



Sarah's Vineyard

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Celebrating 40 Years

In late 2000, I was looking for a winery for a weekend retreat and as a hobby business. That's when I met Marilyn 'Sarah' Otteman, the founder of Sarah's Vineyard, who was ready to retire after an illustrious 22-year career in the wine business. Marilyn was a charming and eccentric spiritualist with a different approach to selling her place. After meeting a few times I made an offer, and the next day—nothing. Or the next. Marilyn had a large teepee on the property, and spent three days and nights on a vision quest to decide if I was the right person to pass the torch to. In the end, she had a dream of the Lady of the Lake giving the sword to King Arthur; and thus I was allowed to take over.”



At the time, I wasn't aware of how famous Marilyn had been in the industry. Though her production was small, she was selling wine into the best restaurants all over the country. This is the fortieth anniversary year for Sarah's Vineyard and we have a lot of awesome credentials in the wine industry; from being served in the White House to notable gourmet festivals over the years, and a long list of high scores from popular wine publications. I think I've done well to maintain and grow the reputation and I look forward to the next ten years.

Tim Slater, Owner

How did you get started in wine?

I got the wine bug in 1985 during a leisure arts class I took in college. I thought the wine world was for snobs and rich people but I also wanted to improve myself so I gave it a try. Fortunately the instructor for the class was very laid back and approachable, and gave the perfect introduction to tasting wine, which I can still remember well: 'Take a sip, swish it around your mouth, swallow it – and then your tongue will throw a party for your mouth.' It was true! We would try twelve or more different wines a week, and there was always a focus on tasting every bit of the wine—educating the senses. The instructor got me to think of wine beyond the simple good-bad judgement, and think of each wine more as an experience. I took that class every quarter for two years and became very good at sensory analysis; and was offered a job at a local winery in Santa Ynez Valley. I decided to stick with engineering and instead, became a workaholic 'Mr. Engineer.' It was about 15 years later, when I was laid off from my last high-tech job, that I dropped into the wine world and started to take winemaking seriously. This is my new life.

With a history of being a successful “micro-machining” engineer you are a self-described mad-scientist. How does that help you in the vineyard and in making wine?

First of all, I should point out that as a Mad Scientist I'm mad-crazy; not mad-angry. This is an important distinction! I tend to have a different outlook than most people. In the wine world, the scientific aspects of winemaking seem trivial to me; and most of my efforts are spent working on what an individual wine should taste like, or what I can do to make it better. I want my wines to be perfect—even if nobody notices it.

What are your biggest challenges to making wine?

It was a difficult adjustment to learn about farming, coming out of the computer chip industry where everything including the air you breathe is tightly regulated. Nature follows its own course and there's not much you can do about it. It's a constant worry. We're always looking at the weather and wondering what we're going to do if the weather doesn't cooperate. Have you ever noticed that look of peaceful calm that farmers have? They're just worn out from the constant worry.”

Another challenge has been living in the shadow of 'Sarah,' meaning that I feel constrained to stay true to the founder's vision—which is making soft, elegant and feminine wines. We have a large wine club and accounts across the country. If I suddenly changed the profiles of our wine and started to make bigger and bolder wines, we would alienate our loyal fans and the trust they have for this brand. But at the same time, I'd like to be able to do something different now and then. It's a difficult to balance, these competing desires.

Do you have a degree in winemaking?

I earned a Master's in Electrical Engineering, specializing in semiconductor physics and fabrication. Starting in 2001 when I took over the winery, I attended the School of Hard Knocks to learn about winemaking; and in 2011 finally completed the winemaker's certificate program at UC Davis. I've also worked with a number of consultants and the other local winemakers to learn whatever I can.

Who is the primary winemaker for your wines?

I'm the head winemaker, but it's a group effort of course. We have a really good assistant winemaker, Pat, who is endlessly cheerful and good natured. And we are continuously working alongside other local winemakers, and have lots of discussions about how to overcome problems or perfect the blend of a wine. Colleagues like Jason Goelz (winemaker at Jason-Stephens Winery) and John Aver (winemaker at Aver Family Vineyards) are always willing to give honest feedback and that's tremendously helpful.

