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# The Grape Game



**W**hether you consume wine as a means to relax and connect with friends or to feed your passion for sampling varietals, you contribute to the 856 million gallons of wine consumed in the U.S. each year. By comparison, Americans sipped a mere 33 million gallons in 1934, when The Wine Institute started tracking our love for wine. Behind this \$36 billion industry that churns out whites, reds, rosés and blends, there is a cadre of women fortifying their role in the grape game.

Some of them are household names: Gina Gallo of Gallo Family Vineyards is at the forefront of the brand's Moscato. The Baroness Philippine de Rothschild oversees a portfolio from Château Mouton Rothschild in France to California's Opus One. The grande dame of Burgundy, Lalou Bize-Leroy, helped build the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, one of the most expensive wines today. There are other esteemed names like Merry Edwards, one of California's first woman winemakers, and Helen Turley, often labeled as the finest winemaker and a top wine consultant. In 2003, Alpana Singh became the youngest female at age 26 to earn the title of master sommelier, an honor held by only 21 women in North America. With so many worthy names, M&V sought out small vintners with unique tales and a Costco dynamo to keep it real.

**W**ine, soil and family go hand in hand at O'Connell Family Wines, led by **Gabrielle Leonhard**. The green-thumbed vintner from Napa Valley is the founder of the Gabrielle Collection, which includes boutique Cabernet Sauvignons and Proprietary Cabernets sold under the family umbrella company, O'Connell. She's the creator of GC Home, Spa & Pooch, a line of products cultivated from the same soil as the wine.

To understand Leonhard's passion for cultivating a diverse ecosystem, take a look at her upbringing. Leonhard learned about good, clean food from her father who was a food and wine critic and her mother, a food and wine chemist in Europe. "She would always look at a label, first and foremost, and more times than not would say, 'Absolutely out of the question, it's not coming into the house,'" recounts Leonhard. From formulating her own cleaning products to creating authentic farm-to-table meals, Leonhard's mom taught her daughter the importance of pure ingredients.

In the '70s and '80s Leonhard was an environmental horticulturist, operating a hugely successful California interior landscaping company called Living Interiors, where she fine-tuned how to naturally grow and maintain plants without spraying chemicals. When Leonhard purchased the estate in 1998 and planted the vineyard in 2000, she insisted on adopting organic and sustainable farming and lifestyle practices. This includes repurposing everything into the businesses. "The wine that is leftover from the casing is infused into organic sea salts from France, and we now have chardonnay and cabernet salts."

Leonhard, who is a past Women for WineSense national board president, incorporates those organic and biodynamic lessons into her vineyard. There is minimum use of sulfur, usually only in May, rather than the usual treatment of April through July. The vine cuttings are mulched and composted. The vineyard is surrounded by a diverse ecosystem of herb gardens, fruit trees and eucalyptus trees. Leonhard credits this biodiversity in keeping the vineyard healthy. "We've never had to spray for diseases of any kind in the vineyard or on the property," she says. To Leonhard, it comes full circle by cultivating products from the land that end up on the table.



**Deborah Hall** unintentionally became part of wine history when she and her husband purchased a Santa Barbara, California, property in 1994. On their land was an ancient mission grape vineyard hidden behind overgrown brush. The vines were originally brought to California in 1767 by Spanish Padres from Mexico. Hall named her mission vineyard after Dona Marcelina Felix Dominguez, the first known female winegrower in Santa Barbara County.

Hall's entry into the wine world was unconventional. She was a surgical assistant to her physician husband Bill who was in remission from cancer at the time of the land purchase. The land, which came with a farm, was the couple's future, but the plans were derailed when Bill's cancer returned and weeks later he passed away. Hall's future became her present. She had children and bills. "I fell into being a winemaker. I didn't know what I was getting myself into," says Hall.

She persevered. Her wine lessons: "The first thing I would do is find the varietal that you are absolutely in love with. Go out

and source the finest fruit for that varietal. Then find a wine consultant who shares your philosophy."

Gypsy Canyon Winery is a small vineyard. Five of its 130 acres are dedicated to the Trois Pinot Noir and The Collector's Pinot Noir, and three acres are for the Ancient Vine Angelica, the fortified dessert wine made from the mission grape. Currently, there are five barrels of mission wine. Each barrel (which is about 600 bottles) has several years of wine in it, starting from 2004. "It's non-vintage, not made by the year. I'll take a blend from the other barrels to make one barrel's worth," explains Hall, who aims to make her winery organic and biodynamic.

Hall admits the winery has come a long way since 1994, and today there is huge success and even a waitlist. This year, four barrels of pinot noir will be sold through Ground Boots. Hall is donating all proceeds to Thailand's Soi Dog Foundation, dedicated to ending animal cruelty. Hall has teamed up with Soi Dog founders John and Gill Dalley and artist Donald Roller Wilson, who is creating the Ground Boots' wine label. Hall will finance the rescue, spay and neuter of an entire village's cats and dogs as well as the reconstruction of Wat Saun Kaew Temple, a dog shelter in Bangkok. "Every release I sell out, and I have always wanted to do more and give back. This is the year."



Photos by WingsofIron.com@pshot.com



**L**aura Evans describes Rosso e420 as a mom and pop vineyard, but from the vineyard to the finished product, there's nothing simple about it, not to mention the breathtaking view.

