

TOWN&COUNTRY

The Side Business Devin Nunes and Donald Trump Have in Common

Both men have invested in wineries with an unusual connection.



by **TIMOTHY J. BURGER** APR 17, 2017

Part of Donald Trump's campaign pitch to a surprisingly willing electorate was his prowess as a businessman. His name is, of course, emblazoned in gold on skyscrapers, but it's also splashed across a host of other enterprises. And while Trump steaks, **Trump University**, and **Trump Models** haven't fared so well, **Trump winery**, at least, seems to be a success.

He's not the only vintner pulling the levers of power in Washington these days. Embattled House intelligence committee Chairman Devin Nunes also dabbles in grapes. Nunes has been a **minority partner in Napa's ritzy Alpha Omega since about 2006**, when the congressman made between \$50,000 and \$100,000 selling his share of some family farmland and **sunk about the same amount of money into the winery**.

"Rich, dense and layered" might be said to describe Nunes's machinations between the intelligence committee and Trump White House, but it's actually **how Wine Spectator opens its review** of a 93-point, 2012 Cab offered by Alpha Omega for \$200.

Nunes, at least, must be glad for the good reviews. He had been enjoying a star turn leading the Russia investigation when he awkwardly inserted himself into the back and forth over President Trump's unverified claims that his predecessor Barack "Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower." A few days after Nunes went public with dramatic but muddled claims about Obama White House handling of surveillance, the House ethics committee said it was investigating Nunes for possible "unauthorized disclosures of classified information." In classic Washington fashion, Nunes swung wildly in the course of about a week from getting House Speaker Paul Ryan's vote of confidence March 27, and insisting he wouldn't step aside, to doing just that on April 6.

Then, CNN reported on April 12 that lawmakers in both parties examining the intelligence about which Nunes sounded the alarm "have so far found no evidence that Obama administration officials did anything unusual or illegal, multiple sources in both parties tell CNN."

This latest edition of musical investigation chairs, that old Washington parlor game, guaranteed that the Nunes's connection to the Russia spy controversy might throw the Alpha Omega Winery onto the defensive. Critics quickly noticed that Alpha Omega is listed as [one of several U.S. suppliers for Luding Ltd.](#), a Russian alcohol distributor. Suddenly the blogosphere lit up, and Alpha Omega was in the spotlight.

Alpha Omega promptly [Tweeted](#) its response: "The only time Alpha Omega did business in Russia was in 2013 when a broker handled a one-time transaction for 22 cases of wine." The vineyard pinned this to the top of its Twitter feed for emphasis.

The only time Alpha Omega did business in Russia was in 2013 when a broker handled a one-time transaction for 22 cases of wine. — Alpha Omega Winery (@AOWinery) [March 23, 2017](#)

But *Town & Country* has learned that there is another connection between Nunes's winery investment and President Trump. That link is Michel Rolland, a ["rock star winemaking consultant"](#) often referred to as "the flying winemaker," who helped open Alpha Omega in 2006 and had been working with the winery's general manager since 2001.

Just two years before that, in 1999, he'd begun consulting on establishing [the ill-fated Kluge Estate Winery, which is now owned by the Trumps](#). As of December 2011, after Trump took control of the winery, according to a [blog post](#) by *Washington Post* wine critic [Dave McIntyre](#), "Rolland himself is still a consultant."

That suggests that for at least a few years, Rolland was working both for Trump Winery and Nunes' Alpha Omega Winery.

"Outside of Michel Rolland, I cannot think of one connection between Trump Winery and Alpha Omega," Alpha Omega communications director Kelly Carter said by email. Asked to arrange an interview with Rolland, who's featured on Alpha Omega's web site, Carter said, "I'm sorry but I cannot assist in this request. I can confirm that Devin has not met Michel."

Carter said Nunes has had nothing to do with running the winery and is simply “one of a few friends Alpha Omega managing partner Robin Baggett invited to invest in the winery in 2005. None of the investors has ever been involved with the management of the company. Robin is the sole managing partner and ultimate decision maker at Alpha Omega. Robin has made a point to never mix politics with the business of Alpha Omega.”

Rolland did not reply to an email sent to the contact listed on his web site and Trump Winery’s general manager did not immediately reply to a voicemail seeking an interview. Nunes’ chief of staff said the congressman was not available for an interview.