

12TH OCT 2023

Memento Mori and Vida Valiente

Hayes Drumwright sees his near-death experience when he was twenty as the best thing that's happened to him. Since then, he co-founded the wine estate Memento Mori—a reminder to live. A few years later, Hayes and his wife Susana partnered with Sam Kaplan and his wife Nancy to embark on a separate, refreshingly heroic winery project: Vida Valiente.



Unbreakable

Part 1 – Memento Mori: Remember to Live

"You know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in this world. To not know why you're here... That's... That's just an awful feeling."

- Elijah Price in the movie "Unbreakable"

Hayes Drumwright sees his near-death experience when he was twenty as the best thing that's happened to him. Since then, he co-founded the wine estate Memento Mori—a reminder that death is inevitable.

"I believe that names can have a certain kind of power, so I don't choose them lightly," Hayes tells me as I begin tasting their newly bottled 2021 wines. "When I picked the name Memento Mori for our fledgling winery, the meaning was personal. I received a cancer diagnosis during my senior year of college. This was at a time when I thought I was practically invincible. I went into the doctor's office as the captain of the swim team at a Division I University. And I left that office stunned. The doctor told me I had to have immediate surgery, possibly dropping out of school to focus all my efforts on just surviving. The weeks after had a profound effect on me."

In the aftermath of surviving cancer, Hayes immortalized the experience in a wine label that features a dark name yet is anything but morbid.

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"I understood over time that it was the best thing that ever happened to me. When you truly internalize that everything can be taken away from you in moments, and the only thing that can stop you in life is losing your health, it sends a spark through everything you touch. Afterward, in my early 30s, I called my two best friends. This was before we had any wealth or success. I said we needed to do something together. It had to be something that we loved, or we just wouldn't see each other anymore because of family and work commitments. We agreed we couldn't take for granted that we would always be here and wanted to do something together. By that time, we all collected and loved wine. We had just discovered Peter Michael, Dana, Hundred Acre, and other insane Napa Cabs. So, we decided we wanted to explore building a brand we would be proud to drink and share with loved ones. After three years of research and making friends in the valley, we were ready to start. We decided the name needed to represent us and the venture."

Hayes and two friends, Adriel Lares and Adam Craun, banded their savings together. The first 2010 release of Memento Mori was a Cabernet Sauvignon sourced mainly from fruit purchased from Beckstoffer vineyards. It was made a favorite winemaker of the founding trio, Sam Kaplan, who was (and continues to be) the winemaker at Arkenstone Estate. Having made every vintage of Memento Mori since, Sam has been instrumental in growing the project. Today, they produce around 2000 cases across the four labels: the flagship vineyard blend as well as single vineyard wines from Beckstoffer Dr. Crane, Beckstoffer Las Piedras, and Vine Hill Ranch. The one thing missing was an estate vineyard and home for their winery until that changed late last year.



"At first, I thought, 'What have I done?' Then I saw the place."

"So, I got a call last year from a realtor, who told me this property had just come on the market," says Sam Kaplan. "No one else had seen it yet. I was in the middle of harvest, but I dropped everything and went to check it out. It was perfect. I called Hayes, except he was out of town, and I knew this wouldn't stay on the market long once word got out."

"I trusted Sam," Hayes says. "I said yes without even seeing the place. We put in an offer, and they accepted. At first, I thought, 'What have I done?' Then I saw the place."

Have to hand it to them: they found a pretty sweet spot in Calistoga, just off Highway 29, perched in the foothills of Spring Mountain and overlooking Sterling Vineyards. The property not only has five acres planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, but it also has a cave/cellar that was previously used to showcase art exhibitions, an 1800s farmhouse, and a fantastic "Sky Space" art installation by acclaimed artist James Turrell encompassing a jaw-dropping infinity swimming pool.

"I couldn't help myself," says Sam. "It was a baking hot harvest day when I first saw the property, so I stripped off and jumped in the pool. That's when I realized you can swim under and into the art piece and get this immersive experience."

Best of all, the property came with an existing winery permit, which is increasingly hard to come by in Napa Valley and, therefore, incredibly valuable. Plans are now in place to construct Memento Mori's own winery here.

"We're hoping to make wine in the new winery in 2024," says Hayes.

The first vintage of a Memento Mori wine to be made from fruit off the Calistoga estate will be 2023.



Part 2 - Vida Valiente: Live Bravely

"These are mediocre times, Mrs. Dunn. People are starting to lose hope. It's hard for many to believe there are extraordinary things inside themselves as well as others."

- Elijah Price in the movie "Unbreakable"

A few years after they founded Memento Mori, Hayes and his wife Susana partnered with Sam Kaplan and his wife Nancy to embark on a separate, refreshingly heroic winery project.

In 2017, the Drumwrights bought a property off Crystal Springs Road in St. Helena, which included a farmhouse and a few acres of viable vineyard land in the foothills of Glass Mountain, composed of prime Cortina soil—free draining cobbled rock and sand, the Holy Grail of dirt for making high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley. In 2018, guided by Sam Kaplan and aided by viticulturist Jim Barbour, they planted four acres to four different clones of Cabernet Sauvignon. Then, in 2020, the Glass Fire destroyed their home and a small portion of the vines, not to mention countless old oak trees. The vineyard has since been repaired and replanted, and at least one ancient, partially burned oak has been saved. Plans are in place now to build a small winery on the estate.

A new vineyard and winery in the wake of the 2020 fires—an uplifting story, yes, but what's so refreshing and heroic about that?

