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Keeping It in the Family: Next Generation Successes in Sonoma County

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Vista of Hawley Vineyards and Winery

Précis. In this second of two articles on Northern California's next-generation successes, Drs. Lucia and John Gilbert share the generational-transition stories of six highly-regarded family-owned and operated Sonoma County wineries: [*A. Rafanelli Winery*](#), [*Hafner Vineyard*](#), [*Hawley Winery*](#), [*J. Rochioli Vineyards and Winery*](#), [*Nalle Winery*](#), and [*Peterson Winery*](#), offer insights and reflections, and a coda.

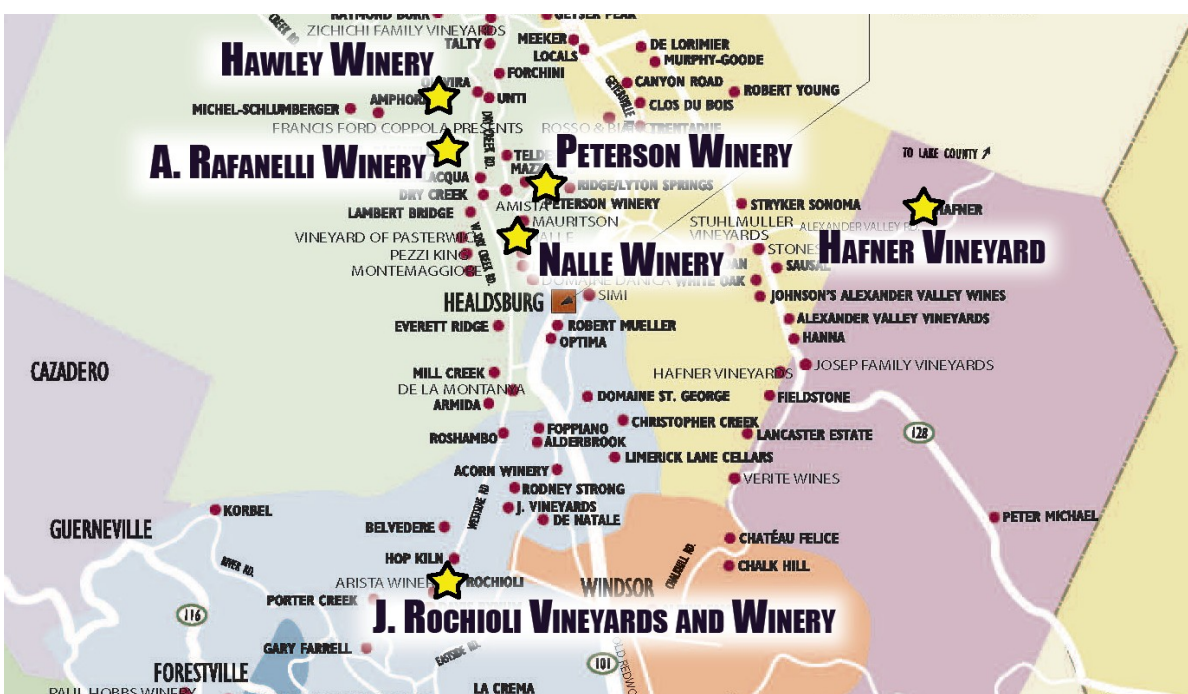
California's independently owned and operated small family wineries face a difficult future. These wineries, particularly those with vineyards and a known brand, face pressures to sell rather than retain a family business. [The industry is experiencing increased competition and costs associated with decreased sales](#), an influx of corporate and private money, and further consolidation.¹

To provide an in-depth perspective from the family wineries themselves, we identified wineries having significant next-generational involvement in the Napa and Sonoma regions. Our first article [provided stories from six families in the Napa Valley](#). We focus here on Sonoma County, with its rich history of excellent farming, grape growing, and quality wine.

We contacted six families with highly-regarded wineries that, parallel to the Napa wineries, had significant next-generational involvement and had been established by the 1980s and 1990s. All six wineries are near [Healdsburg](#), a popular tourist destination.

Each family participated in a conversation about their particular "Generational Transition" and the career paths of the children who have become involved. We also asked their advice for those families that might be considering a generational transition.

This article shares their generational-transition stories and provide insights and reflections from the conversations. The wineries of the six families, along with the year the winery was established in parentheses, are: *A. Rafanelli Winery* (1911), *Hafner Vineyard* (1982), *Hawley Winery* (1996), *J. Rochioli Vineyards and Winery* (1982), *Nalle Winery* (1984), and *Peterson Winery* (1985). The map depicts the approximate location of each winery.



Partial map of Sonoma County

Meeting with the families in-person was a privilege and a valuable opportunity. We not only experienced the beauty of their vineyards, but also the families' passion and commitment for their work, and their kind hospitality. The conversations were wide-ranging, informative, and illuminating.

Rashell (Shelly) Rafanelli-Fehlman, A. Rafanelli Winery (Dry Creek Valley)



Vista of A. Rafanelli Vineyard

"Our winemaking style has come from four generations of experience, and we have always prioritized quality over quantity." Shelly Rafanelli

[A. Rafanelli Winery](#) is a successful fourth-generation family business and one of California's foremost producers of Zinfandel wine. The winery was founded in 1911 by Italian immigrants, Letizia and Alberto Rafanelli, Shelly's great-grandparents. According to Shelly, "if it wasn't for my great-grandmother, Letizia, we wouldn't be here." Letizia grew up in a winemaking family in Tuscany, but as a woman was prohibited by Italian law to inherit any of the family's land. After emigrating to California, "she taught my great-grandfather how to grow grapes and make wine!" The family bought farmland in the Dry Creek Valley in the 1920s, beginning what is now an over 100-year stretch of working with the vines.

Americo, Letizia and Alberto's son and Shelly's grandfather, was the next winemaker. He died unexpectedly in 1987, and Dave, his son and Shelly's father, then became winemaker. Dave, a graduate of UC Davis, had been the general manager at *Lambert Bridge Winery* in nearby Healdsburg. Shelly has been the winemaker since 2000.

