

FIELDS OF DREAMS

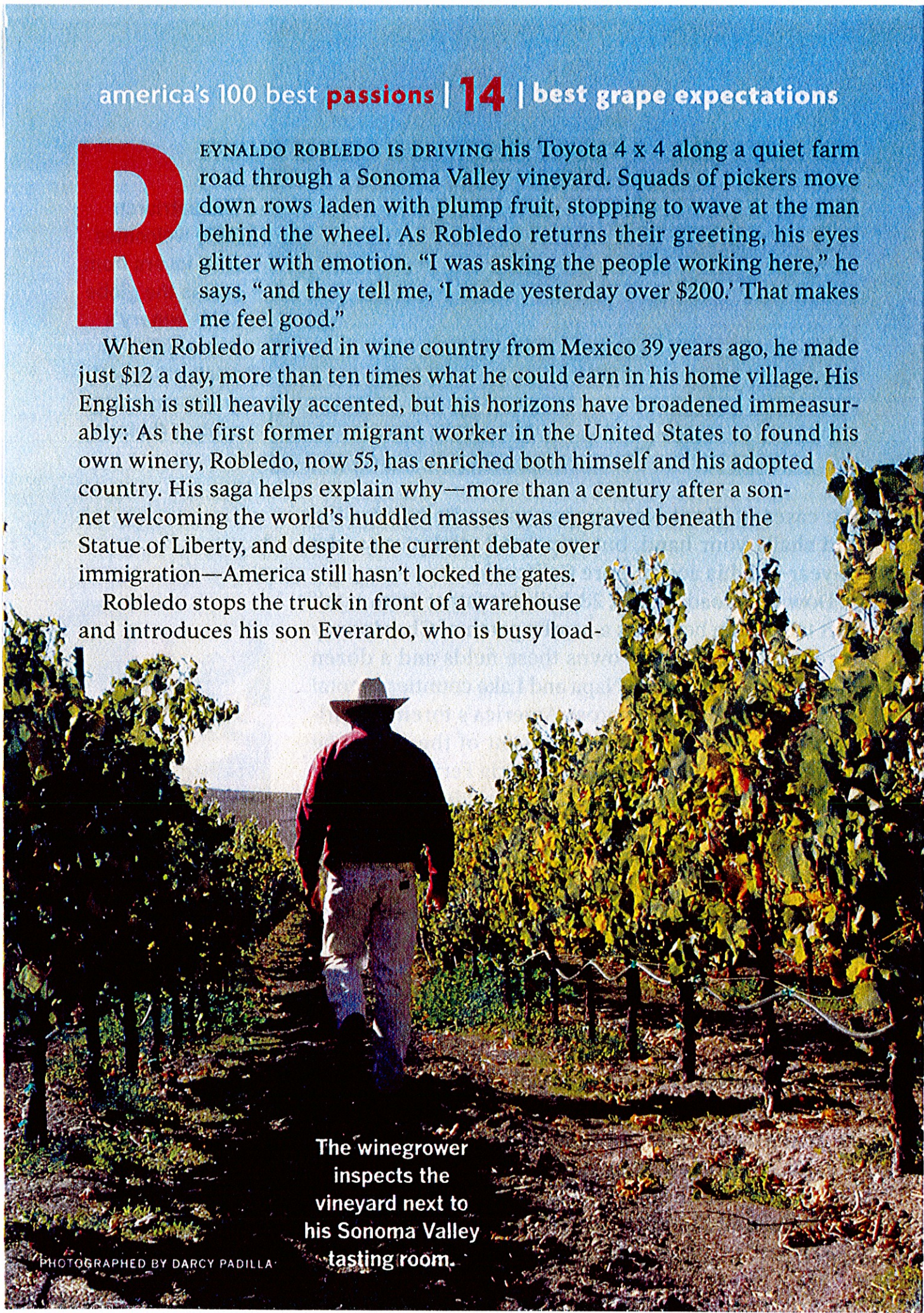
With hard work and unsinkable optimism, Reynaldo Robledo went from migrant worker to owner of a California winery

