



Toad Hollow's Wild Ride

by John Campbell

*T*odd Williams is a colorful character and has lived a colorful life. His personality is clearly reflected by the whimsical labels found on bottles of his handcrafted wines. Todd, who spent his youth in nearby Versailles, Kentucky, had many ups and downs during his notorious saloon days, which began at the Pink Elephant Club – purported to be the toughest joint in southwestern Oklahoma – and continued with a series of taverns, nightclubs and restaurants that ran from Chicago to San Francisco to Montego Bay, Jamaica.

All in all, Todd owned or ran a total of seventeen different operations over a period of twenty-nine years before loosing it all at the Whiskey River Inn in the Sierra Nevada. His beautiful wife Frankie tightened up his loose screws and Todd shifted down a few gears to find his true passion was in the world of wine. Today, Todd and Frankie spend their days at Toad Hollow Vineyards where they have dedicated themselves to producing high quality wines at an affordable price.

Behind Toad Hollow's whimsical labels lies a seriously good wine and behind the whimsical Todd Williams lies a man serious about good wine. I spoke to him recently and this is what he had to say about the wonderful world of Toad Hollow Vineyards.

Todd: Morning John. Tell me what you need. If I don't have a story I can certainly make one up.

John: Well, how about telling us how it all began.

Todd: Well, as you know, I was in the restaurant/nightclub, what my wife Frankie fondly calls "the saloon business," for a good many years. My last one cost me a big-time, seven figure bump. I was totally broke and she said, "Give me the check book and you'll own another restaurant or bar over your dead body." I started building restaurants and bars, which I had done most of my life anyway. I took a couple of pretty bad falls and she said, 'I guess you better go back and do what you do,' and I went to work over in the Napa Valley running a restaurant for a year with the idea that, because I love wine, I was going to hook up with a winery somewhere. Nineteen years ago, on my fiftieth birthday, I came home and said 'By the way, I quit my job today.' And that's where we started. I went to work for Whitehall Lane for a short time and then, about six months later, went and worked for John Schafer over at Schafer Vineyards.

That's a great winery, what a great opportunity.

Yes, it was. I was over there for about three years and I started my own marketing company and sold wine nationally. I started Toad Hollow in '93 with Rod Strong. I started this thing up just to have something fun to do and it just kept growing. Hell, we make fifteen different wines now. It's been a lot of fun.

Rodney Strong passed away recently, correct?

About three months ago. I miss him dearly. We make a wine called Rod's Pride for him, in his honor. The '03 vintage was the first one. In fact, one of your local magazines up around Indianapolis gave it 98 points, which I thought was kinda fun. I wish he'd still been alive to see that he would have loved it.

What varietal is it?

Todd: Pinot Noir. I only make about 800 cases of it.

Can you tell us more about it?

Todd: There are six different clones in this silly little vineyard on a little southeast slope. Ray Corsen from Elyse Winery is my consulting winemaker. He and I and my vineyard manager walk the vineyard and we picked what we thought were the four best clones, and cut the yield



down from four tons to a little under one and a half tons to the acre. We pulled off the tonnage that we wanted and it's all free run juice, just crushed and no press. Fifty percent of the wine went into new French cooperage. We picked the four best coopers we could find, what we thought were the best for all different characters of the barrels, and put half of each of the four clones in all four of the barrels and half of it in three year old barrels. It came out as a pretty elegant wine. Everyone that tastes it just falls in love with it. It's totally different than anything out of the Russian River Valley. It's very elegant.

Is it available in Indiana?

It is. Twenty-eight six-packs of which I'm sure have sold out by now.

When was it released?

September. And the '04 will be out this September. You've got twenty-eight cases coming to the wholesaler in Indiana.

Is the Chardonnay still holding strong as your flagship wine?

Oh, yes. I just released the '05 about three weeks ago. Still thirteen years all steel fermented. I make around 70,000 cases a year of it and – knock wood – I sell out every year. People still like the style. It's nice and clean.

What's the benefit of fermenting Chardonnay in stainless steel instead of oak?

It doesn't have the woody flavor. It doesn't taste like melons and bananas and whatever the hell else they put in there... mangos. It tastes like Chardonnay. It tastes like fruit. The grape tastes pretty damn good, you know, given a chance. It's not a sappy wine. It's just a real nice, clean, crisp wine. That's why I made it that way; it's more in the Chablis style. I leave it on the lees, on the yeast, for about seven months, but I don't stir the lees, that gives it that California butter flavor. What it does is if any oxygen gets in the tank that yeast just eats that oxygen up. So, I like to think it's just as fresh when I put it in the bottle as when I put it in the can. We do malolactic secondary fermentation to give it a little creaminess. I just drank the last of my '95 Chardonnays and they are still beautiful. They hold for a good amount of time.

Yeah, that's eleven years.

Yeah. They're still good. I've got a friend of mine up in Wisconsin that still has a case or so of the '93. Every year or two he and his wife pull out a bottle and he just laughs 'cause it's still lovely. The fruits come up a little bit, the acidity has gone down some, but he said it still has straw color and some acidity left in it. At this point that wine is going on thirteen years old.

That's remarkable. Unoaked Chardonnay has seen a rise in popularity in recent years.

