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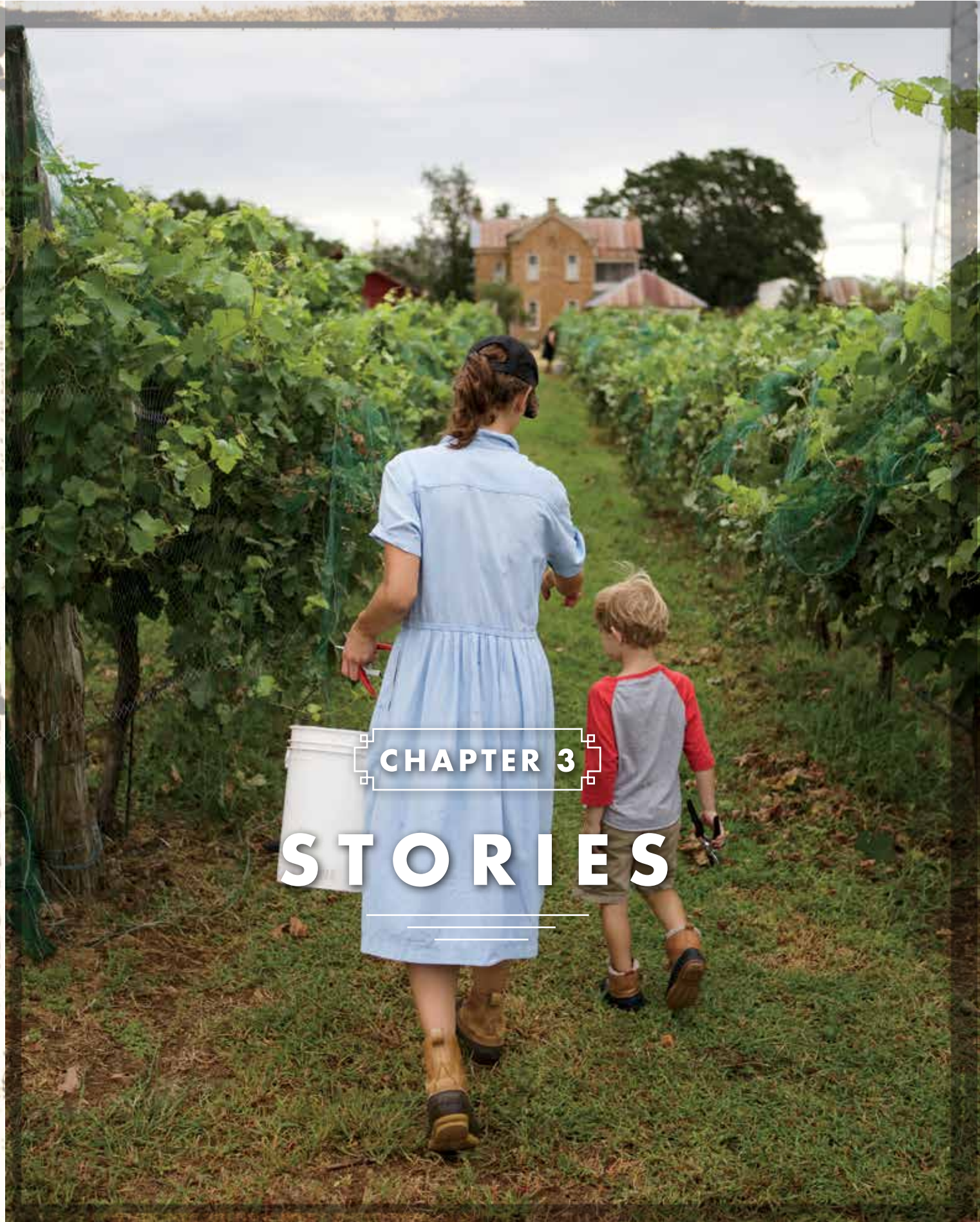
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Uniquely SOUTHERN

“ TO IDENTIFY A PERSON AS A SOUTHERNER
SUGGESTS NOT ONLY THAT HER HISTORY IS
INESCAPABLE AND FORMATIVE BUT THAT IT IS
ALSO IMPOSSIBLY PRESENT. ”

SALLY MANN

{ STORY }
Nº1

Pontotoc Winery WORKING

Written by Tom Ramsey / Photographed by Jody Horton and Robert Jacob Lerma

This page: Carl Money sorting out the obvious debris from the buckets before transporting them to the crush pad. Photo: JH

Driving from Llano to Brady, Texas along TX-71 you might miss the roadside hamlet of Pontotoc. It's not a large place. From edge to edge it's about the length of a long, par-5 golf hole and there's not much commerce happening to catch your eye. No billboards. No storefronts with neon. Not even a gas station or one of the 575 Dairy Queens that seem to pop up from the dust in every Lone Star town. But missing it would be a mistake, particularly if you're driving through on the mid-August weekend when the Money family and their hundred-or-so closest friends are harvesting and crushing the grapes from the family vineyard on a speck of land that refuses to die.

