

# Marimar Torres: A life in wine

KIP DAVIS

Marimar Torres remembers well the liberating event 40 years ago that helped set her on the path of an exciting, more fulfilling life.

A member of a prominent and historic winemaking family in Spain, Torres had been raised in a country defined by the cultural and political oppression of the Francisco Franco dictatorship. It was a totalitarian regime that, among other things, strictly defined and limited the role of women in Spanish society and everyday life. In 1973, Torres visited San Francisco and, she remembers, her eyes were opened to a vibrant world of fun, friends and opportunity. It was a far cry from her preordained life as a sedate, upper-class lady in Franco's Spain.

"When I came here the first time to San Francisco in 1973, I loved it," Torres said. "I made friends and loved the city. I made more friends and loved the city more."

Two years later, Torres moved to San Francisco and has never looked back. She helped introduce America to her family's Spanish wines, published two cookbooks on Spanish cuisine and founded Marimar Estate vineyards and winery in Sonoma County.

"It's in my blood, right?" Torres said at her Catalan farmhouse-inspired winery in the bucolic Green Valley near Sebastopol. Family genes may be a factor, though it is clear that the California winery, Spanish cookbooks, her college degrees and fluency in six languages play a role — it's all the result of Torres' unwavering will to get the most out of life.

It was Torres' lineage, however, that likely motivated her to open her own winery. She was born into Spanish winemaking royalty. The family business — Bodega Torres — was started by her great-grandfather and his brother in 1870. After being destroyed during the Spanish Civil War, the winery was resurrected in 1940 by Torres' father, Miguel Torres Carbó. Bodega Torres grew to become Spain's largest winery, expanding to Chile in 1979.

Growing up in Franco's Spain, young Marimar Torres was not allowed to participate in any activity that was not considered proper for a lady. Surrounded by the wine business, she was not

Family genes may be a factor, though it is clear that the California winery, Spanish cookbooks, her college degrees and fluency in six languages play a role — it's all the result of Torres' unwavering will to get the most out of life.

As if developing a vineyard and winery were not enough, in 1984 Torres started her first cookbook, "The Spanish Table," a collection of authentic recipes from all regions of Spain with an overview of Spanish wines.



Submitted photo

Marimar Torres with her beloved English Springer Spaniels in the Don Miguel Vineyard, named after her father.

allowed in vineyards or wineries. Prohibited from cooking, Torres would have to sneak into the kitchen where she would occasionally help the family cook. As a "lady," Torres said, she was expected to marry well and keep her place.

"You got used to it," Torres

said of her early life in Spain.

"I mean I was born into the Franco regime so you think that's normal until you start to travel outside Spain."

Torres did persuade her parents to let her study at the University of Barcelona, where she earned a degree in business and

economics. She also traveled, promoting Torres wines and serving as the company's export director. Then she married an American — wine critic/writer Robert Finigan — prompting the move to California.

See **TORRES**, Page C2



# TORRES

From Page C1

The marriage lasted four years but Torres' love of Northern California has endured for four decades.

When she moved to the U.S., Torres began coordinating sales of Torres wines, dealing directly with distributors. At the time, Spanish wines were little known or appreciated in America. After all, in the 1970s America was just coming to terms with its own budding fine wine industry.

After persuading her father to hire an importer to handle U.S. sales of the family's wines, Torres found extra time to devote to new projects. In the early 1980s she began looking for land to plant a vineyard and start a winery. A former apple orchard caught her eye in a wooded valley northwest of Sebastopol.

"It was love at first sight," she said. "The land had been cleared ... and I was sold. When I was told it would be great for pinot noir and chardonnay ... I thought yeah, nothing wrong with that. Obviously we (Torres) were not producing pinot noir in Spain and just a little chardonnay, so I thought it would be great since we would not be in competition."

At the time, vineyards and wineries were still sparse in the cool, wooded Green Valley area south of the Russian River and just a few miles from the ocean. Undeterred, Torres persuaded her father to invest in the 56-acre property, confident that she could produce world-class, cool-climate wines in what would later prove to be one of Northern California's premier growing regions.

