

# ST. HELENA STAR

## In building wineries, St. Helena's Cary Gott is one of key ingredients by TIM CARL – July 14, 2015

If there were a recipe for making a high-profile Napa Valley winery and vineyard, Cary Gott would likely be among the key ingredients. He has been involved in the creation of more than 20 wineries, and he has a history that gives him unique expertise.



*Cary Gott is not only the project manager for the new Davis Estates, located south of Calistoga, but he is also the winemaker.*

"I am a fourth-generation California winemaker and have been fortunate enough to be involved in many great wine projects. I build wineries, make wine and plant vineyards, and have done so for over 40 years," Gott said.

Gott also partnered with his two sons to lease Taylor's Refresher in 1999 and transform it into the wildly successful Gott's Roadside cafés.

Although his family's history would suggest he was destined to enter the wine business, like many young people, Gott initially explored an alternative career.

"I was born in Modesto and then moved around before going to USC. My dream at the time was to become an architect. But it was the late '60s and there was a lot of change happening, and when the Watts riots happened, I left USC and moved to Davis and began their enology and viticulture program. That's when I fell in love with winemaking and vineyards and started working at Inglenook when my dad was responsible for production there."

From that moment onward, Gott's path veered away from architecture and shifted to immersion into the world of wine and vineyards.

"In '71 my wife's father purchased an old vineyard in the Shenandoah Valley, which is in the Sierra foothills. The place was mostly planted in old zinfandel, but within a few years we'd planted new vineyards and replanted some of the existing ones."

By the time he was 23 they'd built the Montevina Winery on the property.

But Gott was doing more than just planting and building — he was learning how the process of creating successful wine brands works.

“There were a lot of people just replacing vines at the time, but we were thinking about what might work best in our particular spot and in the marketplace.”

Gott continued building his experience by working for various other wineries, refining his understanding of the world of the California wine business, and eventually becoming head of winemaking at Sterling Vineyards and Mumm in 1991.

By 1998 he'd noticed a growing need, so he started his own business called Vineyard & Winery Estates, which, according to Gott, “helps people successfully enter and thrive in the wine business. Starting a winery is much harder than people think.”

When asked what the process of working with a new client looks like, Gott said, “My first question to someone who contacts me wanting a winery is, ‘Have you gone into a wine shop and seen the extreme level of competition?’ If the answer is yes, then my next question is, ‘Do you have a strategy, the patience and the resources to find a way onto that overcrowded shelf?’ If the answer is yes again, then I say, ‘Okay. Let's go have some fun.’”

And Gott looks like he knows how to have fun. Quick to smile and laugh, he is a fit man in his mid-60s who seems perfectly comfortable in work clothes and a hardhat.

We are touring his newest project, the Davis Estates, a 30,000-gallon winery just east of the intersection of Larkmead Lane and the Silverado Trail, south of Calistoga. The property totals 155 acres, with 11 acres planted in cabernet sauvignon, petite sirah and cabernet franc. In 2011, the Davis family purchased the property and began an ambitious project to create a new distinguished winery, including restoring one of the property's century-old barns and hiring Gott to oversee the project.



*After wanting to study to be an architect at USC, Cary Gott left the Southern California area following the Watts riots in the mid-1960s and moved to Davis to study enology and viticulture.*

“When it’s finished it will seem like it’s always been here,” Gott said, referring to each new building as we tour the construction site.

To achieve that goal they hired Howard Backen as the architect, which makes it nearly certain that this new winery will rank among the many other fine wineries that Backen’s team has created over the years, such as Harlan Estate Winery, the Napa Valley Reserve and Dana Estate Winery.

Davis Estates is expected to be completed for the 2015 harvest.



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“Often we’re still plugging in glycol while the first grapes are coming into the winery, but with this one we’ll be ready to go with plenty of time to spare,” Gott laughs.

He’s referring to the glycol systems that are used to manage temperature in many of the fermentation tanks, which are often some of the last things to be hooked up before a winery is complete and ready for processing grapes and making wine.

Tractors and construction workers maneuver around us as we tour the impressive property. The compound has three new and one renovated enormous barns, each made of natural- looking board-and-batten wood planks that provide a feeling of elegant comfort, reminding one of a pair of well-worn blue jeans, exactly the sort of winery that Backen and his crew are known for.

Behind the barns, two large cave openings penetrate into the hills, their slopes covered with dry grass and fir trees. The light mid-morning breeze brings with it the smells of sage and pine. The shrill of insects fades in and out, muted occasionally by the surrounding building operations.

“This has been such a fun project,” Gott muses as we walk along.

The picturesque scene is set off by a beautiful 50-foot functioning windmill that draws water up from a well using nothing but wind power.

When asked about his thoughts on the ongoing drought, Gott said, “I’m excited about the indications of an El Niño this year. But I’ve certainly experienced situations like this before, such as in

1976 and 1977. Luckily the next year, 1978, was a very wet year. Let's hope for California that we get the same thing in 2015 or 2016."

"Perhaps a bigger issue for the valley at the moment is that we are in the middle of another boom time and people are forgetting the lessons of the past."

Gott is referring to what he calls big cycles in the wine industry: from boom to bust.

"I've been through at least six big business cycles. People forget that in 2009 things were really tough. Everyone wants to come in, build a winery and sell their wine for north of \$100. But where are all these consumers who are willing to pay for such an expensive wine? We're in a boom time, yes, but this is the time to get your pricing right and to build a loyal customer base, creating value by developing strong relationships that go beyond the competition."

But Gott is optimistic about the growth of the future.

"The city of Napa will be a sophisticated Bay Area city as the downtown area should not flood again so development will continue. Yountville will continue to be the food capital of Napa Valley. St. Helena will be the shining star of the winery business and residences of the valley. Calistoga will be the spa/resort capital of the valley with beautiful resorts and a beautiful walking downtown. Wineries in all of the valley will continue to grow, and more vineyards will be planted where there have not been vineyards before."

He anticipates as many as 20 percent more new wineries could be built over the next 20 years.

According to the Napa Valley Vintners website, Napa Valley currently has some 475 physical wineries. A 20 percent increase would mean about four or five new wineries a year.

It is unclear what impact such growth would have on the valley, but Gott certainly has a clear idea about the legacy he hopes to leave behind: "That I helped people achieve their dream of owning a winery that is recognized by consumers and the press as being excellent."

Based on his past performance, he and his clients can certainly bank on that.