How would you describe the Santa Clara wine region?

Our local wines are getting better overall, year after year. Over the last ten years there has been a big step up in our wine region's quality. We have a lot of new wineries opening up and a lot of growth in the number of visitors too.

I remember forty years ago, a lot of the fine wines of California were still a little sweet, or they would be cloudy, or have a funky smell; lots of problems. Nowadays, people demand perfection—nobody will buy a wine that's cloudy or smells bad. Wine drinkers are a lot less forgiving and wine quality is much higher because of it. That's true for our local area and across the entire State as well.

As a partner in The Stomping Ground, how does this fit into your business model for Sarah's?

We ran out of space in our little winery years ago and I needed a place to make wine. I've been working with Jason and Janu Goelz to convert an industrial space into an upscale, urban winery that currently houses four separate winery partners. Sharing equipment with the Goelz's, I moved most of our wine production there. Although we will be keeping the Sarah's Vineyard tasting room at our current location, I'm contemplating a new label with different kinds of wine which I might open at The Stomping Ground. It would be a nice way to express some individuality in the wine world!

What are your future goals?

Our overall goal is for Sarah's Vineyard to be the most noteworthy winery on the Central Coast, from Santa Barbara to San Francisco. We want to make the best wine and have the best customer service; and I'm fortunate in having a staff that really believes in the goal and wants to be a part of the program. I'd also like to make Gilroy

famous as a growing area; where everybody knows about Gilroy and our local agriculture. This is a great place to be.

What do you drink when you are not drinking your own wine?

Sancerre, from the Loire Valley in France. Sancerre is a Sauvignon Blanc that tastes like a bowl of liquid sunshine. It is especially delicious when paired with fish or oysters. A nice glass of Sancerre on a hot summer day with some oysters on the half shell is just wonderful.

What kind of vibe does your winery have?

Our goal is to provide a gracious and welcoming experience by a highly educated staff. We want to offer fine wines in nice surroundings, but not be snobby about it.

What is your all-time food and wine pairing?

As a young person, I was a very picky eater and stayed skinny until my late 20s when I discovered the world of wine. Now I'm a gourmand and have to watch my weight. My all-time favorite pairing is a great Bordeaux, like a 2007 Figeac, with a little piece of prime (Wagyu) steak drizzled with a touch of red butter sauce

What kinds of wine do you specialize in?

We specialize in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay while dabbling in Rhone wines. Most all of our grapes are estate grown.

Favorite award or accolade that you received?

We received some lofty scores for our 2015 Estate Pinot Noir. Wine Spectator gave this wine 93 points and Robert Parker, from Wine Advocate, gave us 92 points. Our wines have received a lot of good attention from national publications over the last few years, but having such highly-respected magazines give us some recognition is pretty special. It also backs up my opinion that the Hecker Pass area is a great place to grow Pinot Noir!

What is the biggest misconception about you?

I once heard someone say that I was a snob. (Tim bursts out laughing). I was flabbergasted! I only wear jeans and really old t-shirts and mostly eat fast-food or cans of chili, and have a pretty low sense of humor. Can you imagine?

Why are your club members so loyal?

I believe their loyalty stems from us caring about them. Most of our wine club members recognize that we are trying to make excellent wine without breaking the bank. Naturally we've stumbled and made mistakes over the years, but the local people that support us have been generous. I think they see that we're always trying to improve, and they support us in return.

Which part of owning a winery do you prefer: farming, winemaking, tasting room/schmoozing with customers?

I'm a talkative guy and like meeting people, but I'd have to say 'farming.' There is something special about being a part of the land and growing things. I love to learn about grapevines and their funny ways. There is nothing better than a couple of dogs and a vineyard to walk around in. The dogs are happy, you're happy, and the world is a wonderful place.