

## COUNTRY LIFE

### Wine cellar catharsis

On the scale of fancy wine cellars, ours would be near the bottom. Mostly because it is in the cellar, the same place that houses broken lamps, tire chains for driving in the snow and Fourth of July decorations. It is dark and dank and cool year round



so it attracts spiders and their webs and small reptiles but it is perfect also for housing wine.

Wine cellars in wine country are as much a requirement as an old truck and a dog and the types vary just as much as the trucks and the dogs. One of my friends bought a fancy wine cellar and a house came with it. Other friends have developed a separate area of their home just for wine. These add-ons often look like an Olive Garden Restaurant just for wine including grape vines painted on the wall and a music system. When one of my sons saw one of these turbo cool wine cellars, he asked, "Why don't we have a wine cellar like that?" My response was, "We could have a wine cellar like that; we would just have to live in it."

Most of the new wine cellars I see are full of refrigerators that are bigger than my SUV. The fancy cellars also feature fancy labels that identify wines I didn't know existed like Seyval and Baco and regions that I don't associate with wine like Long Island. Then, there is the sheer size. To me, a wine cellar that houses ten thousand bottles sets up a race between me and the cellar. The cellar is taunting me to see how much I can drink before I die. I suspect many of the huge cellars have a few Screaming Eagles at eye level and hundreds of Two Buck Chuck's at the knee level, never to be seen but filling the shelves.

Our cellar in the cellar has neither of those brands. Rather, it has a bunch of wine that we like and drink. The main section of the wine cellar, that is, easy to reach and in the middle of the wall, houses our favorite wines so it is almost always empty. The "rest" of the cellar is what is always full. The rest of the cellar is what required my attention and cleaning.

The old bottles on the bottom of the racks looked interesting. These bottles were there when we bought the house. The labels were unreadable and the bottles were only two thirds full with a brown liquid. This could be wine from the 1800s and still good, I thought. After a quick smell and taste it was clear that the liquid was muddy water from the last time the cellar had flooded. The water had seeped into the bottles through the crumbling corks. It was easy to decide what to do with these bottles.

Then there were the Chardonnays and other white wines we had placed in the racks for a special occasion. Alas, the special occasions have come and gone and so have those wines. Those white wines from the early nineties' assumed a warm amber glow, more like a whiskey

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Carolyn Younger photos  
 Estate Chef Alejandro Ayala, left, who heads Meadowood Napa Valley's catering kitchen, was named 2012 Employee of the Year by the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce. Here, Ayala slices a rolled rib eye cap as Jaime Ceja, center, tosses a salad with Champagne dressing, and Sous Chef Juan Carlos Acosta, right, steps in to prepare celery stalks for slicing.

## Pots, sauté pans and sharp knives

### Alejandro Ayala carves out a life for himself and his family

By Carolyn Younger  
 STAFF WRITER

It was business as usual last week as Meadowood estate chef Alejandro Ayala and "his guys" (some gals as well) were preparing a lunchtime array of salads, roasted meats and grilled salmon for a corporate meeting being held at the resort.

In an efficient kitchen recently carved out of a former storage area, Ayala and his crew of 20 regularly prepare staff lunches and cater events both on and off the Meadowood property.

Last weekend that included a collaboration with Meadowood executive chef Christopher Kostow for St. Helena Montessori School's 25th anniversary celebration and fundraiser. In what might seem like an example of culinary conjuring, Ayala's kitchen also catered dinners at Cade Winery, Kathryn Hall's, the Napa Valley Reserve and at the resort that same weekend.

Meadowood's Director of Wine and Cuisine Patrick Davila estimates that Ayala and his staff prepare about 60,000 meals annually, both on and off the property — heady numbers for a chef who started as a dishwasher at Meadowood nearly three decades ago.

So perhaps it wasn't a surprise to those who know him when the 46-year-old Ayala was singled out in January as Employee of the Year by the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce.

"I just think that anybody like him, who works so long and has so much dedication should be recognized by the community," Davila said this week, during a break in menu planning with Ayala. "He contributes so much to the community, doing festivals, wine auctions and fundraisers."

Even so, "I didn't expect it," Ayala admitted during a tour of the kitchen. But, he insisted, without his staff the award wouldn't have happened.