The new estate, named Vida Valiente (Spanish for Brave Life), has been linked to a charitable foundation created by Hayes, Susana, Sam, and Nancy in 2021 to mentor and financially support first-generation kids of USA immigrants from low-income families, helping them to thrive at one of the country's top colleges. The foundation is inspired by Susana Cueva Drumwright. The youngest of a family of eight, her father was Mexican, and her mother was Guatemalan. Susana's successful career in the tech industry was mainly inspired by her mother.

"My mother, Julia, was born in Guatemala and grew up in severe poverty," Susana tells me. "At the age of 16, she was sent to the US to find work and send money back to support her family in Guatemala. With no family here and no knowledge of the English language, my mom relied on a family friend to help her find work. After a few years and a few failed attempts, she landed a job as a housekeeper/nanny to an affluent family in Encino, CA. There, the matriarch of the family, Mrs. Lowe, taught her how to drive, helped her learn to speak English, and ultimately gave her the courage to believe in herself. As time went on, my mother got a job in a medical manufacturing company and moved up the corporate ladder. She survived a harsh childhood and lived a life as brave as they came in hopes of providing a better future for her family. She always strived for more and always made me feel as though I could achieve anything I put my mind to. And for her, Mrs. Lowe was a mentor, someone who guided her with compassion, humility, and authenticity. She believed in my mother when so many others hadn't."

The Vida Valiente Foundation mirrors the mentoring opportunities afforded to Julia by Mrs. Lowe and Susana by her mother for deserving kids with little or no guidance.

Even for underprivileged kids who achieve that dream of getting into a top university, the harsh reality is stark—90% of first-generation low-income students in the United States take more than six years to graduate, and 33% drop out after three years. They juggle classroom time and assignments with jobs to make ends meet, often with little or no support from home.

“Many of these kids don’t even own phones when they get to college,” says Susana. “They arrive with almost nothing.”

Beyond resources scholarships, the Vida Valiente Foundation provides an extra level of help—mentorship and access to professionals who grew up in similar circumstances.

“We provide both financial and advisor support for kids that have already been accepted to Stanford University,” Susana explains. “These young people are the 1% of the 1%. They got into Stanford against all odds. We have a good rapport with the Office of Financial Aid at Stanford. The kids apply for the scholarship in part by telling us their stories.”

2022, the first year of choosing scholars to accept, was brutal on Susana and the other founders—Hayes, Sam, and Nancy. They read dozens of stories from kids who survived abuse at home, homelessness, and managing back-breaking jobs on top of their high school studies to help their families survive amidst feelings of futility and hopelessness. Susana sent me a few of these stories. Some were so distressing to read I almost couldn’t finish them.

“In the first year, we were supposed to accept 25 applicants, and we accepted 33,” says Susana. “There were so many incredible stories. We couldn’t turn those kids down. Our goal with the foundation is to put accomplished yet humble leaders in front of our VV Scholars. These are professionals who are willing to share their wins along with their failures. I want our Scholars to see a bit of themselves in these leaders so that they can not only relate to them but hopefully believe that they, too, have the potential to also do great things. We hope to create a program where VV Scholars return to pay it forward as our leader speakers have with them.”

The foundation receives funds from charitable donations and via an annual fundraising auction. The first auction, held last December, raised \$535,000 for the foundation. The foundation is connected to the Vida Valiente wine estate via the time donated by the team of founders and proceeds from one of the estate’s four labels going to the foundation: The Movement. A blend of the estate’s vineyard, Beckstoffer’s To Kalon, and High Ranch Vineyard (in Coombsville), \$100 from the sale of each \$250 bottle of this wine directly supports the Vida Valiente Foundation.



"Vida Valiente wants to give that valiant life a purpose."

The other three Vida Valiente wines are single vineyard bottlings of the estate, To Kalon, and High Ranch.

"High Ranch Vineyard is a small, five-acre vineyard in Coombsville," Sam Kaplan says. "I worked with Mike Wolf to replant this in 2017 to Cabernet Sauvignon clones 4, 169, and 7. This place is owned by the Guttersons. It's all the way at the end of Montecito, looking at Kongsgaard's The Judge Vineyard. This 2021 is the first vintage of this wine. We have a long-term contract with this vineyard. The To Kalon is from Beckstoffer's recently (2018) replanted section—A2B, all clone 4 Cabernet Sauvignon. This is the first fruit off this replanted section."

Total production across the four Vida Valiente labels is only 1200 cases currently. A new site—Graveside Vineyard in St. Helena—is coming on board for this vintage.

With these first 2021 releases, the Vida Valiente wines hit the ground running in terms of quality, thanks to the use of choice vineyard sources and skillful winemaking. The style is similar to Memento Mori—wines of great purity and impressive density without being weighty and with an emphasis on textural opulence. But, of course, the wine signatures are unique because the vineyard sources are markedly different.



After the tasting, I head for my car an hour and a half later than I had anticipated, completely missing a Zoom meeting back at my office. But there are some stories that are too good not to make time for. The group—Hayes, Susana, Sam, and Nancy—walk me down the drive.

“You know, we started Vida Valiente because it is less about an outcome and more a representation of grace in hardship, humility in success, and understanding there is real joy in focusing on lifting others,” says Hayes. “Where Memento Mori has a beautiful Remember to Live ethos, Vida Valiente wants to give that valiant life a purpose.”

Memento Mori and Vida Valiente offers on the 2021s are due to be released to mailing list members this month. Those interested in securing an allocation should join the list via their websites:

<https://www.mmwine.com/>

<https://vidavalientewinery.com/>

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