

“Not just juice in a bottle...” - A chat with Ross Halleck

By Lotus Fong

A bit of Background

At the 2019 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, Halleck Vineyard was awarded two #1 "BEST OF CLASS" Pinot Noirs. One was for their Halleck Vineyard 2014 Russian River Valley AVA “The Farm Vineyard” and the other was for their 2016 Sonoma Coast AVA, “Clone 828”.

I met with Ross Halleck, co-owner of Halleck Vineyard, to ask him about his wine life. Surrounded by trees, creeks and easy, gentle hills, the comfortable and elegant home is also command central for Halleck Vineyard - the first vineyard planted in western Sebastopol.

Why Wine? Connection!

Ross: “In Oct 2017, they found this amphora [in the Republic of Georgia] containing remnants of wine that was over 8,000 years old. Mesopotamia and the birth of civilization was around 7,000 years ago. That’s a 1000 years before the birth of civilization. So, you’ve got to guess it was in the realm of the shaman, the spiritual practitioner, the healer... **[Wine] is sacred in almost every religion in the world:** It’s because of this ability to connect us. So the idea of building community through wine is not original. Though not new, it’s one that speaks personally to me. Something that extends this whole endeavor beyond just *juice in a bottle or party in a glass*. It’s about the **ability to elevate a conversation, enhance intimacy** and we’ve actually broadened ‘building community’ to include philanthropy.”

By creating unique events for their members and auctioning them off for their respective charities, Halleck Winery has been able to **raise \$750,000 in the past 10 years...**

Ross: “So there’s this joke. It’s not even a joke, but it’s a humorous fact in the wine business. **‘How do you make a small fortune in the wine business?’** You start with a large fortune’. And we didn’t have that. This is a small family endeavor and we planted a vineyard in our backyard. The **forces beyond us... lifted us to this place.** But it’s always been one foot in front of the other; so the idea of giving back philanthropically seem out of reach for us. But the doors which have opened from owning a winery and making a wine of this caliber have allowed us to contribute... and we haven’t had to write the checks... This has been the most meaningful **part of this job, really.**”

The accidental winery...

Some 20 years ago, Ross and Jennifer came to Sebastopol. They got married here and started a family.

Ross: "It wasn't very ambitious. It wasn't this big vision. I chose wine as my drug of choice in my mid-twenties... **Wine was my chosen medicine**... I just became enamored with it. So,

when we moved to Wine Country, it wasn't wine country at the time. **It was apple**

country... We bought this spec house which was empty for two years. It was about to go to the bank; so we found ourselves in the middle of nowhere coming from the Bay Area on this piece of land. The next obvious thing seemed to be to plant it."

Early Success!

Ross: "It took six years to produce a commercial crop. The vineyard produced much less than we anticipated ... but, low and behold, it was really good. And the first vintage that had our name on a bottle **won number one pinot noir in the United States. That was**

in 2002. It was a 2001 vintage and I will tell you, in 2002 **nobody really cared**. There were 217 wines competing and they were jury selected. There were geeks out there who were really interested in pinot noir, but most everybody was still into cab and chard. Winning, however, gave us the indicator that we were onto something"

The 2017 Sonoma Fires

When asked about wine challenges he's experienced, Ross laughed and then the words began to flow.

Ross: "**Wine making and farming is dancing with Gaia: she has big feet and always leads**. Mostly, you're not in control. In fact, 99.9% of the time you're not in control; you're just bearing witness and participating. Some of those times have been very challenging...

I woke up the morning of October 10th [2017] and I noticed all these texts and voice mails on my telephone. But it was too early for me and I looked over the horizon and I saw this little glow. I go,

"that is the weirdest sunrise I have ever seen and that's not even east." And I didn't realize the glow was the fires. We had a crew of people planning on

picking our vineyard... All of our **vineyards** under contract had been picked. Our Estate Grown around my home was the last one to be harvested.

People usually start picking at night. The sun has to be down. You want to pick through the night so the grapes don't get warm. Then you can get them to the winery without beginning fermentation... Needless to say, **nobody showed up and we had 2,700 pounds of grapes out there**. This is our premier vineyard, our tête de cuvée, our top of the line. It is a cult vineyard, highly desired by our wine club members.

We were looking at this vineyard and going **'what do we do?'** So Jennifer [Halleck - winery co-owner] and I started at 10 o'clock at night. We rolled up our sleeves, put on face masks, head lamps. Our vineyard manager came with small bins and **we picked 2700 pounds of grapes until 8 o'clock in the morning**. We loaded it in the truck.... working through the night and then drove the grapes to the winery in the morning. They were weighed and crushed and then I had to drive the truck back to the rental office. And I actually had a flight that afternoon to New York which I cancelled. **And we saved that crop."**

The next five years

Ross: "That's funny you ask because we just spent half of yesterday doing our strategic plan for the next five years. We didn't complete it. We anticipate growing from our current size, but still remain a boutique winery. It's a huge leap.

It'll require more resources than we have. We can't do it ourselves. It's one of these deals where it takes a village. **We're fortunate that we have a village**. We have a great advisory board from Sonoma County and San Francisco. They have our backs and they are guiding us through this transitional period... It is exciting and a little scary. I have to wrap my arms around what it means to share this with other people. It's a new thing for us to think in these terms. What do we need, what are we going to do with it and where are we going to get it...

Owning a small winery is **like singing for our dinner everyday**. We're still going to be singing for our dinner, but there's going to be a few people who share the risk with us." Ross laughs.

Personal Influencers

Ross: **"I've always been a seeker**. I suppose those of us who are seekers do so to cope with the pain of existence. And so, the early influencers were Hermann Hesse, reading Siddhartha, and Alan Watts... In my teens those were the philosophers who sent me in the direction of Zen Buddhism and meditation and transcendental meditation... I still read Thich Nhat Hanh and Eckhart Tolle... I have books and books of **Rumi** next to my bed. If I wake up in the middle of the night, I will often pick up a

poem and just read it. It **can take me both to sleep and to exaltation**. There's amazing power in those words. So I think I've always been someone who liked to peel the onion. I don't have any choice in the matter."

<http://www.halleckvineyard.com/>