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## Six generations keep a winery in the family

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*Editor's note: This monthly feature looks at the challenges of running a family business.*

Gundlach Bundschu Winery started in 1858 as a family business — and six generations on, it still is. Set on 320 acres in Sonoma, 55 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge, its reds, whites and rosés are also available at various restaurants, K&L Wine Merchants and BevMo. It has also become a destination for music and its tasting room. I caught up with Jeff Bundschu, who took over as president in 2001.



RACHID DAHNOUN

Jeff Bundschu, Katie Bundschu and their father Jim Bundschu

**What's it's like running a company that's been in the family for six generations?** Once you get past three generations, you start to get into the zone of being different from other businesses because you have a broad spectrum of interested family members and stakeholders. You're running an entity that has as much of an eye on the past and honoring what got you there as the future. When I was younger in my career and watching my friends in the tech

world, the mentality that those businesses have in their DNA in terms of scaling was almost “you got in quickly to get out quickly.” It was something completely foreign to what we knew up here.

**How many family members are still involved in the company?** Full time, six. My parents are still all over the place. My cousin’s wife who’s a landscape architect will come in when we need a project.

**How did you all keep the company in the family for such a long time?** If I was drawing a pie chart, it’d be luck, grit, ambition and then a whole lot of hard work. From generation to generation, there’s no expectation to do anything other than make the business something that you want to wake up to and are passionate about. There’s not an expectation for the next generation to come in. If anything, there’s an expectation to demonstrate that they want to be here and they’re ready to work hard.

**Will there be a seventh generation?** Thankfully, there already is. Whether they decide to work in the family business is another question.

**Have you brought in nonfamily members?** Oh, for sure. We have 140 people now. We want the best people in the best positions regardless of whether or not they’re family. That could mean some harder conversations for family members whose ambitions might not line up with their skill sets.

**What were your biggest challenges over the past 16 months?** One of the upsides of such a long history is that there’s really nothing that we’ve seen today that somebody in our family hadn’t seen in some other part of our history. We just read in my grandma’s journal from 1918, moaning about having to wear a mask everywhere she went.

**Tell me about how your business weathers fire season.** 2017 was the first one in our neck of the woods, and it was catastrophic. We were one of the few wineries that was hit hard. Smoke is probably going to become more regular and we need to make sure our business is fire protected. We also need to make sure we’re ready to navigate power outages and air quality, which can impact grapes and wine quality.

**How is sustainability baked into your vision?** We've been sustainable for decades in terms of our approach to chemicals in our vineyard. In 2010, we installed solar panels and got to 70-plus percent of our power being solar generated, and then we installed five degenerative wastewater ponds so we could collect all the runoff from our winery and put it back to use at our vineyard.

**If the founders, your great great great grandparents, could see the company today, what do you think their reaction would be?**

The legacy they started is still intact. That we're getting along as well as we ever have — that's rare in any family, with or without a business. We've been growing pretty aggressively the last 24 months so I think there might be a little bit of "it's about time," because those guys were ambitious back in the day.

**How did you train for your current role?** I grew up on the vineyard and did a lot of manual labor — enough to make me want to run far away from any dirt. I went to school in Los Angeles and studied international relations with a plan to go into the Foreign Service and travel the world. Then I had sort of an "aha" moment. I wanted to go back and be with my family after seeing all these really tight-knit communities around the world. I love music so I was able to scratch that itch in the context of our business by doing it from within.

**Right, you regularly have concerts on the property.** Now going on 12 or 13 years. When I started I was calling agents and begging them to get bands to stop by. Now, they're calling us, so we're not complaining. Metallica was one little band that managed to play up here. During Covid they needed a spot for a show they were going to try to make a movie out of. It's a big property that was easy to be private and nobody knew about it. Definitely a high point but we've had a lot of great artists on this site.

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