

Want to get into the wine biz? Get Gott

by Jennifer Huffman – January 31, 2012



photo by J.L. Sousa

Cary Gott, founder of Vineyard & Winery Estates, helps people who want to get into the wine business, whether that means building a winery from scratch or reshaping an existing operation. But Gott has another way of describing it.

“I’m a dream weaver for people,” Gott said. “I will help you get your dream. If you’re dreaming incorrectly, I will correct you, but what I try to do is steer you down your path that you get to fulfill.”

Gott, 63, is the fourth generation of his family to work in the California grape and wine business. He previously worked at Seagram Chateau and Estates, Sterling Vineyards and Mumm Napa Valley, in addition to other enterprises.

The family also owns Gott’s Roadside cafés.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?

Working at Inglenook in 1969 for Al Del Bondio. I built oak tanks with two American Italians from Canton Wood Products and then worked the vintage with winemaker Bob Stemmler and crew. So much fun, and all the while learning about cellar work and winemaking; the romance of the wine business.

WHAT’S A COMMON QUESTION OR MISCONCEPTION YOU GET ABOUT YOUR WORK?

That it’s easy to build a new brand and get into the wine business. It’s not easy. It’s a complex business that takes a lot of time and money and effort. It looks very romantic on the outside. It is a business that you have to be sensible about getting into. If you understand what you’re getting into, then you have a great time.

WHAT’S NEW AT YOUR BUSINESS?

I’m doing a customer crush winery in Arizona. That’s exciting. We’ll be opening this summer. I have a new project at Davis Estate, a winery on Silverado Trail. I’m helping the Chumash Indian tribe get into the business.

HOW MANY WINERIES OR WINE BUSINESSES HAVE YOU HELPED START?

Probably 20 or 25.

WHAT'S YOUR ADVICE TO SOMEONE WHO MIGHT WANT TO GET INTO THE WINE INDUSTRY?

Sit down with somebody who has seen the cycles of wineries — someone with experience in starting wineries and knowing the things you should do and shouldn't. You should understand the lay of the land so you can make sound decisions.

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY, DOES ANYTHING SURPRISE YOU?

When Mother Nature takes over in the vineyard.

DO YOU MISS ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR EARLY DAYS IN THE WINE BUSINESS?

I don't get to drive a tractor anymore.

IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Yeast that yields less alcohol so we can get full-flavored and mature grapes without too much resulting alcohol. Better wines with less alcohol.

IF YOU COULD BE ANYWHERE RIGHT NOW, WHERE WOULD YOU BE?

On a sunny and sandy ocean beach location, ready to go body-surf for another hour.

WHAT OTHER BUSINESS PERSON(S) WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE FEATURED IN "10 QUESTIONS FOR..."

Bill Harlan.

Mike Davis, Davis Estate in Calistoga.

WHICH THREE PEOPLE WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO HAVE DINNER WITH?

Maynard Amerine (of UC Davis), André Tchelistcheff (of Beaulieu Vineyard) and Gustave Niebaum (of Inglenook).

We would have dinner and a selection of new and old vintages of Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon produced by Beaulieu, Inglenook and other Napa producers. The wines would be selected by André and Gustave as the best they ever grew and produced. Maynard would select his favorites from his years of wine education. All the wines would be at their prime.

The chefs and menu would be Paul Bocuse (in France) and Darrell Corti (of Corti Brothers). They also would sit with us to taste the wines and eat.

The sommelier would be Alessandro Sbrendola of Alex Restaurant in Yountville. Additional guests would include John Williams of Frog's Leap for humor and stories, Mary Maher of Napa Reserve for Napa viticulture, and Mike Chelini (of Stony Hill) for Napa Valley stories.

The table would be set with stemware by Riedel, china by Richard Ginori (from Italy) and antique flatware by Shreve & Co., the menu designed and printed by David Goines of Berkeley. The wines and food would be stunning. Wouldn't be able to move the next day.

WHAT JOB WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY/NOT TRY?

Try: Architect designing wineries so the entire winemaking staff had a great place to work and make great wines. Beautiful but proper for excellent wines.

Not try: Airline pilot, as I cannot sit still.

What's the worst job you ever had?

Painting !

WHAT'S ON YOUR TO-DO LIST?

- Get several new wineries ready for harvest 2012.
- Get the 2011 reds through (malolactic fermentation) and then figure out when the first racking is.
- Get an excellent Uptick Vineyards Rosé ready to bottle next month.
- Finish labels and packaging for the new Davis Estate.
- Re-learn to relax after a long harvest.
- Smile and stay happy.

WHOM DO YOU MOST ADMIRE IN THE BUSINESS WORLD?

Steve Jobs, because he was so dedicated to the intersection of humanity and design.

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR LIFETIME THAT YOU HAVEN'T YET?

Help many people and families get into the wine business so they fulfill their wine dreams. It is so interesting and they remain friends forever.

WHAT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?

I'm Santa.

WHAT WAS YOUR CHILDHOOD AMBITION?

Eating great food, although some of my earlier selections — Velveeta and dill pickles or abalone sandwiches (in grammar school) — might seem a bit strange now.