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wizard Sam Kaplan

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Sam Kaplan

From helping his father with his small vineyard in Oklahoma to being consultant and co-owner of multiple wineries across California, Sam Kaplan's 'valiant life' in Napa wine's top tier has grown to the point that now he's ready to start giving back

STORY JONATHAN CRISTALDI

Vida Valiente is much more than just another winery for Napa winemaker Sam Kaplan. Over the past 20 years, Kaplan has become the shepherd of a growing number of blue-chip Napa wineries, including Arkenstone, Memento Mori and Vangone. His newest project is a joint philanthropic venture with his wife Nancy, along with Memento Mori co-owner Hayes Drumwright and his wife Susana Cueva Drumwright.

Both the Kaplans and Drumwrights are aware that part of their individual successes can be attributed to generous mentors – people who gave them an inch, as well as the resources, to turn it into a mile. Which is why the spotlight at Vida Valiente (Spanish for 'valiant/brave life') is on charitable giving. Launched in conjunction with California's Stanford University, the Vida Valiente Foundation provides money and mentoring to new university scholars who don't have the privileges of an affluent family or support circle.

'We aim to help low-income, first-generation American college students lucky enough to be admitted to top US schools, but who typically don't have a sense of community when they arrive on campus,' explains Susana. 'Especially in the Latino culture where you're surrounded by a lot of family at home, but don't have that support network at school or mentors who can offer guidance on what's possible.'

Vida Valiente came to be largely thanks to the triumph of Memento Mori, whose 2014 vintage was top lot at the 2016 Premiere Napa Valley wine auction (see p65). But that success – and the success of other blue-chip wineries he's worked with – is down to the talents of Sam Kaplan.

EARLY INSPIRATION

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Kaplan spent most of his childhood on a small farm at the edge of a reservation in Oklahoma, where his physician

father had planted a vineyard. Every year, they made wine together in the family's garage.

His father had hoped he'd also become a doctor, but while attending Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, Kaplan met the late Gary Andrus, who owned Archery Summit in the Willamette Valley and Pine Ridge Vineyards in Napa. The winery smells triggered nostalgia for Kaplan's garage youth, and he asked if there was a job available. Andrus, noting Kaplan's Spanish-speaking abilities and experience driving tractors, offered him an internship at Pine Ridge.

After that 1998 harvest, Kaplan was hooked. He joined ZD Wines in Rutherford as a cellarhand, eventually working his way up to assistant winemaker, and meeting his wife Nancy along the way. Then, in 2006, two ardent ZD fans, Ron and Susan Krausz, approached Kaplan about making their own wine and building them a winery.

Arkenstone on Howell Mountain came to fruition with lightning speed. From the 5.3ha of estate vines, Kaplan produced the first vintage in 2006 while spearheading production design on the winery, including a 2,000m² underground cellar – the idea being for Kaplan to make wine for friends who also had boutique brands.

BRANCHING OUT

With the Krauszs' blessing, Kaplan began his own consulting work, and in 2010 he signed on his first clients: Hayes Drumwright, Adam Craun and Adriel Lares. Together they launched Memento Mori, Latin for 'remember that you have to die', named for Drumwright beating cancer in his 20s.

The following year Kaplan partnered with viticulturist David Abreu on a Pritchard Hill project called Nine Suns – a ripe, full-throttle red that garnered praise from American critics, and scores ranging from 90 to, eventually, 100 points.

'I like acid, so I tend to pick a lot earlier than most winemakers,' explains Kaplan. 'I like my





From left: Hayes Drumwright, Susana Cueva Drumwright, Sam and Nancy Kaplan

‘Both the Kaplans and Drumwrights are aware that part of their individual successes can be attributed to generous mentors’

wines to have power and intensity, but I think that can be achieved at a much lower sugar, and then the wines have much greater ageability.’

The three Memento Mori co-founders anticipated that Kaplan’s winemaking style would make a good fit for the coveted grape contracts they’d acquired, namely Andy Beckstoffer’s Dr Crane and Las Piedras sites, as well as Vine Hill Ranch vineyard in Oakville.

But the first time Kaplan presented his proposed samples for Memento Mori’s flagship wine, he didn’t present single-vineyard reds from the prestigious sites. Instead, he explained: ‘I had about 13 barrels [of 2010 vintage] that I blended to make three blends. It was like blending Burgundian grands crus and labelling the finished wine a Bourgogne.’