Each generation made a unique and significant contribution to the family winery and built on the previous generation's foundation. Americo moved winery operations from Healdsburg to its present location in the Dry Creek Valley in the early 1950s, cultivated premium Zinfandel grapes, and in 1973, released the first wine having the *A. Rafanelli Winery* label.

Dave convinced his father Americo to cultivate Cabernet grapes on the property, and they later added Cabernet Sauvignon to the winery's portfolio. Shelly made a similar request to plant Merlot, but Dave initially had mixed feelings about doing so. During a 2000 [Wine Spectator](#) interview, he mentioned "allowing Rashell to make 500 cases of Merlot. I decided that it was only fair to indulge my daughter," noting, "My father didn't want me to start with the Cabernet either."

A. Rafanelli is well known for its three premium red wines, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot—the only single varietals it produces—and also crafts a Bordeaux-style blend. Annual production is about 10,000 cases, and the winery uses sustainable farming practices. The wines are mostly sold directly from the winery.

Dave and Shelly both believe the winery's continued success can be attributed to knowing their land, love of farming, following traditional winemaking practices, and focusing on quality over quantity. The wines consistently receive high praise for their excellent quality and value.



Shelly and Dave Rafanelli (Credit: Kim Carroll)

Both the Cabernet and Zinfandel come from old vines and share a pure, if not rustic, quality that emphasizes ripeness, depth, and concentration of the fruit. The 2018 Dry Creek Valley Cabernet Sauvignon was listed among [Eric Asimov's 2023 "most memorable" wines](#). A. Rafanelli Dry Creek Zinfandel was in the top ten of the ["The World's Most Wanted Zinfandels"](#) on Wine-Searcher in February, 2024, and its 2017 Zinfandel was the Winner of [Vivino's 2020 Wine Style Awards](#).

The Family and Its Generational Transitions. A. Rafanelli Winery remains very much a family operation. Both Dave, now 75, and his wife Patty continue in management activities. Shelly, as noted earlier, heads up winemaking. Her sister Stacy holds a law degree and oversees hospitality, direct-to-consumer matters, and sales relations; she joined the family business in 2007. Craig Fehlman, Shelly's husband, manages all vineyard operations.

Dave and Patty's three daughters were always encouraged to follow their own interests. Shelly said, "Growing up I did not see myself as a winemaker" and planned on staying in the business side of the wine industry. She completed a degree in agricultural business with a marketing concentration from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, in 1996. The next step in her career plan was to work in marketing. At this point, Craig, then her fiancé, questioned why she was not working with the family and encouraged Shelly to approach her dad for a job. Shelly said, "I realized the special opportunity I had in this beautiful appellation to follow my passion."

When Shelly asked Dave about a position, he said, "We do not have a marketing department, but you could start working with the cellar crew." So she began as a "cellar rat," moved up to assistant winemaker, and eventually was promoted to winemaker in 2000, all the while learning from her father and taking courses at UC Davis. "My dad felt comfortable with me and gave me free rein. I think it helped that I was diligent and focused and that he realized 'she can do this.'" She went on to say, "My

dad is a great farmer and a celebrated winemaker. He has enormous knowledge to pass on. It was hard for him to give up the title of winemaker."

When we asked Shelly if there were "aha moments" that reinforced her love for wine and her chosen career path, there were two. The first was making wine at Cal Poly that made her realize her interest in the winery. The second was discovering "the love of creating something from beginning to end." Shelly early on had worked with a crew replanting a Cabernet vineyard to Merlot and training the vines. Later, while harvesting the grapes and tasting the fruit, she convinced Dave to let her make a barrel of Merlot on her own. It turned out to be a successful experiment!



The Rafanelli Family

When asked what she most loved about her involvement as a fourth-generation family member, she said "I have a history that I can share with customers. As I get older, I get more attached to our history and family traditions." Raising her son Caden, now 15 (second from right in photo), in this environment, working side by side at harvest, "makes me a proud mother."

Fifth-generation involvement looks promising. Caden drives the forklift, does punchdowns, and helps in the vineyards. Her eight-year-old niece, Stacy's daughter, is already leading tours for visitors.

Considerations in Planning for a Generational Transition. Shelly's advice included good financial planning and a business plan that can be revised as needed. A case in point is the 2020 Glass fire that prevented release of the 2020 vintage because of smoke taint—the first time this had occurred in the winery's long history—and required changes to its five-year business plan. Members of the next generation need to see opportunity, where they can contribute, and how they can add value. Also important is a family's ability to reach agreement on key business issues. These may include how to move the business forward without increasing production and how to generate interest among new customers.

Shelly noted that the next generation will feel pressure to maintain the quality for which a family winery is known, and may have their abilities initially questioned. Reflecting on her own experience at *A. Rafanelli*, as a woman winemaker and the daughter of an industry icon, some people asked, ". . . is the wine as good? Her father took the wines to another level, what does she know?" Shelly stayed true to her passion and stayed the course. All to say, a next-generation winemaker, regardless of gender, needs to possess a strong vision and stay true to their passion. Doing so will help ensure the winery's success.

Parke Hafner, spouse Sarah, brother Scott, and daughter Kate Bernal-Hafner, Hafner Vineyard (Alexander Valley)



Vista of Hafner Vineyard

"Our focus is on producing high quality wine at a good value with personal service. Sustainability and 'doing the right thing' guide our family and business." Parke and Scott Hafner

We looked forward to visiting [Hafner Vineyard](#), a third-generation winery with a gorgeous property in Alexander Valley. The winemaking style of Parke Hafner, the founding winemaker, was greatly influenced by his time in France, one of his two daughters chose studies in Bordeaux over UC Davis, and his other daughter did a harvest there. In short, there is a strong "French connection" at *Hafner*.