BY KENNETH MILLER

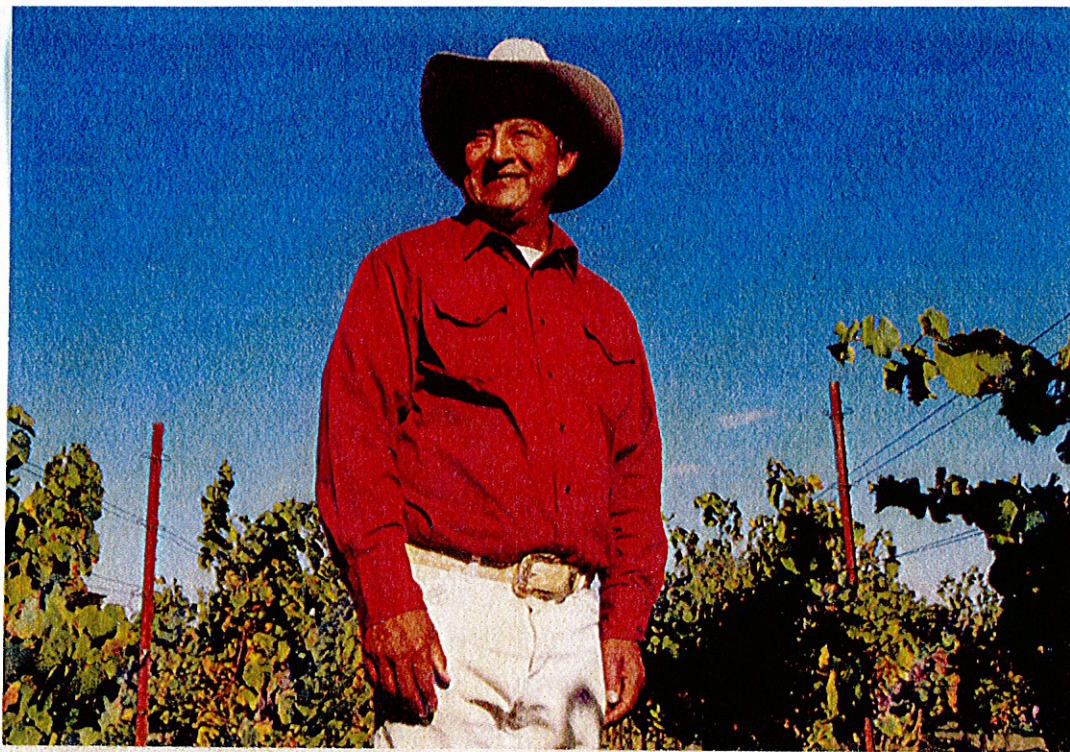
REYNALDO ROBLEDO IS DRIVING his Toyota 4 x 4 along a quiet farm road through a Sonoma Valley vineyard. Squads of pickers move down rows laden with plump fruit, stopping to wave at the man behind the wheel. As Robledo returns their greeting, his eyes glitter with emotion. “I was asking the people working here,” he says, “and they tell me, ‘I made yesterday over \$200.’ That makes me feel good.”

When Robledo arrived in wine country from Mexico 39 years ago, he made just \$12 a day, more than ten times what he could earn in his home village. His English is still heavily accented, but his horizons have broadened immeasurably: As the first former migrant worker in the United States to found his own winery, Robledo, now 55, has enriched both himself and his adopted country. His saga helps explain why—more than a century after a sonnet welcoming the world’s huddled masses was engraved beneath the Statue of Liberty, and despite the current debate over immigration—America still hasn’t locked the gates.

Robledo stops the truck in front of a warehouse and introduces his son Everardo, who is busy load-



The winegrower
inspects the
vineyard next to
his Sonoma Valley
tasting room.



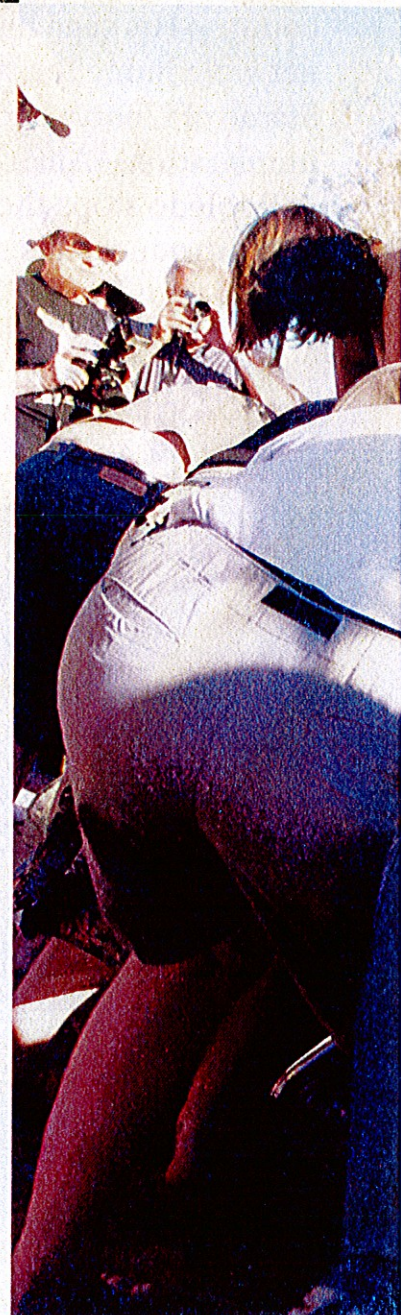
The patriarch (left) welcomes wine lovers from across the globe to his winery's annual harvest celebration and grape-stomping contest (below).

ing cases of Pinot Noir grapes onto a flatbed trailer. "I'd shake your hand, but mine's all sticky," says the 31-year-old, his accent pure California.

