

Prepare for That High-Paying Winery Career!
Number 67 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine in our area
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During the final public hearing in the Board of Supervisors chambers before enactment of the new El Dorado County Winery ordinance, Madroña Winery owner Paul Bush was told by Supervisor Ron Briggs “No wonder there are so many wineries here — look at all the money to be made!” To which Paul replied, “Supervisor Briggs, if you’d like to be part of a non-profit enterprise, start a winery.”

A vast gulf exists between the public perception of a winery — the romance, the elegance, the riches, the myriad of very special jobs that a winery affords, and reality. The truth is that a winery is just like every other small business — it requires continuous effort on the part of the owners and employees to survive, everyone has to work hard to make it succeed, and the work, instead of being romantic and elegant, is often dirty, wet and cold.

How to Launch Your
Wine Career

The Wine Appreciation Guild is proud to offer the first ever book detailing how to break into, and get ahead, in the wine industry.

This detailed guide is perfect for those looking to break into the industry, or those already in looking to further their career, and includes:

- Detailed job descriptions
- Educational and skill requirements
- The "career ladder"
- How to get started **\$29.95 retail**
- Job hunting strategies

Recently the email ad above arrived, suggesting the purchase of a new book (for only \$29.95) that purports to prepare you for exciting new careers in the wine industry. Included are jobs like winery owner, winemaker, cellarmaster, outside salesperson, freelance wine writer, tasting room sales associate, and many others. As a public service (and to save everyone the expense), here are my own list-based suggestions of how to prepare to enter this rapidly-growing field.

Winery owner:

1. Have a lobotomy

2. Surrender all your earthly assets in pursuit of an impossible dream.
3. Prepare for an extended period of poverty, to be exited only when you can sell the winery to some other poor fool who's been possessed by the same demonic dream..
4. Decide that working twelve hours a day, seven days a week is a "more active lifestyle."
5. Realize that you are dependent for the grapes that make your wine on growers who are trying to produce the most grapes per acre in order to avoid their own poverty, even though those overcropped grapes will make inferior wine for you.
6. Be aware that for every 1,000 cases per year you expand, another \$100,000 or so of your cash or your profits will be converted into inventory.
7. Recognize that after you started out making 4,000 cases per year, you couldn't make enough profit to afford the extra \$100,000 to expand to 5,000 cases (and the same for 6,000 cases, etc.).
8. Expect to find out that the facility you designed isn't even big enough to handle the barrels, case goods, tasting room and cubbyhole office for your 4,000 case winery.
9. Expect that the cost for permits, building materials, and construction labor to expand the winery will have gone up by 300% since you completed the facility.
10. Be prepared to entertain freelance wine writers (see below), but be prepared with reasons why you can't buy them a free lunch, at least not today when you have to file federal paperwork, especially if there's an expensive restaurant nearby.
10. Be prepared that seven other wineries will open in your neighborhood in the next few years, siphoning off the customers you've carefully courted.
11. Always reward your employees' dedication and hard work by giving them an occasional bottle or two of unlabeled wine. Try to make a ceremony of your extreme generosity.
12. Realize that your kids are so much smarter than you that they will have nothing to do with a winery.
13. Be prepared for a severe strain on your family relationships, your financial situation, your world outlook and your free time.
14. Remember that winery ownership is a form of mental illness and seek counseling before considering it.
15. But be aware that the reward for all this hardship is that you can drink all the bottles of unlabeled wine you want!

Winemaker:

1. After completing an increasingly expensive undergraduate degree, enroll in the UC Davis Master's program in Viticulture and Enology, costing at least another \$30,000.
2. After graduating from Davis, learn that the only jobs available to new graduates are cellarmaster (see below) or assistant winemaker in a small winery.
3. Realize that the starting salary for these positions is about half of what you might have earned had you taken a job after completing that increasingly expensive undergraduate degree.

4. Learn that you will always be an employee, and that the style and quality of the wine will always be dictated by the winery owner, who as we've learned, is not mentally healthy.
5. Realize that most of winemaking is about punching down fermenting vats, pumping cold liquids, driving a forklift, and cleaning up after you do all that. Try not to dream about having a cellar master (see below) as an assistant.
6. Always think of yourself as a creative artiste, skilled at creating liquid gold from the mediocre grapes the owner insists on buying.
7. Be prepared to change jobs every few years, because in most family-owned wineries, not only is there no opportunity for advancement, there is nothing to advance to.
8. Expect to spend long hours filing federal paperwork you think the owner should be responsible for, but since you work for him, what you think doesn't really matter.
9. Be ready to be trotted out as the featured speaker for frequent "winemaker dinners," where you will be expected to wax eloquent about the wines, talk with dozens of wine snobs, and pretend to be both charming and knowledgeable.
10. Be prepared to go on lots of "ride-along" sales calls, where you travel from place to place with the outside salesperson (see below), visiting bottle shops and restaurants who have just had visits from a dozen groups like you and have almost no interest in purchasing your wines.
11. Always remember, when the wine is fabulous, it's because the owner was able to see the hidden values in grapes that he bought from a grower who produced way too many tons per acre, and if it's not fabulous, it's all your fault.