Surprisingly, this didn’t faze the Memento Mori trio – the blends were a hit. But the winning combination used just five of the 13 barrels. The rest would go to the bulk market – a massive loss for most start-up wineries, but the owners reasoned that the potentially arduous work of honing a perfect flagship wine had been done – and they had a winemaker willing to push boundaries. For Kaplan, it was validation.

The first release of Memento Mori was that 2010 bottling. Today, the portfolio also includes vineyard-designated wines from Dr Crane, Las Piedras and Vine Hill Ranch, while the flagship

blend combines all three along with some fruit from Weitz Vineyard and Oakville Ranch.

NEW PROJECTS

In 2014, Kaplan was approached by longtime friends Ron and Karen Davidowski, owners of Meritage Wine Market & Tasting Room in San Diego, who were ready to make wine from a property they’d bought in the 1990s. It was a no-brainer for Kaplan. The 44ha Vangone estate includes 8.9ha of vines planted on the eastern edge of Oakville on a rocky, well-drained plateau looking down on the back of Screaming Eagle. Kaplan makes one Cabernet Sauvignon: the first vintage was 2014 and the current release is 2018.

While Kaplan began working on Vangone, he was aching to start a label with his wife Nancy. He approached respected Sonoma grape-grower and vineyard manager Ulises Valdez Sr (who tragically died in 2018, aged 49). Valdez was selling to Mark Aubert and Paul Hobbs but had no fruit for him. Kaplan persisted, and the two struck up a friendship. Eventually, in 2015, two ‘incredible blocks of Pinot and Chardonnay became available from the UV [Ulises Valdez] Vineyard.’

This marked the beginning of Maxem Wine, named after the Kaplans’ children Max and Emma – and a new adventure for Nancy. Originally a trained chef, she worked at Kevin Zraly’s Windows on the World restaurant in



Cabernet Sauvignon vines in the Vida Valiente vineyard in St Helena. Below: Cabernet Sauvignon grapes during night-harvesting at Vida Valiente



New York City, Terra in St Helena, and was head chef at La Toque in Rutherford when it earned a Michelin star. She gave up cooking after daughter Emma was born and today manages Maxem, which Kaplan and Nancy own. The Valdez family will farm it for them.

AWARD WINNERS

In 2016, a year after Maxem launched, Kaplan was thrust into the spotlight when two of his Cabernet auction lots from the 2014 harvest earned top honours at the Napa Valley Vintners’ Premiere Napa Valley barrel tasting and wine auction, having sold for \$130,000 per lot. One was Nine Suns (which Kaplan stopped making in 2016) and the other was Memento Mori.

Well before those 2016 celebrations, already riding a wave of early successful Memento Mori releases, Hayes Drumwright had proposed an idea

to Kaplan. He wanted to seek out ‘virgin dirt’ to craft a wine that ‘would be the first expression of that land’. Kaplan agreed, with the caveat that the site included rocky, Cortina soils on an alluvial fan. A tall order.

After an extensive search, and coincidentally on the heels of his Premiere Napa Valley success, Kaplan phoned Hayes to say he’d ‘hit pay dirt’. He’d found an old walnut orchard rich in Cortina soils on an alluvial fan of sand and cobblestones, all flecked with chunks of obsidian. The 6.8ha property in St Helena, which Kaplan said he’d ‘passed a hundred times’, is a stone’s throw from the Hundred Acre Winery and the Criscione Vineyard – a source for Araujo, Arrow & Branch, Drinkward Pescbon, Harlan and Ovid among others. Kaplan couldn’t believe grapes had never been planted there.

They immediately scooped it up and Vida Valiente was born. In 2019, the first vintage, Kaplan produced just 100 cases of The Movement Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from sites in Oakville and St Helena. Sadly, no 2020 vintage was made because the Glass Fire tore through the ▶

property, burning two houses but leaving the vineyard intact, save for one tiny block. With the help of viticulturist Jim Barbour, new plantings are in the ground and the wines are being produced at Arkenstone, though there are plans to build a small winery and underground cellars.