From what we had read, *Hafner* wines are only sold direct to their patrons and leading California restaurants. The winery is vertically integrated in that the family handles all the vineyard management, winemaking, bottling, shipping and handling, marketing, and patron follow-up.

Our conversation took place on Parke and Sarah's patio overlooking their beautiful vineyards. Parke prepared delicious cappuccino for us and Sarah served French Madeleines. We were joined by Kate and talked with Scott by phone a few days later. The family's hospitality was exceptional, and, as we learned later, central to their philosophy as a family and as a family business.

While still residing in Berkeley, Dick and Mary Hafner, Parke and Scott's parents, in 1967 purchased a 250-acre Sonoma County ranch, 96 of which were orchards. Dick, a former journalist, headed up public affairs at UC Berkeley and managed the property from afar. By 1974, the orchards had been converted to grapevines. Sustainable farming practices are used in the vineyards and certified through the [California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance](#).



Four Generations of the Hafner Family

Parke grew up in Berkeley and saw his father making homemade wine. In high school he worked in his parents' vineyards, liked science, and specified winemaking on his successful application to UC Davis. After his junior year there, he and a cousin traveled throughout Europe, where Parke found "an appreciation for the quality of life there and its relation to the wine industry." Returning in 1979 and graduating that year, Parke then took a position at *Chappellet* in Napa, working for two years with the well-regarded winemaker, Tony Soter.

He and Sarah married in 1981, the same year his parents decided to build a winery on their property. Parke and Sarah, also a graduate of UC Davis, worked a harvest in France's Burgundy region at *Domaine des Comtes Lafon in Meursault*—part of their honeymoon trip—and the decision to construct the winery was confirmed upon their return. With a class offered by Roger Bolton at UC Davis on winery design under their belts and assistance from Tony Soter with the design and construction, the winery was completed in 1982. Soter also consulted on their first harvest that year, with Parke as the winemaker. Parke now oversees grape growing as well.

Parke noted that "his father relinquished control and gave him agency." Scott, his younger brother, and now director of marketing, agreed, adding, "There was no question that they were the owners, but they gave us both running room and were hands off." He also credits their parents with guidance in their developing openness in their management style. "Our father never took a vote on things with the family—we just kept talking until we could reach agreement."

Scott, who followed the Liberal Arts route in college, told us that he wanted to have a role in the family business and "did not want to be left out." He had worked in marketing in SF for several years and, upon joining the family business in 1984, was tasked with creating a "direct-to-consumer" marketing strategy, with personal service as its goal. He has done this very successfully.

Parke's winemaking style is described as "Old World," and his wines tend to be lower in alcohol and higher in acidity, reflecting the influence of the "French connection" mentioned earlier. He doesn't submit wines for judging, but consistently positive reviews and descriptions are available. Both the *2021 Reserve Chardonnay* and *2019 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon*, as examples, received ratings of 4.3/5 on *Vivino*. The Chardonnay was described as "fruit-forward and lively on the palate," and the Estate Cabernet as "having aromas of Bing cherries, raspberries, blackberries, cassis, and fresh mint, and well balanced." Parke also crafts a Malbec blend, Rosé, and sparkling Blanc de Blancs. All the wines are ["Estate bottled"](#) and annual production is 12,000 cases.

Patrons of their wines note that *Hafner* wines have finesse and balance and can be purchased at a reasonable price. Providing excellent wine at an attractive price is an important goal for the Hafner family and is part of their direct-to-consumer model. Not surprisingly, their wines sell out quickly.

The Family and Its Generational

Transition. Parke and Sarah's daughters are third-generation, and their older daughter Kate has become part of the generational transition. She told us that "her father said he would love to have me come back when there's a need for you; you need to bring knowledge and experience to the business." She returned in 2012, is a valuable part of the *Hafner Vineyard* sales team, initiated a new program to cultivate the next generation of Hafner patrons, and reports to Scott, her uncle, who focuses on the business side of *Hafner*. Kate's portfolio continues to grow and includes hospitality and social media, among other responsibilities.



Scott Hafner and Kate Bernal-Hafner

Kate attended Boston College as a communications major, graduating in 2009. Working at Ralph Lauren during the summers led to a job in Connecticut and eventually to being an operations manager. That was followed by harvest internships in France and Argentina. More recently, she earned an MBA in Wine Business Management from Sonoma State University.



Sarah Hafner and daughter Grace

When we asked her if there were "aha moments" that reinforced her love of wine and her chosen career path, she said, "It has been in our core. Wine is not a job. It is a lifestyle. There's a feeling that this is right, it is so comfortable." Kate loves working with her uncle and considers him a role model. The longer she works with him the more she respects his approach and thinking. When asked what she most loved about her involvement as a third-generation family member, her response was, "carrying on our history."

Grace, the younger daughter and a 2013 graduate of Tufts University, is living in Bordeaux, where she earned a Master of Business and Science in vineyard and winery management from Bordeaux Sciences Agro. She is currently the winemaker for *Domaine de la Solitude* in Martillac. The family hopes to see Grace transition into the position of winemaker at *Hafner Vineyard*, working together with her father for several years.

As for the fourth generation, Kate has two children, ages five and two. Both were engaged in a recent event at the winery, the younger on the tractor with her grandfather and the older helping her grandmother arrange flowers.

Considerations in Planning for a Generational Transition. Parke focuses on the family side of *Hafner* and advises not tracking children into the business but instead giving them the ability to step away to try something different. He suggests allowing children to make mistakes and learn from them, and let things evolve naturally.

Scott, who is business-oriented, recommends having a heterogeneous team with different skills. He adds that the next generation must have interest and ability in areas crucial to the ongoing well-being of the business. He noted that, "what is fair may not be equal, and that the decision-making process must be clear to all members, and decisions that are made, respected."

