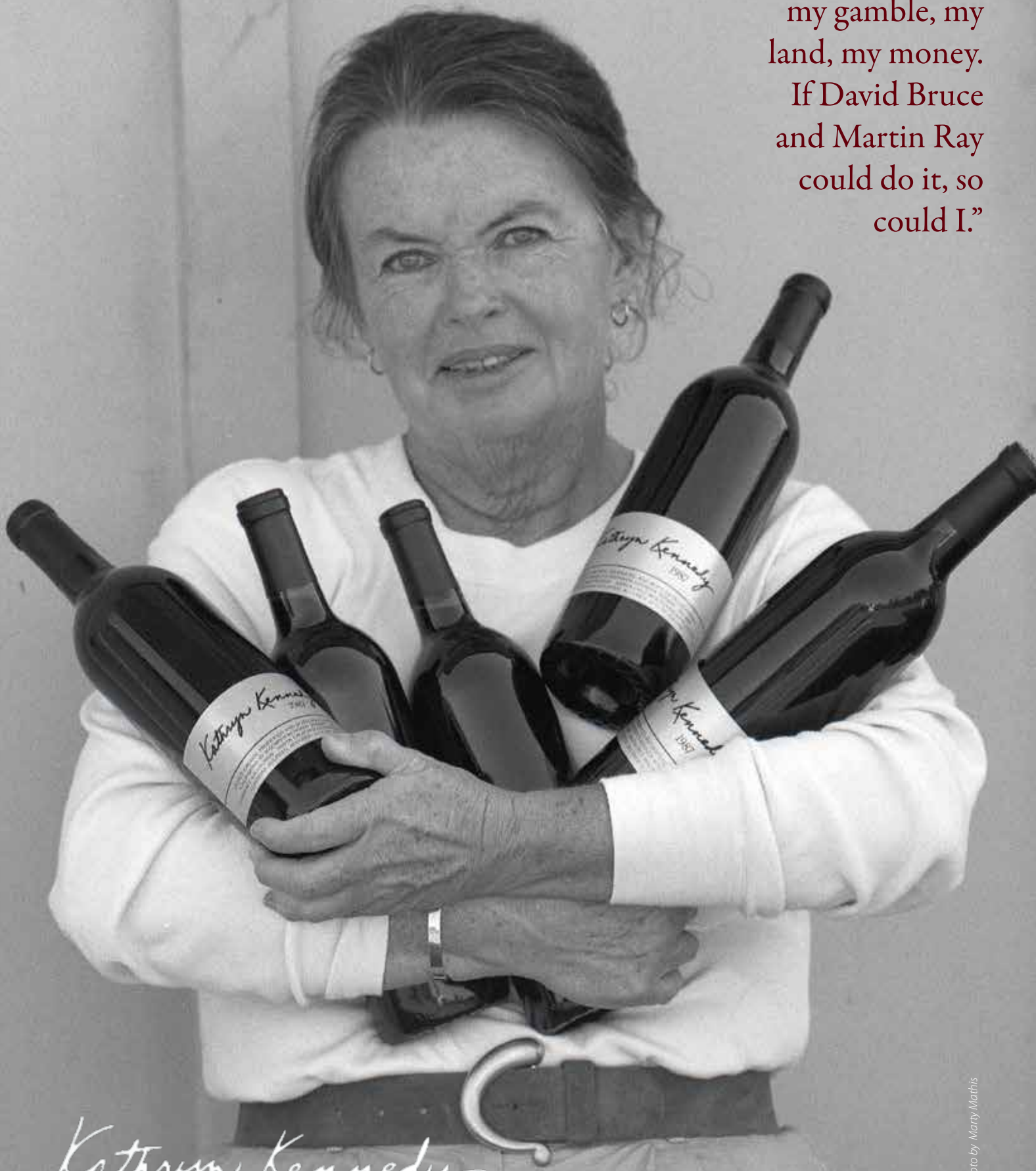


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Kathryn Kennedy

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WOMEN IN WINE

Bold local pioneer made her mark and cleared the way for today's female vintners—who are crushing it

BY YVONNE CORNELL

If a wine reflects the personality of its winemaker, then Kathryn Kennedy would be described as bold, deep, rich, warm, complex and witty. She was a pioneering woman of the California wine industry during the 1970s wine boom. Very few women were making wine at that time, let alone putting their name on the label. The Kathryn Kennedy brand was one of the first to bear a woman's name. When asked by wine historian Charles Sullivan to explain why she put her name on the bottle, Kennedy simply stated, "It was my effort, my gamble, my land, my money. If David Bruce and Martin Ray could do it, so could I." However, it was Kennedy's commitment to craft and the constant stewardship of her land that would inspire future female winemakers.

This passionate endeavor did not come without struggles. On the heels of a divorce in 1965 and left to raise four young children on her own, Kennedy sought to make the most of her seven-acre fallow orchard. The acreage was her only asset and it was a drain on her finances due to the high taxes. Her son recalls "the day after her divorce, she had zero credit." It was unheard of for a divorced woman to be granted a bank loan or credit before the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, especially one with four dependent children and seven untamed acres of land. American Express was the only company willing to gamble on Kennedy. She remained a grateful card-carrying member until her passing in 2009.

