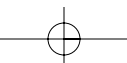


PART ONE

A WINERY IN  
THE WEST



## 1

*The Family*

A portrait of the late Mario Trincherro hangs in the dining room at the restored Victorian mansion next to the Sutter Home Winery, now called Trincherro Family Estates. With thinning hair but still a youthful appearance for a man then in his seventies, he sports a black turtle-neck and black jacket, casual yet sophisticated. He could be a Hollywood agent or a Wall Street investor, but he's not. He's a humble man who lived a true rags-to-riches story, staking everything on the quintessential American dream.

In the portrait, Mario's velvety black eyes gaze directly back at the viewer, as though he's still alive, vibrant, and in control of the winery where he first toiled more than 50 years ago. Perhaps, through his children, he is.

At first glance, you would hardly know that Bob, Roger, and Vera Trincherro are siblings, the children of Mario and Mary Trincherro. They're so dissimilar, they could be any three people randomly picked from a crowd, except for their eyes: luminous, ebony, inkwell eyes. Mario's eyes.

At six feet three inches, the lean and athletic Roger, youngest of the three, stands several heads over both Bob and Vera. Now in his mid-fifties, Roger played college

football. If a movie were to be made of the Trincheros' lives, the actor-playwright Sam Shepard would be an ideal candidate to play the role of Roger: trim, fit, with an enigmatic flow of thought and emotions lurking just below the surface. A veteran of Vietnam, Roger has been described as a playboy and hellion in his younger days, and a good guy who settled into being a smart, kind, and loyal employer. He was the first Trinchero to graduate from college. Today, he's president of Trinchero Family Estates.

Born in 1936, a decade before Roger, Louis "Bob" Trinchero dresses more like the local hardware store owner than the CEO of a multi-million-case winery. Amiable, amusing, and self-assured, he married his high school sweetheart, follows the Pritikin diet religiously, and anchors the family's stability. Like the middle-aged Mario, Bob sports a round, Charlie Brown head, thinning hair, and a friendly grin that comes easily. Bob says he shaves his father's face every morning. "I look so much like my dad. We have the same basketball kind of head," Bob says with characteristic humor. His father and uncle taught him how to make wine, but it was Bob who stumbled on the fortuitous accident, the creation of Sutter Home White Zinfandel, that would ultimately transform the family's mom-and-pop operation into one of the world's largest wineries.

Vera Trinchero Torres' soft complexion and poise belie an inner strength that has helped her overcome a history of hardships. The only daughter in this intensely Italian family, Vera was also the only sibling to work most of her life outside the struggling family business. "They couldn't afford to pay me," she says. Two years younger than her brother Bob, Vera sustained and overcame serious health problems: bypass surgery, breast cancer, nerve damage in her wrist, and other maladies. Her once dark locks, now streaked with silver, curl gently around her head. She is, like her brother Bob,

often described as “quite a character,” due to her kindness and unbridled generosity melded with a sharp but restrained feistiness. Long divorced, she is the only sibling whose children, Tony and Bobby Torres, chose careers in the family business.

As dissimilar as Roger, Bob, and Vera first appear, they share the same intense, powerful eyes: dark, large, round, and deep. They radiate confidence, sincerity, conviction, and compassion. Their eyes are so distinctive that even in photographs they attract the viewer’s interest over all other details, like the eyes in Byzantine portraits of the ancient Roman Empire.

If it’s true that you can tell something about a people’s character by looking in their eyes, then the Trincheros’ eyes reveal volumes about themselves—all positive, all strong, and all as bewitching as their father Mario’s eyes. This is their story.

## HEADING WEST

December 5, 1948, was a rainy, foggy day in northern California. After a three-day, cross-country train ride from New York City, Mary Trinchero and her three children—Bob, 12, Vera, 10, and Roger, 2—arrived at the Oakland train depot. Mary’s husband, Mario, who had come West several months earlier, was there to greet them, and the family drove two and a half hours to the small town of St. Helena in Napa Valley to begin their new lives as vintners at Sutter Home Winery.

“We pulled into the winery, which was a dilapidated old barn that hadn’t operated since before Prohibition,” Bob Trinchero remembers. “It had been abandoned and was waist high in weeds in the front, with dirt floors and no

electricity. My mother started to cry. We came from midtown Manhattan, where we had a pretty nice lifestyle, so we couldn't understand why my dad would bring us to a place like this."

Trading a cozy lifestyle in New York for an unknown future in a place as far across the nation as you could get to launch a new career in the then-tiny California wine business may not seem that odd to many Americans. After all, entrepreneurship weaves throughout the fabric of our nation's history. But Mario Trincherio, who turned 50 his first year at the winery, was no longer a young man. His wife, Mary, was 37. She grew up in an Italian convent after her parents died and worked in a sweater factory in New York before marrying Mario. She raised their three young children well, and, while no stranger to work, had no idea the future for which she and the family left New York would be so drastically different.

