



# Vida Valiente and Wines That Give Back

AMBER GIBSON



Photo Credit: Vida Valiente Winery

**S**usana Cueva Drumwright embodies the American Dream. Both of her parents immigrated from Latin America to the United States, and, against all odds, she became the first in her family to earn a college degree.

“I wanted to make sure that their hard work would not be in vain,” she says. “They certainly didn’t mean to put any of this pressure on me, but I so desperately wanted to make them proud. I knew that an important factor of achieving success was to do well in school and ultimately attend college. While I lacked guidance on the specific things I needed to do to achieve my goals of higher education, my mother’s grit and determination made anything seem possible.”

Now, the Vida Valiente co-founder, in partnership with her husband Hayes Drumwright, is paying it back with a philanthropic winery dedicated to providing financial assistance and holistic support to first generation, low-income students at four-year universities. The odds are still stacked against low-income, first-generation college students – 90% do not graduate within six years and 33% of first-gen students drop out within three years.

“We’d come to a point in our lives where we knew our network would support the mentorship aspect of the program and that our wine business could be a great way to help with the financial aspect of the foundation,” Drumwright says. The wines by winemaker and co-founder Sam Kaplan are damn good too.

Vida Valiente’s 2021 The Movement Cabernet Sauvignon just received its first set of critical scores – 97 points – and a glowing review from Lisa Perrotti Brown at Wine Independent. The wine is a blend of Vida Valiente’s three vineyard sources: the Estate, To Kalon, and High Ranch. The Movement directly supports the label’s philanthropic mission, with \$100 from each bottle sold going to the Vida Valiente Foundation. Currently, through a partnership with Stanford, Vida Valiente is providing last dollar scholarships, covering the parent and student contribution portion of aid, to 73 students.

Sophomore Heena Kahn, 20, is one of the scholarship recipients, receiving \$5,000 each year for four years to pursue her studies in biotechnology. “Given my low-income background, I am solely responsible for covering all financial obligations related to my college education,” she says. “I cannot fathom how I would manage this part of my college expenses without Vida Valiente, and I am immensely grateful for this financial support.” Vida Valiente’s last dollar scholarship gives students more flexibility to participate in internships, school activities, and extracurricular opportunities rather than feeling the pressure of needing to work while balancing a challenging school schedule.

For 18-year-old Nicole Ocampo Montoya, a freshman from New York City studying mechanical engineering and design, the scholarship allows her to join the Stanford Running Club, attend professional networking events, and dedicate herself to academics. “I get the often-forgotten freedom of simply enjoying my role as a student where my main responsibility is learning,” she says.

Kahn says that the relationships she has formed through Vida Valiente have been invaluable and eye-opening – and equally important as the monetary support.. After meeting Elli Kaplan, the CEO of Neurotrack, at her first Vida Valiente event, Kahn was inspired to merge her passion for medicine and technology to work toward a career in biotechnology.

“Stanford can be overwhelming, with a multitude of remarkable individuals, and imposter syndrome can take its toll,” Kahn says. “I’ve faced it myself, but the mentors I’ve connected with through Vida Valiente have consistently encouraged me. Many of these mentors come from backgrounds similar to mine, and they have been so wonderful and helpful through my Stanford journey.”

Montoya says that Vida Valiente has provided her with unprecedented access to opportunities and mentorship, as well as camaraderie and community with other Vida Valiente scholars. “With Vida, we now have each other,” she says. “We all have a chance to be successful together.”

Vida Valiente’s new releases mark a triumphant return for the team, following a year-long hiatus due to fire damage to their St. Helena estate vineyard, which resulted in the necessary omission of the 2020 vintage. Kaplan may be better known for his talents at Arkenstone and Memento Mori, but his Vida Valiente wines are just as memorable and age-worthy. The 2021 vintage includes an important debut – the first-ever wine produced from the virgin vines of the

Vida Valiente estate vineyard in Crystal Springs, the tiny region between Howell Mountain and St. Helena, which may soon become Napa Valley's 17th AVA. The four acres of vines planted in 2018 at the 17-acre Vida Valiente Estate are the first vines ever planted to its rocky Cortina soils at the base of Glass Mountain.

“We hope that our wines remind people to embrace their own valiant journeys and that oftentimes it's in the difficult points in life where we grow the most and gain a deeper appreciation for life's purpose,” Drumwright says. “Rarely will you meet young people as authentic, resilient, and full of potential as our Vida Valiente scholars [are]. Some of them have persevered through incredibly tough circumstances only to rise above it all, and want to make a real impact in the world. They inspire me and I am truly honored to be someone they can count on. I have no doubt that they will be the incredibly capable and deeply empathetic leaders that our world so desperately needs right now.”