Kennedy briefly contemplated growing Christmas trees but soon realized this would consume her time during a magical time of year, which she preferred to spend with her children. Her curiosity was piqued watching the workmen across the road tending to old Cabernet vineyards. Inspired by what she observed, she decided to attend two semesters at the UC Davis viticulture program, commuting two and half hours each way during the gas crisis of the 1970s. After a professor advised her to plant Cabernet Sauvignon vines, she purchased 3,300 root cuttings from David Bruce Vineyards. She babied those vulnerable cuttings through their first full year in an onsite nursery before planting them by hand. In 1973, at the age of 46, Kennedy planted each vine on her own with the help of her children, family and friends. In a 1994 interview, she reflected back on those early years: "There was a lot of resistance at first, a lot of sexism, in accepting the wine from a woman's winery." Her first two harvests in 1977 and 1978 were sold to Mount Eden Vineyards. In 1979, she established her own brand and winery and the Kathryn Kennedy label was born.

Nicole Walsh, local vintner and director of winemaking and vineyard operations at Bonny Doon, was inspired by the history of wine-making in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "Right now, I am making a Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc because of wines like Ridge and Kathryn Kennedy," she said. Walsh started her own wine label, Ser, in 2012. In 2016, she opened her first shared tasting room in Saratoga with Silvertip Vineyards.

Kennedy's son and winemaker, Marty Mathis, is the dedicated steward of his mother's legacy and she inspired his own calling in wine. Mathis remembers the day his mother handed him a hoe, soon after he graduated from college. "After my first summer in the fields, the harvest came and that was it. I was hooked. I have a great respect for her bold endeavor and commitment to making something of world-class quality." He became the label's winemaker in 1981.

Much of the vineyard land was sold for development after 2009, something that Kennedy resisted in her final years, yet acknowledged was imminent. Throughout her 60 years of land ownership, Kennedy acted as a stalwart conservationist and preservationist of the agricultural and winemaking heritage of this valley. Prudy Foxx, a Santa Cruz Mountains viticulture consultant and winemaker, describes Kathryn Kennedy as a dedicated grower and winemaker. "She was really caring for the land. Marty carries on her legacy and is completely devoted to natural farming."

Mathis lovingly tends the vines of his mother's estate Cabernet label, which still bears her signature. The Kathryn Kennedy Winery continues to bottle 1,000 cases each year. Since the winery's first release in 1979, it consistently produces one of the best Cabernet Sauvignons in Santa Cruz Mountains with its deep flavor and intense structure.

What's in a name? Everything. Kathryn Kennedy boldly put her name on that first bottle of carefully crafted wine of world-class quality, and today it remains highly sought after by wine aficionados. ✕

The Kathryn Kennedy winery, nestled in the hillside neighborhood of Saratoga, is not open to visitors but its wines can be found at Draeger's and Joseph George Wine Merchants.

Yvonne Cornell is a food photographer, writer, stylist and blogger. Styling with foraged botanicals, vintage props and elements from nature imbue her images with an Old World mood. To see more of her work, visit Yvonne's blog FollowingBreadcrumbs.com.

Today's Inspiring Bay Area Women in Wine

Nearly 40 years after Kathryn Kennedy's first crush, today's Bay Area women winemakers are still breaking new ground and producing award-winning wines. Their stories of passion, inspiration and hard work are captured in every bottle.

Olivia Teutschel | Bargetto Winery | Soquel

Teutschel was the first female winemaker at one of the oldest wineries in the Santa Cruz Mountains. She is most proud of Bargetto's local Pinot Noirs.

"As a female winemaker, you must try to over-deliver on the quality of your wines and proudly share them whenever possible!"

Sara Fowler | Peju Winery | Rutherford

Fowler—named Best Local Winemaker by *Napa Valley Life Magazine*—is the director of winemaking at Peju Province Winery & Liana Estates.

"Growing up on a 400-acre organic ranch, I have always had a passion for farming and been of the belief that the best wine starts in the vineyard. If you don't have good grapes, then you're not going to have good-quality wine."

Pamela Bianchini-Storrs | Storrs Winery | Santa Cruz

Bianchini-Storrs's Italian grandfather encouraged her interest in the study of wines and gave her the determination to be the first woman in her family to earn a college degree (UC Davis, Viticulture & Enology.)

"Our philosophy is basically to step back and let nature take its course, for the most part. Our job, outside of totally hands-on vineyard work, comes when we select the barrels for the final wine that you will enjoy. This is the artistry of winemaking and no two domains would do it quite the same."

Ellie Patterson | Mount Eden Vineyards | Saratoga

Patterson has been running the business side of Mount Eden Vineyards for 35 years. In 2008, she established a new brand, Domaine Eden, and became the owner of Mount Eden.

"My mentor, the dynamic author and vintner Eleanor Ray, was affectionately nicknamed 'Madame Pinot' in the 1950s. She lived on the same mountaintop that I live on today."



Kristen Barnhisel | J. Lohr Vineyards & Wine | San Jose

Barnhisel is best known for making white wines at Inglenook and Handley Cellars.

"I was inspired at an early age by pioneering winemakers like Zelma Long, who served as my mentor and introduced me to the art and science involved in making complex white wines. I am making these wines today because of women like Zelma who opened the door."

Nicole Walsh | Ser Winery | Santa Cruz and Saratoga

Walsh launched her own Cabernet Pfeffer under her Ser label in Saratoga in 2012 and is the director of winemaking and vineyard operations for Bonny Doon Vineyard.

"When I decided to become a viticulturalist/winemaker at Michigan State University (1995), it was myself and one other woman in the whole undergraduate department of Viticulture and Enology with this as their declared major. In my first job as a vineyard manager, I knew I needed to stay hands-on. I learned early on that to lead from experience, I needed to understand more than just grape growing and the chemistry of winemaking, but also how the equipment worked and all the practical applications of winemaking."

Kathryn Kennedy acted as a stalwart conservationist and preservationist of the agricultural and winemaking heritage of this valley.