Evans' venture into wine happened spontaneously. She purchased 12 acres of countryside along with a 17th century pile of rocks—a very ruined farmhouse—in Umbria, Italy, in 1997. Over the years the farmhouse took shape and was restored into a beautiful villa called Podere Calzone, surrounded with sweeping hillsides. “We saw this little house on the prairie with the landscaping full of details, and it screamed to me that it needed a vineyard,” says Evans. She retired from her job as a Sotheby's specialist in American folk art in 2002, and today splits her time between Palm Beach, Florida, and Umbria.

In 2004 Evans planted 3,000 sangiovese and 800 merlot plants alongside 300 olive trees on her Umbria property. The first batch of wine was produced in 2008, and while it was off-the-charts tasty, the next year proved difficult. Evans slowed down the process and spent 2010 and 2011 reorganizing the production and the vision. “I wanted a boutique vineyard to sell to friends and family. This past year, we sold the 2012 Rosso e420 privately, which was initially my plan. We will pre-sell 2013-2014, and each year, keep 1,000 of the 4,000 bottles.”

Rosso e420 is 85 percent sangiovese and 15 percent merlot vines and is produced off-property by a local winemaker in nearby Todi, Umbria. The name comes from several sources: The elevation of the vineyard is 420 meters. There are 420 red grape varieties in Italy. Lastly, Evans' apartment number in Palm Beach is also number 420. “I had no experience restoring this farmhouse in Italy, but I just worked ahead. I didn't think about it too much. I had lots of friends encouraging me, and I don't do anything half-ass,” says Evans. “We are all hands-on. Friends from all over come every year to help us pick the grapes in September.”

**W**hen the average person thinks of wine, Costco Wholesale may not come to mind, but for winemakers around the world, it stands out. That's because the retail warehouse giant buys a robust amount of wine. Costco sold \$1.5 billion worth of wine in its 2013 fiscal year. That number is driven by **Annette Alvarez-Peters**, the assistant general merchandise manager (AGMM) who is responsible for overseeing the wine, spirits and beer program in the United States.

Starting at Costco in 1983, Alvarez-Peters was transferred in 1995 from the electronics department to the position of Los Angeles regional buyer for beverage/alcohol. As a newbie to the beverage world, she took great strides to educate herself. She peppered her wine distributors and suppliers with questions and attended their in-office education sessions. She also earned a diploma certificate and a certified wine educator certificate from the Wine and Spirits Education Trust and Society of Wine Educators, respectively. “The journey of education continues as the world of wine, spirits and beer evolves,” says Alvarez-Peters, who lives in Issaquah, Washington. The hard work paid off. She was promoted to her current position of AGMM in 2005 and is often listed as a top wine influencer on media power rankings.

As AGMM, Alvarez-Peters' daily routine varies. There are the typical business necessities—e-mails, paperwork and meetings—to the more creative activities. “I am on the road quite a bit as well, working with various regional buyers, visiting competition, sourcing Kirkland Signature [Costco's private label brand] and developing relationships with our suppliers and distributors,” says Alvarez-Peters. She also manages a team of 11 buyers throughout the U.S. “Each buyer will purchase product for their respective region, reviewing product categories that might be unique and interesting.” Costco buys from thousands of suppliers, but Alvarez-Peters says she and her crew definitely see a buying trend, with Italian wines being the most successful imported wine and California wines being the most popular domestic wine. “We have a wide range of members, from casual wine drinkers to collectors; the buyers will taste the product to determine if the item represents a value and is of quality. We're limited in our item selection; therefore, the buyers must be disciplined when choosing an item for distribution.”

“We test many different items within the wine, spirits and beer categories to see which items our members will respond to. In addition, we constantly watch our competitors to see what appears to be working for them,” says Alvarez-Peters, who describes it as a treasure hunt mentality. “We constantly move in and out of product to keep the department fresh and interesting for our members.”



**T**he Mandela name carries a lot of clout, but **Tukwini Mandela** is not only relying on the name to carry the House of Mandela brand to success. First, why wine? That's simple. “There's great synergy between wine and our family legacy,” says Mandela. “Initially we weren't interested in wine, but after research and visiting other wine farms, we thought it would be a great way to tell our family story, and not necessarily the political story of Nelson Mandela.”

Tukwini is Nelson Mandela's granddaughter; her mother is Dr. Makaziwe Mandela, the eldest daughter of Nelson Mandela. Together they created the House of Mandela brand seven years ago and officially launched it in 2013 in the U.S. Mandela oversees the day-to-day operations; her mother concentrates on the company's strategic direction. “My grandfather talked very passionately about what formed him as a human being: legacy and lineage. It's that part of the story that we are trying to tell,” explains Mandela. She also hopes to further the evolution of the country's fine-wine industry, which is currently valued at \$3 billion and employs about 450,000 South African workers.

House of Mandela is sourced from local South African wineries that embrace sustainability and affirmative action. With the help of a winemaker, the Mandelas have created two collections: The Royal Reserve Selection is the higher-end line, featuring a chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and shiraz made from the Fairview stable. The Thembu collection (three whites and three reds) is sourced from certified fair trade farms Citrusdal and Dutoitskloof, and named after Nelson Mandela's Xhosa-speaking tribe. The bee logo represents courage, compassion and a concern for others; its wings symbolize family as well as the cycle of life, from seed to tree.

House of Mandela's goal is to advocate for South Africa and the people by bridging the past, present and future and celebrating and honoring those who came before. Through the brand, the Mandelas want to showcase the best of what South Africa has to offer in terms of wine, increase international awareness of the quality of South African wines and encourage more diversity in the wine industry. “On the whole, there are more black people entering the wine industry than when we started. I hope this will lead to a younger black generation in the business, whether they become winemakers, sommeliers or even marketing executives.” ■

