

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## At home: Ann Colgin

By Maria Shollenbarger

The Napa Valley vintner has restored the house and vineyards of California's first female winery owner



Ann Colgin at home in St Helena with Corton and Gevrey, her two Coton de Tulear purebreds

**A**t midday on the front patio of Tychson Hill, Ann Colgin's wood-frame house just north of the town of St Helena in Napa Valley, the thrum-swoosh of cars and trucks on Highway 29 is near constant. "It's not as bad as it can be in the summer, though I knew early on when I got this house that double-glazed windows would be a priority," Colgin says. "But in Josephine's day, that was still a dirt road."

"Josephine" is Josephine Marlin Tychson (1855-1939), a well-bred Philadelphian who journeyed west to Napa Valley with her new husband in the 1880s, bore several children and, in the wake of his suicide, persevered against the odds to realise their shared dream of building a winery. Tychson was the first female to do so, and then produce wine herself, in

California – and she built the original house on this site.

Colgin, the proprietor of Colgin Cellars, one of Napa’s most prestigious producers of Cabernet Sauvignon and bordeaux-style blends, has owned Tychson Hill since 1996. Her wines are the epitome of “cult”: Colgin Cellars produces fewer than 3,000 cases a year for which there is a three-year waiting list. Seventy per cent of the wine goes to that limited coterie of private clients (with some bottles starting at \$290 the list is self-limiting). The remainder is allocated to a handful of restaurants in the US, Europe and Asia.

Colgin is a former art and antiques dealer who became the head of west coast wine auctions at Sotheby’s in the early 1990s, about the same time she started making her first Cabs in a rented space at the Napa Wine Company with the now-celebrated winemaker Helen Turley.

Born in Waco, Texas, and educated at Vanderbilt (“the Harvard of the south”) and New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, Colgin is a southern belle turned wine geek: sleek, impeccably turned out and extremely well-connected after decades spent in LA (home to her primary residence), she is also into vine training, cuvaison, terroir and even more obscure wine-related topics.



The front porch

When Colgin acquired the modest house, constructed on around three acres, in the 1880s (where Josephine Tychson lived until her death in 1939), she was determined to oversee a faithful restoration. “There was mould in the walls, and there were inch-wide gaps between the floorboards through which you could see the ground. It was in dire straits, because over the years the run-off from the hills behind the house had washed half the stones in the foundation away. Contractor after contractor came through and said it was unsalvageable. But I didn’t want to take no for an answer – I must have had six or seven of them up here.”

During the couple of years Colgin spent commuting between Napa and Los Angeles, she met her husband, Joe Wender, an investment banker and prolific wine collector who, upon seeing Tychson Hill for the first time, “must have thought, ‘My God, she’s a crazy woman’”, Colgin says. “That’s when I admitted a total tear-down was the only course of action: we’d take the house back to its foundation but create something that maintained the spirit of Josephine.”

The original home was a low-ceilinged loose quadrant of rooms: a front parlour, kitchen and dining room, and two small bedrooms, with a steeply pitched attic running across the entirety of the house. Colgin’s architects reprised the lines of the original structure but dispensed with the attic, allowing for cavernous ceilings in the sitting room and dining room that add grandeur to what, from the outside at least, still passes as a standard-issue clapboard California cottage. A few outsized details define the space in the sitting room: windows are exceptionally tall, and a monumental stone fireplace imported from Burgundy (where Colgin and Wender also own a small domaine, Maison Camille Giroud) dominates the south wall.



The sitting room of the 19th-century cottage

“I did want to keep the integrity of a 19th-century cottage,” she says. “But whatever that fireplace was going to be, we knew it had to be a big statement.” The room showcases a handful of significant pieces that Colgin imagined were ones Tychson might have brought with her out west: a vast English walnut bookcase, with a collection of puppets found at an antiques dealer in Pennsylvania lined up on its top shelf; a rare cherry wood Federalist secretary, bought at auction at Sotheby’s; and the pale-violet antique Aubusson rug on the sitting room floor, which regularly succumbs to the sharp claws of her two purebred Coton de Tulear dogs, Corton and Gevrey; “So once a year I roll it up and send it down to Mansour in LA, who reweave bits of it for me.”



Vineyard views are enjoyed from the

However, the sitting room is not the epicentre of home life. “Joe and I will have a glass of champagne by the fire every once in a while, but the action mostly happens in the kitchen.” Indeed, informal dinners at Tychson Hill are often analogous to sought-after bid items at Hollywood charity auctions. Restaurateurs Thomas Keller (owner of the French Laundry, Bouchon and Ad Hoc in nearby Yountville and Per Se in New York) and Richard Reddington (of the much-lauded Redd in St Helena) are regular guest chefs – and Wender is an investor in Keller’s restaurants.

Colgin built a small cellar on the site of what she believes was the crush pad Josephine Tychson used to ferment her grapes. Set behind doors inlaid with ironwork in an intricate vine pattern, and lined with her own wines – including every vintage of the Number IX Estate, Tychson Hill and Herb Lamb

back porch

Vineyard Cabernets (the last, produced until 2007, now fetches thousands of dollars a bottle at auction), along with a smattering of rare bordeaux and burgundy from Wender’s cellar – it is a collection that would put some Michelin-rated restaurants to shame. A couple of empty salmanazars displayed on a shelf function as guest books, their sides dense with missives in metallic ink.

The kitchen itself merges French country with west-coast Arts and Crafts: it is at once vast for a putative “cottage” kitchen and convincingly cosy. Retracting panels, finished identically to the cabinets, are built in to either side of the bar that separates it from the dining room.

The master suite, comprised of a reading and television room, a bedroom and an office, opens on to a patio, where one can sit and admire the three planted acres running up the hillside. “The first time he came here, Robert Parker” – who has awarded his top score of 100 points to no fewer than five Colgin Cellars wines – “said this place reminded him of a little *clos* in Burgundy,” says Colgin. “It had been on the market for a while when I saw it. It was too small for most wine people to really want to plant.”

The vines Josephine Tychson had put in were destroyed, along with nearly all the others in Napa and Sonoma, during the Prohibition era. Colgin replanted in 1997, and the first Tychson Hill estate vintage was released in 2000.

“I fell for the soil profile,” she says. Rather than the view, or quality of light on the hills, it was the chemistry and mineral balance of the ground that won her over. “I love the romance and the heritage of this house, and Josephine’s story,” Colgin says, “but I’d never have pulled the trigger on this place if I didn’t think I’d have the potential to make really great wine here.”

*Maria Shollenbarger is deputy editor of How to Spend It*

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## **Favourite things**

“These are my ‘signature’ earrings; they are tiny diamond grapes by one of my favourite designers, Cathy Waterman,” says Colgin. “Joe gave them to me for my birthday when we were dating, which makes them even more special, but as it is, I wear them almost every day. They’re a perfect little sparkling complement to my jeans, to black tie – any outfit. And people almost always ask me about them.”



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