

Boardrooms to Barrels: Here are the Orange County Executives Investing in Winemaking

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OCTOBER 6, 2025

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Joe and Sarah Kiani release their inaugural namesake wine label this fall

After making their marks at reputable firms, several local executives are now toasting their accomplishments by taking on winemaking.

Owning vineyards and producing their own wine has become a passion project for several members of the business community, such as well-known medical device executive Jim Mazzo and Masimo Corp. founder Joe Kiani, who is launching his namesake—Kiani Preserve—this fall.

“It’s taken over a decade,” Kiani told the Business Journal of his wine journey.

Making wine isn’t a cheap endeavor—and not the most profitable industry, especially if you’re starting from scratch. From planting grapes to harvesting and barreling, winemaking can take up to two years before you sell one bottle, Steve Contursi of Rare Coin Wholesalers told the Business Journal.

“If you’re going to build a wine brand, you better have a lot of money, and you better know what your market is,” he said.

Buying a winery, on the other hand, has more security if you’re making wine for yourself and other clients.

“Anything we make, we put right back into making our grapes better, hiring better people,” Neurotech Pharmaceuticals Chairman Mazzo told the Business Journal.

He and his wife, Kelly, are part-owners of the Jessup Cellars and Handwritten wineries in Yountville.

From Collectors to Wine Makers

Many executives were collectors before they jumped into their own venture.

It was a bottle of Napa Cabernet that drew Hayes Drumwright, founder of Trace3 Inc., to start researching winemakers with his two best friends.

“Unlike the tech world, where success often feels like a zero-sum game with only one winner, wine is different,” Drumwright told the Business Journal.

“Collectors don’t choose just one label – they build cellars filled with many wines, across brands and varietals.”

He co-founded Memento Mori in Napa Valley in 2010.

For Jim Mazzo, a winery was a completely new environment for him and his wife to experience.

“You learn how wine is made. You learn the different varietals,” he said. “It’s a lot of fun, and it challenges us all the time.”

After years of collecting fine wine, Kiani and his wife, Sarah, are releasing their inaugural bottles of Kiani Reserve this fall, crafted from grapes grown on their ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley.

“Even just acquiring the vines takes time,” Sarah Kiani told the Business Journal.

Joe and Sarah gave the Business Journal a glimpse of the new collection of varietals and blends during a visit to their Shady Canyon home in Irvine.

Joe noted the importance of recruiting a good winemaker, comparing the position to a chief technology officer. Both roles require attention to detail and a sense of creativity, he said.

“It takes a lot of patience, but if you know you’ve got the right ingredients, you just stick with it,” Joe said.

Winemaking, he noted, is also no different than running a successful business like his new venture, Willow Labs.

“No matter wine or Willow, the fundamentals remain the same—uncompromising craftsmanship, long-term mindset, and the ability to navigate uncertainty,” he said on LinkedIn.

Wine: Kiani Preserve by Joe and Sarah Kiani
Winemaker: Adam Henkel

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY — Joe Kiani grew up in Shiraz, Iran, where his father would take him hunting on weekends, often in the region’s vineyards.

After coming to California, starting a family and founding Masimo Corp., which makes noninvasive patient monitoring devices, and now Willow Labs, Kiani and his wife, Sarah, started to look for a piece of land to develop on their own.

“Shiraz has been known for thousands of years for wine and poetry, and I think just having a piece of dirt that I can go to was in my blood,” Kiani told the Business Journal.

In 2012, they were searching in states like Kentucky and Montana but ultimately found an 8,100-acre ranch in Santa Ynez.

“We feel like stewards of it,” he said, adding that he and Sarah plant about 100 new oak trees each year.

When deciding to start a wine venture, Kiani said they were thinking of future generations.

“We think this is a place that we hope our children will keep, and their children would keep.

So, we thought a vineyard and wine might be a good way for them to be able to keep it going even after we’re stopped paying all the bills.”

