

# ALPHA OMEGA MAKES THE RIGHT MOVES



CHUCK O'REAR PHOTO

ROBIN BAGGETT AND ERIC SKLAR HAVE TAPPED THEIR COLLECTIVE BUSINESS ACUMEN TO OPEN ALPHA OMEGA WINERY IN RUTHERFORD.

**M**ANY PEOPLE WHO BUY OR START NEW WINE COMPANIES HERE DO IT PRIMARILY TO ENJOY THE NAPA VALLEY LIFESTYLE, BUT ROBIN BAGGETT AND ERIC SKLAR USED THEIR EXPERIENCE TO CRAFT A BUSINESS THAT TURNED AN OPERATING PROFIT IN LITTLE OVER A YEAR.

TO DO SO, THEY DIDN'T JUST PICK A FEW KEY STEPS AND DO THEM WELL; THEY IMPLEMENTED A TEXT-BOOK OF IDEAS TO ENSURE SUCCESS FOR THEIR ALPHA OMEGA WINERY.

TO START WITH, THEY BOUGHT AN EXISTING WINERY ON HIGHWAY 29 IN RUTHERFORD, THE HEART OF NAPA VALLEY. AND THAT PROPERTY CAME WITH AN UNLIMITED PUBLIC TASTING ROOM, SOMETHING NOT OFFERED FOR NEW WINERIES IN NAPA COUNTY FOR MANY YEARS.

SECONDLY, THEY HIRED A TALENTED YOUNG WINEMAKER AND PAIRED HIM WITH THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS WINEMAKING CONSULTANT, MICHEL ROLLAND. ROLLAND'S IMPRIMATUR IS VIRTUALLY A GUARANTEE OF SUCCESS, AND ALPHA OMEGA IS ONE OF THE FEW PLACES VISITORS HAVE EASY ACCESS TO WINES ROLLAND HAS CRAFTED.

WITH ONLY LIMITED VINEYARDS OF THEIR OWN, THEY ALSO ARRANGED LONG-TERM LEASES WITH SOME OF NAPA VALLEY'S LEADING VINEYARDS INCLUDING BECKSTOFFER TO KALON, NEWTON, HUDSON AND STAGECOACH. THE DIVERSE AREAS ALLOW THEM TO BLEND THEIR WINES WITH VARIED COMPONENTS AND THEY LEASE THE VINEYARD BLOCKS SO CAN CONTROL MANAGEMENT, NOT JUST BUY GRAPES BY THE TON.

THEY'VE INVESTED IN PRIME WINEMAKING EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES, TELLING THE WINEMAKER TO GET THE BEST. "WE DIDN'T GIVE HIM A BUDGET," SKLAR SAID.

THEY ALSO EARLY FOCUSED ON DIRECT SALES THROUGH THE TASTING ROOM AND BUILT A 2100-MEMBER WINE CLUB QUICKLY, AVOIDING GIVING UP HALF THEIR SALES TO DISTRIBUTORS.

NO SURPRISES

LEARN A LITTLE ABOUT THE TWO PRINCIPALS AND IT'S NOT SURPRISING HOW THEY'VE PROCEEDED. THEY'RE BOTH ENTREPRENEURS WHO'VE STARTED SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSES BEFORE.

A NATIVE OF SALINAS, BAGGETT WAS A SUCCESSFUL LAWYER WHEN HE BOUGHT 3,000 ACRES IN EDNA VALLEY IN 1988 AND PLANTED 800 ACRES OF GRAPES WITH A PARTNER. IN 1998, THEY ESTABLISHED COURTSIDE CELLARS, WHICH NOW HAS PRODUCTION FACILITIES IN SAN LUIS OBISPO AND SAN MIGUEL. HE ALSO STARTED TOLUSA CELLARS THERE.

HE MOVED TO NAPA VALLEY IN 2006 TO CREATE ALPHA OMEGA; HE AND SKLAR PICKED THAT NAME PARTLY BECAUSE BAGGETT WAS TIRED OF BEING AT THE END OF THE ALPHABET WITH HIS TOLUSA WINERY, BUT AVOID USING THE GREEK LETTER OMEGA TO AVOID A "FRAT BOY" IMAGE.

