



By Devon Avery

"You can sort of divide my life into thirds -- first baseball, then law and now wine," said Alpha Omega Winery owner Robin Baggett. With an easy smile and a warm laugh, he let on, "When I was eight, I talked my parents into telling the newspaper I was ten, so I could get a paper route. I spent every cent I earned on baseball cards."

Proud of his Salinas, California, upbringing, Robin said, "It was a 'Leave it to Beaver' town back then." Sports was a key ingredient in their close-knit family. He took great joy in telling me, "My mom could beat me in one-on-one basketball until I was a teenager."

Attending Cal Poly on a baseball scholarship, Robin admits that's all he cared about. "I could have played professionally, but a close friend of my dad's gave me some great advice. I'll always remember his words, 'You're good enough, you'll sign, you'll play, but at 30 you'll still be a back-up catcher. If you go to law school, I guarantee you'll be a partner by the time you're 30.'"

He soon discovered he had an aptitude for the law. "It's really an advanced course in common sense," Robin said. Graduating at the top of his class, he clerked for Justice William P. Clark, Jr. at the California Supreme Court and joined the prestigious firm of Morrison Foerster. "Clark was my mentor. He taught me how to be a clear thinker. 'Don't make things complicated,' he would say. And always with a reminder that there are consequences to your actions," he added.

As in sports, Robin brought his competitive nature and good instincts to the law, and he said, "Nobody worked harder than I did." Living in the Bay Area with his first wife when their daughter Kelly was born, Robin missed the country. The family moved to San Luis Obispo, and he started accumulating ranch land. After their son Scott was born, Robin became General Counsel for the Golden State Warriors. "It was great. After work we got to

play on their practice court," Robin said, letting his "kid at heart" enthusiasm show through.

As you can imagine, sports has continued to play a role. Robin built a rope arena on his ranch, and friends would show up in the evening to practice team roping. "I had the steers, so they just had to bring the beer," he laughed. Rodeoing and trail rides are still a part of Robin's life. "This will be my 33rd year riding the Rancheros Vistadores trail ride in May. I rode with my old friend Bill Clark, and, for a few years, Ronald Reagan rode with us as well. That guy genuinely liked people," he said, thinking back.

Running cattle on his ranch, he realized the quality of the soil and the climate made this Edna Valley land better suited for growing grapes. Still practicing law full-time, he determined that making wine was not his forte. "I didn't have the patience." So, along with law partner Bill Schiebelhut, they started "playing the grape market." Well, "life is kind of like bumper cars," he found out. "You knock up against something, turn and go in another direction." Robin is a man who learns something valuable from every bump. To protect themselves against a fickle market, they built a custom crush facility. Since some wineries prefer utilizing other facilities, Mondavi offered them a five-year contract and others followed.

Excited by what they saw in Edna Valley, the partners launched their own brand in 1998, and Tolosa Winery was born. Cognizant of the prevailing practice, Robin felt selling wine through distributors was a disadvantage. "I just thought there had to be a better way," he said. Doing business only in California allowed him to sell directly to wine shops and restaurants. Then in 2005, a Supreme Court decision opened up "direct to consumer" sales in many states around the country.

While contemplating an expansion into the Napa Valley, Robin met marketing expert Michelle Fields, whom

he later married. He smiled, "I knew there was something special there." They contacted a Napa realtor with exacting criteria for a winery. It had to be on Highway 29, on the east side and have a good permit. The old Quail Ridge Winery came on the market, and it was a perfect fit.

Once the property was in escrow, Robin told Michelle, "You better get to work and come up with a name. And it's got to start with an 'A'."

"Like AAA Bail Bonds in the yellow pages?" I asked. "Exactly," he laughed in agreement. After some careful thought, Michelle looked at him with that "I've got it" look in her eye and asked, "Who's the greatest winemaker?" "Jesus Christ," Robin replied. "And he's the Alpha and the Omega," she grinned.

For the Baggetts, forming life-long relationships is the key to success. Building that bond takes the team all around the country into people's homes. Robin explained, "We shy away from wine dinners in restaurants for a more intimate experience with members and friends. We really love bringing people to Alpha Omega for events as well." Staff relationships are just as important as they continue to grow. "Talented people pay for themselves. We believe in our people." Robin said.

As Events Director Vickie Andreassi offered, "No matter how intense it may get in the final hours of preparation for an event, Robin knows we'll pull it off. That kind of confidence and support is beyond measure."

Embracing the new world and the old world, the Baggetts have recently purchased a significant interest in Perinet Winery, a Spanish vineyard in an area known for its powerful reds. They will be able to incorporate Perinet into the Alpha Omega and Tolosa offerings and sell their California wines in Spain.

So it seems Robin's "advanced course in common sense" and good instincts are at work once again.

# Up Close and Personal with Robin Baggett