



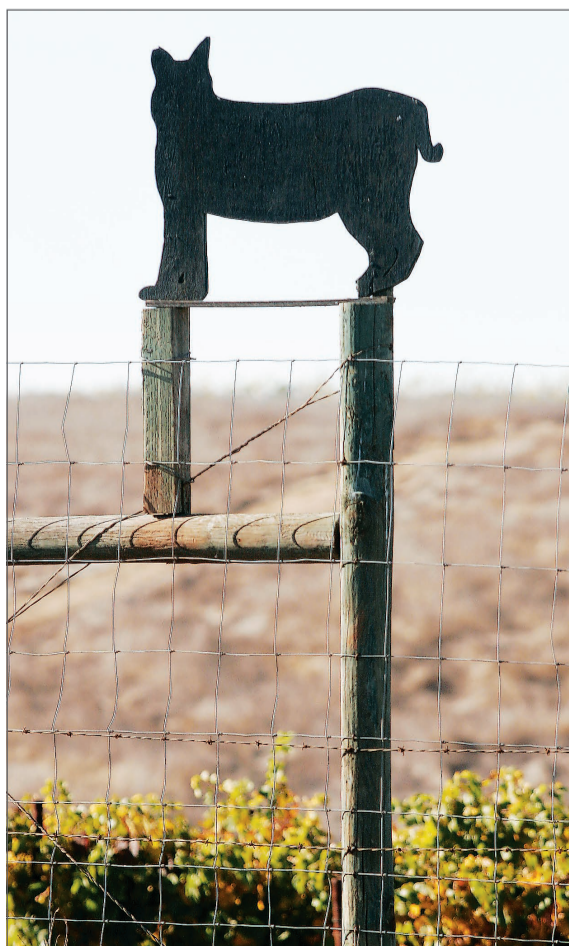
Photos by Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

WINEMAKER STEVE MACROSTIE, founder of MacRostie Winery and Vineyards, partnered with Tony and Nancy Lilly to plant the winery's estate vineyard at the western edge of Carneros.

WILDCAT MOUNTAIN VINEYARD

A partnership bears fruit

By Sierra Jenkins | *Index-Tribune Staff Writer*



Wildcat Mountain Vineyard stretches over a windswept patch of land settled over the hills at the western edge of Carneros. The dirt road to the vineyard winds through golden hills bare of trees, with nothing lapping at their edges but the brilliant blue sky. Just one hill away is the vineyard's namesake – Wild Cat Mountain, a bare hill carpeted with pale yellow grass with just one dark green oak jutting off the side. The gate to the vineyard is marked by a black wood cutout of a wildcat and the skulls of cattle – a throwback to the property's past.

The Donnell Ranch, which is home to the vineyard, is home to Nancy and Tony Lilly and has been in Nancy Lilly's family since 1940. Her father was originally from Ohio and went to business school at Stanford before buying the property in Carneros, which he used for running cattle.

"It was a great place to grow up," said Nancy Lilly. "I've had my hands in the dirt most of my life."

The original parcel was 4,000 acres and the land was split between Lilly and her sister and brother after her father passed away in 1984. At that point, Lilly started looking into other possibilities for the property and connected with winemaker Steve MacRostie.

"I kept an eye on him when he left Hacienda Cellars," said Lilly, who knew him through their children who attended Prestwood together. MacRostie was winemaker

at Hacienda Cellars from 1974 to 1986, then founded MacRostie Winery and Vineyards with his wife, Thale, in 1987. He produced MacRostie wines at Roche Winery, across the street from Donnell Ranch, from 1990 to 1997.

"I started out cash-poor and capital-poor," said MacRostie with a smile.

Nonetheless, he was looking to plant a unique estate vineyard and first hit on the idea of this property when taking his two children around the area gathering soil samples for science projects.

The hilly land has red volcanic soil over fractured basalt that drains well, as opposed to the heavier dark clay on the lower parts of Carneros, which are affected by silt deposits from bay waters. A little hardship is good for vines. Too much water swells up the berries and thins the flavors, so rockier soil on well-drained hillsides will produce flavorful grapes. The cool fog that blankets much of Carneros and the cool breezes off the Pacific and San Francisco Bay allow for slow ripening, producing complex flavors.

Lilly had had some guys up to "kick the dirt" in previous years, and it was clear it was suitable for planting grapevines.

MacRostie and the Lillys partnered to make the first planting in 1998, the second in 2000 and the vineyard includes chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah.

"It's being put to a more modern use," said Nancy Lilly.

From the edge of Wildcat Vineyard, you can glimpse the spires of the Golden Gate and the blocky outlines of skyscrapers cast in various shades of blue.

Bluebirds and barn swallows flit over the vines and owls nest in one of the bird boxes placed around the vineyard.

The quantity is lower than hoped – about 2.5 tons an acre – but the quality is definitely what MacRostie had envisioned, with fruit that is "distinctive and intense."

The syrah has that peppery quality that marks cool-climate syrahs and he also describes it as "leathery and gamey." The pinot noir has dark fruit flavors of blackberry and loganberry.

"This is no light pinot," said MacRostie.

He makes vineyard designates of the three varietals and also blends them into his other wines.

The 2004 MacRostie chardonnay from Wildcat Mountain Vineyard got a rating of 92 from Wine Spectator, and the Wildcat Mountain Vineyard Syrah also took a 92, among other positive ratings for MacRostie's Carneros wines.

Every year brings something new, and MacRostie and the Lillys often walk the vineyard and talk over how to manage the vines.

"We're having fun," said Nancy Lilly.

"It's a learning experience for us old folks to keep active and engaged in farming," said MacRostie with a wry smile. "Every year is different."