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*Interview with
John and Doug Shafer*

DEDICATED TO
THEIR CRAFT

*Spotlight on
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MAY 2018

WWW.GENTRYMAGAZINE.COM

\$4.99US

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71486-01800-1



Doug and his father, John Shafer

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Legacy of the Vine

SHAFER VINEYARDS' FATHER-AND-SON TEAM REFLECT
ON THE FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR.

It is that particular late winter moment in the annual cycle at Shafer Vineyards in Napa Valley's Stags Leap District when the vines have gone through bud break and pruning is complete. A polite rain is falling on what *Wine & Spirits* magazine named one of the "Top 25 Vineyards in the World."

"When the rain stops, we'll be mowing the cover crop out in the field," explains winery president Doug Shafer, looking toward the hills he first tended as a teenager in the early 1970s—hills from which he cleared thousands of rocks by hand on long, hot afternoons after his father, John Shafer, a former publishing executive, had moved the family westward from the Chicago suburbs to pursue a mid-life career change.

The journey since then has been full of plenty of false starts and hard work, as well as the sort of success that can be deduced from a glance at office walls lined with James Beard Foundation award medallions and White House dinner menus documenting the Shafer "Red Shoulder" 2010 Chardonnay that accompanied crisped halibut on a memorable evening in the Obama Administration, and the 1986 Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon with which President Bush (the first) and Queen Elizabeth (the second) washed down their crown roast of lamb and dauphine potatoes.

Quality has been a core value of the family business since before its inception. At a time when most Napa vineyards were planted on the valley floor, John sought to purchase instead a hillside property after reading about Mediterranean methods best encapsulated in the ancient proverb *Bacchus amat colles* ("Bacchus loves the hills"). Since California grapes then were valued by weight, his decision meant deliberately forgoing the larger proceeds to be gained from large clusters of valley floor-grown grapes that could yield five or six tons per acre, versus shallow-soiled hillside-grown grapes that might yield just a ton and a half per acre.



“We’re having fun,” Doug says. “To make 35,000 cases every year, year in, year out, five different varietals, and make them all good and dependable is a lot of work. It’s full time. We’ve got a great crew, a small crew, everybody works really hard. And it’s not a given. On the outside it seems pretty simple: ‘Shafer makes great wines.’ But there’s a lot that goes into that. Getting any larger in size would make that really tough to do.”

“I came out with the idea of getting into the wine business,” recalls John, at age 93, now the company’s chairman. “Once I got here, I realized how much there was that I didn’t know, starting with farming. I abandoned the idea of getting into the wine business and concentrated on the vineyards.” At the encouragement of a winemaker friend, he made a first effort at about the time that the famous “Judgment of Paris” tasting gave top honors to a Cabernet made from grapes grown a mile away from Shafer’s property.

“So, in 1978 I bought some barrels,” he continues. “There were no wine barrels in the United States at that time. I had to buy bourbon barrels to which we added citric acid to clean them up, and a few French barrels.”

In the 1980s, John chaired the committee that successfully petitioned to have the Stags Leap District certified as an American Viticultural Area (AVA). The appellation is known for wines with velvety texture. “There’s a tremendous level of mid-palate fruit that makes the tannins appear softer,” Doug says. “People ask, ‘Why is that?’ And I don’t have the answer; it’s just the place.” A Shafer Cabernet (their 2002 Hillside Select garnered a perfect 100-point score from critic Robert Parker) is so silky that at the first debut of their 1978 vintage at a vintner’s symposium, John was widely disbelieved when explaining to tasters that there was no Merlot blended in, just pure Cabernet.

The Shafers have been working with winemaker Elias Fernandez, a native son of California farmworkers, for 34 years, since he was first hired upon graduating from UC Davis. “The three of us have been together since 1984,” Doug says. “That’s a long time. That’s unusual in this business.”

Recently, the team has been celebrating their first new release in a decade, a red blend. “The name is TD-9, which is the name of a tractor that we found here in 1973,” Doug explains. “TD stands for Tractor Diesel,” John chuckles. “That was the way International Harvester labeled their tractors.”

How to drive the tractor was just one of many lessons the Shafers learned through trial and error through the years. Embarrassing critical reception of their 1984 and ’85 Chardonnay has become, over time, an amusing anecdote to share, akin to Doug’s slapstick



Shafer

“It was a long, hard seven years, a lot of mistakes, and learning how to make wines better. Around 1990, Elias and I were tasting all the wines in the cellar, which we do every couple of weeks, and it was like, wow!, everything tastes great. That’s when we decided . . . we’re doing this.”

tale of learning to drill a posthole for a fence that would fall down a week later. But at monthly meetings of the Napa Valley Wine Technical Group in the 1980s, Doug and Elias and a generation of industry colleagues who were all learning together shared new approaches and ideas. The “cover crop” that Doug mentions, for example, didn’t exist at first, as it was common practice for Napa vintners to show clean bare earth between vines.

Shafer Vineyards is a true family-owned winery; they’ve never taken on outside investors. “We grow it, we make it, we market it, we sell it,” Doug says. “We’re involved in everything. When people come into the tasting room, we drop in and say hello.”

In the late 1990s when pockets of Northern California were flush with cash from the tech boom and the phenomenon of “cult wines” was rampant, John had a dream of doubling production from 30,000 to 60,000 cases. But in an atavistic assertion of his Midwestern Methodist roots, Doug, who by then had been named company president, resisted his founding father’s urge to expand. By focusing on quality over quantity, he helped avoid the fate of wineries that were left with debts and excess inventory when the boom went bust. Doug feels smug knowing that what he calls Shafer’s “Internet bubble profit” was spent on nothing flashier than a new roomful of stainless steel barrel racks, which, he notes, “have about a 500-year life span.”

“We’re having fun,” he says. “To make 35,000 cases every year, year in, year out, five different varieties, make them all good and dependable, is a lot of work. It’s full time. We’ve got a great crew, a small crew, everybody works really hard. And it’s not a given. On the outside it seems pretty simple: ‘Shafer makes great wines.’ But there’s a lot that goes into that. Getting any larger in size would make that really tough to do.”

From Shafer’s reception area terrace, one can gaze southward past volcanic palisades toward San Pablo Bay. A key feature of the Stags Leap District’s climate and geology is the wind funnel that channels cooling breezes northward in the early evenings. “The wind here gets so strong at times that the canvas patio umbrellas have frequently needed to be replaced,” says Doug. “But for now, the air is calm and under a damp grey sky.

Doug recalls the day he decided—or realized—that the winery would be his life’s work. “It didn’t happen until about seven years after I started working here,” he says. “Until then, I didn’t have time to reflect. It was one fire drill after another. It was a long, hard seven years, a lot of mistakes, and learning how to make wines better. Around 1990, Elias and I were tasting all the wines in the cellar, which we do every couple of weeks, and it was like, wow!, everything tastes great! That’s when we decided . . . we’re doing this.” ♦