

VINE HILL WINERY™

The View From Vine Hill

By Laura Ness

There is something really satisfying about seeing a long-held dream unfolding before your eyes. It is even more satisfying when you know you are building something your children can inherit: something of which they can be proud, even if they per chance choose not to get their elbows deep into it as you are. Such is the situation in which Nick Guerrero, one of the principal owners of Vine Hill Winery, an ultra-premium Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir producer, finds himself. Nick, along with his wife Celeste and partners Nat and Laura Simons, have embarked on a journey that continues a long tradition of grape growing and winemaking at this historic 26 acre site on Jarvis Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Formerly the home of Ken Burnap's Santa Cruz Mountains Vineyard operation, the property has roots that go back as deep as they can in this storied wine producing region. The parcel was once part of the many Mexican land grants that were carved out of the area during the 1840s, the original Spanish landowners planted Mission grapes here. They produced wine that only a priest could love. After logging cleared some 18 million board feet of lumber from the hills beginning in 1850, George and John Jarvis, for whom Jarvis Road is named, began planting vineyards here in 1863, in what was then known as the Vine Hill District.

Walking through the vineyards that grace the rolling, fog-facing hillsides still covered with redwoods despite all the logging, Nick and the Wine Team are building their future: a future that is bright with promise as the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA truly comes into its own as a premium producer of Pinot Noir. Vine Hill Winery seeks to create some of the finest Pinot Noirs that have ever come out of this storied grape growing region.

Nick took a somewhat indirect route to winery ownership. During his lifetime, Nick has focused on helping others. Whether it is the fermenting of

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beer and wine or helping people when they are ill, Nick has always been a giving person, and his work has supported the ideal of a better life for those around him. Beginning as a pre-med major in college, Nick later pursued a degree in Fermentation Science at UC Davis. He got his first job out of college with Anheuser-Busch as a brewmaster. Although he had an offer from a winery in Pennsylvania, being a practical person, he decided that a three-year apprenticeship at very little pay would not offer him the security or career path he had in mind. So, instead, he chose making beer in New Jersey over making wine in Pennsylvania. When his wife got accepted into a Masters program at UCSF, he relocated to California, and began to rethink his skill set and focus on making something other than beer. He applied to the Masters program at UC Berkeley.

While at UC Berkeley, Nick once again embraced dual pursuits as he studied for joint degrees: a Masters in Business, as well as a Masters in Public Health. Nick spent the next three years working in hospitals, clinics, and administrative offices to improve his knowledge of US healthcare. He interned at prestigious institutions like Kaiser Permanente and Catholic Healthcare West. At the same time, he wrote a business plan for his Capstone project, (akin to a Master's thesis), focused on the "U-brew" operation, a concept pioneered in Canada during the mid 1990s, that would allow people to brew their own beer. His mentor in this effort was none other than Dan Gordon of The Gordon-Biersch Brewing Company. For this plan, he was named "Student Entrepreneur of the Year at the HAAS School of Business Class of 1994."

Although he did not ultimately pursue the business plan at the time, Nick met two people who would go on to play a pivotal role in the creation of Vine Hill Winery, Nat and Laura Simons. Nick was introduced to the Simons at party at which he brought along a couple of bottles of his 1992 and 1993 Cabernet Sauvignon. During the party they quickly decided to make some wine together during the next harvest. Five couples purchased grapes together and made wine at Nick's place in 1994, beginning an association of vintners who still collaborate to this day. Nick had already established the brand name "Gatos Locos" (Crazy Cats) in 1992 and that name endures, along with the friendships that eventually made the Vine Hill Winery effort a reality.

Nick's educational investments paid off when he landed a job with Ernst & Young LLP as a consultant in the Healthcare Practice. Nick traveled the country consulting with hospitals and HMO's and ten years later, after CAP Gemini purchased Ernst & Young's consulting practice, Nick found it was not a good corporate or personal fit. When CAP Gemini sold the Healthcare practice to Accenture, he was already exploring the possibility of a new career, and quickly moved to McKesson, the largest company in the world focused on providing healthcare technology to hospitals and clinics. He also began simultaneously working on a new direction, determined not to be involved in a job where he had to be on a plane constantly, away from his family and home. His journey began when he sought the assistance of a life coach, Margie Gordillo, who put him to work on three life paths: the first was to "continue to do what you do because you need to pay the bills;" the second was to continue the present occupation but to reduce travel and do it locally, and the third path was a "what if?" in this case, if you had a million dollars, what would you do?

The idea of owning and operating a winery immediately popped into his head and he began running the numbers, realizing that this dream was within the realm of possibility. Now he just needed the million dollars. Within three months of writing the newly inspired business plan and contacting friends from his grad school days, Nick found himself in escrow on the property on Vine Hill. Things were moving faster than sugar levels at harvest. Along with a group of family and friends, including Nat and Laura Simons, Nick took ownership of the well-known Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard property. He continued to work his day job for 18 months after close of escrow, and since August of 2005, has been focusing all his efforts on replanting the vineyard and building the winery's two brands.

When asked how he came to focus on the Santa Cruz Mountains as the location for their winery project, Nick explains that not only is the area his family's home, (his wife, Celeste, was raised in Santa Cruz, the daughter of a physician and a liturgist), but it is also home to some of the best Pinot Noir in North America. Santa Cruz County has a long history of producing excellent wines, and it is well documented that fruit from this region was used as early as the 1880s to blend with and improve the quality of wines being produced in other areas of California. By the mid 1880s, winemakers in Santa Cruz

County were producing wines on par with those of Europe. Like the Burgundy region of France, the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation has a relatively cool, sunny climate that lends itself to smaller crops of good quality grapes, especially the Burgundian varietals, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

When they laid out the business plan, Nick and Nat had already decided there would be two brands: a foundation brand, called Gatos Locos, and a higher end exclusive brand, later named Cumbre, which would aim to produce the ultimate in Pinot Noir. Notes Nick, “We always knew we were going to focus on Pinot Noir, and it was clear from the outset we had to be in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We wanted to be part of the group of winemakers that elevates Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir in the collective conscience of the discerning public. We want to be in the same company as Alfaro, Burrell School, Hallcrest, Sonnet, Soquel Vineyards, Testarossa and Windy Oaks, to name some of the wineries we most admire.”

With the increasing emphasis on quality clones and sustainable farming practices, and the vast wealth of knowledge they can tap from local vineyard consultants, Vine Hill Winery is well positioned to produce some of the finest Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir ever to come from this region aptly named “Pinot Paradise.”

Cumbre
of VINE HILL™

VINE HILL™

Gatos Locos
of VINE HILL™