

A CULTURAL BLEND FROM NEW ENGLAND TO BORDEAUX TO SONOMA COUNTY

When Peter and Diana Merriam chose to spend their honeymoon in France, little did they know the experience would help to set the stage for who they would become as a couple. Now, 27 years later, everything they loved about France — the French countryside, the French vignerons and their enthusiastic welcome of visitors, the stone walls leading to the wineries and the earthy smell of French oak barrels — is fully integrated into their lives with the launching of their Merriam Vineyards Winery and Tasting room on the edge of California's Russian River Valley.

"Upon landing in Paris, we rented a car destined for the Loire Valley toward Bordeaux. Unbeknownst to us it was a holiday and all the wineries were closed. We stopped at one chateau anyway, desperate for a guidebook." While Peter was walking through the courtyard, Diana stayed outside, taking photos until an imposing Irish wolfhound jumped up and bit her. The owner came to the rescue, escorting Diana into the chateau. As Peter and Diana explained the reason for their intrusion, the owner gave them a signed copy of a book. To their great surprise, he was the illustrious Alexis Lichine, proprietor of Chateau Prieure-Lichine and author of "The Wines and Vineyards of France," the very book for which they were searching.

Once settled into married life, Peter and Diana carried this French theme through their love of entertaining family and friends with inventive food and wine pairings at home near Boston, and at their coastal home in Maine. In the late 1980s, they established a wine shop outside Boston, which made traveling to France a necessity to learn more about the passion they continued to embrace.

Peter and Diana regularly visited Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne for the next 20 years, where Peter studied the wines, and Diana the exquisite food and gracious entertaining. Once, they came upon the Robert Arnoux Chateau when it was closed but couldn't resist driving into the courtyards. "Beyond the majestic gates, it seemed the whole world opened up to us." Although the proprietors were having dinner at the time, they insisted that Peter and Diana taste wines with them in the caves. "The stone cellar was full of spit marks, and the smell of wine, I'll always remember," reminisces Peter. "Making sure we could travel with the wines back into the United States, our hosts were sticking labels on bottles as fast as we could lug them out." What Peter and Diana remember most fondly about these visits is the seamless quality between life and work that was shared by these French vignerons.

Peter and Diana are now living a seamless life of their own, with several vintages behind them and a new winery on the edge of the Russian River Valley. Sonoma County reminds them not only of their native New England, because of its natural beauty, but also of France — the lay of the land, the gentle rolling hillsides, and the climates that allow them to create Bordeaux-style wines. The passions of Peter and Diana's shared 27 years, stretching from New England to Bordeaux, deepen as their roots expand in Sonoma County.