John Hawley and sons Paul and Austin, Hawley Winery (Dry Creek Valley)

"College was instrumental to my sons' maturity. Sending them to college was one of my best decisions."
John Hawley

It was a beautiful drive up the curving road to the [Hawley Winery](#). Located off of Mt. View Ranch Road on Bradford Mountain, it is at altitudes exceeding 1,000 feet and safely above the fog line. The family home is perched high on a hill above the winery and looks down on the picturesque outside tasting area where we meet John Hawley, the founding winemaker, and his sons Paul and Austin for our conversation.

Hawley Winery has an unusual history. Just before John went to UC Davis to study enology and viticulture, he and his spouse Dana, also a UC Davis graduate, learned about a property owned by Dana's uncle. It had been damaged by fire and was for sale. John noted that his father suggested he purchase it: "We signed a scrap of paper, paying interest only for five years and then the full payment." That agreement was reached in 1977.

John completed his degree in 1980. He subsequently held positions for the next 16 years at *Clos du Bois*, being its first winemaker, and then at *Kendall-Jackson (K-J)*. He was chief winemaker there (1990–1996) and responsible for one of California's most popular Chardonnays. Meanwhile, he was also at work on their hillside property, viewed as excellent terroir for their future vineyard. They built a home, ripped out old diseased vines, and planted a new seven-acre block of Merlot, which also served as the core of *K-J's*



John Hawley with falcon in training

reserve program while John was chief winemaker. This block had to be replanted in 2000 because of *phylloxera*, the same year the building housing the winery was erected.



Hawley organic vineyards

John left *K-J* in 1996, where he had expanded production to over 2.5 *million* cases per year, to start his own "*Hawley*" label, and as he says, "to get my hands dirty again; I am a farmer." Using borrowed equipment, he started making wines under his own label. His sons joined the business full time in 2005. Ten years later, John, now in his mid-70s, stepped back from production to devote more time to [falconry](#). His son Austin is now the winemaker.

The Hawley family farms about 10 acres of Estate vineyards planted to Viognier, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc, all on *phylloxera*-resistant rootstock. The vineyards have been certified organic (CCOF) since 2006. *Hawley* offers a wide range of premium varietal wines, with most being crafted in lots of less than 500 cases. John says, "Making wines in small lots from select vineyards allows us to capture the character of a vineyard and a vintage, the *terroir*." Total production is about 3,500 cases a year.

The wines from *Hawley* consistently merit high praise. As examples, the 2018 *Estate Cabernet Sauvignon* was awarded Double Gold at the *San Francisco Chronicle* Competition, as were the 2020 *Old Vine Zinfandel* and the 2020 *Estate Merlot*. The 2020 *Cabernet Franc* received Double Gold at the American Fine Wine Competition, and the 2021 *Reserve Pinot Noir* earned a Gold Medal at the Orange County Fair Competition. *Hawley* sells much of its production through its wine club and has a tasting room and art gallery featuring Dana's works in downtown Healdsburg.

The Family and Its Generational Transitions. Our discussion was quite lively, and reflected a strong relational foundation and mutual respect among John and his two children. We learned later in the conversation that Dana has a central role in the family, particularly as the mediator who looks at all sides of issues that arise.

Paul, who is a few years older than Austin, described how they "were always around wine" from a young age. John encouraged his sons to taste and train their palates: "We started tasting when we were in grammar school and our father was at *KJ*" and participated in "go to work with dad" days.

Encouraged to attend college, both sons graduated from UC Santa Cruz, Paul with a BA in film production in 2003, and Austin with a degree in biological sciences in 2006. The year following his graduation, Paul traveled to New Zealand and Australia to pursue his interests in film. He ended up supporting himself by working the 2004 vintage in a winery that specialized in Sauvignon Blanc. Austin took a break from his studies that year to visit Paul and to research the wines and style of New Zealand and Australia. Importantly, they had received no pressure to be involved in the family business.

We asked Paul and Austin if there were "aha moments" that reinforced their love for wine and their chosen career paths." Austin said that it was not until he was in college that he began to realize all the opportunities in the world of wine and "how cool it was to own a winery." Most important, however, was a conversation with Paul in Australia about saving the family farm.

Both sons returned to the winery full time in 2006 and discussed with John where they could fit into the business. After much arguing and discussion, the three of them were able to come to an agreement on how to move forward. Both Paul and Austin saw investing in the winery as providing a unique professional opportunity and a place for them to contribute. John was pleased that both sons brought "new ideas, vision, and style" and that they both "could feel real ownership."

Paul, who is talented with numbers, completed a certificate program in small-business administration, started the wine club, developed a marketing plan, and predicted that a tasting room in downtown Healdsburg would be wise financially (it is). Austin, with his outgoing personality, headed up sales and started working in the cellar and taking enology courses at UC Davis.

His father oversaw Austin's winemaking over several years, giving him one wine at a time to craft from start to finish, European style. He proved his worth and took over the winemaking in 2015. John noted that "Austin has an intuitive approach to winemaking and has turned up the volume in a good way." Paul added that his father has come around to accepting Austin's winemaking style.

Both sons also have an outside creative interest. Paul loves brewing and Austin does woodworking. Third-generation involvement looks promising. Both Paul and Austin have two children who spend a lot of time on the property.



Paul and Austin Hawley

Considerations in Planning for a Generational Transition. John, who is "debt adverse," strongly advises good financial planning to minimize accumulating debt. Other advice included the next generation possessing the necessary passion and skills to continue the family winery and its legacy—be they in the areas of business, winemaking, or fixing and maintaining the equipment. "You have to be driven by your passion." The family has to be able to work together, and this needs to start when the children are young. It is also useful if the family members have diverse skills.

As for challenges and rewards, all three agreed that a small family-owned winery is a place in which one can implement ideas and see them come to fruition, and where creativity is central. Finally, they noted that "theirs is a lifestyle" and that family wineries are now competing with people who have tons of money and differ from the Hawleys, not only in their financial resources but also in their seeing a winery as simply another investment.

