

Five Generations of Farming: Pickled Pelican Farms Growing Grapes and Ganja



Sean Ciapusci displays the family grape-growing license from the turn of the century.

Not very many cannabis farms can boast an authentic “cheese closet” upon entering their house, but for Shawn Ciapusci and his family, cannabis is the latest addition to five generations of family farming.

“I can remember my grandmother making raviolis on the porch,” smiles Shawn. His land and his family are steeped in local history. Shawn’s great-grandfather was Charles Ciapusci, who owned the Gualala Hotel and the Point Arena Hotel. Charles was one of 12 children born to Antone and Mary Ciapusci. Antone was from Chiavenna, Sondrio, Italy in the Italian Alps. Mary (Noriel) Ciapusci was from Olema, California. Antone homesteaded the ranch in 1888. He owned the Gualala Hotel in 1932 when he died, leaving it to his children. Antone and Mary Ciapusci were Shawn’s great-great grandparents.

In a story in the Anderson Valley Advertiser, author Brad Wiley quotes Charles, who was the recipient of the California Bonded Winery #2 certificate following Prohibition. Charles said, “We Italians, we were grateful to own our land, we respected and enjoyed it, never fought it to make more money logging and overgrazing it like the southern ruffians who got here before us.” In an effort to continue this respect for the land, Pickled Pelican Farms received organic certification in 2021 for its grapes and chestnuts.

Pickled Pelican farms is located in southwestern Mendocino County, and on a clear day, you can see the ocean. The name of the farm comes from the name of a Texas bar, where Shawn’s brother, who worked as a comedian, performed. “My dad fell in love with that name, and we decided to go for it,” he laughs.

Though the wine cellar has been transformed into a drying area, the farm exudes history. A Victorian couch still graces the living room, and on the wall, Shawn points to the family’s original cultivation license- for grapes, not for cannabis! The barns still contain antique tools and tack for the draft horses, long gone. “We’re still growing grapes and making wine along with the cannabis,” says Shawn.



The Gualala Hotel, owned by the Ciapusci family. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia.)

Growing up in Cloverdale, Shawn has been connected to the soil since childhood. “My father owned IROC Landscaping.” Both sides of Shawn’s family became interested in cannabis, and in 2016, his father moved up to the farm, which hadn’t been occupied for a couple of decades. “This is where Dad wanted to be. Before he passed in 2019, he worked on getting our

cultivation license. I inherited the property and made the decision to continue in the same direction.”

The property is extremely remote- taking about an hour to reach Cloverdale to the south, or Boonville to the north. “If you want to live here, you have to find a way,” says Shawn, who farms the grapes while simultaneously tending the cannabis garden. “Kendall Jackson and Edmeades in Boonville maintained the vineyard for a time. Now they’re being fertilized and disked. They enjoy the love.”

Shawn is a subhauler working out of Ukiah, an owner of his own transfer trucks. “Cannabis is not the only income we have, thank God,” he laughs. He moved up to the land in 2019. “The first year we planted cannabis was a big learning curve. My mom and stepdad used to have big indoor and outdoor farms years ago. I did my homework- read books and got through the hearsay and the magic juju,” he smiles.

The family’s history with soils was a big help. Because of his “family connections” with IROC, Shawn explains they started out with “800 yards of the best soil I ever saw,” which he continues to amend every year. “There are so many ways you can work your dirt- no-till, till, cover crops. We built the greenhouses ourselves. We ordered the I-beams and hauled them up. We converted hoops to a curtain system and then framed everything in for the greenhouse.”



The family grows from seed.

“It’s a more natural process and the seed plants seem healthier. We’re really happy with the great genetics from Humboldt Seed. We’ve had really good luck with their feminized seeds. Initially we tried to dep some plants from seed. They weren’t feminized, so we learned pretty fast. We hunted through Humboldt’s catalog, looking for what would be best for our climate and a desirable strain for the market. Everything is turning out really good.”



The farm is laid out in three sections. “We have hoops and another garden where the Garlic Budder was grown. We keep every strain separated so there’s no confusion, and harvest and hang everything separately, one section at a time.”

Along with grapes, Chestnut trees are planted on the property. “The Chestnut Garden is where the Garlic Budder is grown,” says Shawn. Two challenges that coastal farmers face is the regularity of the fog and the strong afternoon winds. “The wind cuts through the canyon in the spring. We place bamboo fencing



between chicken wire for a wind break. Despite the struggles, we end up with big, beautiful plants. Every year at harvest, we stand back and say, ‘This is beautiful. This is great.’”

“Everything I grow I love. I like the bud structure, and the little calyxes of the Garlic Budder. The buds aren’t starfishing or airy. They’re solid. People expect cannabis to be a certain way, but every plant is so unique.”

Like so many farmers, Shawn feels constrained by the market’s preoccupation with THC percentages trumping overall quality. “When was the last time you went into a bar and asked the percentage of the drink you ordered? Don’t we simply order what we like?”

Shawn’s mom, Carol does all the clerical work for the farm. “She hates it as much as anyone. She’s also been involved in all the construction, but when it comes to the paperwork, I hide away,” Shawn grins.

“To be honest, the whole regulatory process feels like extortion. The ways you need to conduct business- it’s insane. The government is all about the dollars. We’re sitting here doing the best with our 10K working against mega-farms in San Luis Obispo.”

“It’s so easy to get into the downward spiral- talking about industry and how we’re not getting a break. We should have legalized cannabis a long time ago, but if they did then what they did now, no one would want to grow it.” Shawn notes how challenging it is to market anything but known strains. “No one want to purchase the ones that are different, so we have dispensaries selling the same things. The way the regulations work, it’s like car manufacturers not being able to sell vehicles directly to consumers.”

Speaking of cars, because he must maintain his commercial driver’s license, Shawn depends on his family to sample the family crop. “It would be nice after work to responsibly indulge. My mom smokes and my brother programs systems for the legal market at Treez. I’m so jealous of them!” he concludes.

You can find Pickled Pelican’s entry, Garlic Budder in the Kure Mendocino Invitational Box.



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