

by Stephanie Riley

**I**f Rob Sinskey had a motto, it might be, “Beauty is only skin deep.” The adage holds true in the wine world, where Robert Sinskey Vineyards has been making a name for organically produced wines for the past decade.

“Instead of looking like a soap opera star with a perfect complexion, (my) vineyard has rugged good looks, five-day stubble and a pockmark here and there,” observes Sinskey, a second-generation vintner with 200 acres of vineyards spread among the Stag’s Leap and Carneros districts of Napa.

What the vineyards lack in traditional good looks, they make up in natural allure, producing smooth, elegant wines that bear the mark of a vintner who is passionate about his craft – so passionate, in fact, that the former advertising executive overhauled the vineyard from the ground up in the late 1980s. As the story goes, it only took one attempt at shoveling the forlorn soil to convince the younger Sinskey that change was needed. He committed himself to reintroducing nature to the vineyard, bringing in organic material, introducing beneficial insects and even providing solar power. When his efforts produced a soil that was alive and replete with healthy, resilient vines, Sinskey effected a mindset change at RSV: *Let the vineyard drive the winemaking.*

“We theorized that if the soil was healthy, the vine could survive and thrive with pest pressure. If we can encourage a healthy, natural soil, one that is both structurally sound and rich in the type of nutrients that supply a vine what it needs, when it needs it, then it will reward us with high-quality fruit.” That fruit, he reasoned, would then produce exceptional wines.

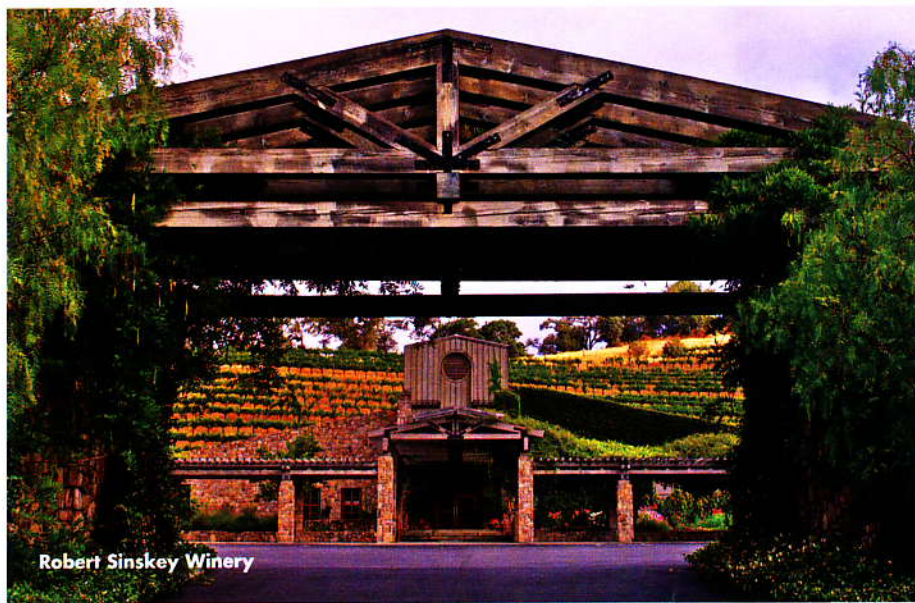
Sinskey believes that “a luxurious wine should be handmade with conscientious farming methods. We’ve always felt that there was a disconnect in the perception of wine as a luxury item, in that conventional farming was created to provide produce (grapes) at the lowest cost per unit and highest return on investment.”

While investing nearly 10 years in the organic certification process, Sinskey fixed his gaze on the lower end of the luxury scale: the soil. “We spend most of our energy managing the earth that bears our crops,” professes



nature's  
bounty

**Robert Sinskey's  
Passion  
for Organic Wines**



Robert Sinskey Winery

Sinskey, a self-described “dirt farmer” with a keen interest in the ways of nature.

“Conventional farming is about conquering nature. Organic or biodynamic farming is about being receptive to nature and working with its rhythms. You are concerned about the health of the soil and you want the farm to function as an ecosystem. Issues need to be addressed in advance so that nature has the time to respond,” he says.

It appears that ever-fickle Mother Nature and wine enthusiasts alike have responded quite favorably to his approach. RSV wines are included on some of the most impressive restaurant wine lists in Northern California. Just as foodies love their wine, they apparently love what Sinskey has done with his dirt. The French Laundry, Cole’s Chop House, Ad hoc, Martini House, ZuZu, Terra and Chez Panisse offer RSV wines.

Sinskey is quick to point out that organically produced wines haven’t always enjoyed access to A-list restaurants or upscale wine shops. In the past, growers were reticent to mention that their wines were produced organically for fear of being banished to the obscure organic section. “Now,” observes Sinskey, “people care and want to know how their wines were created. We’ve come out of the closet.”

No longer relegated to dusty back shelves, organic products have developed a loyal following of those who seek a greater connection

with their source of their meals.

The Sinskey family themselves – Rob, wife Maria (an acclaimed chef) and young daughters, Ella and Lexi – are inextricably connected to the soil and its products. While his wife creates seasonally inspired meals featured in her book *The Vineyard Kitchen*, their daughters work with the chickens and feed the lambs. During the last harvest, the girls even got in on the action, making a muscat juice that they called Black Cat Muscat.

Admittedly, it will be several years before this next generation is able to sip a lovely glass of RSV Merlot, served alongside their mother’s herb roasted duck breast. No matter – for now, they are content to roam, dig in the dirt and freely sample the produce in their healthy, home-grown playground. ■

*The Robert Sinskey Winery is located at 6320 Silverado Trail, Napa. For more information about Robert Sinskey Vineyards, please visit robertsinskey.com or at 800-869-2030.*



## HERB ROASTED DUCK BREAST

Recipe by Maria Helm Sinskey

The rosy pink slices with crisp skin and crunchy herbed bread crumbs are absolutely delicious. Serves six.

### Ingredients:

- 6 6-ounce boneless Peking or Muscovy duck breasts, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves
- ¼ cup dry, lightly toasted bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

### Preparation:

**With a sharp knife, score the skin of the duck in a diamond pattern.**

Cut through the skin but not into the meat. Season both sides with salt and pepper. In a small bowl, mix together the thyme leaves, bread crumbs and softened butter thoroughly.

**Preheat the oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit.** Heat a large sauté pan over medium-high heat. When the pan is hot, add the duck breasts skin side down and reduce the heat to medium. Render the skin, draining the fat as it accumulates, until it is golden and crisp, about seven to eight minutes.

**Turn the breast over and sear for two minutes on the flip side.** Divide the bread crumb mixture equally between the breasts, pressing them into the skin in an even layer.

**Place the breasts in the oven and cook** for two to three minutes on the top rack. Remove the pan from the oven and place the breasts on a rack to rest for five minutes before slicing into six equal pieces.

**Serve one breast per person** with apple cranberry compote and wild rice on the side (find recipes at robertsinskey.com).