

FORTUNATI VINEYARDS

The Tiny Winery in Oak Knoll District

BY LAYNE RANDOLPH



Vintners Gary and Ellen Luchtel describe Fortunati Vineyards, with a lot of pride—the sort of satisfaction that comes from achieving a dream and doing something they love—creating handcrafted wines in the Oak Knoll District of the Napa Valley.

“Our adventure with wine started young, in our early 20’s. We traveled European back roads wine tasting. We learned what we really liked,” Ellen said. Their wine adventure continued into the next decade with home winemaking, and their enthusiasm for good wine grew from pure passion. “We scraped together our dollars, sold what we owned to purchase a parcel of land, plant vineyards, and continued to build our project slowing from the ground up; it’s all derived from sweat equity.”

Oak Knoll District’s climate and its mixture of soils set it apart. The ground in Napa Valley is sedimentary and gravelly in some areas and dense and volcanic in others. The OKD has a longer growing season than some other regions, and longer hang time provides optimal ripeness. San Pablo Bay influence creates cool summer nights and foggy mornings. This combination of climate and soil allows for the cultivation of many different varieties not commonly grown throughout the Valley.

Purchasing property in 2003, they produced their first wines under the Fortunati Vineyards label – Syrah co-fermented with Viognier and whole-cluster pressed Rosé of Syrah. Other estate wines soon followed - Viognier, Malbec, Port-style dessert wine, and soon to be released Cabernet Franc.

Adding to their portfolio, winemaker Gary also crafts Reserve and Signature Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from Oak Knoll Ranch; Santa Rita Hills AVA Pinot Noir. Classic-style Bordeaux blend and Chardonnay. With access to a block of old vines growing on Mt. Veeder, they craft Zinfandel. Lately, he’s experimenting with small lots of high-end, whole berry-fermented Cabernet.

The wide range of varieties produced contrasts with the small quantity of each wine made – on average, 100 to 150 cases, and heavier reds handcrafted to only 250 to 350 cases.

Project planning started in 2015, and by late 2019, Gary and Ellen built and opened a small winery and hospitality space within their Oak Knoll vineyards. They wanted to create something right for the parcel size so it fit into the environment. Their parcel is 10.25 acres, or as Ellen jokes, “point twenty-five to spare,” since 10 acres are required for a wine permit. “We’re just a tiny winery,” Ellen humbly said.

Yet, it really just comes down to the wine, so sought-after, “It’s almost embarrassing that we sell out so quickly,” Ellen said, “They’re exceptionally priced because we don’t distribute through normal channels. We ship directly to wine enthusiasts across the country, offering premium quality at extraordinary values.”

Known for the one-on-one customer attention they lavish on guests, Fortunati Vineyards is 100 percent direct-to-consumer, and they do not advertise. Business has grown through word-of-mouth, by referral.

What started as two young adult’s fun while dating in college, to home winemaking experiments, to giving up “the city” life and follow their hobby, with a dream, talent, and hard work, they’ve made their vision come to fruition with their tiny winery in the Oak Knoll District.



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