"Cellar Master"

1. This is the fancy version of the true title "Cellar Rat," created to avoid the negative connotations of that title.
2. This is generally the lowest level job in any cellar, often filled by a new UC Davis enology graduate.
3. As an alternative educational qualification, it's best if you have completed most of your probation, as long as there isn't a "no-alcohol" provision in your program.
4. Get used to hearing those terms of endearment that pass from the winemaker or owner: "Here, hold this," and "Clean that up,"
5. Expect to be rewarded for your intense loyalty to the winery by being allowed to keep your job — as long as the economy is strong and sales stay good — oops!
6. Realize that you will go home at the end of each day tired, wet, cold and lonely — and those are the good points of the job.
7. Prepare a budget that allows you to eat out at least once a week, but don't plan on anything beyond MacDonald's.
8. Expect an annual bonus of up to two bottles of unlabeled wine as an extra acknowledgement of your skill and dedication.
9. Don't plan to show up for winemaker dinners — that food costs money!

"Outside Salesperson"

1. The best preparation for this job is in-depth sales experience in a related field — used cars, real estate or aluminum siding sales positions are good training.
2. Try to establish a professional appearance — keep your hair well moussed, buy the best plaid sports coats you can afford, and give evidence of being well-fed; it increases the customers' confidence.
3. Develop skillful use of sophisticated wine terms when demonstrating the wine to potential customers — emphasize the silky mouthfeel, the breadth of impact on the middle palate, and the special discounts you can provide for the wine, today only!
4. Whenever possible, bring the winemaker with you on “ride-along” sales calls, but make sure he doesn't say anything about how the wines are really made. He should just emphasize the silky mouthfeel, the breadth of impact on the middle palate, and leave the rest of the sales pitch to you, because people who think they are artistes are very poor at calculating those special discounts.
5. Insist that you be included in all winemaker dinners, because you can provide the very persuasive sales pitch that owners and winemakers are not skilled at delivering.
6. Suggest that the owner provide you with at least a dozen unlabeled bottles of wine each month so you can refine your sales pitch and decide exactly how deep the special discounts should be on each wine.

“Freelance Wine Writer”

1. Extensively travel the wine country with a small notebook and pen, taking excessive notes and always spitting the wine you taste into the dump bucket at each winery.
2. Rapidly learn which wineries will feed you a free lunch in exchange for a favorable review of their wines.
3. Whenever possible, suggest that the winery's products be tasted at the most expensive restaurant in the area, because after all, wine is food.
4. Work on asking incisive questions of the owner and winemaker at each winery, such as “Do you think you might need *just a touch* more French oak in the cellar?” or “Don't you agree that these grapes were picked just the *tiniest* bit green?” or “It's certainly a nice little wine, but do you suppose you might have left it on the skins *just a day* too long?”
5. Always suggest that the owner might want to pack up a few bottles (even unlabeled bottles) for you to take home in order to give the wines a more thorough evaluation.
6. Try to get established at a local newspaper so you can write a weekly column on local wines, but only if you live in an area where there are many wineries and really good restaurants..
7. If becoming a wine columnist doesn't work out, prepare to become a wine blogger on the Internet, but be aware that the only people who will read your blog will be yourself and your mother.

“Tasting Room Sales Associate”

1. Expect to work part-time for very low wages, pouring wine for customers, some of whom think they know more about wine than you.
2. Learn to smile when pouring each wine, no matter how bad a face the customer just made.
3. For each wine, have a ready suggestion of what the customer will taste — “Our Syrah has elegant aromas of woodsy mushrooms, subtle tones of white pepper, and a rich, complex mixture of flavors on the middle palate.”
4. Develop a varied list of foods to accompany each wine — for a Cabernet, suggest it be paired with braised lamb shanks, for a Merlot, recommend braised veal shanks, and for a Pinot Noir, tell people to try it with braised salmon shanks.
5. Remember that people who offer ideas for improvement of each wine they taste are really just trying to help the owner and winemaker enhance the quality of the wines.
6. In spite of all these drawbacks, be aware that you will brighten many customers’ days, make friendly connections with hundreds of really nice people, and provide a benefit to the winery equal to many times your salary.
7. Expect that, in return, the winery owner will reward you with an occasional bottle of unlabeled wine.