They planted the vines in 2020, and Joe Kiani had only one request for their winemaker, Adam Henkel.

“Choose the vines you want. The only thing I want is Shiraz.”

The Kianis are now releasing their first bottles of wine, under the Kiani Preserve label, in October. Roughly 1,500 cases are ready to be shipped to a mailing list of friends and family.

The inaugural bottles include a 2022 Estate Shiraz, 2022 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, 2022 Estate Red blend and a 2023 Estate White blend.

With a 100-acre vineyard and 170,000 vines, Kiani said they only use 10% of the best grapes to make the wine.

They have harvested and barreled every year since 2020, “tasting and waiting” for the right time to bottle.

“We didn’t want to rush it,” Sarah Kiani said. “We really, really wanted to make sure the first vintage was something special and it really has turned out to be.”

Joe added: “This is the first year we feel good about it.”

The Kianis plan to eventually produce 20,000 cases of wine. They’re also looking to open a wine tasting room in Los Olivos.

The ranch also produces olive oil from a grove of a few thousand olive trees and has eggs from its flock of chickens.

Sarah Kiani’s favorite part about Kiani Preserve is taking care of the land. She said they use regenerative farming, which involves 150 grassfed cows grazing responsibly, goats as natural weed whackers and a garden that provides vegetables to local restaurants.

“Because you tweak something a little bit, even with the wine – which is what’s really interesting to Joe – and everything changes,” she said.

Rare Coins to Rare Wines

Wine: Arrow&Branch by Steve and Seanne Contursi
Winemaker: Jennifer Williams

NAPA VALLEY — Steve Contursi built his business Rare Coin Wholesalers around his childhood hobby of coin collecting. His passion for finding and trading rare, historical coins has produced a firm that generates over \$2 billion in transactions.

When he started working at 10 years old, Contursi said he would cash in his paycheck for coins to look for rare pennies and nickels and compared the search to “Indiana Jones.”

As he grew up, Contursi built his collection by scouring coin shops in the Bronx. By the time he started grad school, Contursi said he was able to sell almost his entire collection to help with a down payment on a house in Minneapolis. Nowadays, Rare Coin Wholesalers carry the largest inventory of rare, vintage U.S. coins available for sale.

Contursi moved his family and business to Orange County in 1982. As the firm grew, he also started to collect and trade wines with a similar passion based on a love for French wines from Burgundy and Bordeaux.

Years later in 2007, Contursi and his wife Seanne were looking for a summer home and they found a property in Napa Valley that belonged to a notable vintner wine consultant Tony Soter. The vineyard had plenty of viable vines and was still growing Cabernet Franc grapes, which they discovered had produced vintages that scored highly among critics in the past.

“We looked at each other, my wife and I, and said, ‘When are we ever going to have a chance?’” Contursi told the Business Journal.

They chose not to sell the grapes and took the plunge into winemaking in 2008, establishing the Arrow&Branch brand. The name is inspired by the illustration that is on the back of many U.S. coins—an eagle holding an olive branch and a set of arrows. The first bottle, a 2008 red, came out in 2011.

“We’re not making pedestrian wine. We’re making wine for collectors,” Contursi said.

“Statement wines well sought after by collectors and investors, and that are going to be highly rated by critics.”

His favorite? The Arrow&Branch flagship red wine from 2008, a Cabernet Franc blended with Merlot.

They also buy grapes from seven to eight other top vineyards for Arrow&Branch wines.
“Just like our coins, we are only buying the best of them,” Contursi said.

After almost 20 years of outsourcing their wines, and with the help of investors, the family built a physical winery facility to make their own vintages on a 10-acre estate they acquired in 2020. It includes approximately 10,000 vines and opened in 2024.

They launched a new wine label called Coronet—featuring the first wines made at this new winery—in September. The inaugural release includes two 100% Cabernet Sauvignons from 2023.

