Viader brings winemaking full circle

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Delia Viader stands at the top of her hillside vineyard in the Napa Valley's Howell Mountain region.
Tim Carl photo

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When Delia Viader was growing up in Argentina, her grandfather planted a seed that through her meticulous and dedicated cultivation has resulted in Viader (pronounced veeya-dare) Wines.

Delia, a single mother of four, including one child with Down syndrome, has grown grapes and produced wines from her Howell Mountain vineyard since planting her 92-acre estate in 1986. But like most stories in the wine business, hers has not been done alone or without its challenges.

"My father traveled as a diplomat for the United Nations, so I spent much of my early life in Buenos Aires with my grandfather (Joan Pedro Rafael Viader), who became my Superman," Delia said. "He planted the seed of freedom in me, telling me that with discipline and optimism anything is possible."

Joan Pedro had been forced to leave his home and land in Spain after Francisco Franco took control of the government in 1939 and went about confiscating property from landowners.

"My grandfather was forced from the country, and he had to find a way to feed his young family, including my father, Walter, who was 3 years old at the time," Delia said. "All he had was enough for a third-class ticket to the Americas, and he wasn't sure if he'd go north or south, so he flipped a coin and ended up in Argentina."

Delia's grandfather eventually worked with Aristotle Onassis, another recent immigrant to Argentina from war-torn Europe who was on his way to building what would become the world's largest privately owned shipping fleet. Onassis and Joan Pedro worked together initially by growing, processing and transporting tobacco products, and both became exceptionally wealthy.

"Beyond tobacco, my grandfather had many real-estate projects and other activities," Delia said. "He came as an immigrant with nothing and found a way to make things work, which he then passed on to my father."

The entire land holding her father inherited in Argentina was about 15,000 hectares (roughly 37,000 acres). Beyond overseeing the businesses that had been passed down to him, her father joined the Argentine military and eventually became a U.N. diplomat.

"We traveled around a lot while I was growing up," Delia said. "For most of my teens I lived in Europe, with much of that time spent in France. Wine was just a way of life for us."

By her early 20s, Delia was fluent in six languages, including English and German.

"My grandfather would always ask me, 'Who are you,' and I had learned to respond with 'Catalan from Catalonia' (a region of Spain that has been seeking independence for decades and where the family had originated), and then he'd say, 'No, who are you?' and I would say, 'Free.' I learned to respond 'Free' because it was very important for him that I was free in spirit and free to opening my mind. That probably steered me to study philosophy in college."

Beyond reading philosophers such as Heidegger and Hegel in the original German, she'd also married and had children early while living back in Argentina. Her first child, Paul, was born with special needs, and immediately Delia started searching for a better place to bring up her young family.

"I married too young," Delia said. "But I wouldn't change it because I have my kids, who are everything to me. It's really one of the main reasons I even came to the United States. Having a child with Down syndrome in Argentina at the time was challenging — I wanted more options."

So, like her grandfather, she flipped a coin and then headed north to Boston with her brother. She took postgraduate business classes at MIT and then moved to the Bay Area to continue her studies at Berkeley. She found her way to the Napa Valley on weekends, and she became enamored with its beauty and rural nature.

"In many ways, the valley reminded me of when I was growing up in Argentina," she said. "I just loved it and thought it would be a wonderful place to raise my family and begin a new life for all of us. I didn't know much about the wine business, but I knew about business and postulated the barriers to entry were not that high at the time."

After convincing her father to accept her business proposal, they purchased the land on Howell Mountain and she worked with some of the finest wine-related minds at the time to create a planted vineyard of 28 acres, much of that cabernet franc, and build a winery.

This is the deck of winery's tasting room with the Viader's cabernet franc vineyard below.
Tim Carl photo

"We worked with (vintner) Rick Foreman and (viticulturist) Dave Abreu to create a mountainside vineyard, which was rare at the time, especially one planted with vertical rows (as opposed to the traditional terraces)," Delia said. "But I had seen it done in France successfully, and cab franc seemed to be the best option for both the soil and geology."

When the winery had been designed and the vineyard was ready to plant, Delia brought in winemakers such as Tony Soter and organic vineyard specialist Daniel Schuster from New Zealand and experts in biodynamic practices from France. Over time, she merged all of these techniques into a special blend suited for the site.

"I wanted to create a vineyard that was organic from Day 1," Delia said. "This is where I was going to raise my family. But not everything works here that might work other places. Now, we are basically using sustainable practices, much of which is organic but without all the paperwork."

Now, Alan Viader, her second-eldest son, oversees the winemaking and operations alongside his mother.

"I grew up on this land and in this town — it's my happy place," Alan said. "We love the community, and I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. We have added in a few other wines so that I might leave my own mark on the winemaking. Mom created our benchmark, and now we are exploring other aspects of this place."

The Viader lineup of wines includes two cabernet blends: the original "Delia's Propriety Blend" ($170 per bottle with 1,811 cases made) and the newer "Black Label" that includes syrah ($100 per bottle with 850 cases made), a 100-percent cabernet franc ($70 per bottle and 750 cases made) and a malbec ($60 per bottle and just 180 cases made).
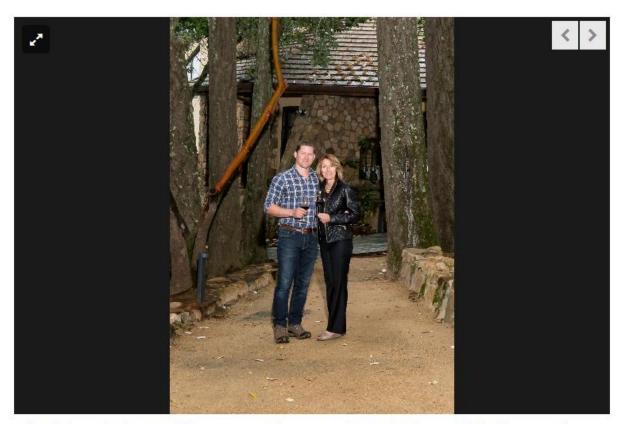
All the wines display what Alan explains is a consistent aromatic profile of sweet dried lavender and a dark-rich color with magenta-tinged edges, but that's where the similarities end. The Propriety Blend is full of black-and-blue fruit and sweet oak, clove tobacco and licorice. The Black Label shows chewy tannins with aromatics of sun-dried blueberries, Kalamata olives and peppered beef jerky. The cab franc highlights ripe cherry, herbs de Provence, leather and cedar, whereas the malbec, although darker in color than the others, actually has a lighter touch, with elements of sweet plum, milk chocolate and a refreshing brightness in the finish.

Beyond making wine and growing grapes, the community has kept the Viader family in the Napa Valley.

"Ever since I got here I have felt loved and supported by the community," Delia said. "My oldest son, Paul, is very happy here and has thrived. It's why we are committed to giving back to this place."

As a part of that giving back, Delia and her family have donated resources to schools, families in need, education and the Auction Napa Valley. The Viader 2017 Auction Napa Valley offering – a trip with Delia to tour the wine regions of Argentina – went for $520,000, the fourth top lot after Colgin Cellars, Antica Napa Valley and Dalla Valle Vineyards.

"I wanted to bring people from here to my first home to see not only the wine but also what it means to live in a place that has its rough spots, too," Delia said. "Going back there is in some ways like going full circle. The path may not always be easy, but it can be wonderfully beautiful along the way."

Delia and Alan Viader, her second-eldest son, oversee their winery and vineyard in the eastern hills of the Napa Valley.

Tim Carl photo