SKLAR, A ST. HELENA COUNCILMAN, HAS BEEN GROWING GRAPES IN NAPA VALLEY FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS AT SILVERADO TRAIL AND SKELLENGER ROAD. HE'S ALSO INVOLVED IN HOUSING PROJECTS AND A HOTEL DEVELOPMENT HERE, BUT EARLIER IN HIS CAREER, HE FOUNDED AND THEN SOLD BURRITO BROTHERS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE WINERY BUILDING (AND PERMIT) THEY BOUGHT HAD STARTED AS DOMAINE DE NAPA IN 1985, THEN BECAME ANTHONY BELL'S QUAIL RIDGE. IT WAS ESQUISSE WINERY WHEN SKLAR AND BAGGETT BOUGHT IT IN 2006. AN EARLIER SALE FELL THROUGH, ALLOWING THE TWO PARTNERS TO RAISE THE CASH THEY NEEDED TO BUY THE PROPERTY AND GET STARTED.

THEY HIRED SWISS-BORN WINEMAKER JEAN HOEFLIGER FROM NEWTON VINEYARDS BEFORE THEY TOOK CONTROL OF THE PROPERTY IN FEBRUARY, AND OPENED THE TASTING ROOM THE DAY AFTER THEY COMPLETED ESCROW ON JUNE 30 TO SELL WINES HOEFLIGER HAD BLENDED.

RUSHING FRANTICALLY TO INSTALL NEW EQUIPMENT, HOEFLIGER CRUSHED GRAPES THE NEXT MONTH.

MEANWHILE, SKLAR AND BAGGETT HAD SIGNED THE FAMED ROLLAND — NOT AN EASY TASK; ROLLAND HAS 17 CLIENTS IN NAPA VALLEY ALONE, INCLUDING SCREAMING EAGLE, BRYANT, ARAUJO, HARTWELL, HARLAN, DALLA VALLE, QUINTESSA AND BLANKIET. BUT ROLLAND HAD WORKED WITH HIS PROTÉGÉ HOEFLIGER AT NEWTON, AND HE WELCOMED THE CHANCE TO DO SO AGAIN. "I LIKE TO WORK WITH PEOPLE I LIKE," HE SAID.

THE FAMED CONSULTANT AND HIS PUPIL ARE BOTH FANS OF A TOUCH OF RIPE PETITE VERDOT, WHICH ADDS COLOR, AROMA AND FLAVOR. "BUT IT'S LIKE A SPICE," SAID HOEFLIGER. "YOU CAN'T USE TOO MUCH."

AT ALPHA OMEGA, ALL THE PRODUCTION AREAS HAVE BEEN REFURBISHED, AND AN IMPROVED TASTING ROOM SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY THE END OF JUNE — THE STAFF HAS HAD THREE TEMPORARY LOCATIONS SINCE ALPHA OMEGA OPENED.

IT AND NEW PATIOS AND REFLECTION POND WITH FOUNTAINS (REALLY THE IRRIGATION POND) LEND AN ELEGANT BUT NOT GRANDIOSE TOUCH. "IT'S NO TAJ MAHAL," SAID BAGGETT. "OUR FOCUS IS TO MAKE THE BEST WINE POSSIBLE."

THE NEXT PROJECT IS A U-SHAPED BARREL-AGING FACILITY TO BE BUILT NEXT YEAR BEHIND THE WINERY; THE BARRELS ARE NOW STORIED AT THE RANCH NEARBY.

“WE USE A LOT OF BARRELS,” SKLAR SAID, NOTING THAT THEY BARREL FERMENT THEIR CHARDONNAY AND EVEN PART OF THE CABERNET. ALL FERMENTATION STARTS NATURALLY, AND THE WINES AREN'T FINED OR FILTERED.

PRODUCTION IS ABOUT 8,000 CASES.

THE WINES INCLUDE SAUVIGNON BLANC, CHARDONNAY, CABERNET AND A PROPRIETARY RED BORDEAUX BLEND. THEY COST \$32 TO \$76. THE TASTING ROOM IS OPEN DAILY FROM 10 A.M. TO 6 P.M. THE TASTING FEE IS \$10, REFUNDED WITH A WINE PURCHASE.

ALPHA OMEGA WINERY IS AT 1155 MEE LANE AT HWY 29 IN RUTHERFORD. THE PHONE NUMBER IS 963-9999.