

GENTRY

THE WINE ISSUE

FLAVOR FORWARD

Lohr, Melka, Beckstoffer,
Kenward, and more—the families
and figures behind the wine

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EST 1993

MAY 2020

THE HEARTS & MINDS OF SILICON VALLEY

CONTENTS

Melka Estates

PHOTO BY ANASTASIA BLACKMAN

FEATURES

38 Art & Craft

For nearly half a century, the Lohr family has created wines that showcase the pure expression of the fruit and terroir.

46 The Man Behind the Wine

With 25 years of experience in California, legendary wine consultant Philippe Melka is well positioned to look ahead at the industry's future.

68 Ranch Redux

Award-winning interior designers Nancy Evars and Dimitra Anderson reimagine a Silicon Valley family home with a light, airy, elegant feel.

DEPARTMENTS

20 Editor's Note

Resilience + Perseverance

23 The Current

Celebrating 50 years of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, unveiling a brand-new label—TOR Wines—and more.

30 Calendar

Online exhibitions, performances, and experiences for May

34 Impact

Emily Mangini walks the vineyards with Andy Beckstoffer, who has given \$100,000 for COVID-19 relief.

36 Social Network

Fundraisers, galas, and events

58 Inspirations

Lena Dakessian Halteh looks to fashion for interiors inspiration.

64 Design Spotlight

Designer Sara Fraser underscores the importance of functionality in design now.

74 Quoted

The Napa Valley Vintners make a pledge to their community.

On the cover:

Director of Winemaking Steve Peck photographed at J. Lohr Vineyards in Paso Robles

ART + CRAFT

For nearly half a century, the Lohr family
has created wines that showcase the pure
expression of the fruit and terroir.

WRITTEN BY STEFANIE LINGLE BEASLEY







On April 6, J. Lohr earned the 2020 Sustainable Winegrowing Leadership Green Medal Award for being an industry standard bearer in terms of environment, economics, and social equity. The award says a lot about J. Lohr's past, present, and future. We touched base with the Lohr family to understand their passion for wine.

"The story really begins with our dad, Jerry," notes Steve Lohr, CEO of J. Lohr. "Dad, the son of Irish immigrants, grew up on a farm in Eastern South Dakota growing grain, wheat, corn, sorghum, and millet. The land—and understanding it—was a part of his very being from day one." Jerry Lohr went on to study civil engineering at South Dakota State and later attended Stanford in the mid-1950s for graduate school. A fellow grad student from Lake County brought a bottle of wine to his classmates one day and Jerry found a new passion. "It was really good," he recalls with a smile. "We didn't have a lot of wine in South Dakota. I was fascinated and spent the next two decades looking for the right property." In the meantime, he

married his college sweetheart—a beautiful grad student at Stanford named Carol who was there to study French and Russian. Jerry parlayed his civil engineering degree into a building company creating homes for families throughout the Santa Clara Valley. While the business grew, the Lohr family grew too with three children: Steve, Cynthia, and Lawrence.

By the early '70s, Jerry's dream of a vineyard became a reality. He found the piece of land he'd been searching for—280 acres blessed with rocky soil, cool Pacific evening breezes, and warm sunny days in the sleepy town of Greenfield on the Monterey Peninsula. Jerry hired professors from UC Davis to help with the process. "It was always meant to be a business," recalls Steve. "Dad loved wine, but he wanted the vineyards to grow and produce." Over the past 46 years, J. Lohr has grown into one of the most successful wine brands in the business with over 4,000 acres of vineyards stretching from Paso Robles to Napa Valley.

The Lohr siblings recall weekends in Greenfield as kids. "We loved it," relates Cynthia, who is now co-owner and Chief Brand Officer of J. Lohr. "As a

child, I just recall it being fun—running around the vineyards with my brothers. But for our father this was serious; he was really cultivating more than just his own wine, he was pioneering Central California Coast wines, too." Indeed, many experts have likened Jerry's leadership and contributions to Paso Robles and Monterey's Arroyo Seco district to Robert Mondavi's efforts in Napa Valley.

Lawrence, also a co-owner and Chief of Brand Education, notes that Jerry wanted his children to find their own path before joining the family business. "All of us went in different directions and acquired different skill sets." Steve attended Stanford, earning degrees in economics and civil engineering before embarking on a successful career building high-end custom homes in Silicon Valley. Cynthia followed in her mother's footsteps, majoring in French and psychology at UC Davis. "Then I jumped into high tech," she notes, "working in marketing and brand development for a number of pre-IPO companies, including Yahoo!, and later becoming a vice president at Alexander Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide. In



Jerry Lohr



A rustic dining room with a long wooden table set with glasses, a large wooden barn door, and string lights.

**“Sustainability
is all about
taking care
of the Earth
and your
community.”**



Lawrence, Cynthia, and Steve Lohr

2002, she pivoted and brought her passion for brands and marketing to the family business. Lawrence, who had majored in political economics when he attended undergrad at UC Berkeley, joined the family business two years after Cynthia. “Dad wanted to make sure that we understood the business from the ground up,” he says. “When I was a teen in the ‘80s, I worked in the barrelhouse. He wanted me to understand the full scope of production. Later, I started in the sales office working with our distributors and working out in the field selling. It was an incredible education. I think our really common thread and why we work well together is that we all have a passion for different aspects of the wine business.”

In 2008, the Lohr family experienced the pain of the sudden and unexpected loss of matriarch Carol to metastatic breast cancer. The loss galvanized the family to honor Carol and give back. “We partnered with the National Breast Cancer Foundation,” says Cynthia, “and designated the J. Lohr Carol’s Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon as a commemorative release. Since the program started, sales from the Carol’s Cab releases have supported early breast cancer

detection, access to mammograms, and patient navigation services.”

A commitment to community has been a through line for the Lohrs. Steve notes, “Really, sustainability is all about taking care of the Earth and your community.” Jerry underscores, “We’ve had a philosophy of sustainability since I started.” Now in his eighth decade, Jerry is very much involved in the day-to-day operations of the vineyards. He says, “Growing up in the Midwest you learn what types of crops work well in which climate and soil each year. Grapes are different. The climate and soil are key, but when you plant grapes you plant for the long term—25 years.”

That long-term focus and commitment to the land has truly shaped everything about the business for the Lohrs. Wanting to create an excellent product has meant major investments in time, talent, and innovation. The team is laser focused on sustainable water retention and irrigation and solar power that provides 75% of the energy consumed by the vineyards, facilities, and tasting rooms.

“In terms of talent, we are so fortunate,” adds Cynthia, “to have longevity of leadership.” The extended family at J. Lohr includes President and COO Jeff Meier, who joined as

a member of the harvest staff back in 1984, and Director of Winemaking Steve Peck, who joined in 2007. “Jerry has always been supportive of the needs of winemaking,” relates Meier. Peck continues, “There is just so much focus on the details—we’re in search of that perfect wine in every wine we make. It doesn’t matter if it’s in the Cuvée Series or in the Vineyard Series or the Estate Series—there is just an amazing commitment to quality.”

That quality has resonated with consumers over the decades. “We put the quality of the wines first and I think that’s what separates us from a lot of our competition,” Steve Lohr proudly notes. “Turn over that back label—you’ll see it says, ‘produced and bottled.’ Others say, ‘cellared and bottled.’ We care for the wine from beginning to end and our customers can count on that attention to detail. During tough times like the current pandemic, those details count. Our tasting rooms may be closed, but we’re reaching out to our customers with online experiences and look forward to the days ahead where that high-touch, intimate engagement we’re known for can be celebrated again. We take enormous pride in all that our team does—we’re in it for the long haul.” ●