Gem of Napa

Vineyard: Estate Yountville by Gary Jabara
Winemaker: Thomas Rivers Brown

YOUNTVILLE — Gary Jabara, founder of real estate investment firm Boardwalk Investments Group Inc. and the telecommunications infrastructure company formerly known as Mobilitie, is the brain behind the largest commercial property in the town of Yountville.

The Estate Yountville was established in 1870 and lies off the Saint Helena Highway, about 55 miles north of San Francisco. It is a 22-acre collection of upscale hotels, restaurants, wedding facilities, a shopping center, a vineyard and other facilities.

“It’s the gem of Napa Valley,” Jabara said at the time of the 2022 purchase, a deal that approached \$300 million.

He considered the estate a “trophy asset.”

Last year, the property was also named one of California’s top resorts in Condé Nast Traveler’s 2024 Readers’ Choice Awards.

Known as a heavyweight in the tech sector and a real estate mogul, Jabara has rounded out his resume with the estate’s 150-year-old vineyard.

The winery is known as the second oldest in Napa Valley. The estate’s winemaker, Thomas Rivers Brown, is renowned in the valley and was the youngest American winemaker to score two perfect 100-point ratings from critic Robert M. Parker.

Guests have even been invited to help harvest the grapes for the estate’s wines.

Jabara’s revitalization has caught the eyes of his neighbors in Yountville, including Jim Mazzo and his business partners at Jessup Cellars and Handwritten.

Wine: Memento Mori, Vida Valiente by Hayes and Susana Drumwright
Winemaker: Sam Kaplan

NAPA VALLEY — In the mid-2000s, some time after he founded Trace3 Inc., Hayes Drumwright said he was given a few bottles of a very high-end Cabernet from Napa Valley and was “blown away.”

“It was after that I called two of my best friends to start discussions about doing a project together in Napa,” he told the Business Journal via email.

For three years, he researched winemakers and vineyards in Napa. He then launched the brand Memento Mori in 2009, specializing in Cabernet Sauvignon, with Adriel Lares and Adam Craun.

Memento Mori is Latin for ‘remember your mortality.’

“My friends and I loved this name because I had suffered from cancer when I was 20 and we wanted the brand to inspire a “remember to live” ethos,” said Drumwright said.

The trio only produced 100 cases of the first 2010 vintage.

“We did not have the funds to buy a winery site or purchase vineyards in the beginning, so we secured contracts to source amazing fruit and used what is called a crush facility (someone else’s winery that contracts space) to make the wines with our winemaker, Sam Kaplan,” Drumwright said.

Drumwright was finally able to acquire a property for making Memento Mori wine in 2022, a 17-acre estate in Calistoga.

Then in 2019, Drumwright and his wife Susana launched a second brand called Vida Valiente after they got married. The two initial vineyards for this brand were planted in 2018. The first was a walnut grove when the Drumwrights purchased it.

It debuted with its inaugural 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon in 2021.

Vida Valienta, which translates to “Valiant Life,” was developed with a philanthropic purpose in mind. The couple started the Vida Valiente Foundation to support first-generation low-income students attending Stanford University. So far, they’ve helped 173 students.

Both the Vida Valiente winery and the Memento Mori estate total 34 acres in Napa Valley.

The three partners still maintain long-standing contracts with other sites in the valley, which allows them to produce additional bottles.

Memento Mori is available to members on a private mailing list, with some bottles selling for over \$300, though it can also be found at various steakhouses and fine-dining restaurants such as Mastro’s.

Over 10 years later, Drumwright sees the risk he took as rewarding.

“In total, you’re looking at roughly seven years before you see any meaningful revenue from a new wine project,” he said. “And that’s just the financial timeline without factoring in the unpredictability of Mother Nature or the many other variables that can set you back.

For that reason, the wine business really requires deep patience and, above all, a genuine love for wine.”

Ophthalmology Exec Ventures into Napa

Wine: Jessup Cellars, Handwritten by Jim and Kelly Mazzo

Winemaker: Andrew Wright

YOUNTVILLE — When Jim and Kelly Mazzo became part-owners of Jessup Cellars, they knew the business would be something out of their comfort zone.