"Why didn't you tell me it was going to be like this?" Mary asked Mario. "Because," Bob recalls his father saying, "if I had, you would never have come." Her three children agree—she wouldn't have.

That winter and the following spring were difficult seasons for the new arrivals to the valley. While Mario and his brother John converted an old, two-story barn on the winery property into living quarters, the Trincherios lived for seven months in a small, unheated motel cabin with no indoor bathroom. Like their mother, the children struggled to adjust from the sophistication of New York City to the rural simplicity of St. Helena.

Napa Valley was a far different place in 1948 than it is today. It was completely rural, with more acres of prunes and walnuts than grapes, and a sizable amount of land was given over to tomato farming and cattle grazing. There were only a handful of wineries.

“I remember as a boy making spare money picking walnuts and prunes, and I remember the prune dehydrator south of town where Bob worked when he was in high school,” Roger says. “The lifestyle then was a lot slower and, unlike today, there was no tourism. Napa Valley was definitely off the beaten path.”

That description probably explains why, after years amid the excitement and bustle of midtown Manhattan, Mary Trinchero began crying when she first saw Sutter Home. “Actually” recalls Bob, “she cried for three months.”

## ADJUSTMENT

The Trinchero children did not cry as their mother had, but they were equally befuddled. “I couldn’t believe that when you picked up the phone, you got an operator who completed your call,” Vera says. “We had direct dialing in Manhattan! And the kids in my class thought I was from Europe because they couldn’t understand my New York accent.”

If the local kids thought the Trinchero children were odd, Bob, Vera, and Roger were even more stunned by their surroundings. “Even before seeing Dad,” Bob recalls, “as we pulled into the station, I thought, ‘We’re in the wilderness.’ I thought my dad had kinda lost it. I kept wondering what was going on. I couldn’t put it together.

“Then, when we got off the train and I saw my dad standing there in a short-sleeved shirt and Levi’s,” recalls Bob, “I burst out laughing. I thought it was a joke. I’d never seen my dad wear anything like that. Back in New York, my father wore three-piece suits, a tie, a nice hat, an overcoat, sometimes an ascot. He used to be a sharp dresser. A couple of times, we visited him where he

worked and he wore a tuxedo with tails. He was a bartender, but I mean the high-end type of bartender. I'd always seen him dressed up, always impeccably dressed. Now I saw him in a short-sleeved shirt, which I'd never seen him in before in my life, and—a pair of Levi's jeans!" Bob scrunches his face in amazement, eyes wide and glassy, but speaks somberly. "What was this?! was my reaction. I started to laugh, a nervous laughter. It was like they took my whole world and completely turned it upside down. It was weird."

Bob's early weeks in St. Helena caused the family even more concern. "I kept hearing this buzzing sound in my ears, a whining all the time," he recalls. "So they took me to the doctor, who asked where we lived beforehand. We came from New York, a big city, and we were on 66th Street. If you know 66th Street on the West Side, it's one of the few two-way streets, and it goes across Central Park. All night long there's traffic noise. Then you have the St. Nicholas arena, which was right across the street from us, where they had all the fights and wrestling. Noise all the time. So now, it's quiet in St. Helena. There's no noise whatsoever. Except this constant whining sound in my head. Apparently, the pastoral quietness and lack of traffic in St. Helena was so foreign, I couldn't take it. The doctor said it would go away, and sure enough, a couple weeks later it was gone."

Life in California took a real adjustment. "I don't remember my exact feelings at first, but I remember being apprehensive, especially when I went to school. I mean here I was dressed for school: slacks, white shirt, tie. Whooeel!" Bob turns his head slowly and makes a noise that resembles a noooo and a wooo. "A good idea? I don't think so! When I came home that first school day, I said, 'Ma, you gotta buy me a pair of these things called blue jeans—which is what

they called them back then. In New York, the family said ‘dungarees.’ So she went down to Goodman’s here in town and bought me a pair. Of course, back then, they were really more like canvas. They stood up on their own, and when they’d get wet, your legs and thighs would turn blue. Whew! That was terrible.”

But the most drastic change was the place where the Trincheros first lived. The El Bonita Motel, situated on the main highway just south of the town of St. Helena, is today a contemporary, upscale motel, hip and trendy in a retro-deco sort of way. Rooms go from \$135 to nearly \$300 a night for poolside suites. El Bonita’s neon sign beckons valley tourists, and the outside of the place is painted a crisp, eye-catching pink. But in the 1940s, the El Bonita was a run-down, rustic set of cabins with few amenities. Yet it was walking distance to the Sutter Home Winery, and really the only place available for the Trincheros to stay.

