold it for \$200 million in 1998 allowing Johnson and him to launch their winery, also named Ovid. Cantilevered on Pritchard Hill over the Napa Valley, the solar-powered winery is surrounded by organically certified vineyards. Inspired by decidedly low-tech practices still used in Bordeaux, the winery makes its plush, age-worthy cabernets in small concrete fermenters designed by French masons and built in place.



## MAILING LIST

Two-year wait to get on



## CONTACT

info@ovidwine.com  
707.963.3850  
ovidwine.com



# CLOS DE LA TECH

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS



## OWNERS »

T.J. Rodgers and Valeta Massey

## TOP WINE, CURRENT VINTAGE »

Clos de la Tech  
"Domaine du  
Dr. Rodgers"  
Pinot Noir 2010

\$102

## WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED »

"I was amazed to find out how complex and multidisciplinary winemaking is. It's every bit as challenging as the semiconductor technologies I work on." —T.J. RODGERS

## SILICON VALLEY ROOTS »

Rodgers is the founder, president, CEO and a director of Cypress Semiconductor Corporation, and has just announced a merger with memory-product maker Spansion. Massey is a former senior SRAM design engineer at Cypress.

## BEHIND THE WINES »

Self-taught winemakers Rodgers and Massey, who are married, founded their appropriately named Clos de la Tech winery in 1994 with the goal of bringing Silicon Valley savoir faire to the 8,000-year-old wine industry. While Massey runs the winery, Rodgers (who also boasts degrees in chemistry and physics) has developed new winemaking systems and equipment, helping Clos de la Tech become one of California's top pinot noir producers. In a design nod to the two industries they love, Rodgers and Massey have affixed each bottle of their reserve wine with a Cypress Semiconductor memory chip.



**MAILING LIST**  
Available



**CONTACT**  
vm@cypress.com, 650.722.3038, closdelatech.com



# PETER MICHAEL

KNIGHTS VALLEY, SONOMA

## OWNERS »

Sir Peter Michael and Lady Michael



## TOP WINE, CURRENT VINTAGE »

Peter Michael  
“Ma Belle-Fille”  
Chardonnay 2012

\$90



## WHAT THEY’VE LEARNED »

“I came to San Francisco in 1972, working in Silicon Valley. Shortly thereafter, I decided that I wanted a piece of the Golden State and became a *vigneron*. I’ve had the best ride in the two greatest of all valleys—Silicon and Napa.”

—SIR PETER MICHAEL

## SILICON VALLEY ROOTS »

Michael founded England’s Micro Consultants’ Group and UEI, as well as Cosworth Engineering. In 1973, while working in Silicon Valley, he cofounded Quantel, a digital special-effects company whose product Paintbox revolutionized television and film graphics.

## BEHIND THE WINES »

In 1982, Sir Peter Michael and Lady Michael bought 630 acres of dangerously steep, volcanic ridges that form the western face of Mount St. Helena—and planted them with vineyards. Three decades and several destroyed tractors later, the estate makes perhaps the best chardonnays in California (Mon Plaisir and Ma Belle-Fille are favorites). Michael, who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1989, has what he calls a “100 x 100” vision for the winery—100 percent family ownership for at least 100 years.