Tom Rochioli, daughter Rachael, and son Ryan, J. Rochioli Vineyards and Winery (Russian River Valley)



Vista of J. Rochioli Vineyards (Credit: Kim Carroll)

"I would die inside to see our family business go away. My happiness comes from my children's interest and involvement." Tom Rochioli

The history of [J. Rochioli Vineyards and Winery](#) is one of farmers who loved their land. Joe Sr. began planting new vineyards in the early 50s, mostly varietals for blending at first and then Sauvignon Blanc in 1959. He had farmed the property, Fenton Acres, since 1938 but only later had been able to purchase it. It was his son and Tom's father, Joe Jr. (1934–2022), who was prescient in his passion for growing high quality grapes, however. Over time and working with Tom, Joe took care to select the

right varietals, clones, and rootstock from France. After successfully growing Pinot Noir in 1968, Joe planted Chardonnay; both varietals were highly sought by Sonoma's top wineries.



Joe Jr. and Tom Rochioli

Tom had worked with his father in the vineyards growing up and noted, "it was tough to meet his standards, making at times for a strained relationship." He left for college, completed a degree in finance, and then worked for Bank of America in Santa Rosa. His assignment to the agricultural section of a corporate banking group educated him about the successes and failures of wineries. He had an "aha moment" working with wineries on their finances and realized that his heart was with a family winery.

Tom returned to the family farm in 1983, intrigued with the idea of changing the winery brand from Fenton Acres to *J. Rochioli Winery and Vineyards*. After some deliberation, his father agreed. Tom next generated a business plan for a winery with the family name to signify a family operation; the winery was completed in time for the first crush in 1985. Tom was named partner and business manager in 1983 at age 25, and then as winemaker in 1985 at age 27.

Tom hit a home run with his first single-vineyard Pinot Noir when *Wine Spectator* (WS) named the 1985 *J. Rochioli Vineyards & Winery* vintage as the "Best Pinot Noir in America." It was the first estate Pinot Noir crafted primarily by him at the then new winery. An article by [Dorothy Gaiter](#) provides further detail.

They farm their 130 acres of vineyards sustainably and produce an average of 8,000 to 10,000 cases per year. The winery is using the techniques of [Simonit & Sirch](#), master pruners for many famous vineyards in Burgundy, as part of a continuing process of preserving its historic vines.

J. Rochioli offers three estate wines, a fruit-forward Pinot Noir; a rich, opulent Chardonnay; and a tangy, food-friendly Sauvignon Blanc, as well as highly-regarded single-vineyard Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. Its wines consistently receive praise and accolades, with scores in the high 90s for every vintage (see [PinotFile](#), and for recent years, ratings from *Jeb Dunnuck*, *Vinous*, *Wine Enthusiast*, and WS). As one example, the 2021 *Rochioli Estate Pinot Noir* was Dunnuck's #1 pick for his Top 100 wines of 2023.

The Family and Its Generational Transition. Tom, now 66, always wanted *Rochioli* to be generational but did not want to pressure his two children to be involved. "I left and returned, and it was better for me." He wanted his children to make their own decisions but hoped they would eventually want to become part of the family business.

We met with daughter Rachael and her younger brother Ryan, both in their early 30s, in the winery's beautiful outside tasting area. An engaging conversation ensued; Tom was away that week. Reared in the Healdsburg area, both went away to college and worked elsewhere for a few years. Through a series of different circumstances for each of them, they are happy to have returned home, feeling they belong and having an important role.

Rachael completed a degree in business management in 2014 at the University of Arizona and then moved to Los Angeles. She took a position at a large spirit and wine company in sales and distribution, where she "gained a tough skin" and learned the importance of building relationships. After two years, Rachael decided she was ready to pursue a different path and looked for positions in Sonoma County.

She joined a small family-owned winery in 2016 as assistant tasting room manager to learn the hospitality side of the business. Rachael left that job when her father offered her the position of hospitality manager for *Rochioli*; Theresa, her mother, had opened the tasting room in the late 80s and successfully managed it for many years. Having been away for over four years, returning to a position with the family business had always been Rachael's long-term goal. She is now the general manager.

When asked about an "aha experience" that confirmed her career path, Rachael responded, "When I came home from LA, I *loved* coming home, this was home. The opportunity to work with my family and build on this legacy is such a gift!"

Ryan grew up helping in the vineyards and working harvest, but his passion was baseball. He was awarded a baseball scholarship from UC Davis where, sadly, a serious injury and four surgeries ended his baseball career. Ryan went on to earn a degree in Economics there in 2017 and also completed the university's certificate program in enology and viticulture. Ryan worked in the wine business after graduation for about a year.



Rachael, Tom, and Ryan Rochioli (Credit: Kim Carroll)

At this point, Ryan's passion for brewing beer led him to San Francisco (SF), where he worked for several years at two well-known breweries. The onset of the pandemic prompted him to return home to assist his dad in the vineyards and cellar and to learn winemaking from him. When we met with the family, he has just completed his fourth harvest since coming back and is now assistant winemaker and in charge of the Chardonnay program.

Ryan still continues brewing beer during down times in the cellar and is growing hops on the *Rochioli* property. His grandfather, who passed away in 2022, tasted a beer he had just made and said, "he loved it," providing Ryan with great affirmation for his brewing skills.

When asked about a possible "aha experience" that confirmed his career path and his experience as a fourth-generation family member, Ryan noted that when he came home from SF he realized, "This is what I want to do, and I have the freedom to run with it. I have always loved it here. I wanted to contribute to the history."

It is too soon to know about potential fifth-generation family involvement, but Rachael is expecting her first child.

Considerations for a Generational Transition. Tom is very concerned about the loss of family-owned farms in the Sonoma area to agribusiness, where the goal is maximizing profit rather than crafting quality wines. He advises small family-owned and operated wineries to have a good lawyer and a good accountant, and believes it is wise for someone in the family to have a business degree. A good business plan is necessary because farming is a business, and your brand and property *both* have value. Money management is also vital.

