

By Steve Werblow

The winemaker's secret

'Selling the story' could help you sell your harvest

Surrounded by oak barrels, Mike and Mary Colhoun of Landmark Winery describe the blend of art, science, and faith that allows them to rely on wild yeasts to ferment their rich Chardonnays. But the real lessons from this dynamic wine duo are their marketing secrets—and those apply as readily to prime rib as to Pinot.

The story. When Mike's mother, Damaris Deere Ford, located the Landmark winery in the Sonoma Valley town of Kenwood, Calif. in 1989, she took a bold step, focusing on Chardonnay in an area already packed with top Chardonnay houses.

The wine was good and the reviews were, too. "But just the fact that you have a good wine doesn't make it sell," notes Mike. He and Mary left high-octane careers in the East

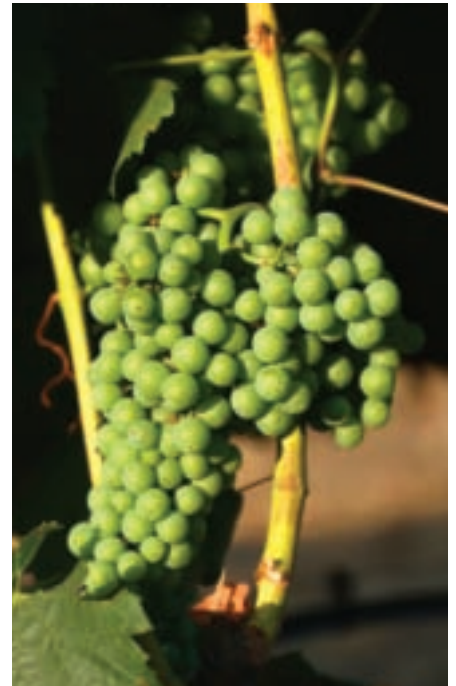
(he was in commercial real estate; Mary was in incentive travel) to buy into Landmark and apply their marketing energy to the family's brand.

The first step was carving out a niche—establishing Landmark as a small, premium, independent winery. The house Chardonnay was priced at a relative value next to other top-shelf Sonoma wineries; their two premium Chards and a couple of reds push prices toward the \$40 and \$50 mark.

But Landmark's real niche is its agricultural heritage. Damaris Ford is the great great granddaughter of John

►**Below:** (from left) Winemaker Eric Stern, owners Mike and Mary Colhoun, and assistant winemaker Greg Stach celebrate another great vintage in Landmark Winery's aging room.

►**Right:** Landmark emphasizes farming when selling its Chardonnay in a crowded market.





►**Left:** Mike and Mary Colhoun link Landmark to Mike's great great great grandfather, John Deere, emphasizing the family's agricultural heritage.



►**Above:** Mary Colhoun chats with guest Frank Scalzo in Landmark's tasting room, vital face-to-face contact that builds customer relationships.

Deere. It's a tie-in that pervades every detail of the winery's marketing, from the "Our Story" page on Landmark's Web site to the green-and-yellow merchandise in the winery tasting room.

The Deere legacy even extends to the names of the wines themselves. Damaris Reserve celebrates John Deere's wife (and the Landmark founder's namesake). Grand Detour Pinot Noir is named after the site of Deere's 19th century foundry. And Steel Plow Syrah speaks for itself.

"We're selling wine, we're not selling tractors," notes Mike. "But we are selling farming." Talking about farming allows the Colhouns to discuss how their wine is made. It gives them

a chance to invite customers to take a horse-drawn wagon ride around the vineyard, picnic among the vines, or spend a night in the guest cottage or winery suite. And it gives wine fans something to remember.

"If we can get somebody to come to the winery, we've started building a relationship," says Mary. Adds Mike, "if they've had a good experience, you may have a customer for life."

Landmark works hard to cultivate those relationships. Two wine clubs keep the winery in touch with 900 core customers through regular shipments of new releases. And Mike and Mary's dizzying travel schedule—tasting events for the trade, winemaker dinners for consumers—keeps them in contact with consumers, retailers, restaurateurs, and distributors, each a key link in the wine sales chain.

Belly to belly. Constant relationship-building also keeps Landmark wines on the radar screens of the dozens of distributors who put the wines on shelves in 49 U.S. states, Canada, Europe, and Asia. "It's a belly-to-belly business," says Mike.

Wine-lovers' thirst for the story behind their wines has spread to other consumers who are increasingly eager to hear about their food, notes Mary.

"I think there is a great parallel for other people in the farming business,"

she points out. "Now when you go to a specialty grocery store, they label who the farmer is. Lettuce certainly has come a long way."

In fact, when Jean Andreasen, the Minneapolis-based general manager of PastureLand, sells her dairy co-op's artisanal butter and cheeses, she even borrows a winemaker's term—terroir, the way local soils, climate, and cultivation affect the product.

"We are always trying to give our customers a sense of place," Andreasen says. "We talk a lot about where we're from and what that's like."

Educated consumer. PastureLand's story of small, local, grass-fed dairies milking in synch with the grazing season resonates with the company's highly educated consumer base. So does the chance to bird-watch at a member dairy or meet a farmer at the local natural food co-op.

"We do a lot of one-on-one demos," Andreasen says. "Our customers like to meet the producers."

Todd Churchill of Thousand Hills Cattle Company in Cannon Falls, Minn., tells the story of his grass-fed beef, which lights up the eyes of the old-timers who tell him that it's what beef used to taste like. It also excites doctors—some even prescribe it to patients because of its high levels of healthy Omega 3 fatty acids.

Churchill grew up raising beef conventionally in Illinois. In 2003, he set out to produce premium grass-fed beef. "Most people in my kind of industry are pretty aggressive in pointing out problems with the conventional system, but that's not my point," he says. Instead, he sells high quality, healthy meat, and happy cattle.

"We've got a great story to tell, and I love telling it," says Churchill.

That's the winemaker's secret, says Mary Colhoun. "It's up to us to deliver the romance," she says, "to talk about the romance and the beauty of the product we're producing." ■