I was amazed and pleasantly surprised at how many people were tired of that over-oaked stuff. There are some wonderful Chardonnays that have oak that have good balance, but most of them are just overdone. Especially at our price point, see. They oak the crap out of them and they all taste like cookie-cutter glob to me. I don't have any use for them. And they're certainly not food wines because they overpower anything you put them with. You can't taste the flavor in the food.

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Anything new coming out of the Hollow?

We just released my first Sauvignon Blanc this year. I called it Askew and put the label on crooked, which is kinda fun. I only put it in my top nine markets around the county. I think Indiana got fourteen cases of it, but they sold right through it. Next year I'm going to make a lot more. I only made 1,300 cases. I'm going to make around 3,000 or so next year. My first Cabernet Sauvignon was released last September and we're going to release the '04 again this September. Two years ago I released my proprietary red called Erik's The Red, which is now making 8,000



cases and selling out of that. It's really a real fun wine. I call it my pizza and meatloaf wine. It's just a real good bottle of wine. It's like a Chateau, but my style. I only made 1,200 cases the first vintage. It has eighteen different varietals in it and the center blend changes every year. The one we have this year is old vine Syrah and Petite Sirah. I just did the final blend about three weeks ago on the new one. It will be coming out in a month or so and it's Cabernet Franc, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah.

Your wines are very affordable considering the quality.

I've only had two wines I've raised my price on since 1997. Everything else is the same price it was eight or nine years ago. I don't think I have one neighbor that can look you in the eye and tell you that truthfully.

It makes good wine easily accessible for people.

That's what I'm trying to do. I make a nice living. I don't live in a fancy house or drive a fancy car, but I live well and I'm happy to say I've been able to give my whole crew the last three or four years in a row a fifteen percent bonus. Everybody is happy; nobody quits. We've got a pretty good thing going here.

So, what's on the horizon for Toad Hollow?

Well, I don't know. I'm happy. I'm just about where I want to be. We have a new wine club and I'm making some fun stuff just for the wine club. I've

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got a new reserve Petite Verdot in the barrel. I hate the word Meritage, but I'm gonna do a little Meritage because they like to see that kinda stuff. I'll make maybe a hundred cases a year of a special wine just for the wine club.

So, what do you do when you're not at the winery?

Sleep. When I'm not here I'm on the road eighty plus days a year.

You do travel a lot, but somebody's got to sell the wine.

Yeah, but I'm cutting back, my hearts starting to act up. Today is the first day of my sixty-ninth year. It's my birthday today.

Happy Birthday!

Thanks, John. Frankie is making me back off, which is good. I'm not traveling in June, July or August. It's been a lot of years since I've had those three months at home and I'm going to put them to good use. I'm going to do a little fishing and I haven't had a golf club in my hand in seven years. I'm going to go play a little golf and do a couple of things I don't normally get a chance to do. I love what I do so much that I told her everyday is like a vacation for me when I come to work. She said 'NOT FOR ME.'

Do you see much of your brother Robin these days?

Oh, now and again. He's got two or three new movies running around. His wife and my wife and a bunch of ladies are all taking off to go to a spa for a week this Sunday. My brother, I think is in Italy or England or some place. He travels more than I do. He flies to New York like you and I go to the filling station, he's never home. He's staying busy and we see each other two or three times a year.

Have you had any cameo appearances since Mrs. Doubtfire?

No, but I started pushing him this Christmas. I said 'You know, I could use another little nudge. After twelve years I've kinda worn Mrs. Doubtfire out. Gimme a little something. I could be a bartender, a druggie, a mercenary, all the things I'm used to doing.' He just started laughing. So, we'll see if I can talk him into something else. ■

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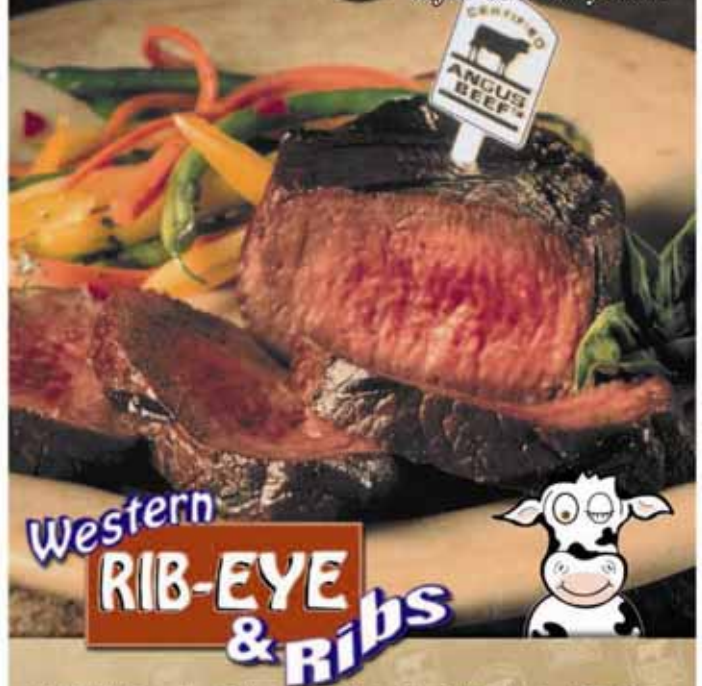
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