

American entrepreneur Barbara Banke divides her time between overseeing the creation of some of the finest red wine ever produced in the USA and studying the General Stud Book in a bid to keep winning on racecourses around the world

WORDS: DIANA BUTLER IMAGES: JACKSON FAMILY WINES

Barbara Banke is probably best known in the UK as a successful racehorse owner and breeder. Under her Stonestreet Stable name, Barbara's racehorse Curlin won racing's richest prize, the Dubai World Cup, in 2008, while her filly Lady Aurelia took two great races at Royal Ascot in 2016 and 2017.

However, Barbara is about to become better known at Smith's Lawn as the owner of Vérité, the official red wine of Guards Polo Club. Vérité's highly acclaimed red blends are now featured on Mosimann's wine list in the Royal Box and Clubhouse, hailing from Sonoma County in California.

Vérité is, in fact, three wines – La Muse, La Joie and Le Désir, all Bordeaux blends – created in 1998 by vigneron and Bordelais, Pierre Seillan.

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“Sonoma County is closer to the ocean so it's a little bit cooler and the conditions are more like Bordeaux,” explained Barbara. “It gives the wines a different taste. Our concept is to showcase the diverse climates – or micro-crus as Pierre would call it – within Sonoma County.

“Many wine enthusiasts think great wines from California come from the Napa Valley, but Vérité wines are from Sonoma, and in our opinion, stands among the best wines in the world. Its pedigree may be short but the wines have earned 100 points [the traditional wine scoring system] 15 times, which is tremendous.”



This interview took place late last year in London, just before Barbara and Pierre introduced the 2015 vintage from both Vérité and Cardinale, one of the family's prestigious wineries based in the Napa Valley, to Britain's wine connoisseurs and collectors. Barbara was upbeat about how the wines would be received by her British audience. “The UK has always had a lot of good wine collectors and wine connoisseurs who are mainly focused on French wines. I think Vérité will naturally appeal because it has more of that sensibility,” she said.

“Pierre is very diligent about harvesting on the fresh side of the spectrum for the grapes so they have a little bit less alcohol and more complex flavours, not as fruity,” she continued, before

adding that “Vérité is meant to be aged. It is attractive when young but gets better with time!”

Barbara has not always been involved with the wine trade; she is a property lawyer by profession. Jackson Family Wines, of which Vérité is one winery, was founded by Barbara and her late husband Jess Stonestreet Jackson, also a lawyer, in 1982. “Jess started the first winery in the early 1980s and retired from practising law in 1987 to be in the wine business full time. I was still practising law at that time, but Jess was having a great time making wines. The law wasn't nearly as much fun so I retired from

TASTE OF SUCCESS



my practice in 1990 to join Jess and build our family wine company."

Sadly, Jess died in 2011, but not before the family's wineries, which now total some 40 across several countries, had started to reap significant success. Jess was inducted into the Vintners Hall of Fame in 2009 for "his outstanding contribution to the wine business" and was named Wine Enthusiast's Wine Person of the Year in its inaugural year, 2000. Barbara went on to receive that honour in her own right 13 years later.

Today the company remains a family business. "My three children, their spouses in some cases, my stepdaughter Jenny and her daughter are all involved," said Barbara. "My son, Christopher, has a law degree and was really thinking of practising law – he clerked and did other things –but he realised the wine business is much more

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rewarding and so he came back into the wine business.

"My daughter Katie still has writing aspirations – she wants to write the great American novel – but in the mean time she is focusing on sustainability and our environmental stewardship in California, juggling that with three very small kids. Meanwhile my other daughter Julia does more of the travelling – she is on the road quite a bit for the company."

Being a California winemaker brings plenty of advantages but also some problems that are rarely encountered by French producers. "We lost some grapes in the October 2017 California wildfires so our 2017 vintage is going to be small for some of our Napa Cabernet wines, if at all. It wasn't so much that the vines were damaged but we couldn't get in to harvest in some vineyard properties. Grapes grew past optimal harvesting, resulting in lower yields in some mountain vineyards, although the vines are fine and still producing high quality fruit.

"More importantly though, all of our teams were OK. Twenty-three people lost their homes in the fires but everyone was safe. It was pretty nasty; only seven miles away from home at one point – in Alexander Valley, Sonoma County – and it was travelling so fast."