PAYING IT FORWARD

For every \$250 bottle of Vida Valiente's The Movement Cabernet Sauvignon sold, \$100 (or \$250 from every \$650 magnum) goes directly

to the Foundation. In future, plans are to produce 2,000 cases annually and with that 'we should be able to help 20 to 30 kids a year', says Susana Cueva Drumwright. For her, the pilot programme at Stanford University in California is deeply personal. 'I didn't go to Stanford, but I was one of those first-generation American kids. My mother is from Guatemala and my father is Mexican, and what my parents taught me is "vida valiente" – you need to be valiant, not just for yourself, but for people around you.'

Cristaldi's pick: six Sam Kaplan wines to try

① Arkenstone, Estate Sauvignon Blanc, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 2019 92

£75 (ib) Four Corners

Organically farmed, the 94% Sauvignon Blanc and 6% Semillon components were blended after 11 months' ageing on lees in a combination of concrete eggs and new and used French oak, then aged for an additional 18 months before release. Very aromatic, showing pithy grapefruit, pear and flint along with garrigue-like wild herbal characters. The same flavours are concentrated on the medium-bodied, sinewy palate, framed by good acid grip.

Drink 2022-2028 **Alcohol** 14.8%

Arkenstone, NVD Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2018 98

£75 (ib) Four Corners

This 100% Cabernet is sourced from vines in Pritchard Hill, Howell Mountain and Calistoga. Aged 22 months in 75% new French oak, it delivers heady aromas of cinnamon-dusted black cherry and ripe blueberry, an intriguing herbal note and ground espresso. The structured palate is plush with red boysenberries, savoury black olives, leather and a refreshing herbal note. It glides to a chocolatey finish, supported by fine-grained, sappy tannins. **Drink** 2022-2040 **Alc** 14.8%

Maxem, UV Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast 2019 95

US\$90-\$100 B-21, Company Fine Wine, Meritage

This shows the immense power and dark berry concentration of the Calera clone of Pinot Noir allied to the freshness of the Sonoma Coast – like a dew-soaked pine forest on an early morning hike.

Flashy boysenberry, dried strawberry, fresh blueberry and sarsaparilla are supported by sinewy tannins on a long, creamy palate, which finishes with pops of cherry cola and rose petals. **Drink** 2022-2028 **Alc** 14.8%

Vangone, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2018 95

£150 (ib) Four Corners

Vangone's estate vineyard sits on a plateau east of the Silverado Trail between Oakville and Yountville. In 2018, Sam Kaplan made just 300 cases of this 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, aged for 32 months in new French oak. Packed with concentrated aromas of black fruits, tilled earth, cedar oak, pie crust and vanilla bean. Elongated satiny tannins support a spicy palate of blueberry, blackberry and graphite, with lifts of sagebrush and purple florals. **Drink** 2022-2030 **Alc** 14.9%

② Vida Valiente, The Movement Cabernet Sauvignon 2019 94

US\$650/magnum vidavalientewinery.com

The second release of Vida Valiente, a partnership between Memento Mori co-owner Hayes Drumwright and his wife Susana, with winemaker Sam Kaplan and his wife Nancy. This 100% Cabernet was sourced from vineyards in St Helena and Oakville and aged 22 months in new French oak. Blackberry, cassis, graphite, soy, herbs and elegant vanilla oak spice on the nose lead to a weighty palate of buoyant spicy red and black fruit. Fresh acidity and featherweight tannins provide structure through the spiced chocolate finish. **Drink** 2022-2031 **Alc** 14.5%

③ Memento Mori, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2013 91

£272.34 Fine & Rare

Grapes for this flagship 100% Cabernet Sauvignon are sourced from Beckstoffer Dr Crane, Beckstoffer Las Piedras, Oakville Ranch and Weitz. 2013 was warm in Napa; typically Sam Kaplan manages to maintain balance even at high alcohol levels, but I found the alcohol overpowering here, particularly at room temperature, though it does still boast plenty of gritty texture and unfolds in heady layers of blackberry, plum and redcurrant fruit, with scorched herbs, coffee beans, smoked meat and notes of turned earth. **Drink** 2022-2023 **Alc** 15.2% **W**

MORE CALIFORNIA

To see 10 more wines made by Sam Kaplan from Arkenstone, Maxem, Memento Mori and Vida Valiente, with notes and scores by Jonathan Cristaldi, go to decanter.com/premium