Torres was now faced with developing the property. Despite her pedigree, Torres needed help.

"I had never studied viticulture because that was not a thing for a lady," she said. "So I relied on friends and my brother."

She said her brother - Miguel Torres - by then had taken the reigns of Bodega Torres and was at first reluctant to take on another project.

Marimar's vineyards are certified organic and the operation follows a full range of bio-diverse and sustainable farming practices. Marimar estate-grown pinot noir and chardonnay wines are elegantly produced with minimal handling to reflect the high quality of the fruit. A reflection of its Spanish roots, in 2012 Marimar released a highly acclaimed Albariño grown in the Don Miguel Vineyard.

High-density planting, she



M/J Wickham

Nestled in Green Valley near Sebastopol and the Russian River, Marimar Estate Winery produces highly rated, estate-grown chardonnay, pinot noir and Albariño.

said, has been slow to catch on in California vineyards due to the increased expense. Vines are planted closer together to force greater competition and more plant stress in an effort to boost fruit quality.

Torres followed her brother's advice and planted the Don Miguel Vineyard (named after her father) in 1986, planning to build a winery in 1988. She also enrolled in viticulture classes at UC Davis for a year.

"When I was there my brother called me one day and said that there was no way we could build the winery if we needed the money I don't know, an underground cellar or something."

With the winery on hold in 1989 Torres made the Marimar estate chardonnay custom-crafted by

and out of the said in 1991 to Spain with me a bottle of chardonnay she was last day it was had ever really ally

Marimar, we must have a winery in California. When he died, I reminded my mother ... so the

winery was built in 1992."

As if developing a vineyard and winery were not enough, in 1984 Torres started her first cookbook, "The Spanish Table," a collection of authentic recipes from all regions of Spain with an overview of Spanish wines.

Torres said that her love of cooking blossomed only after she moved to San Francisco.

"It came with my coming to live here in California," she said, "because in Spain, in those days with Franco, ladies didn't cook. You were supposed to be

into the article through the food," Torres said. "Then one thing led to another."

Publishing a Spanish cookbook, she said, was the next logical step in helping Americans and others understand Spain and its vibrant food and wine heritage.

"For me it was a mission," Torres said. "It was about showing the world what Spanish cuisine was like. People thought of Spanish food as spicy hot, done with tequila or beer and churriles. I was on a mission to show Americans what great we had."

Released in 1986, "The Spanish Table: The Cuisines and Wines of Spain" was a hit and went on to write a second book - "The Catalan Kitchen" - released

Torres had energy on runs. County winery now includes a yard near Occidental her mother, Don. Though Marimar partnership with her two brothers, bought out her siblings and is now the sole owner of the winery and vineyard.

Marimar's vineyards are certified organic and the operation follows a full range of bio-diverse and sustainable farming practices. Marimar

estate-grown pinot noir and chardonnay wines are elegantly produced with minimal handling to reflect the high quality of the fruit. A reflection of its Spanish roots, in 2012 Marimar released a highly acclaimed Albariño grown in the Don Miguel Vineyard.

A constant presence in Torres' life has been her daughter Cristina, born in 1988. Cristina grew up in the Green Valley vineyard, and Torres hopes her daughter will continue the Marimar legacy. To that end, Cristina is learning more about the wine business, working in London as a brand manager for French wines.

Torres acknowledges that her cookbooks, like her family's wines, may have played a small part in helping her daughter

A constant presence in Torres' life has been her daughter Cristina, born in 1988. Cristina grew up in the Green Valley vineyard, and Torres hopes her daughter will continue the Marimar legacy. To that end, Cristina is learning more about the wine business, working in London as a brand manager for French wines.

Although Marimar Torres happened to find her freedom and creative epiphany in America, her life seems to mirror that of her native country during the post-Franco era. Both Torres and Spain have blossomed.

of the creativity of Spaniards in art, in architecture, in music."

Although Marimar Torres happened to find her freedom and creative epiphany in America, her life seems to mirror that of her native country during the post-Franco era. Both Torres and Spain have blossomed.