Sustainability and saving water are key issues for the modern winemaker and Barbara and her family are leading

the way with some inspired programmes to get their production off the grid as much as possible. "We have cut our water intensity by more than 60% since 2008. We will reduce water usage further through water reuse efforts through micro-filtration, which cleans water for reuse multiple times within the winery and micro-irrigation in the vineyards. We don't use a lot of water in the vineyard. We also store water on our vineyards using rainwater capture reservoirs, which has also helped to protect local fish species and control erosion.

"Even during frost events we are not using water so much as wind thanks to our investment in wind machines, which further reduces the water required to protect against frost. We have small wind machines in the vineyard which stops the frost from settling – they move the air around instead.

"All of our vineyards in California and Oregon are certified sustainable through third party organisations, although in Australia they are using biodynamic and organic methods – using things like ground-up cow horn. It's been very successful. Our biggest worry is the weeds, but we have a lot of lambs, ducks and chickens to eat them.

"We are now starting to adopt practices from our two properties in Australia throughout some of our estate vineyards in California. A lot of our lands are left to open space, so they're pretty wild, we have a lot of coyote, and mountain lion. We even have bear. It's a little hazardous. We have a lot of natural wild life on our properties that we have to manage.

"There is a mother black bear that tends to eat the best of the Cabernet Sauvignon every year and so she pretty much takes

one row. We leave it for her. They are very small and shy bears and as long as we keep her supplied with cabernet sauvignon vines she's happy!"

The other animals in Barbara's life are her racehorses. This Jockey Club steward currently has more than 100 broodmares, 50-60 horses in training and an interest in at least 20 stallions. "I go to Lexington [Kentucky] for the major horse sales and during Derby season. I am always trying to get different bloodlines for my broodmare band."

Barbara still retains an interest in her Dubai World Cup winner Curlin, whom she now stands at stud. "I have most of Curlin and his son, Good Magic as well as Maclean's Music and Carpe Diem; maybe an interest in 20 different stallions. I do have a say in which mares are sent to them although Curlin stands at Hill 'n' Dale Stud and John Sikura, our President, is really good at taking the right mares and rejecting others. I trust him."

"I have about 50-60 thoroughbred horses in training with various trainers. It depends on what we are trying to do. If we want to come to Ascot we go to Wesley Ward as he is very successful at getting the horses to Ascot. I have Chad Brown who trained

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THE WINES OF VÉRITÉ

The wines of Vérité, French for "truth" are the result of a combination of old-world experience and new-world fruit. Each wine is a distinct blend of unique components harvested from small vineyard blocks, culminating in a meticulously formed union of grape varieties, climate, soil, expression and winemaking techniques. Vigneron, Pierre Seillan, refers to this methodology as droit du sol, "right of the soil". The vines are grown on no fewer than 32 different soil types, across four different regions: Alexander Valley, Bennett Valley, Chalk Hill and Knights Valley. Each Vérité wine represents a blend of micro-crus from these mountain vineyards.

Pierre uses the term micro-cru to define his approach, which is indicative of each particular plot within an already outstanding vineyard. Vérité wines are blends of these distinctive micro-crus – crafted on the Bordelais model. La Muse should be considered a "Right Bank" or Pomerol-style wine, made from a Merlot dominated blend with Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine expresses elegance and finesse. La Joie can be seen as a "Left Bank" or Pauillac wine, which demonstrates richness and power from its predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon blend. Le Désir is chiefly made from Cabernet Franc and illustrates the opulence and grace expected of the best wines from St Emilion.

Vérité wines spend 12-14 months in new French oak; but the wood is noticeable as a softening influence, not a distinct flavour element. "Oak in wine should be like a ghost. You sense its presence, but you don't actually perceive it," explained Pierre Seillan.

The wines have a signature of impeccable balance and texture; moreover they are drinkable when first released, even though they can also age superbly for decades.

Good Magic, Mark Casse for his technical ability and a couple with Steve Asmussen who is very good with two-year-olds in the United States. He trained Curlin. Sometimes we like a few up-and-coming trainers and we give them a horse that doesn't have the best pedigree but might have some potential."

So a regular day for Barbara is pretty much a mix of wine and horses, depending on the season. Even this trip – she is heading to Switzerland and Italy after her London event – has been organised so that she is back in the USA in time to watch one of her horses run! It is no surprise to learn that Barbara's visit to Guards Polo Club this year will coincide with Royal Ascot and I think we can guess the topic of conversation between Her Majesty and Barbara Banke in the Royal Box on Cartier Queen's Cup Finals Day! 🍷

