



Bev Stenehjelm is a local wine enthusiast, author and freelance writer focused on the wineries of Santa Clara Valley. Bev wrote "The Wineries of Santa Clara Valley," a historical photo book published by Arcadia Publishing in 2015.

Aver Family Vineyards



John & Carolyn Avers, Owners

Half way up the Wine Trail on Watsonville Road, is Aver Family Vineyards, a hilltop winery with 180-degree views of the Uvas Valley and surrounding vineyards below. Specializing in Rhone-style wines which sell out every year, John and Carolyn Aver are a husband-wife team that use vintage photos of their relatives to label their wine bottles; providing a fascinating glimpse into their family's history. While John focuses on growing the grapes and making the wine, Carolyn supports the back office and staff while cooking up a storm of great food to complement their fine wines. Their outdoor tasting room offers a relaxed experience for people of all ages and their furry companions.

Aver Family Vineyards is open Noon-5pm, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

How did you get started in a winery?

John: Truth be told, I developed a bit of a palette as a youngster when my grandmother would let me have a sip of wine at her home. In college, wine was affordable at \$2 a jug. Once I had a real job out of college, I would spend a little more on wine, curious to see what a \$5 or a \$10 bottle tasted like. One day I bought a \$20 bottle of Pichon Lalande (a Bordeaux wine) to share with friends. It was at that moment that I really fell in love with wine. Later, in the early 1990s I was introduced to Châteauneuf-du-Pape (a Rhone wine) and, oh my God, was it good. I did a 180 degree shift from Bordeaux to Rhone wines.

What did you and Carolyn do before you started the winery?

Carolyn: We both grew up in the East Bay and met while attending Ohlone College and have been together ever since. I finished my degree in accounting while John earned his MBA in Finance. Both of us worked at high tech corporations; I was a CFO and John worked in Finance and Operations.

When did you start making and/or selling wine?

John: Carolyn and I planted our first grape vines while living on an acre plot in Novato. We were near the border of Carneros in Napa-Sonoma and I thought that our soil would be similar to that great region. I caught the wine-making bug here and told Carolyn, "This is what I want to do when I grow up!"

Carolyn: (Laughing) I told John, "I just want you to grow up!"

John: We spent several years looking for the right property to start a winery.

In 2005 I read about an open house for a vineyard in Gilroy. It had 8 ¼ acres of planted Cabernet. Despite being unfamiliar with the area, I was so impressed when I got here that we made an offer that very day. Our first commercial vintage was the following year. We produced 200 cases which included mostly Cabernet and some Petit Sirah and Syrah. But my vision was to specialize in Rhones and so over a four year period of time, I made the transition to growing mostly Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Petit Sirah. Our Petit Sirah is so outstanding that it has become our flagship wine, taking up one-half of our vineyard.

You and Carolyn are partners; who does what?

Carolyn: Before I left my high tech job, John did 90-95% of all the work while I helped out in the wine tasting room. Three years ago, we realized that he couldn't continue to do all the farming, winemaking and back office work, and so instead of hiring another person to help, we decided the time was right for me to quit my job and join the winery. John does "grape to wine" – sourcing the fruit, maintaining the vines – he farms every day, rain or shine. I have taken over the back office, staffing and tasting room responsibilities. And we both pitch in for sales.

How did you learn to make wine?

John: I am self-taught and learned a lot from Kian Tavakoli, a consulting winemaker that has worked with me for the past thirteen years. Additionally, I have taken just about every wine course that UC Davis Extension has to offer.

Any tips for other husbands and wives who would like to work a family business together?

John: We learned that each person has to have their own specific area of responsibility and then the other person has to let go and trust that it will get done.

Carolyn: It took a little while to adjust and to figure out how to work together.

Any new releases or anything special for the coming year?

John: I recently sourced Cinsault vines for the first time and am excited to add it to my Hope red wine blend. It should add a little complexity and spice. I also sourced a new local vineyard of Grenache which will add another “color” to my palette for making southern Rhone wines. We are also debuting a new website with amazing photography.

What makes your wines so special?

Carolyn: John is super focused on the quality of our grapes—whether what he grows or what he sources—and never wavers on getting the absolute best fruit. All of our wines are a result of John’s vision, specializing in Rhone style wines and blended to his palette. Our organic farming practices make for a complete quality system. John recently completed a three-day seminar on soil and is on the leading edge of developing the best soil conditions.

John: In the end, it’s all about the quality of the soil because it is the soil that nurtures the vines and predicts the quality of the grapes.

Best advice you received from another winemaker?

John: Always make what you like because you never know if you may have to drink it all someday. Also, believe in yourself and your instincts. Don’t go in for fads.

You frequently post photos of your dogs. Do they help around the vineyard?

Carolyn: We currently have four dogs: Princess and Benny keep us company in the office and Max and Hope patrol the property; keeping critters away from the vines.

What is your favorite award or accolade you have received?

John: Despite all the gold medals our wines have received, what always touches me is when someone says that they love every single wine on our tasting list – that there isn’t one wine that they don’t absolutely love. To me, that is better than any other award.

What kind of vibe does your winery have?

John: It’s casual—our tag line is “Where friends become family.” People feel welcome and comfortable here – they can bring a picnic and relax. Kids get popsicles and dogs are welcome, too.

Carolyn: Our house has always been the place where our friends and family gather and so we like our winery to offer the same welcoming feeling. Our winery is all John’s vision – his clear and unwavering view of what kind of wine we make, the level of quality and the experience he wants to deliver to our customers. I do everything I can to help execute John’s vision.

Why are your club members so loyal?

John: Our wine club is an extension of us – folks that are new to the area and appreciate good wine especially like to join. It’s a way to discover good friends who have similar interests in food and wine. We plan an annual river cruise to European wine regions which always sell out fast.

Do you have a favorite wine and food pairing?

Carolyn: We don’t go out to dinner a lot and prefer to cook together at home. One of our favorite pairings is grilled lamb chops rubbed with fresh garden herbs and paired with our Hope red blend. Or cracked crab with our Viognier. I post my recipes under “Carolyn’s Kitchen” on our website for other great pairing ideas.

John: Several years ago, at a winemaker’s dinner, the chef slow cooked ox tail in Moroccan spices paired with our Carignane – it was simply amazing.

What advice do you have for people new to wine?

John: My philosophy is: there are a million wines out there and you will never know what wine you will like until you try it. Don’t let anyone tell you what you should like. If you like a \$2.00 bottle or a \$2,000.00 bottle – either is fine. But please invite me over if you have a \$2,000 bottle because I’ve never had one!

What does the future hold for our local wine industry?

John: I see our wine industry going forward in a very positive way. Many of us have received excellent scores from *Wine Enthusiast*. I was excited when Tim Slater, the winemaker at Sarah’s Vineyard, recently received recognition in *Wine Spectator*. The challenge is our land prices are so expensive which makes it difficult for other new wineries to come in. We’ve become a well-recognized wine region and we are all part of making that happen. It is an exciting legacy for all of us.