Jim Mazzo, a notable executive in Orange County’s ophthalmology industry and current chairman of Neurotech Pharmaceuticals, said that he and his wife were inspired to join the winery because of the unknown environment.

The Mazzo family had previously lived overseas for 14 years in Rome and London, which is where their love of wine blossomed.

“Living in Rome, we visited some unbelievable vineyards with wines that people don’t even know because the locals own them,” he told the Business Journal. “Then, of course, living in London, we went to France a lot.”

When they returned to OC, they had no intention of starting a winery. But Mazzo’s close friend and healthcare colleague, Vance Thompson, changed their minds. In 2005, Thompson had taken complete ownership of the Jessup winery with two other partners and their significant others.

Thompson kept telling Mazzo about his experience of “getting out of ophthalmology and doing something different,” which intrigued him. Around the same time, his son Chris Mazzo was working at the tasting room for Jessup Cellars and living near Yountville.

“That’s what got us involved,” Kelly Mazzo said. Her husband added that it was a way to challenge their everyday norm of ophthalmology and charity work.

“We knew nothing about wines. And so, it really tests us. It still tests us to this day,” he said.

The Mazzos became partners in 2013 and are now one of four couples involved as majority owners.

Before they officially became partners, the group debuted a second wine label called Handwritten in 2009 to reach collectors and a higher-end customer base.

They also opened a second wine tasting room—which Kelly Mazzo helped design—dedicated to Handwritten wines at the south end of Yountville, home to the famous three-Michelin-star restaurant, The French Laundry by chef Thomas Keller.

The group collectively owns 30% of the grapes used to make the wines. The other 70% is purchased from other vineyards across Napa Valley. On average, Jessup and Handwritten produce between 15,000 and 20,000 cases of varietals each year, depending on the harvest.

Even 18 years later, both Jim and Kelly Mazzo will clarify that they are not wine connoisseurs and consider it their favorite hobby – one of which allows them to do things like name their favorite blend, Graziella Sangiovese, after their granddaughter Grace.

Betting on Private Labels for Restaurants

Wine: McClain Cellars by Jason and Sofia McClain

Winemaker: Dean Guzman

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY — Jason McClain started McClain Cellars after turning down a television deal from Amazon Prime in 2016.

He and his wife Sofia made their first vintages in 2018 and sold the bottles in a pop-up event at their home in Coto de Caza. They make the wine at their facilities in the Santa Ynez Valley from a variety of grapes in that region.

They opened the first wine tasting room in Laguna Beach a year later and have since opened locations in Solvang, Buellton and Irvine.

McClain Cellars received the Up & Coming Award at the Business Journal’s Family-Owned Business Awards in 2022.

After alcohol sales surged during COVID-19, the industry hit a slump. McClain knew he had to try something different to keep growing. The first strategy was to start manufacturing and distributing private-label wines.

McClain now makes wine for about 30 different restaurants in the U.S. and hotels from Florida to California featuring their brand name on the label.

According to McClain, it’s helped the business survive the retail market. They also receive requests from corporate offices and real estate agents.

“It takes up probably a third of our revenues right now,” he said.

This led to a second addition to the business, which has been creating “virtual wineries.”

McClain Cellars will not only make the wine and create labels with the client’s name on it, but the team will also build a website where customers can purchase the custom bottles.

McClain will then ship the orders, with the proceeds split between them and the client.

McClain said he knows that not everyone can break into the wine business, so this allows him to break down the barrier a bit.

2025 has been another busy year for McClain. He just acquired a winery in Temecula, La Fata Cellars, and is rolling its operations into his.

He built a recording studio at the Irvine facility to start his “Crush and Climb” podcast this year. McClain also wrote two books that were released in August and include stories about operating the winery. He describes his wine career as labor intensive.

“This is probably the most physically exhausting undertaking I’ve ever taken to create the most beautiful product I’ve ever had,” he said.