



## Eugene & Katie Trefethen

### The Visionaries

Dinner parties used to be easy. Back in the 1940's, all you needed was a big piece of meat, some potatoes, and maybe a few carrots. It didn't necessarily have to taste all that good, just as long as there was enough. Oh, and don't forget the scotch. Lots and lots of scotch.

Upon arrival, guests were greeted with a scotch and soda. When they sat down to dinner, they got a different glass. Of scotch and soda. And afterwards, when they adjourned to the salon to digest and get down to the business that had brought them all together, they filled their pipes with tobacco, and their glasses with more scotch and soda.

Catherine Trefethen, however, detested scotch and soda. So when her husband, Eugene Trefethen, held a business dinner, which as an active philanthropist and the chief fundraiser for the Kaiser Corporation he did fairly often, the guests were treated to something slightly different than the standard fare.

To start, there was champagne, which up to this point had been reserved for New Year's and the launching of ships. Dinner was replete with fresh vegetables from Katie's garden, and universally regarded as not only filling but delicious.

This wasn't all that surprising, however, as Kaiser built a lot of ships and it was well known that Katie was a gifted gardener and cook. The main point of curiosity was the novel substance served with the main plate – Claret or Bordeaux or some such thing. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't wine. Only Italians drank wine, and you had to be Italian to stomach the stuff. This was delightful!

Whether it was the wine, Katie's hospitality, or Gene's famous warm personality, the dinners worked. They and other fundraising efforts enabled Gene to turn such dreams as the Hoover Dam, the San Francisco Bay Bridge, and the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley into reality. Still, his greatest project was yet to come.

Gene had grown up on a farm in Piedmont, California, and privately longed to return to agriculture. And Katie wanted a bigger garden. A much bigger garden. In 1968, their twin love for wine brought them to Napa Valley, an agricultural backwaters of San Francisco, that some delirious old men claimed had once produced California's finest wine.

Whether their ramblings were true or not, it was certain that grapes were not the crop of choice anymore, and all the old vineyards of legend were ridden with phylloxera. Still, where others saw only the unhappy ending to a Steinbeck novel, Gene saw great promise, and when he was presented with the dilapidated Eshcol property, complete with a collapsing “ghost winery,” he purchased it and several surrounding farms, creating a 600 acre estate. He paid \$3,000 an acre, and quickly began replanting everything to wine grapes.

It was about here that even his closest friends started to doubt his sanity. In anyone’s estimation, the ground had cost far too much, and he was obviously planting the wrong thing. What on earth would he do with all those grapes? There were fewer than 20 operational wineries in Napa at the time, and none were very financially sound entities. They certainly were not looking to expand production. And, as far as anyone could tell, Gene had no intention of making his own wine.

Like so many of his projects, however, Gene’s vineyard venture turned out to have impeccable timing. By the time his new vines started to produce, a new movement toward winemaking had begun in Napa, and Trefethen Vineyards had plenty of clients. At the same time, Gene’s son John began showing an interest in turning some of those grapes into his own wine. Who knew where that would lead?

In 1979, all doubts about Gene’s most recent venture were put to rest when Trefethen Chardonnay earned the title of “Best Chardonnay in the World” at the Gault-Millau Wine Olympics in Paris. Soon after the result, Time magazine came out to Trefethen to take Gene’s picture, an event he found particularly amusing. “I’ll never forget the smile dad wore that day,” says John. “Here he was, President of one of the largest corporations in the world for fifteen years, and the only time he ever got his picture in Time magazine was when his upstart winery bested the French.”

For her part, Katie planted her garden, using a full five acres of the new property to do so. And when her son Johnny started making his own wine in the early seventies, she stopped buying that Bordeaux stuff. Along with John’s new bride Janet, she founded the first Napa Valley cooking class, in order to showcase the new Trefethen wines with the aid of delicious cuisine that was at the time absent from the valley. “There was no good food in Napa back in those days,” Janet Trefethen remembers. “All those fancy restaurants, they came much later. And many of the chefs were the same ones that had come to cook with us!”

In 2007, Catherine Trefethen passed away, leaving this world to find Gene waiting for her in the next. Together, they left behind a loving family, inspired friends, and far too many public works to name. And it only seems fitting that for this great couple, these exceptional visionaries, their most outrageous, most daring dream, the winery that bears their name, has proven to be their most enduring legacy.