He noted that grape growing is not as lucrative as it once was, and although wine is still profitable, you cannot keep raising prices. There needs to be the passion and commitment to keep up the excellence of the winery and its brand, to continue its legacy, and to have a focus.

Rachael and Ryan talked about the compatibility within their family and its importance, and the central role of their mother in creating and maintaining a strong support system. They view as crucial having a family that gets along, is supportive and respectful, has common goals, and is open to each other's ideas.

Doug Nalle, spouse Lee, and son Andrew, Nalle Winery (Dry Creek Valley)

"As a family, we are committed to making this work." Andrew Nalle

Doug Nalle is a remarkable person of great passion and many talents who has been marching to the beat of his own drum in the Dry Creek Valley for the past 40 years. He met and married Lee Henderlong in 1974 and enrolled at UC Davis in 1976 to study viticulture and enology, earning an M.S. degree in 1979. After graduation, Doug began a four-year position with [Balverne Winery](#) in Windsor to design and construct its winery building and serve as its winemaker. In 1984 he started [Nalle Winery](#) out of a barn that he had renovated. In 1986 he next designed *Quivira* in Dry Creek Valley, serving as winemaker until 1990. That same year he built his current winery on family property.



Doug and Lee Henderlong Nalle

Central to the Nalle Winery story is Lee Henderlong Nalle's four-generational family history. Her great-grandparents, John and Martha Henderlong (1st generation), lived in Dry Creek Valley and were ranchers, as were Lee's grandparents, Fred and Ruby Henderlong (2nd generation). Fred and Ruby purchased property in Dry Creek Valley and planted grapes. Lee's parents (3rd generation) inherited this

property and granted permission to Lee and Doug (4th generation) to construct a building on the property to process grapes they purchased from the Henderlong's historic benchland Zinfandel vineyard, now listed with the [Historic Vineyard Society](#).

Lee and Doug built a home on the property in 1983 and, as noted above, a winery in 1990. The grapes from the Zinfandel vines planted in 1927 by Lee's grandparents, together with fruit sourced from local growers, are used in crafting *Nalle* wines.

Nalle Winery was started with the intention of making elegant, complex Zinfandels (Zins) in the European style of notable red wines. "We were following tradition using French oak and making wines under 14% alcohol. We wanted our wines to be food friendly." Doug had long been inspired by the wonderful Zins crafted in the 1960s by [Joe Swan](#) of *Joseph Swan Vineyards* and Lee Stewart of *Souverain* and characterized by moderate alcohol levels. The challenges associated with doing so were well known, but this was his passion.

The first vintage of *Nalle* Zinfandel was in 1984. Since then, Doug produced vintage after vintage of stellar Zins, all the while staying true to his philosophy of maintaining moderate alcohol levels. His 1987 *Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel* garnered 92 points from *Wine Spectator* confirming his belief in how great Zins could be made. His 2007 *Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel* ranked third of the wines tasted for the article, ["Zinfandel Steps Back From the Abyss."](#) by Eric Asimov, wine critic for the *New York Times*. The only wine below 14 percent in the tasting panel, it was described "as graceful yet well flavored, and lacked nothing."



Nalle "cave"

Production is about 2,000 cases a year. The winery follows sustainable regenerative farming practices, and their vineyard is dry farmed. All the wines are made in an above-ground cave, kept cool throughout the year by a living roof of rosemary.

Nalle makes small lots of Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, a proprietary Cabernet/Zinfandel blend, and, on occasion, a sparkling Rosé of Pinot Noir. The wines consistently receive high praise. For example, [Vinepair](#) included the 2015 Nalle Dry Creek Valley Estate Old Vine Zinfandel in its 2019 Top 50 list.

Doug and Lee's son Andrew (5th generation) transitioned to winemaker over a 10-year period, and he and Doug continue to work closely together. In the spring of 2022, two of Andrew's Zins earned scores of 93 and 94 from the *Wine Spectator* (WS). The 2019 Nalle Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley was listed at #32 in [WS's Top 100 Wines of 2022](#) and described as "Refined and graceful, this is a top form Zinfandel, with vibrant cherry and raspberry flavors laced with sweet anise and pepper. The finish lingers long toward polished tannins."

The Family and Its Generational Transition. Doug and Lee did not count on their two sons becoming involved in the winery and told them, "We will support you through college, then you're on your own." Their sons grew up with an appreciation of fine wine and had some involvement in the winery as youths. Andrew said he "remembers the smell from winemaking."



Doug and Andrew Nalle

Both sons left home to attend college. While in college, Andrew worked in several restaurants, which he said, "gave me an appreciation for food and wine." He graduated from the University of Redlands, his father's *alma mater*, in 2002, majoring in philosophy. To help him gain a global perspective, Andrew visited a number of international wine regions and did a harvest in South Africa. That Lee and Doug had traveled a lot to other wine areas was important to Andrew who noted, "[It] gets into the soul, the wine areas that are so beautiful."

Furthering his wine-related knowledge, Andrew took courses in Enology and Viticulture at Santa Rosa Junior College and UC Davis Extension. He recently completed an M.S. degree in Viticulture and Enology from California State University, Fresno.

Andrew's younger brother Sam pursued a different academic path. He earned a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in Biomedical Science and now works in biotech as a drug discovery and development scientist.

In August 2002, Andrew was home finishing his undergraduate thesis and working on a mobile bottling line. Doug, 55 at the time, was considering decreasing production to lower his and Lee's workload. As Doug and Andrew were sampling grapes in the vineyard, with Andrew asking lots of questions, Doug realized that he may have an interest in winemaking. Andrew, in turn, was having what we call an "aha" moment: "Why am I looking so hard for what I want to do when it is right here, and I really wanted to work for my family." He added that as much as he enjoys traveling to wine regions, he most loves being around family and being at home: "It brings a sense of comfort."

