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Great Terroir

ON GETTING IN TOUCH WITH ONE'S RUSSIAN ROOTS,
THAT HAPPEN TO SPROUT PINOT AND CHARDONNAY GRAPEVINES

Tatiana Copeland is the daughter of Russian emigrants. Her mother was of the ancient Russian noble family Satin, through which she is related (grandniece) to the composer Sergei Rachmaninov. And her father was a highly-educated engineer whose family traced back to a well-known purveyor of French Champagnes to the Imperial Court.

So perhaps is not surprising that Copeland maintains a keen interest in the nexus of Russia, wine, and music. A graduate of UCLA, she received her MBA from UC Berkeley, spent her career working in international business, and is very active in philanthropy, the arts, and wine. She and her husband, Gerret Copeland, own Bouchaine Vineyards, in Carneros, California.

Did your Russian background have any influence on your getting into the wine business?

I think in a way, yes, my Russian roots had a big influence in at least getting Bouchaine. [In 1981] I was flying on business to Los Angeles, my husband was called by a friend of his, saying there was a possibility of a limited partnership in a winery in Carneros, and nobody had ever heard of Carneros back then. And would he be interested?

Now, my husband's dream at that time was to have a vineyard in France, until he really seriously started looking into it and saw that the regulations were so tough, that as a non-French person you could really never own anything, other than a minority share. So he said, "Well, let me think about Napa," and he came to me.

Now mind you, I was a UCLA and a Berkeley graduate, so I'm the free spirit from California... So when he came to me [and asked] "What do you think of Napa," I mean,

Tatiana Copeland in Napa this summer, attending Festival Napa Valley, where she and her husband, and Bouchaine Vineyards, are founding benefactors.



PAUL E. ROBINSON

to me Napa was Mecca, it was incredible. And I said, “Napa, yeah!” I was much more interested in that than France...

So he said, “Go ahead, take a look.” So I was in LA and I flew up to San Francisco, and went to Napa, and [the winery] was more of a warehouse, a really run-down warehouse. There were no vines, no vineyards. And it was a fairly substantial piece of property.

And here’s where the Russian part comes in... I remember I went to stand on that land among those hills, and I had an incredible reaction, which I can only say was Russian. That affinity for the earth... I stood there, looking at a rather bleak series of buildings, no vines, and this is true: I got goose bumps. I just said, “This is incredible, I would love to own this piece of property.” Just standing on the land. I think that’s the Russian part of me that somehow was reacting to the ownership of a piece of earth. It looked lovely, the surroundings were beautiful, and I could see what could be done.

We took pictures at that time and they’re hanging at the winery, and everybody always asks, “What possessed you to buy that? You must have been crazy!” And my husband usually answers, “Well you know, she’s Russian, she came in here and fell in love with the land, and what can I tell you?” Now of course it looks gorgeous, but back then it sure didn’t.

But I think that was the Russian part of me that took to that earth like Tolstoy, and said, “Yes, there is something that calls to my soul in this.” And I know it sounds a bit bizarre, but that’s exactly what I felt.

Did you know André Tchelistcheff, the famous Russian emigré chemist who was instrumental in resurrecting the Napa wine industry after Prohibition?

We met several times. He was very well known, he didn’t know who I was, and he was so delighted to speak Russian with me. All sorts of people would

keep coming and interrupting, and he would wave them away and say “Go away, go away.” We had the best time... I’m one of the only people back then in Napa who could pronounce his name properly. There were no Russians back then, in Napa, I can tell you that...

After I had my connection to the earth, I needed to get some input from people who were meaningful, and that’s when I got to know Tchelistcheff, and I went to see him, and asked questions about wine, and wine style and what would work, and just get inspiration... And he just fell over backwards with joy when he thought, “Oh my God, a Russian, this is fabulous.”

We had a couple of wonderful encounters and he kind of mentored me in the ways of Napa, and told me the story of what he had done, and it was fascinating. He was quite a character.

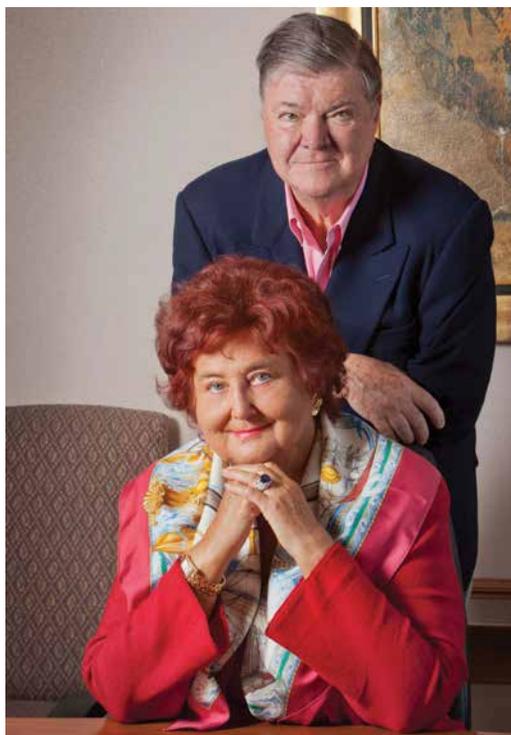
You could say my first mentor was Tchelistcheff.