"We are just one team," he said. "We are like a family in my kitchen. And I have to tell you, all my department starts from the bottom, just like me."

The former Meadowood dishwasher was raised in Indaparapeo, Michoacan. He was 8 when his father died, leaving Ayala's mother with nine children to raise; the old-



Members of Meadowood's catering team, Veronica Flores and Javier Portillo, prepare filling and dressing for an array of sandwiches.



Chef Alejandro Ayala displays a platter of Ora King Salmon prepared by his staff.

est 13, the youngest 6 months old. "But with my grandpa's help, my uncle's help, we managed."

His older sister became a "second mom" while his mother worked and the other children contributed as best they could. Ayala was 18 when an uncle working at Meadowood suggested he and his brother, Cecilio, come to the United States.

"We wanted to do something for our family," Ayala said. "It was a necessity, and I think we just wanted to grow up. For me, in the beginning, it was like an adventure. We didn't realize ... if you don't work, you don't eat."

Ayala worked in the fields those first months, later picked pears in Lakeport, then came to the Napa Valley to harvest grapes. It was lonely and difficult, he said, and he missed his family.

He had been in the valley two weeks when his brother told him about an job opening at Meadowood. Which is how, in 1986 and still in his teens, Ayala began what would be a 27-year career with the St. Helena resort.

He washed dishes but when he had a free moment would also ask what he could do to help the cooks.

"So that is when I started chopping little veggies and

making crepes," he said. "I wanted to learn."

Along the way he had the support of a succession of chefs, from the first chef he worked with to those who followed, among them Herve Glin, Henri Delcros, Roy Breiman and Didier Lenders.

He moved up in the kitchen hierarchy, developing culinary skills as he went. He worked as a prep cook, went on to preparing salads and working the cold line. He was promoted to sous chef and later was in charge of the grill. He credits Lenders with teaching him the value of

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*Carolyn Younger photos*

**ABOVE LEFT:** Dishwasher Ricardo Delgadillo helping ensure the catering kitchen's smooth operation. Chef Ayala began his own Meadowood career as a dishwasher nearly 30 years ago. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Jaime Ceja slices celery for a luncheon salad after adjusting the blade to the preferred thinness.

## Meadowood

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organization — helping with the annual Auction Napa Valley fundraiser and working with celebrity guest chefs underscored the importance. When the famed wine auction rolls around this summer, it will be Ayala's 27th.

Considering the hard work and long hours required to get where he is today, Ayala agreed it can be hard on family life.

"Looking back I'll think that at some point I should have stayed home more

with my children," he said. "It's hard because you have to put both on the scale and say, 'OK this is what my children, my family needs ... but I need to work so we can survive.'"

He keeps this in mind when mentoring those in his kitchen with the potential to get ahead.

"You have to have a lot of time and pay attention to details," he believes. "You have to like it ... to have a passion for it."

Two years ago Ayala remarried. His wife, Delia, is a supervisor in Meadowood's wine and cuisine department "and understands everything," her husband said.

In April the two head for New York where Ayala, as well as wine and cuisine

director Davila and Meadowood's pastry chef, Danielle Brocious, will host several dinners and a reception for wedding and event planners.

"We'll be prepping and serving, prepping and serving," he said, "then Sunday we'll have time to walk around and see the sights. It will be great."

Ayala isn't the only member of his family who travels, and he tells a favorite story that has become a part of family lore.

"Before my father passed away he used to tell my mom, 'When your kids grow up you're going to have a beautiful life, a happy life. They are going to take you everywhere ...'

"My mom always said, 'You're crazy' because we come from a really poor fam-

ily, but now she says my father was right. She goes to Chicago to visit my sisters, to Mexico and she's living in Napa with my brother."

As a youngster in Mexico, Ayala never considered the possibility of becoming a chef, "it never came in my mind," he said. "I was working with my grandpa in construction, so probably that would have been my job if I hadn't come to the States."

But opportunity, determination and the good will of others changed that future.

"It's been an amazing and a beautiful experience for me on this property," Ayala said, looking across Meadowood's expanse of lawn where the annual wine auction is held. "This is my home, my second home."