A Good Start and a Couple of Hard Knocks

In the late 19th Century the tiny town got its start and had a short-lived, burst of enthusiasm. In 1851, Robert Kidd opened a general store and gave the town and the nearby creek the name of his hometown - Pontotoc, Mississippi (derived from the Choctaw words for "hanging grapes"). As it grew, it attracted like-minded German settlers who built homes and formed businesses and a real sense of community. The town boasted a hotel, a mill, competing general stores, a pecan processing facility, smiths and stables. The well-educated population wanted to share their knowledge and endeavored to build a school for teachers. In 1883, the Pontotoc and San Fernando Academy enrolled its first pupils and quickly grew to a student body of over 200. But in 1887 a pall of tragedy hung over the community.

The shallow water-table in Pontotoc was both its blessing and its curse. Ready access to water wells meant that homes and farms could easily reach the necessary element, but when typhoid fever arrived, the shallow water table meant that the buried bodies of the first typhus victims contaminated those shallow wells. The highly infectious disease swept through the town like fire in a match factory. The end of 1887 saw the town's cemetery full and a second one had to be built. In less than two years, far more of Pontotoc's citizens lived beneath the ground than above. By 1890 the lack of students shuttered the academy and the town nearly closed with it.

A mica mine briefly breathed some life into Pontotoc in the early twentieth century and the town even had telephone service and a movie the-

ater. But a fire in 1947 finished the job that typhoid fever started some sixty years earlier. Only a few buildings escaped the blaze and the once bustling school stood as a burned hull of its former self...no roof, no floor - only charred walls and empty windowsills. Then in 2016 the last two walls of the school's ruins fell into a pile of rubble during a fierce, Texas thunderstorm. Now only photographs remain.

But like the green spangle top grass along the roadway, Pontotoc proved hard to kill.

A Rare Third Act

Today there is life again in Pontotoc, thanks to Carl and Frances Money. They, along with winemaker Don Pullum, have transformed the ghost town into a working winery producing high-quality, estate-grown wines in the spirit of Spanish Rioja. Pontotoc's soil and climate are quite similar to the Spanish region where the tempranillo grapes flourish. Their tendency to ripen earlier (The grapes get their name from the Spanish word temprano, meaning "early.") than other varietals is also a factor that makes them perfect for Texas Hill Country.

When we visited for the crush weekend, the old barber shop was filled with gleaming fermentation tanks and giant, open-top vats of crushed fruit. The former general store was chock-full of oak barrels doing their magic and slowly mellowing the wines that will end up in Pontotoc Winery bottles.

Looking back, Carl Money's life looks like a funnel, gathering experiences and pointing him to a specific place and time. His legal career as an officer in the US Army JAG Corps, his further education in Vienna and Prague, his travels throughout Europe as an international trial attorney, teaching law in the Spanish wine country, a whirlwind romance and marriage to a pastry chef, and his strong desire for an agrarian lifestyle culminated in a move away from the city to the small town of Fredericksburg in the Texas Hill Country. He and Frances saw the ruins of Pontotoc and shared a vision of its promise. They purchased much of what remained in the town in 2003. By 2005 they planted the vineyards and started renovating the old farmhouse along with the nineteenth century version of a strip mall that included a barber shop, general store and theatre.

“THERE IS
LIFE AGAIN
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LIFE THAT FEELS
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Top left: Carl Money is a man on a mission. These vines full of Tempranillo grapes are ready for harvest and his crew comprised of friends and family is ready to help. Photo: JH **Top right:** Buckets full of Tempranillo grapes are ready to be emptied into six foot by six foot containers and transported to the crush pad. Photo: JH **Bottom left:** Tools of the harvest. Pruning shears called secateurs are used to cut the grapes. As the grapes are cut, they're to be placed in big buckets, which are then collected and moved to the winery for sorting and crushing. Photo: JH **Bottom right:** Frances Money removes the net that protect the fruit from the hungry wildlife before filling the bucket. Photo: JH





This page: Family and friends get started on what is hard manual labor harvesting grapes albeit in a beautiful setting. Photo: JH

Opposite: All mornig Carl and Frances oversee and move grapes to the winery and return with and empty tractor to start the process over again. All this in addition to thier own cutting and harvesting. Photo: JH