Down the road, Jenaro, 28, hails his father from a golf cart to tell him he thinks a nearby patch of Chardonnay is ready. Robledo, who owns these fields and a dozen other tracts in Sonoma, Napa and Lake counties (a total of 220 acres scattered across America's foremost viticultural region), delivers 80 percent of the grapes he grows to big producers such as Gloria Ferrer, Benziger and Kendall-Jackson. His greatest pride, however, is the wine he bottles with his kids.

Each of his seven sons and two daughters participates in the business, which now sells 1,500 cases a month. Robledo Family Winery has won gold medals at international competitions; critics use terms like *aristocratic* and *sensual* to describe its offerings. The company owes its success largely to the skills and passion Robledo has passed on to his progeny. But one factor predominates. "The good thing about my family," Robledo observes, "is that they are all very hard workers."

IN ATACHEO, MICHOACÁN, a town of 4,000 nestled in Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains, hard work could get you only so far. The eldest of 13 siblings, Robledo spent his childhood in a thatch-roofed adobe hut and often



went to bed hungry. His father and grandfather were braceros, part of a U.S. guest worker program in effect from 1942 to 1964, allowing them to eventually obtain residency papers. Though they spent months of the year doing farm labor in the States, the cash they sent home was never enough.

Young Robledo left school in Atacheo in the third grade to pick corn and strawberries for local landowners. In 1968, armed with his own long-awaited permit, the 16-year-old went

with his dad on the northward drive in a battered Chevy Impala.

They arrived in Napa Valley on a February night, and the next morning Robledo joined a field crew at Christian Brothers Winery. He had never seen grapevines before—"They looked like small trees," he recalls—but he was soon captivated by the ever-varying cycle of pruning, grafting, thinning and spraying. He also realized that the craft, if one became skilled at it, could offer a way out of





poverty. To his eyes, the labor camp bunkhouse seemed luxurious. But he sensed there was an even better life waiting, if only he could grab it.

And so he came to a decision: Unlike his kinfolk, who frequently returned to Mexico, Robledo would stay. He would transform himself into the best vine tender in the business—and, in the process, into an American.

To reach his goal, Robledo worked up to 16 hours a day, seven days a week, sending his Monday-through-Saturday wages (\$1.10 an hour) home to his mother and siblings, and keeping his Sunday pay (\$1.50 an hour) for himself. He lingered after his shifts, teaching himself new techniques and practicing on tractors and backhoes.

Within a few months, he got a job as foreman for another company, overseeing 35 workers, including his father. His new boss was Frankie Barbera, a legendary grower; the older man mentored Robledo in the arcane world of viticulture.

Three years after his arrival in the United States, Robledo became a supervisor of several crews. By then, he had married Maria de la Luz Ramirez, a girl from Atacheo whom he courted mostly by mail. Their first child, Lorena, was born in Mexico the following year, and shortly thereafter, with her papers in order, wife and daughter joined Robledo in California. The family rapidly expanded.

In 1974 Robledo landed the position

The Robledo family—at the Thanksgiving table in 2006—has grown to include nine children, all of them involved in the business, and 15 grandchildren.

Daughter Vanessa (below) is the winery's president. Like her siblings, she worked with her father tending vines when she was young.

of vineyard manager for Sonoma-Cutrer, running the company's properties in the Sonoma, Napa and Russian River valleys. His salary of \$60,000, worth more than four times that much today, reflected his unusual talent. "He was brash, ambitious and smarter than a whip," says former owner Bryce Jones, who helped Robledo learn to run a business and remains an advisor.

Robledo moved on to Curtis Ranches in 1981; the owner was so impressed with his abilities, he sent him to France to teach grafting at an affiliated winery. Robledo's English was still spotty, and on the layover at JFK, he got so lost that he almost missed his flight to Paris. He tried improving his fluency using his children's textbooks, to little avail. (In fact, his linguistic insecurity led him to put off seeking U.S. citizenship until 1990, when he finally took, and passed, the rigorous exam.) "The language barrier was the most difficult thing for my father," says daughter Vanessa, 29.

