

Five Years On

Lessons from a “Hobby Gone Wild(er)”

By Scott Elliff



Ducard's tasting room, circa 2010

► **Everybody knows something about wine.** Usually what they know is that old joke: How do you make a million dollars in the wine business? Start with two million. If I charged a dollar for every time that's been shared with me I'd be well on my way to negating that truism.

► **Minimize the wine jargon.** Let's just say that no one has asked what strain of yeast we used in making the Petit Verdot, what cooperage our French and Virginia oak barrels come from, or how many bars of pressure we use when we press the Viognier. Of course, now I can be sure that one of you will come in and ask, wise guys. And we'll certainly tell you.

► **Make it special.** There's no lack of things to

do around the area, so you've got to have something that makes you stand out. For us, our gorgeous mountainside location on the edge of the Shenandoah National Park is a draw. In the end it comes down to customer service and making our customers feel special. What our moms told us, way back when, still rings true: “Treat others the way you would like to be treated.”

► **Viva la Difference.** News flash: Husbands and wives almost always prefer opposite wines. It's just a fact of life, and it's not bad for business: “OK, honey, we'll get what you want of course, and then I'll also get the bottle I want.” I've also noticed that when we have an unmarried couple as customers they tend to like the same wines — draw your own conclusions.

► **Keep pushing the envelope.** We've always been doing that in the vineyard and with our wines, and we have adopted that same view with the tasting room experience. When we visited Napa (the region, not the auto parts maker), we stumbled on a new tasting room experience, one that combined gourmet small plates, wine pairings, and congeniality, and so so we “borrowed” and tweaked the concept a little. We've also expanded our facilities so that we can accommodate weddings and other events after realizing that seemingly everyone wants to get married at a winery, have their reunion at one, or bring the staff out to think big strategic thoughts. Fine with us!



another year older and further in debt,” as the saying goes. Times five then. In a prior column for this magazine, I proclaimed that our Hobby Gone Wild(er) (i.e. Ducard Vineyards) was expanding and would be open to the public with a new winery and tasting room. Well, I'm still here to tell the tale. We have had a growing stream of people walking through our doors, many of them excited about what we're doing and how we're doing it. And oh-so-many wonderful repeat customers which is the ultimate compliment of course.

The expansion was, of course, a leap of faith, fraught with unknowns. **So what have I learned?**

What don't I know? Plenty. Among many questions that are always under consideration: should we be in wine shops and restaurants, or continue to have the wine available only on-site with the full experience? What's the best way to get the word out? What's the role of advertising in the new digital and social media era? And oh-so-many more.

The past five years have been wild(er) indeed, but it's onward to the future. I am confident we'll continue to grow and improve.

Plus, I might just start charging that dollar. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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