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Ken Coopersmith (left) toasts his wife, Merry Edwards, and Champagne Louis Roederer's president, Frédéric Rouzaud, after the French company purchased Merry Edwards Winery in Sebastopol, known for its Pinot Noir.

Champagne Louis Roederer, the French company famous for producing Cristal Champagne, has agreed to purchase Merry Edwards Winery in Sebastopol, a highly regarded producer of Pinot Noir, from Merry Edwards and her husband Ken Coopersmith.

The deal, which includes the Merry Edwards brand, inventory, winery and 45 acres of vineyard land, marks Roederer's first foray into Sonoma County. The purchase price was not disclosed.

"I met with a lot of companies, and when I met with Roederer, we were instantly at ease with each other," said Merry Edwards, who started her eponymous company 22 years ago.

Roederer owns three properties in Mendocino County: Roederer Estate, Scharffenberger Cellars and Domaine Anderson, in addition to wineries in France and Portugal including Domaines Ott, Chateau Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, Ramos Pinto, Delas Freres and Champagne Louis Roederer.

Frédéric Rouzaud, president of Roederer, said that Merry Edwards' distinguished record with Sonoma County Pinot Noir had first attracted him. Pinot is a growing focus for Roederer; the company built Domaine Anderson in 2012 in order to grow that segment of its portfolio.

But it was Edwards' story, and "the fact that she built her winery from scratch," Rouzaud said, that sealed the deal.

"We had looked at Kosta Browne," he said — another high-profile Sonoma Pinot brand, which sold last year to Duckhorn after a string of private equity investments and was no longer under the control of its founders. The importance of working with family-owned wineries, Rouzaud said, "is something we cannot really explain or measure."

As for Edwards' decision to sell, she said it was simple. "I'm turning 72 this year," she said. "How am I going to carry this forward?" Her son and daughter became involved in the winery about 10 years ago, but both ultimately left to focus on pursuits outside of the wine industry. That left Edwards to face the same questions that many of her peers have had to face — like Calera founder Josh Jensen, who sold his brand to Duckhorn a year before the Kosta Browne deal.

"I have a lot of energy now, but what if something happens?" said Edwards. "I have 28 employees. Do I want to wait until something happens?"

The deal with Roederer has been in the works for a year and a half, Edwards said. Throughout the process of searching for a buyer, she remained wary. "What's so common today is big companies come in and buy properties like ours, then they just ruin them," she said. She was encouraged by Roederer's "history of taking small properties and building them, but not losing their individual flavor."

Today, Merry Edwards Winery is widely understood to be one of Sonoma County's great Pinot Noir producers. But the winery is merely the culmination of a long and varied career in which Edwards broke through gender barriers and made scientific discoveries that proved crucial for the California wine industry.

She earned her master's degree in food science, with an emphasis in enology, from UC Davis in 1973 — one of just three women in her program, and the only woman who would go on to become a winemaker. She immediately landed an enviable job, as head winemaker at Mount Eden Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and later went on to help launch Matanzas Creek in Sonoma County.

For her master's thesis, Edwards tested 120 wines that had been bottled with lead capsules over their corks, and discovered widespread lead contamination in the wines. That groundbreaking research would help eliminate lead capsules from California wines.

Edwards' other major scientific contribution to the wine industry was related to clones — distinctive selections of a single grape variety. In the 1970s, grapevine clones were poorly understood in California. But on a trip to Burgundy, Edwards learned that the University of Dijon was undertaking extensive research to learn how different clones of Pinot Noir behaved in the vineyard. "I was completely blown away," Edwards said. "By golly, these clones had completely different qualities."

The 25-year-old Pinot Noir vines at Mount Eden, she figured, were as distinctive and beautiful as any. Could those vines produce an isolated clone? In 1975, Edwards took a vine cutting and sent it off to the UC Davis nursery for quarantine. The resulting plant material, officially known as UCD Clone 37, is now often called the Mount Eden clone, or the Merry Edwards clone — and is responsible for much of the high-quality Pinot Noir planted throughout California.

"I feel like it's my gift," Edwards said of Clone 37. "It's virus free. It makes this incredible wine. I was really lucky to find that and be able to clean it up."

Merry Edwards Winery was not the winemaker's original business venture. In the 1980s, she went into business with her parents on a brand called the Merry Vintners. Each year's wine labels featured an illustration of a different type of microbe. It was a financial disaster, Edwards said. Her family sold the brand to DeLoach Vineyards, and her second time around, with Merry Edwards Winery, "we had learned to do everything the complete opposite," she laughed.

She launched that eponymous winery in 1997, a year after Edwards bought a 25-acre vineyard in Sebastopol, which would become her Meredith Estate. The company's land holdings expanded throughout Sonoma County over the subsequent years, and in 2006, after years of making the wines in custom-crush facilities, Edwards built a new winery in the middle of her Coopersmith Vineyard. Just four years later, she undertook a major renovation of the winery.

Famously, Merry Edwards Winery has always offered free tastings. When asked whether that will change under Roederer's ownership, Rouzaud laughed; he was not aware of the policy. "But no, that will not change," he said.

The Merry Edwards Winery staff is expected to remain on board, including Heidi von der Mehden, who was named head winemaker last year. Von der Mehden's hiring, in 2015, was the first step in the succession plan, Edwards said: "We had a very clear three-year plan for Heidi to become winemaker."

According to the agreement, Edwards will continue to work at the winery for at least a year. “And then we’ll play it by ear,” she said. She has two young grandchildren now. Her priorities have shifted. “This has been our life — it’s been our passion,” she said. “But the point is: One has to be realistic.”

Should we expect more California acquisitions by Roederer in the coming years? “Why not?” Rouzaud replied. “We never close the door.”

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Wine critic Esther Mobley joined The Chronicle in 2015 to cover California wine, beer and spirits. Previously she was an assistant editor at Wine Spectator magazine in New York, and has worked harvests at wineries in Napa Valley and Argentina. She studied English literature at Smith College.