

Life in the time of pandemic

TONY POER

Recently, during baseball's first Sunday night broadcast of the pandemic-shortened 2020 season, the archrival Giants and Dodgers took to the field in Los Angeles. From separate studios, a pair of veteran announcers lamented the "fanless experience" of the sport this season.

"We know that fans have been missing players since the shutdown," ESPN's Buster Olney observed to his colleague, Matt Vasgersian. "Well, you know what? The players are so much missing the fans, playing these empty ballparks."

Entertaining summer crowds, and being entertained, are something baseball and wineries have in common—nowhere more for the latter than here in the Napa Valley.

To winery hospitality teams, the summer-to-fall tourist season is like opening day, the All-Star game, and the playoffs rolled into one. The fan experiences of wine tasting and wine country hospitality are as Californian as hot dogs, apple

pie, and the nation's favorite pastime are American.

With the state's tasting rooms having closed back in March, and now cautiously reopened in recent weeks, the situation parallels how baseball has looked over the same period. The delayed season has finally begun, and the players and coaches are doing their jobs on the field. Meanwhile, winery staffs are doing theirs in vineyards, cellars, labs, and tasting rooms.

It's all happening under the dark veil of COVID-19 and the global pandemic: a new normal for these two industries that often seem to transcend the category of mere businesses. Fortunately for wineries, the "fans" are allowed back in, albeit with precautions in place.

With this in mind, Inside Napa Valley talked to a few vintners who share wine as both a profession and passion. Each has been affected by shelter-in-place in distinct ways that are snapshots of life during a global pandemic.



Jeremy Ball

Elizabeth Vianna, General Manager and Winemaker, Chimney Rock Winery

ELIZABETH VIANNA, GENERAL MANAGER AND WINEMAKER, CHIMNEY ROCK WINERY

It famously once featured a small golf course running through the property, but if Chimney Rock Winery was a baseball park, it would have an ESPN camera-ready backdrop. The viticultural estate just off of Silverado Trail boasts one of the valley's more ideal locations, framed by the Vaca Mountains near the base of the Stags Leap Palisades.

At a larger winery, it would be the stuff of PR department dreams. Chimney Rock, however, is more of an artisanal operation. They like to point out that just six pairs of hands are responsible for crafting the wines. The small team is helmed by a woman who's a one-person PR machine.

Please see **Winemakers**, Page 10



Winemaker Remi Barrett with her band Vice Reine.

Submitted photo

WINEMAKERS

From page 9

“The assistant winemaker here decided in 2002 she was kind of bored with wine, and she now delivers babies in Chicago,” Elizabeth Vianna said with a laugh. “I took her job and became winemaker in 2005, and then became the GM-winemaker in 2011.”

The thoughtful, engaging vintner was reached on the phone at the winery in July. While her day-to-day responsibilities for turning grapes into wine at the 105-acre estate haven't changed, that's about as close as it gets to life as she knew it less than six months ago.

“You know, traffic's definitely down, needless to say,” Vianna said about the drop in tourism. “But we've had a regular trickling in of people, and we've been complimented by our guests on our safety measures.”

A 10-minute phone call with the winemaker turns out to be a clinic in coronavirus protocols. When it comes to the pandemic-related challenges to her staff, she describes herself as “a glass-half-full kind of gal.” She's also a safety-first kind of boss.

Like other California wineries, Chimney Rock's production never shut down after Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered the closure of tasting rooms in March.

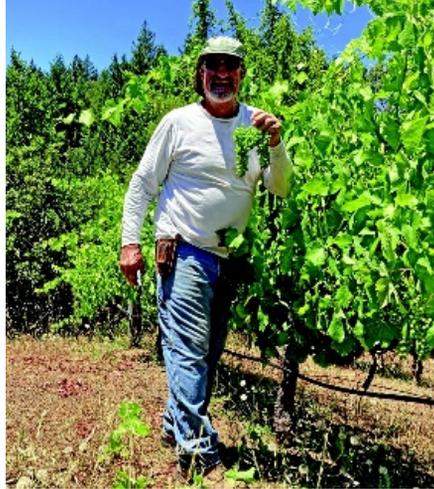
“We immediately addressed how to work safely,” she said. “I'm very lucky because we're just a team of six here, so it's pretty easy for us to maintain the social distancing.”

She added that now more than ever, she feels a responsibility for the people working under her. “We're trying to help them be conscientious about safety measures when they're not at work, as well, and to protect their families. So that's been a whole other learning curve.”

As one of the Chimney Rock brand's lead ambassadors, Vianna would have already taken multiple out-of-state trips this year to visit the winery's distributors and customers across the U.S. But the Terlato family and senior management “made the decision that nobody would travel anywhere. So everybody is home-bound,” the winemaker said.

While she's still able to welcome visitors to the Stags Leap property, that ambassadorial aspect of her job has ground to a halt. It's perhaps the biggest adjustment for a winemaker who is also a general manager.

But Vianna is upbeat. The experience of substituting video conferences and Facebook Live tastings for travel has been part of her own learning curve—what she calls “the sweet spot in discovery for the business.”



Courtesy Steve Lagier

Steve Lagier

“It's been a great way both for the public to have a respite, I think, in their daily pandemic life, and for us to connect with them.”

STEVE LAGIER, CO-OWNER AND WINEMAKER, LAGIER MEREDITH VINEYARD

Golf is part of the colorful past at Chimney Rock. If you bring up the sport to Steve Lagier, prepare for him to segue to one of his favorite movies.

“Everything I know about golf, I pretty much got from ‘Caddyshack,’” he said over the phone recently, breaking into laughter.