“We stayed at the El Bonita all winter, spring, and half the summer,” recalls Vera. “There was no indoor plumbing, so we had to carry our chamber pots out in the morning. The shower was communal. Worst of all, there was no heat. We had a small electric heater, but the owner at that time wouldn’t let us use it, because he said it cost him an additional \$50 a month in electricity. We lived in two rooms, with a room that was actually an enclosed porch. In cold weather, the walls would sweat.”

With every rag used to wipe down the cold, clammy, sweating walls of their El Bonita lodgings, Mary’s depression grew worse. The kids had never seen her so upset, especially for so long. Not that she didn’t have good reason to cry. Mary had been happy in New York. She had no desire to change her life. But if it was going to be different, she dreamed that at least it would be better. This most certainly was not.

Everyone seemed to miss the lifestyle they enjoyed in New York. Everyone, that is, except little Roger and his father Mario.

## NEW YORK DAYS

Mario shooed his wife and their three kids out the door. “*Ecco la!* That’s it, go play in the park, run in the sunshine. I’ll see you tonight.”

It was Monday, and Mario dressed casually in comfortable slacks and a white shirt. No one but his family ever saw him in such plain clothes. For the rest of New York, Mario wore dapper three-piece suits, or even a tux and tails, and appeared just as classy as the patrons he served at the Barbi-zon Plaza, Waldorf-Astoria, or other high-society New York hotels of the time.

Mario was not a wealthy man, but the \$250 a week he earned in the 1940s as a waiter or bartender was enough for his family to live comfortably, even in New York. “We lived in a large, well-kept brownstone apartment on West 66th Street, right smack in the middle of Manhattan, just a block away from Central Park West,” recalls Vera.

“Every Monday, Dad sent Mom and us kids off to Central Park. Even on his day off, he took care of all of us. Dad cleaned the entire apartment and had a nice hot dinner waiting for us when we came back.” Those Monday dinners were important to the Trincheros. They were among the few times the kids saw their father. “He worked as a bartender at night and would come home at four in the morning. When I got up to go to my school, P.S. 94 at West 68th and Amsterdam,” recalls Bob, “Dad slept, and when I came home from school he had already gone to work.”

No one knows for sure why Mario decided to gamble on a vintner's life. But for a man devoted to family and family values, perhaps the night jobs that kept him from Mary and the kids contributed to his decision. Vera thinks a combination of factors led to his move West. "Basically he was tired of being a bartender. He was afraid of becoming an alcoholic, because everyone wants to buy the bartender a drink, plus the fact that his mother died. If his mother hadn't died the year before, he would not have moved. He was very, very close to Nonna. So when brother John called him to come out here, he said, yeah, I'm gonna be my own boss again. And that's how it started."

Prior to the move, Mario never displayed any desire to leave New York, change his career, or make wine. "Dad was a happy man, a prankster. He was an adventurer, a partier—he always loved a good time," describes Bob.

"He married my mother when he was 36 and she was 24, there's 12 years difference between them. Other than his day off, the only time we saw him was on weekends, when it was party time at the house. People would show up and we'd have this five- to six-hour lunch-dinner combination."

"Mario was the main cook," remembers Vera. His family ran their own restaurant in Italy, opening another restaurant in New Jersey after they arrived in the United States. "So he grew up with cooking, and he was a great cook. The only thing he refused to do all his life was wash the dishes. At family get-togethers, Dad did the turkey or the ham, the hors d'oeuvres, the entrée, and mixed the cocktails. He did all types of recipes. Mom did the vegetables and side dishes, and she was the pasta cooker. She made the raviolis from scratch, which was a lot of work. I

used to help. It was fun on a rainy Sunday, when there was nothing to do outside. Meals were always a community effort.”

Bob recalls those days fondly, when Mario cooked and the rest of his family joined him. “The kids would eat and leave, but the parents, they’d fight World War I on the tablecloth with pens and pencils. Once, my Aunt Vera, my mother’s oldest sister, brought her second husband over. The adults swapped war stories, going, ‘We were here, in this place . . . and then we went there . . .’ and so on. My aunt’s husband was new to the family, so his stories were also new—quite a bonus, since everyone else rehashed the same stories over and over again for years. All of a sudden, they realized there was a possibility that this guy could have dropped bombs on my father, because he had been a bombardier for the Germans. He was from the Italian-Austrian border, which the Austrians owned at the time, so he fought for the Germans, the *tedeschi*.” With a boyish laugh, Bob adds, “It was really strange. They all looked at each other and said ‘You dropped bombs *where?*’ ”

Life in New York was full of good times, close relatives, festive food, and Italian camaraderie. After the move to California, many years passed before the Trincheros experienced the same degree of comfort and relaxed enjoyment.