When those vines took root and produced fruit, Carl, Frances and the kids (Harper, Ella, Finn and Welles) became the fifth generation of the Money family to raise crops in Texas. Today they look like they couldn't belong anywhere else. They're too perfect an embodiment of a neo-classical farm family to live in a city. At the Wiengarten on the main drag in Fredericksburg the kids play barefoot together under the broad limbs of the big oak while Frances serves fresh sangria and hand-made pastries. Carl (in his straw hat, bow tie and seersucker suit) shows off photos of the old academy and its long-dead students with their plain dress and stern faces. It was in this idyllic setting that Frances told me about their annual harvest & crush party and invited me back to join them for some hard work and joyous company.

I chuckled to myself and thought "Don't threaten me with a good time."

When the harvest weekend rolled around my wife, Kitty, and I made the drive across Texas and arrived in Fredericksburg around wine-thirty on Friday. True to type, two of the Money children met us at the gate and walked us to the tasting room, Ella gently holding Kitty's hand and Welles tugging on mine. Frances was there, lovely as ever in a gauzy cotton dress pouring glasses of wine and sangria and telling the origin story in such a joyful manner that it sounded like she was telling it for the first time. She greeted Kitty with a big hug and we instantly knew we were in the right place for a fun weekend.

Carl arrived a bit later and laid out the agenda for the weekend. We would start around sunrise on Saturday. Grapes are best when picked before the heat of the day and he anticipated that with the expected crowd he could get all four acres off the vines and into the crusher in time for a late lunch. We visited a while longer and decided to grab an early dinner. Sunrise and the drive from Fredericksburg to Pontotoc would come early.

Many Hands Make Light Work

It's still dark when Kitty and I load into the car and set out from the main drag in Fredericksburg. The pre-dawn darkness does little justice to the

epic landscape. We cross the Llano River and make the turn onto TX-71 when the sun rises behind us. Instantly the light rolls across the red Texas soil illuminating the purple cactus fruit, the tangles of mesquite and the golden tops of the fall witchgrass. The sky fades from inky purple, dotted with the last morning stars to a vibrant cobalt blue with just wisps of thready, white clouds. The strong, truckstop coffee and the Lyle Lovett tunes move the needle from "awesome" to "tearfully perfect."

When we pull up to the "big house" by the vineyard, it teems with activity. Carl calls everyone to join him and gives instructions on what needs to happen and in what order. The nets that protect the fruit from the

ravenous wildlife need to be removed and gathered and then the bunches of grapes should be cut with pruning shears called secateurs. As the grapes are cut, they're to be placed in big buckets, which are then emptied into six foot by six foot containers and transported to the crush pad.

With smiles on their faces, everyone just goes to work. From the perspective of Instagram or hipster travel guides, this might look like some form of agricultural play, like goat yoga or other silliness, but don't be fooled. This is manual labor. It's the kind of labor that breaks the back and burns

the neck under an unforgiving morning sun. But this doesn't faze anyone. The smiles stay on the faces as the stooping, cutting and hauling of buckets continues for hours.

Since I have just enough working knowledge of the winemaking process to be dangerous, I get moved from the picking operation to the crush. If you've never seen this done (or even if you're an old hand at this) it's fascinating. Grapes are pulled from the big plastic bins in big, double-handfuls and thrown onto a sorting table above a hopper where gravity feeds them down to a long, screw-shaped, spinning shaft that simultaneously removes the grapes from the stems and crushes the fruit into a pulpy liquid.

The winemaker, Don Pullum, stands over the table and sorts the grapes on the fly removing the leaves and other MOG (material other than grapes) along with any grapes that aren't up to snuff as he shoves them along to the hopper. He looks for the telltale signs of mold and sunburn.



Left top: The harveset crew enjoying their “pay” of good company and good food. Photo: JH **Left bottom:** Paella as the main course prepared by a Fredericksburg chef. Photo: JH **Center** Fredericksburg Weingarten. Photo: RJL **Right:** Wines from Pontotoc Vineyard are of exceptional quality and made from grapes grown solely in the Texas Hill



left: Award winning Pontotoc wines with some of their many medals hanging above. Photo: RJL **Center left:** Carl and Frances Money and family standing in front of the tasting room at their Country. Grapes are hand harvested and hand selected to ensure the wines are made with only premium quality fruit. Photo: RJL

Pullum snatches out the unripe fruit before it makes it to the crusher and decides on how much of the un-molded, but slightly dried and raisiny grapes to allow in. This is the first step that decides the ultimate flavor profile of the finished wine. After picking her fill of grapes, Kitty, decked out in her floral rain boots and bandana headdress joins me at the crusher and is spotted as a natural sorting talent by Pullum who puts her to work at his right hand.