Did you grow up Russian, speaking Russian in the home?

My parents were Russian, my grandparents were Russian. My nanny was Russian. So, although I was born not in Russia, but in Europe, that’s all we spoke at home.



Bouchaine Vineyards, Carneros, California.



Tatiana and Gerret Copeland

My mother, her Russian history is a thousand years old. You can't abandon something like that, and of course she lost it all. She was like the true patriot that holds onto the roots and the language. She lost so much.

So I was never allowed to speak anything else at home, ever, no matter what country we lived in. And so I grew up speaking only Russian, with the family. Through all the countries we lived in.

I had an enormous affinity for the culture and the language.

Have you been to Russia?

Yes, I have been back quite a number of times. It's funny that I don't feel now that it is my country, but I did feel it growing up. I felt very Russian. And we were completely surrounded by a Russian community in Argentina, where I grew up mostly. That was a very large Russian community. There were Russian plays, and Russian parties, and Russian balls, and New Year's Eve...

And then we moved to LA, which had an enormous Russian community. In those days they were all White Russians; there were obviously no new arrivals because it was completely closed to travel, you couldn't emigrate at all. These were the emigrés from my parents' and my grandparents' era. It was a very strong community...

So, yes, I am completely fluent, but it is the Russian of 90 years ago, that's the Russian I speak.

What is this I read that your grandmother was the first woman to drive a car through Red Square?

Her father only had two girls, and he always wanted a boy... She was the youngest, and so she was educated like a boy. Because no woman back in those days would even dream of driving a car. And yet he educated her to drive a car. She was probably a rather bold and daring young woman. It was forbidden to drive a car through there anyway, and she decided that she would do it.

I don't know what was worse, being a woman, or driving in a car [through Red Square].

So would you say there is anything Russian in your winemaking style?

As far as the actual winemaking style, there is nothing that is Russian in there.

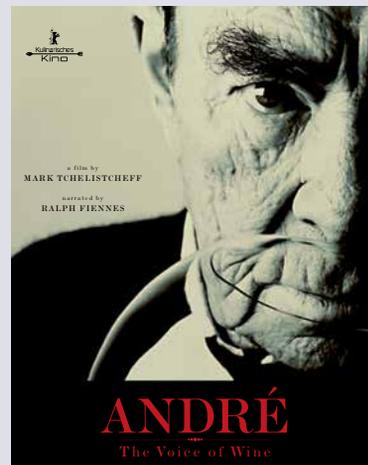
But we have a wonderful dessert wine... you know Russians love dessert wine. So we wanted to give it a beautiful label based on beautiful lacquer boxes... And we named it *Tsaritsa*.

That was the first dessert wine that we had [a late season Chardonnay], but nobody could pronounce it. And we had this gorgeous label, which was hard to produce. So that lasted a few years and then we changed the label and the name to *Bouche d'Or* ("Golden Mouth"). RL



The Russian Who Made Napa

André Tchelistcheff (1901-1994) was the son of Russia's Chief Justice of the Moscow Court of Appeals, and the godson of Prince Lev Golitsyn. He fought with the White Army in World War I and was left for dead on the battlefield. He subsequently fled Russia to Yugoslavia in 1919 and was educated in Czechoslovakia and France. In Paris in 1937 he was recruited by Georges de Latour to help rebuild the California wine industry after it had been decimated by the thirteen years of Prohibition, and made invaluable contributions to the style of Napa's finest wines and winemakers.



A documentary of Tchelistcheff's life has just been released, *André: The Voice of Wine*, by his grand-nephew, the filmmaker Mark Tchelistcheff, and narrated by Ralph Feinnes. The film is an enthralling and affectionate biopic of the colorful and charismatic Russia-born winemaker who more than any other individual was responsible for making Napa the wine capital of America.

"I see the Russia in my memory.
I feel the Russia in my soul."
— André Tchelistcheff

There were just six wineries in Napa when Tchelistcheff arrived in 1938, and over the next half-century he worked with nearly every one of the valley's new growers, from Beaulieu, Charles Krug and Louis M. Martini, to Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Rodney Strong, and many, many more.

Warren Wisniarski, winemaker and founder of Stag's Leap, says in the film that Tchelistcheff was "a combination of a scientist and a poet." And indeed, in his interviews in the documentary, Tchelistcheff speaks lyrically of wines as if they were living human beings. At one point he notes, "a wine is like a person, and needs to be looked after."

And so does the land. Tchelistcheff was an early proponent of malolactic fermentation and ecologically sustainable production – proper care for the land that yields these precious vines. He was also a proponent of the idea that wines needed to struggle to be great, a theory that may have something to do with explaining his own life of war, exile, struggle, and success.

Filled with superior archival and modern footage, and packed with countless fascinating interviews, *André: The Voice of Wine* is a film worth seeking out.

The film's trailer can be viewed at maestrofilm.com.