Later in our conversation as we talked about their working together, Andrew said, "My dad is adamant about how wine should be made, and I agree with him. One needs to start with great fruit but the person making the wine has to really pay attention." Doug and Andrew agreed that "the vineyard is the horse, and the winemaker needs to know how to ride it."

Andrew's spouse April holds a Masters of Viticulture from the University of Adelaide in Australia and joined the family in 2015. A partner in the business, she and Andrew now own *Nalle Winery*. April serves on the Board of Directors of the [Dry Creek Valley Association](#) and also has a leadership role with the [Sonoma County Winegrowers](#).

It is too soon to know about potential sixth-generation family involvement, but April and Andrew have three children, ranging in age from 4 to 8. They play in the vineyard and winery adjacent to their home, originally built by Ruby and Fred (2nd generation).



Nalle Family

Considerations for a Generational Transition. The Nalles' advice was both philosophical and practical. At the top of the list were, "Would you do this for no money?" "Do you have the passion?" and "Do you want to work really hard?"

The practical questions included: Is it viable financially? Do those who want to join in have the needed skills and commitment? Is there healthy communication within the family?

Another important consideration is maintaining the reputation of the brand. As Doug noted, "you are only as good as your last vintage."

Their final advice is to have a sense of humor. To wit, they have created a faux family coat of arms with two squirrels and a Latin motto, "*Vinum sapientiam tibi dat*," that translates to "Wine makes you smart."

Fred Peterson and son Jamie, Peterson Winery (Dry Creek Valley)

"The Peterson approach is capturing the essence of vintage and vineyard—a philosophy we call Zero Manipulation—with low tech, yet high touch, to produce wines of a place, wines with soul." Fred and Jamie Peterson.

[Peterson Winery](#) was established in 1987 and has been producing wine in Dry Creek Valley for 30 years. The man behind the operation is described by [Henry Jeffreys](#) as the charmingly curmudgeonly Fred Peterson. He is widely known as an iconoclast with an old-world winemaking philosophy and a reverence for sustainable farming; he serves on the Board of Directors of the [Dry Creek Valley Association](#).

After high school and serving four years in the Navy, Fred enrolled at UC Santa Cruz. Not certain of his professional goals, he took a leave in 1973 that led to a job in a friend's vineyard. This experience and vineyard and agriculture classes at Mendocino Junior College sparked his interest in viticulture and winemaking. Fred expanded his wine-related skills by working for *Bargetto Winery* in Santa Cruz and at *Corbans Winery* in New Zealand. While "down under," he spent time exploring the wineries and vineyards of Australia and did a harvest at *Charles Krug Winery* in St. Helena upon his return to California. His next step was completing his undergraduate degree at UC Davis in 1978, where he studied viticulture and enology.



Fred Peterson

After several years working as a vineyard consultant in the Healdsburg region, Fred established *Peterson Winery* in 1987. His son Jamie, 43, became its winemaker in 2006, and Fred, in his mid-70s, is the viticulturist. Fred maintains a vineyard consulting practice, served as a volunteer firefighter/engineer/EMT for the Geyserville Fire Protection District for over three decades, and is a director of the Northern Sonoma County Fire District.

The family farms some 16 acres of vines organically on their Bradford Mountain Estate Vineyard. Comprising 10 varietals and located on the northwest side of Dry Creek Valley, it is at over 1200 feet in elevation. *Peterson* crafts wines with fruit from their own vineyard as well as from the Tollini Vineyard in Mendocino County, among others.

The winery is known for its Zinfandel and a range of red and white varietals and blends. The wines are beautifully balanced and receive excellent reviews. As examples, the 2019 *Estate Cabernet Sauvignon* was awarded Gold at the *San Francisco Chronicle* Competition, as was the 2017 *Sangiovese*. Its 2015

Barbera, sourced from Tollini Vineyard, received a Double Gold. Annual production is about 8,000 cases.

The Family and Its Generational Transition. Fred is very proud of Jamie, his middle child, and said "I would not have been able to predict which child would be interested in carrying on the farming." Jamie, in turn, said that he had felt no pressure from his dad to be involved.



Jamie Peterson

Jamie enrolled at Humboldt State in Fall 1999, and after his first year, completed a harvest at the family winery. He worked two harvests in Australia and New Zealand in 2001 to gain an international perspective. In the summer of 2002, his dad's assistant winemaker left, and Jamie agreed to fill in for that year. He was taking winemaking classes at that time and working at a local restaurant as well. Jamie took on more and more responsibilities at the winery over the next few years, including handling its relocation to Timber Crest Farms in the Dry Creek Valley. He redesigned the new winery space and oversaw addition of the tasting room the next year. In 2006, Jamie was given the overall responsibilities as winemaker and general manager.

Jamie is strongly committed to continuing his father's winemaking style. He and Fred share the

same ethos and are respectful of each other. The Petersons practice the philosophy of Zero Manipulation, a term they have trademarked. "Great wine is about place and vintage and not about creating a preconceived style thought to attract sales and accolades. We believe in 'low tech/high touch' winemaking methods," the hallmark of their trademarked term. Once the grapes are harvested, it becomes the winemaker's responsibility to continue the balancing act associated with operations in the cellar. Quoting them, "[they] try to achieve a balance from bud break in the spring until the grapes are picked in the fall." Of note is that *Peterson* red wines are neither fined nor filtered.

When we asked Jamie what he most loved about his involvement as the second-generation winemaker, his response was "my selfish enjoyment of winemaking." He also enjoys tasting grapes during harvest and hearing positive comments about his wine. He shared a recent example that clearly pleased him. A couple who had served his wine at their wedding some years ago, came by to visit and taste and to introduce their teenage son to the Petersons. The tasting room was closed, but Jamie, who was working in the cellar at the time, came out to greet them and provided a tasting!

Third-generation involvement looks promising. Jamie has two children, and his sister Emily, who had been in charge of sales and marketing before starting a family, has a young son.