As the grapes are crushed, the vines are expelled from the back of the whirring and clanking machine and have to be hauled off and piled up in a compost pile that by the end of the day will writhe with thousands of bees scavenging the last bits of nectar from the discarded material. On the

other end of the machine a thick hose chuffs and chugs as a pump moves the mashed pulp and juice away from the crush pad and into waiting vats and tanks in the fermenting room. As wild yeasts converge on the fruit it begins to bubble as the magic of winemaking begins. The yeast will do its work, consuming the sugars, discarding the CO2 and producing alcohol.

Like any temperamental and expensive machinery, the crusher is prone to break down at critical moments. When the stems overwhelm the screw shaft and clog up the pump's intake, the motor keeps running and the precious fruit juice gets dumped unceremoniously onto the concrete floor of the crush pad. When we see the flood of pre-wine liquid splash at our feet there are shouts to shut off the pumps and shut down the crusher.

Hands and tools fly around and gunk is cleared away and once again the liquid flows. This ritual goes on for hours and as the morning slides towards afternoon, more and more help arrives and the vines are picked clean. What looked at first to be a seemingly endless supply of grapes dwindles down to the last few buckets which are sorted, crushed and pumped. The machinery is shut down, hosed off and wiped dry. The work is now up to the yeast, time and the skillful palate of the winemaker.

While we've been toiling in the fields and with the finicky machines, a chef from Fredericksburg has been making a pan of paella the size of a tractor wheel.

The smells of saffron, sausage, shrimp, mussels and garlic fill the old general store and the bedraggled, first-time field hands are drawn in from the

vineyard. Frances is at the ready with buckets of her signature sangria and a young country singer starts tuning her guitar. These are the wages we earned. Everyone is tired, dirty and riper than the fruit we've just picked, but no one objects, despite our close quarters around communal tables. We've shared a day of humble work and we're ready for a hearty meal and an honest tune.

There's dancing, laughing, back slapping and storytelling. The wine flows as freely as the conversation. Promises are made to keep in touch and return at the next harvest.

There is life again in Pontotoc, life that feels well-rooted and permanent. Like the vines, this new life is meant to be tended with care as it draws what it needs from soil and provides so much to so many.



*"Raise a glass, close your eyes
and try to imagine the journey
from soil to glass."*



Top left: Charming vignettes like this rustic red building overlook the vineyard in Pontotoc.

Top center left: A boy and his dog. The youngest Money child wanders through the winery dining room with his trusted friend. Photo: JH

Top center right: Frances' signature sangria is ready to quench to thirsty harvest crew. Photo: JH

Top right Country music on the lawn soothes after a long morning of harvest. Photo: JH

Left: Well-known Texas winemaker, Don Pullum, who is considered an honorary member of the Money family, has an exceptional palate and also helps develop pastry pairings for Pontotoc Vineyard wines. Photo: JH

From Dirt to Vine to Table – How Wine Reflects Place

What you taste in Texas wine starts far below the vines that hang from trellises and spread under the Texas sun. The soil itself imparts its characteristics into the fruit that will become the wine. Soils with rocky elements produce leaner wines with notes of minerality while darker, moist soils produce the woodsy notes of wet leaves and mushrooms. The water is drawn up through the earth and comes to rest in the fruit where the character of the grape varieties mingle with the flavors of the dirt. The broad leaves of the vines capture the sun and produce the sugars that will one day turn to alcohol. Too much sun and the green canopy can overwhelm the fruit and give it a vegetal taste. Too little canopy and the sun can dry the grapes on the vine, imparting a concentrated, raisiny flavor. As the diurnal shift moves from warm to cool and back again, the water in the plant moves back and forth from the leaves to the berries concentrating sugars and producing the acids that will give the wine body and structure. Every vineyard is a micro-climate of moisture, soil composition, temperature variation, humidity, shade/sun exposure, average and specific rainfall amounts and even water runoff from other agricultural areas. Too much rain throughout the growing season and the grapes hold too much water, making the fruit diluted and weak. Too much rain right before harvest and the skins can burst from the internal pressure of the water rushing from the roots to the berries. Not enough water and the fruit never matures. Even the time of day when the fruit is picked can make a difference. Early morning (or even night-time) picked fruit is better because the sugars are more stable before the sun cranks up and starts the energy transfer process from the sun-drenched leaves to the berries. So next time you lift a glass of your favorite wine, close your eyes and try to imagine the journey from soil to glass. I bet you can taste it.

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