

Storybook Mountain

NAPA VALLEY

Tending zinfandel on a hillside facing north and east, Jerry Seps grows classic California reds evocative of the forested Mayacamas.

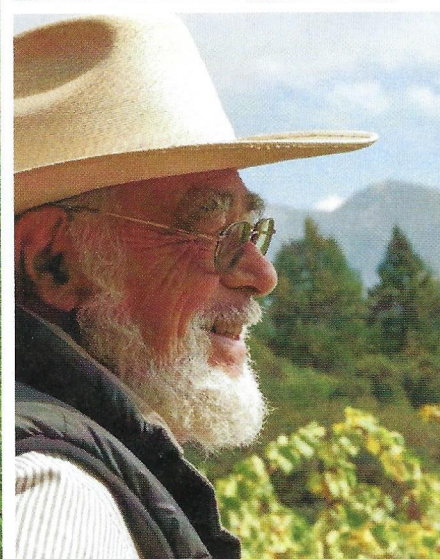
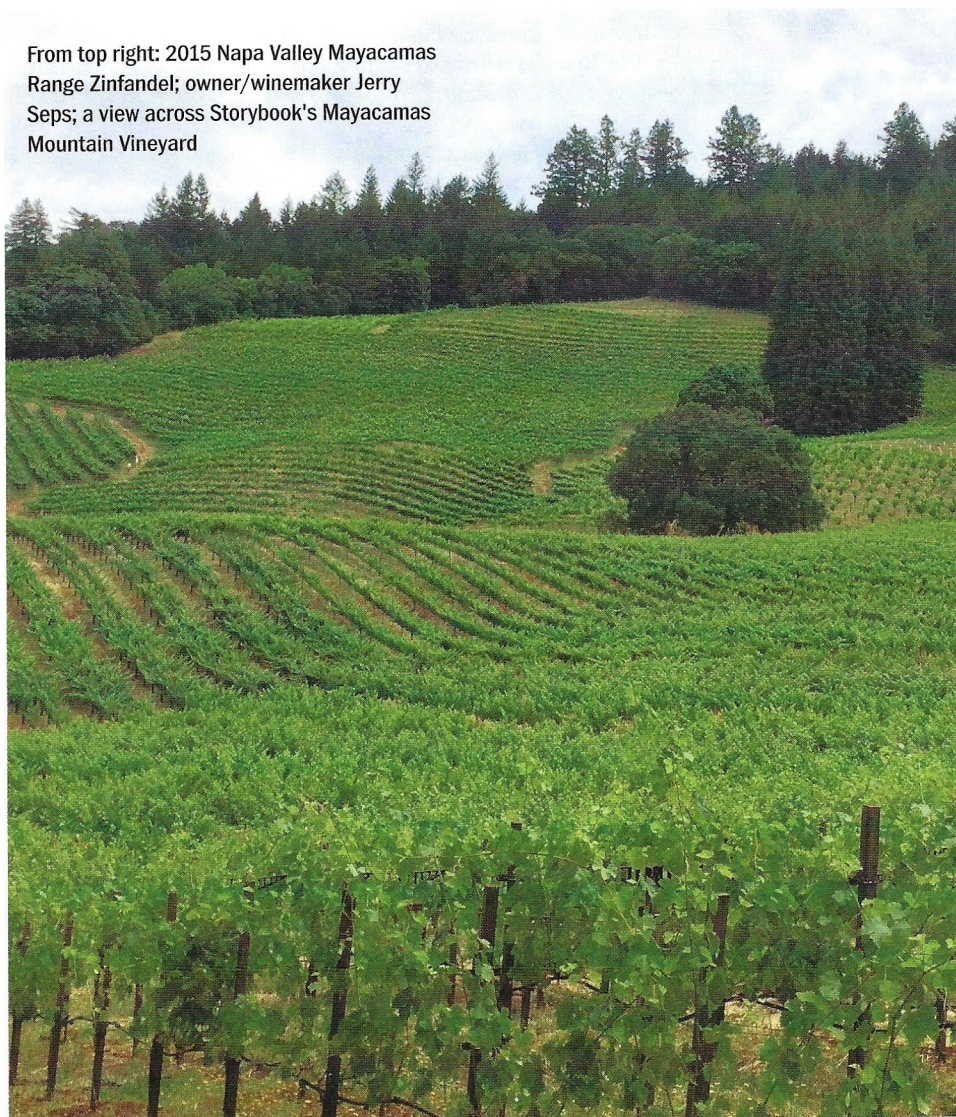
Jerry and Sigrid Seps arrived at the abandoned Grimm Brothers' vineyard in 1976, 12 years after a fire had swept through the property and taken out the 19th-century cellars. After they cleared out the invasive broom, blackberries and poison oak, André Tchelistcheff suggested they plant zinfandel in the hillside's red volcanic soils. Seps wrote to Joe Swan, considered the leading zin-master at the time, to ask for a hands-on apprenticeship. "He took meticulous care of the wine," Seps recalls, "and taught me respect for the grapes—you don't try to push them in directions other than what's in them." Forty years on, Seps's own meticulous care for his vineyard and his grapes, organically farmed from the start, provides some of the greatest red wines being grown in Napa Valley. It also kept him on site when the Tubbs Fire raced up the Mayacamas hills from Calistoga in 2017; he worked with the firefighters to protect the winery and the redwoods burning close to its walls. His perseverance, as well as the water supplied by the springs that humidify his 19th-century caves, ensured that Storybook Mountain sustained its place at the top of the Napa Valley. —J.G.

2015 Napa Valley Mayacamas Range Zinfandel (\$40, 93 points) By the end of a string of drought years, Seps was using a porometer to measure water stress on the vines themselves, and adjusting his watering strategies accordingly. That may have helped sustain acidity in the grapes, apparent in the overall sense of coolness in his Mayacamas Range Zinfandel, the wine he and his daughter, Colleen, select as their most fruit-forward wine. In 2015, its brisk red fruit carries foresty scents of autumn in layered notes of leaves, dried cranberries, pine and mushrooms. All of that savor contrasts the freshness of the fruit, setting it up for aging.

2015 Napa Valley Eastern Exposures Zinfandel (\$55, 92 points) Jerry Seps named this bottling to point up the orientation of the steep, east-facing hillside of his vineyard north of Calistoga, focused toward cool morning sun. In 2015, the wine's soft tannins play off lasting fruit, with flavors of crunchy cherries and gentle notes of raspberry fruit leather. The structure and length seem to emanate from the wine's freshness rather than from its extract; this zin is built to cellar.

2014 Napa Valley Estate Reserve Zinfandel (\$68, 92 points) Darker and fuller in tone than the most classical of the Storybook Reserves (look to 2010, or the forthcoming 2015), this wine offers savory scents of manzanita and licorice root to balance its sweet black-cherry flavors. It's a smooth and fragrant red wine that could only be grown in Napa Valley.

From top right: 2015 Napa Valley Mayacamas Range Zinfandel; owner/winemaker Jerry Seps; a view across Storybook's Mayacamas Mountain Vineyard



Founded: 1976 • **Owner/winemaker/viticulturist:** Jerry Seps • **Acres owned:** 43
Annual production: 4,000 cases
Estate grown: 100%