Considerations in Planning for a Generational Transition. Fred takes a glass-half-full view of the future for small producers and their families. "As the big get bigger, there will be more opportunities

for small producers who craft great wines." He sees direct-to-consumer marketing as increasingly important.

Like many others having a small family winery, he is an advocate of involving children in the winery as they grow up. If they show interest, he recommends putting them to work to see what they can do, or getting them an internship away from home to test out their skills and level of passion.



View from Peterson's Bradford Mountain Estate Vineyard overlooking the Russian River Valley

Reflections on Our Conversations

We turn now to what we learned from these families about their continuing success, advice for others, on-going challenges, and benefits of next-generational involvement. We cannot emphasize enough how impressive these families are collectively and how remarkable they are as individuals.

Commonalities and Advice. Operating a small family winery is no small feat! It requires focus, skill, hard work, and commitments to one's family in addition to three crucial components of success for a winery: Excellent vineyards, exemplary winemaking, and strong sales. These six families demonstrate success in these three crucial areas while also involving the next generation and continuing the family legacy.

With regard to *winemaking*, the current winemaker at four of the families is "a next-generation winemaker," and each one crafts excellent wines, as evidenced by ratings and reviews. For the two other families, the son or daughter of the current winemaker is likely to be the next winemaker. With regard to *vineyards*, the families farm organically and [sustainably](#). Indeed, caring for the vineyards and preserving the land for the future was a prominent theme. With regard to *sales*, several wineries have developed successful direct-to-consumer models and others are increasing their focus on it.

Further Collective Advice. See summary below.

- Solid estate and financial planning, minimal borrowing and debt accumulation;
- Access to a good lawyer and accountant, and ideally someone in the family with a business degree;
- Love for what you are creating and being driven by your passion;
- Modeling your caring for the land and farming for the next generation;
- Freedom for children to find their own way, including a college education and time away from home;
- On-going respect for parents/grandparents and what they have created;
- Children having the passion, interest, and ability/skills, including hands-on experience, to build on the previous generation's foundation;
- Clear roles for children in the family business, associated with agency and room to contribute;
- Compatible, supportive, and respectful family having common goals and open to others' ideas;
- Sense of humor in dealing with all the complexities involved.

On-going Challenges. Our conversations also elicited challenges that these families have navigated and that those considering a generational transition need to heed.

- Sound, flexible business plan and careful money management;
- Clear decision-making process, and respecting decisions that are made;
- Ability to manage the pressure of keeping up the brand;
- Ability to reach agreement on key business issues, including how to generate interest from new customers and move the business forward without increasing case production;
- Ability to manage unexpected challenges such as losing a vintage due to extreme weather changes and fires.

Rewards and the Next-Generation Career Paths. The rewards of being involved as a next-generation family member were evident in our discussions. All had gone away to school and found their way back to the family business having experienced their own unique "aha" experiences. They spoke with ardent feeling about being able to contribute to the family business and how "right it feels" to build on the family legacy. Rachael Rochioli, from the fourth generation of her family, told us, "The opportunity to work with my family and build on this legacy is such a gift!"

Austin and Paul Hawley, members of the second generation, noted, "ours is a lifestyle, not simply another investment." Kate Hafner, a member of the third generation, responded similarly: "It has been in our core. Wine is not a job. It is a lifestyle."

The next-generation family members have acquired the necessary education and skills, and have the requisite dedication and passion. Notably, of these six families, all the current and likely future winemakers are next generation! Many of the next-generation family members have degrees in wine business and sales and are business savvy.

Also obvious was the joy associated with their chosen career path. Shelly Rafanelli, a fourth-generation winemaker, said "I have a history that I can share with customers. As I get

older, I get more attached to it." Raising her son Caden, now 15, in this environment, working side by side at harvest, "makes me a proud mother." Jamie Peterson, when asked what he most loved about his involvement as the second-generation winemaker, responded, "my selfish enjoyment of winemaking, and hearing positive comments about my wine." The winemaker Andrew Nalle, also second-generation, added that as much as he enjoys traveling to wine regions, he most loves being around family. "I really wanted to work for my family."



Path in J. Rochioli Vineyards (Credit: Kim Carroll)

Closing Remarks

The conversations we had with six families in the Russian River, Dry Creek, and Alexander Valleys of Sonoma County left us deeply moved by their success at maintaining their respective wineries. Each family is passionate about their vineyards, their wines, and addressing the challenges facing them that range from weather and costs of doing business to sales. In every case, the children who are assuming roles in the wineries are doing so with enthusiasm and a vision for the future. They left us with confidence that such wineries will continue to prosper despite the challenges.

Coda

Our Sonoma County and Napa Valley conversations were characterized by remarkable similarities. Wine quality, sustainable agriculture and organic farming practices, informed financial planning, and passion for continuing their legacy as a family-owned winery were all paramount. Their respect and care for the land and their embrace and love for the lifestyle were unmistakable, despite the hard work involved and the on-going challenges faced by these families. Moreover, they involve themselves in organizations and initiatives attempting to ensure a place for the next generation of small family wineries and provide them with a level playing field.

Among these established wineries the next generational transitions appear to be on very solid ground. In nearly all cases, the current and likely future winemakers and viticulturists are from the next

generation. Moreover, many of the next-generation family members have degrees in wine business and sales.

Their stories bring a refreshing and hopeful perspective to the doom and gloom often heard regarding the wine industry in Northern California. Their experiences and advice may also help bring about a reframing of what is possible and doable for today's family-owned wineries as they move into the future.

Notes

1. Sonoma wineries no longer family owned by a founding family include those having a publicly-traded parent company (e.g., *Constellation*, *Treasury Wine Estates*) or are owned by another entity (e.g., *Boisset Family Estates*, *E. & J. Gallo*, *Foley Family Wines*, *Jackson Family Wines*, *Vintage Wine Estates*, private equity groups.)

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