## MAILING LIST

Six- to 18-month wait to get on, depending on the wine

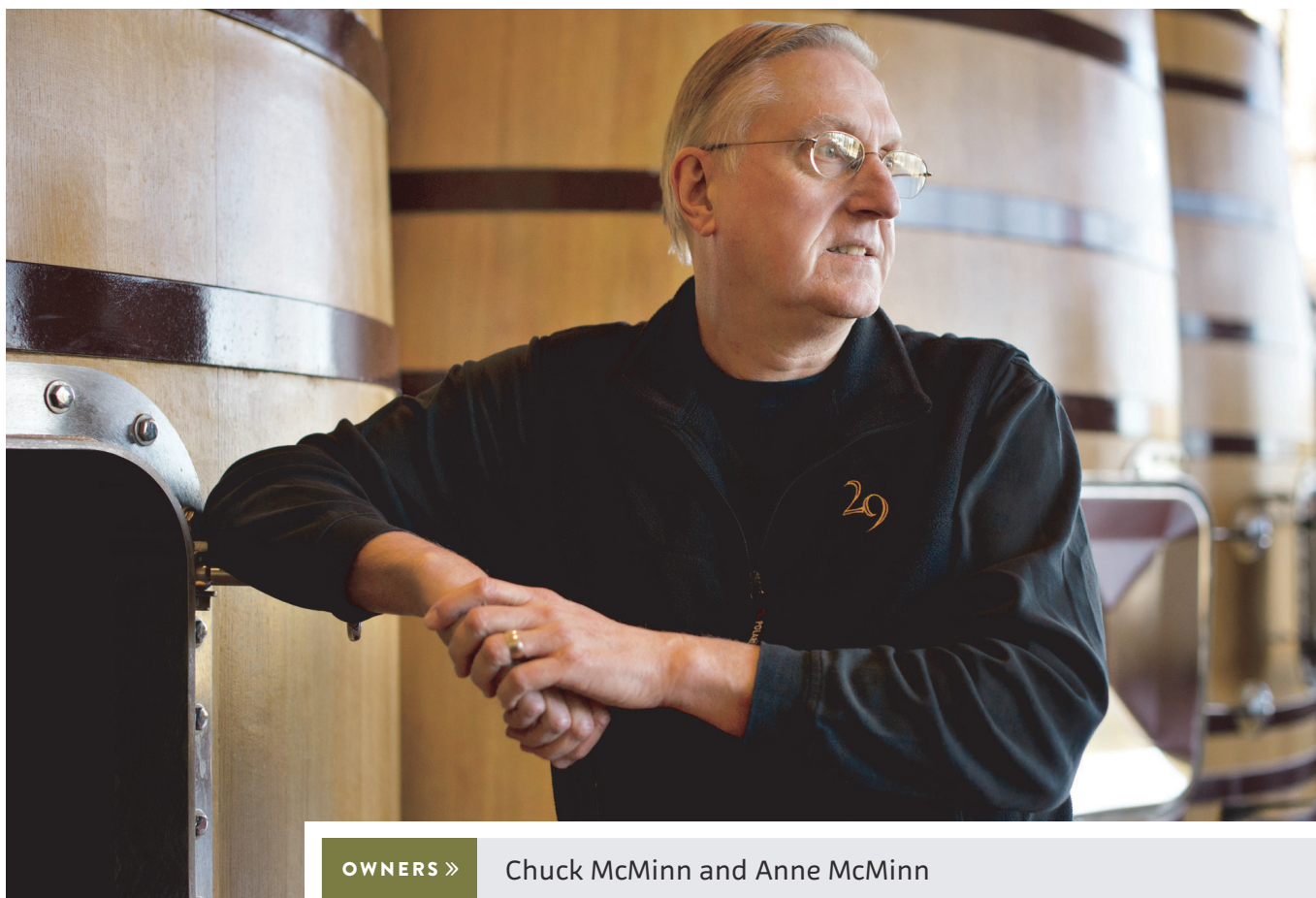


## CONTACT

retail@petermichaelwinery.com  
707.942.3200  
petermichaelwinery.com

# VINEYARD 29

NAPA VALLEY



## OWNERS »

Chuck McMinn and Anne McMinn

## TOP WINE, CURRENT VINTAGE »



## WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED »

"In high tech, the product is everything—customers care much less about who makes it or how. In winemaking, the place, the process and the people are as interesting to our customers as the wine itself."

—CHUCK MCMINN

## SILICON VALLEY ROOTS »

Now a consultant to tech startups, Chuck McMinn founded Covad Communications, a telecommunications firm providing broadband data services to homes and businesses, in 1996. (Anne, a teacher by training, works in horticultural therapy, the use of gardening for therapeutic purposes.)

## BEHIND THE WINES »

The winery's address—2929 Highway 29—made naming it easy, but it took three and a half years to design and build the serene, modern winery with its electricity-generating microturbines and computer-controlled systems that use gravity to gently move wine from place to place. Sitting on an east-facing bank at the narrowest part of the Napa Valley, Vineyard 29 has 13,000 square feet of showplace caves. Known for its majestic cabernet-based red, the winery was also one of the first Napa Valley estates (along with Araujo) to make impressive Bordeaux-style white wines.



## MAILING LIST

One-year wait to get on for the estate wines



## CONTACT

info@vineyard29.com, 707.963.9292, vineyard29.com



# ST. EDEN

NAPA VALLEY

## OWNERS »

Dick Kramlich and Pam Kramlich



## WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED »

"California is blessed with wonderful terroir, climate and great people. Technology here is a cauldron of talent, energy and imagination. Both industries change the world for the better."

—DICK KRAMLICH

## SILICON VALLEY ROOTS »

Dick Kramlich is the chairman and cofounder of New Enterprise Associates, one of the largest global venture capital firms specializing in technology.

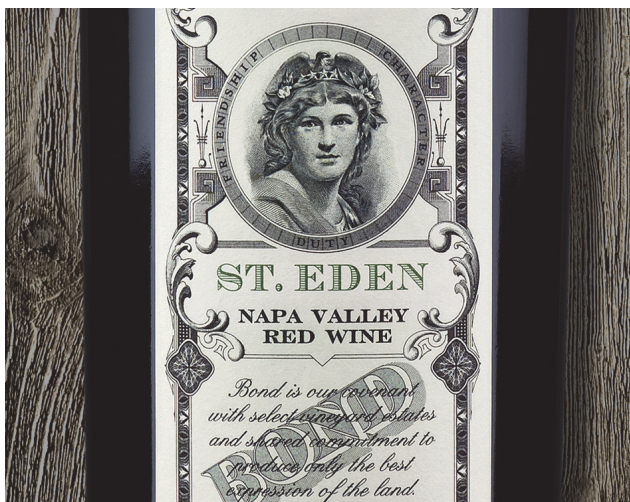
## BEHIND THE WINES »

St. Eden is one of the five wines that comprise the Bond portfolio. Under the quasi-joint-venture structure, each wine is made from grapes grown in an independently owned vineyard. Collectively, the five wines are made and marketed by Bond, a winery and brand owned by Bill Harlan, who also owns the outstanding Harlan Estate. Spread over a knoll of iron-rich fractured rock in the prestigious Oakville section of the Napa Valley, St. Eden was established by the Kramlichs in 2001. The wine's deep core of opulent flavor and layers of complexity have moved it high up on collectors' lists.

TOP WINE,  
CURRENT VINTAGE »

Bond  
"St. Eden"  
2010

\$425



## MAILING LIST

Varies based on vintage



## CONTACT

info@bondestates.com  
707.944.9445  
bondestates.com