

KAREN CROUSE

"I bond deeply with living things."

Napa Valley has been home to Karen Crouse since 1991; she has seen many moments of its beauty. One of the best, she recalls, was watching the sun set over the rolling hills of vines the first day that the vineyard—Mount Veeder Magic Vineyards—was hers. "I didn't take a picture," she says. "I knew that image would be ingrained in my memory forever."

Karen says she lives a "pinch me" life characterized by locally grown foods, world-class wines, the joy of a mountain vineyard, and sharing these things with family and friends. Food, fitness (she is obsessed with pilates), family, connecting—these are part of who Karen is. Although she grew up in Southern California, she was born in New Orleans and raised "very Southern," learning "the art of Southern hospitality, organic vegetable garden, and using these fresh ingredients to cook New Orleans classics like jambalaya, gumbo, red beans and rice, and étouffée."

So much of life has blossomed for Karen since she married her college sweetheart, Greg Crouse, and they moved to Northern California. Greg runs an insurance company, Crouse and Associates, in San Francisco; she initially worked for American Express in sales, marketing, PR, and branding. During those years, the wineries, restaurants, hotels, retailers, balloon companies, artists, etc., in wine country were her clients—and became her friends. One is Bob Hurley, chef and restaurateur. "We worked together on several programs marketing the various restaurants where he was executive chef," Karen relates. "He now has his own restaurant, Hurley's, in Yountville. Once a year, on Mardi Gras, I am the chef at Hurley's. We cook my family recipes and serve them on a prix fixe menu—and usually sell out!"

Karen and Greg bought the Mount Veeder vineyard in 2007, and Karen became a wine-grape grower. In 2009, she became a vintner, producing 600 to 700 cases of Mount Veeder Cabernet annually. The eighty-acre parcel with sixteen acres of vines is one of her favorite places to be. "I bond deeply with living things: humans, animals, plants (especially my vines)," Karen says. "I do my best to surround myself with people and things that fill me up, teach me something . . . make me think . . ."

A perfect place to think is the porch of her farmhouse, a glass of wine in hand. Sitting there, Karen seems very at ease—and connected to her Napa life.



RIGHT: Karen and her husband Greg





CHOCOLATE FUDGE PECAN PIE

3 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped
 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
 4 large eggs
 2 cups sugar
 Pinch of salt
 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
 1 cup pecan pieces
 One 10-inch pie shell, unbaked
 1 cup heavy cream, whipped to soft peaks

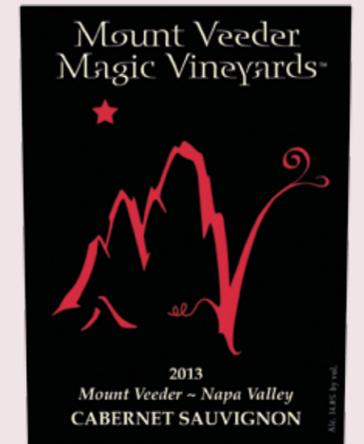
In a bowl, using an electric mixer, beat the eggs slightly. Gradually add the sugar, salt, and lemon juice. Slowly add the cooled chocolate mixture and beat until thoroughly blended. Stir in the pecans.

Pour the batter into the unbaked pie shell. Bake at for 1 hour, or until the pie crust is flaky and just golden. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool completely. Do not chill. Serve topped with the whipped cream.

SERVES 6 TO 8

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In the top pan of a double boiler over (but not touching) simmering water, melt the chocolate with the butter, stirring occasionally. Remove from the heat and let cool.



Pairing Note

Karen recommends a Mount Veeder Magic Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon with this rich twist on a beloved classic pie. The notes of mocha, chocolate, and vanilla in the wine combined with the crisp meatiness of the pecans and flakiness of the pie crust awaken the taste buds with a perfect blend of sweet, salty, and crunchy.

LEFT: Karen working hard during a night harvest * BELOW: Karen and two of *America's Next Top Model* stars hanging out at an Oscar® party in Los Angeles

