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A Journey From Teetotaler To Successful Winemaker

By DENNIS NISHI

Rolando Herrera was a teetotaler until he discovered he had a good wine palate. The native of Michoacan, Mexico, was working as a laborer before discovering an interest in winemaking.

He is now founder and sole proprietor of Mi Sueño Winery, and his wines are poured in restaurants throughout the U.S.—and even at a 2001 White House event honoring former Mexican President Vicente Fox.

Mr. Herrera grew up in Mexico. He left his parents when he turned 15 in 1982 to look for new opportunities in California's Napa Valley.

He went to live with his older brother, a prep cook at an upscale Napa restaurant, and enrolled at Napa High while working after school as a dishwasher. A year later, he found a higher-paying job as a prep cook at Masa Restaurant, 49 miles away in San Francisco.

Odd Jobs

During his summer breaks, Mr. Herrera took odd jobs to help pay bills. That is when he met Warren Winiarski, founder and former owner of Stags' Leap Wine Cellars, who hired him to help build a stone retaining wall. Mr. Winiarski says he was impressed with the teen's work ethic and offered him a part-time job.

Mr. Herrera quit Masa and spent the next two years working as a "cellar rat" washing wine barrels and cleaning floors. He enjoyed the workplace and says the strong oaken smells of wine-steeped barrels made him feel content. But he had no desire to participate in the winemaking process or even to drink.

"I cursed alcohol because back home I had a lot of family and friends with drinking problems," he says.

Things changed in 1987. Mr. Winiarski spotted ambition in Mr. Herrera and wanted to promote him. "I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was interested in doing more than cleaning up," Mr. Winiarski says. So he asked him what his impressions were of the wine.

Mr. Herrera took a sip—his first in years. He didn't care for the taste, but he was able to identify citrus and floral flavor notes. Mr. Winiarski was impressed and encouraged him to develop his palate further. Over the next few years, Mr. Herrera sat on wine-tasting panels at work and joined local tasting groups. "Wine grew to become an important part of my life," he says.

Making the Leap

He was promoted to cellar master, where he assisted winemakers with the production process and also trained cellar workers, and enjoyed the work. He decided to make winemaking his career and enrolled in a winemaking certificate program at the University of California at Davis.

Mr. Herrera left Stags' Leap in 1995 in search of a more hands-on experience. He became an assistant winemaker at Chateau Potelle Winery, which was a traditional winery that employed all-natural fermentation. Mr. Herrera was involved with every stage of the process, including harvesting and handling the fruit, crushing, bottling and running analysis.

The work inspired him to experiment with his own batch of wine on the side. He tapped his savings to purchase four tons of green-skinned Chardonnay grapes from his father-in-law, who owned the small nearby Robledo Family Winery. He then rented the facilities of a small winery where he crushed the grapes himself.

He intended to sell the 18 barrels he made to the bulk market, where wineries buy surplus wine inexpensively to sell under their own label or to blend with other wines. His friends convinced him to bottle it instead.

He named his new label Mi Sueño, which in Spanish means "my dream." His company would become one of the new crop of Mexican-American-owned Napa wineries to open during the 1990s.

Building Up Business

Mr. Herrera continued building up Mi Sueño in his spare time while working as a consultant for about a dozen different wineries. He moved his business into a warehouse in 2001, which he purchased five years later, and leased the land he needed to produce 90% of the grapes for his winemaking program.

With the help of 15 to 20 employees, Mi Sueño now produces 5,500 cases a year, most of which are purchased by restaurants, wine clubs and other wineries.

When looking back, Mr. Herrera, who is now a U.S. citizen, can't believe how his career has unfolded. He never intended to become an entrepreneur. He says that he is happy that he was able to turn a newfound passion into a viable business that is able to support his family.

"I have no doubt that my business will continue to grow if I continue producing the best product that I am able to make," he says.

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