Lagier is the grower and winemaker for Lagier Meredith, the eponymous label he owns with his wife, Carole Meredith, a former professor in the Department of Viticulture and Enology at UC Davis. They run an operation that makes Chimney Rock seem like a multinational corporation by comparison.

The couple grow and produce minuscule quantities of four red wine varieties—none of which is Cabernet Sauvignon—high on Mount Veeder above Dry Creek Road. Their Mount Veeder AVA Syrah is known up and down California as one of the state's finest examples of the spicy, complex Rhône grape.

Lagier is quick to laugh about Rodney Dangerfield and slapstick comedies, but he switched to a more serious mode when asked about the current state of the wine industry under the pandemic, and his wife's and his situation, in particular.

“You know, no one is an island. But it is odd that the way this thing has played out, we're somewhat immune to a lot of the worst attributes,” he explained.

“Carole and I are the only employees of Lagier Meredith. We don't have a payroll that we're burning through. And when leaner times come, you know, it's not really a big deal. We're just not leveraged at all, so that gives us another avenue of resistance to this thing.”

They purchased and moved onto the remote property in 1986. Leaving most of it in its natural, forested state, they started to grow

grapes eight years later. Since their inaugural commercial vintage of 2000, they've created an enviable wine business model: they sell approximately 75% of their production direct to mailing list and other customers. At a time when retail wine sales and home shipping are perhaps unsurprisingly strong, it borders on pandemic-proof: a stark difference between Lagier Meredith and most other wineries.

Lagier is pragmatic about coronavirus, even as he joked again about his treasured golf movie.

“If you're going to go to a rave, or if you're doing the ballroom scene in ‘Caddyshack,’ then, you know, you're going to risk getting this disease. But if people are careful and keep a distance and stay within their social pods—you know, don't get nutty—they can avoid getting the virus.”

He's also fairly sanguine about the future or, at least, the '20 harvest and crush around the corner.

“I don't anticipate that there's going to be any issue really making the wine because people can easily socially distance at the winery” where they rent space. “We're able to do socially distanced winemaking, basically.”

For the immediate future, he'll continue to work on crop-thinning their Syrah and other vines in preparation for the harvest, doing judicious watering, “and then hopefully come in for a nice soft landing during the ‘pandemic crush,’” as he calls it.

“I don't think that it's really affected our viticulture, because we don't have any employees. So, we don't have to comply with a bunch of social distancing and stuff like that. We are kind of de facto socially distanced.”

REMI BARRETT, SALES AND MARKETING, LA SIRENA AND BARRETT & BARRETT (AND SYNTHPOP SINGER-SONGWRITER)

When Remi Barrett says, “I always wear a lot of hats,” it's a bit of an understatement.

On paper, the Calistoga native and San Francisco resident runs the sales and marketing, along with her mother, for a pair of sought-after wine labels, La Sirena and Barrett & Barrett. The latter of these is the project that carries “both” of her well-known parents' names.

Heidi Barrett and her husband, Bo, have been Napa Valley's power couple for decades, respectively via Screaming Eagle and Chateau Montelena. To this day, Bo is the venerable Calistoga estate's winemaker, while Heidi is one of California's pre-eminent consulting vintners.

Please see **Winemakers**, Page 91

WINEMAKERS

From page 10

Their daughter, meanwhile, is a multi-tasking force of nature.

“My job is pretty broad. So that’s kind of a good thing in these times, especially,” Barrett said over the phone from her home in the city, where she’s been camped out for many weeks. “I’m kind of focusing more on certain parts of the business, while other parts are really not happening” because of coronavirus.

She laughed when describing her busy “previous life,” echoing Elizabeth Vianna at Chimney Rock about a work schedule that



Courtesy Remi Barrett

Remi Barrett, Sales and Marketing, La Sirena and Barrett & Barrett

just a few months ago included regular out-of-state trips to see customers and distributors.

Barrett’s frequent visits to her family’s home in Calistoga have also been curtailed, as have those with her two young nieces and her sister, Chelsea, the head winemaker at Materra Vineyards in Napa’s Oak Knoll District.

Still, she said, “I call on accounts in Northern California. I do the website. I do our email list and the social media. I kind of do a lot of random stuff.”

While emphasizing that she and the small La Sirena team “all do a lot of different things to keep the ship running,” the most random part of Barrett’s job description actually has nothing to with

the wine business. In 2013, she and her husband, Erich Uher, started performing as a synthpop duo in clubs around San Francisco. The subgenre of electronic music was something the couple approached slowly at first and have built into side careers over the last several years.

“We had been writing songs just very casually for a year or two before,” she said. “Erich was in grad school in a different state at the time. So we were limping along, making very slow progress, kind of like learning how to do music together.”

They named their band Vice Reine and, in 2016, added a third member, CJ DeMarx. “We got into doing it because we wanted to play shows. So that has really been our focus up until now.”

With the pandemic as a shared backdrop, she compared the new normal version of her wine career to working as a musician. “The music industry is also in a lot of trouble and had a lot of issues before COVID. And like the wine industry, it was sort of a sinking ship that now is on fire, as well!” she added with a nervous laugh.

But for Barrett and her bandmate husband, the fire might be part of the fun. She runs a live music industry party—presently in webcast format—called Star Crash at DNA Lounge in San Francisco’s SoMa district. At 35 years old, the popular venue pre-dates many Napa Valley wineries and brands, including Heidi Barrett’s La Sirena.

“We’ve been around for 25 years. So, we have a really nice following. We’re small, but people really care about La Sirena, which is a blessing I am seriously grateful for every single day. People have a strong, personal connection to our brand, and my mom, you know, she’s the center of that. She’s the reason people care and paid attention to the brand for so long. So, that has been our saving grace.”

Maybe someday in DNA Lounge’s future, its owner will say the same thing about Remi Barrett.

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