But it didn't prevent him from expressing a concern for others as intense as his drive to succeed. Over time,



Robledo helped all his siblings come north and found them good jobs in the vineyards. He sent money back to Mexico to pave Atacheo's roads and repair its churches. In Sonoma he routinely brought workers home for his wife's luscious meals. "He'd make sure they had a place to stay," says Vanessa. "He was like a big dad to everyone."

To ensure his children's future, Robledo began amassing land. "I wanted ten acres *por* member of the family," he says. In 1984 he made his first purchase: a 13-acre plot in Napa occupied by a decrepit ranch house and a defunct airstrip. He trundled 18 truckloads of debris to the dump, moved his family into the house and spent his evenings planting vines. He set up experimental plots in the backyard, using different soils and rootstocks.

Despite killing frosts, ill-timed rains and colleagues' warnings that some of his holdings were hopeless, his fields all bore extraordinary fruit. He began selling grapes to wineries, and by the mid 1990s he'd gone into business for himself.

The kids pitched in from the beginning. "I remember working on my birthday and on Christmas," says Everardo. "Instead of a baseball bat, I got a shovel. I was like, Come on, Dad! But I appreciate it now. He instilled the belief that if you work for it, you can have pretty much anything you want in this beautiful country."

TODAY THE DRAFTY ranch house has been replaced by a pink mini-mansion. Most of the kids have places

of their own. But Maria still cooks for a full house at least once a week. Tonight she's loading a lace-draped table with Michoacán delicacies—chiles rellenos, squash with sweet potato, brisket, shrimp and more—as her children gather.

A generously built woman with a jaunty air, she banters with the kids and sings along with the ranchera music on the stereo. The younger guests (including a few grandkids) drink soda pop, but the rest stick to the family product. Even those in muddy T-shirts swirl their glasses with the finesse of a sommelier.

ROBLEDO HAD LONG hankered to make his own wine, and when daughter Lorena married her childhood sweetheart, Rolando Herrera, winemaker for the prestigious Paul Hobbs label, he found the partner he needed. He released his first wine, a Merlot, in 1998. Other varieties soon followed. And in October 2003 he opened a winery and tasting room in a converted dairy barn in Sonoma. "That's when everything fell into place," says Vanessa, now the winery's president.

In the tasting room, a carved oak bar surrounded by stacks of barrels, the founder himself would often perch on a stool, regaling visitors with the story of his life. Beguiled by the man as well as his wines, oenophiles spread the word to others around the country. The buzz helped multiply sales to restaurants and wine boutiques, and lured hundreds of monthly sub-

scribers to the Robledo wine club, known appropriately as La Familia.

As a privately held firm, Robledo Family Winery does not disclose its revenues. But if one indication of wealth is the capacity to share it, the company is doing well indeed: Over the past three years, it has raised more than \$100,000 for farm workers' health, housing and literacy programs.

Certainly the enterprise is robust enough to keep Robledo's children busy. Rey Jr., 33, is chief grafter. Everardo develops land, and Jenaro runs the main vineyard operation, Robledo Ranches. Francisco, 24, is a cellar rat, or winemaking apprentice; his twin, Luis, handles outside sales. Lazaro, 21, works the tasting room, and Emiliano, 13, is in charge of bird control, which he accomplishes by riding his ATV into flocks of crows while shrieking.

AT THE WINERY'S annual harvest festival, Robledo kicks off the festivities, leading a band of mariachis up the gravel drive as they play "Cielito Lindo." While his guests and family mingle, eat and drink, Robledo circulates, connecting with his customers from across the United States and beyond as though they were his oldest friends.

Later he retreats to the edge of the vineyard, just beyond the yellow winery building. "Look at the smiles," he marvels. "This is why I can work the way I do without getting tired. These people have adopted me. They love me. I've made them happy! I can't describe how that makes me feel."

Then he finds the words he needs, like so many new Americans before him: "Right now my dreams have come true."

A LITTLE EXTREME, DON'T YOU THINK?

After sitting on the tarmac for over an hour, the captain finally addressed the passengers. He got us to stop thinking about our troubles by focusing our attention on another worry. "Sorry about the delay," he said. "The automatic luggage compactor broke down, so we had to crush the baggage manually." JIM LOEPP THIESSEN

Hoping to get some hints on how to draw birds to my garden, I attended a lecture on the subject at the local horticultural society. But for some odd reason, the presentation covered only snakes and toads. "But how do I attract birds?" I finally asked. A man offered the following suggestion: "Park your car under a tree."



BRENDA LEE