

# Quality, Provenance, and Relevance

An Interview with Tara Empson, Chief Executive Officer, Empson USA

**EDITORS' NOTE** Tara Empson earned her success in part because she knows Italian wine from the roots-up. Having grown up in the wine industry, she is eager to live up to her parents' legacy by investing in better ways to strengthen Empson's business model while expanding the company's global footprint. Her parents, New Zealander Neil Empson and native Rhode



Tara Empson

Islander Maria Gemma, moved to Italy in 1969 and founded Empson & Co. in 1972. After several years, they decided to return to the United States to start a family, and in 1984 Empson was born in Rhode Island. Empson lived in Rhode Island until the age of four when she moved with her parents to Milan to be closer to the family business. Educated in the Italian school system until age 15, she was immersed in Italy's language and culture and traveled with her parents to wine events all over the world. Empson always knew what she wanted to do when she grew up: to follow in her parents' footsteps and work in the wine industry. At a young age, she was surrounded by many of her parents' partners and associates who until this day are a core part of the Empson business. The wine world was a very distant concept to her at that time, but something about the caring relationships always intrigued her. Empson's deep-rooted need to nurture relationships and invest in quality – whether it is a relationship or in wine – fundamentally contributes to the person she is. At 15 years old, Empson returned to the U.S., enrolling in a Rhode Island boarding school to reacquaint herself with American English and New England culture. She missed her life in Milan and decided to finish her secondary education at the International School of Milan, and after graduating from high school, she took a year off and traveled with her parents to Australia and New Zealand, her father's native country. There, Empson spent quality time with her family and had the unique opportunity to venture into a different wine region. Following her university studies in Rome, Empson moved back to Milan to begin her career at Empson, thereby fulfilling her childhood dream.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Family owned since its foundation in 1991, Empson USA ([empsonusa.com](http://empsonusa.com)) is an enterprising fine wine importer with a dynamic portfolio of distinctive estates from Italy, Spain, Chile, New Zealand, and the USA. Its mission is to discover and represent carefully selected top-tier brands worldwide, and to share the "Art of Fine Wine" with its customers and partners in the U.S. market.

**Will you highlight the history of Empson USA?**

My parents, Neil and Maria Empson, began in 1970 working out of the utility room of their building in Milan before opening their headquarters in 1972. They traveled all over Italy in search of the best Italy had to offer, ultimately creating relationships with family wineries whose wines they felt the world needed to taste. The company expanded over the next few decades and in 1991, Empson USA officially opened in Virginia. We later opened in Canada in 2000 and Japan as well. Our wines are available in over 35 countries today. We've also expanded our portfolio to include new world and domestic selections and continue to seek and represent quality wines that complement our portfolio.

**Will you provide an overview of Empson USA's portfolio and offerings?**

We offer a wide-ranging selection of top brands, wines, and varietals from around the world, as well as competitive collections for the U.S. market. As a company, we have always been about quality, provenance, and relevance. While we started out only offering Italian wines, we've grown over the years to include New Zealand and Chile, then Spain, and finally Oregon and California, and we continue to grow. We've built our portfolio to include niche and wide-market options and we follow our instincts and try to introduce wines we think are incredible, hoping to gain appreciation for them. Today, we also listen closely to the demands of the market which has seriously grown and is extremely knowledgeable. From the time my parents began, when the importer had a very significant role in the market, to current day, we've realized the importance of listening to our clients' needs and finding solutions. As the market is overwhelmed with global selections, we aim to gather the very best from different corners of the globe and facilitate the creation of a unique wine list with key offerings.





*Tina Empson with her parents and Empson founders, Neil and Maria*

**What have been the keys to Empson USA's industry leadership and how do you define the Empson USA difference?**

One of the keys is definitely our strong connections to the U.S. and Italy. Having such a strong presence in Italy has enabled us to create long-standing relationships with family wineries, which is such a big focus for us. The other key is our strong presence in the U.S. in the on-premise and off-premise markets, helping us diversify. This is thanks to the Empson USA team, which is out there every day in restaurants and stores. And finally, we offer across-the-board services – from vineyard

to table. With all this, we are truly able to stay plugged in with our suppliers and each market, staying abreast of any changes, which gives us the opportunity to act quickly.

**Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for Empson USA?**

There's great opportunity in the domestic market – we represent some excellent wineries now in Paso Robles and Napa Valley in California and the Willamette and Umpqua Valleys in Oregon. Reaching clients and consumers is also an important part of our growth. However, it's not just about growth, but also staying relevant, maintaining what we have, and continuing to

cultivate those relationships in spite of how things change in the market. Making new placements is a great achievement, but seeing that the wine is appreciated and that it turns on the wine list or on the shelf is an even greater accomplishment.

**How has technology impacted the way Empson USA operates?**

Technology has provided a wonderful opportunity to create exposure for our wineries, for what we are doing, and for what the industry is doing. It can be so informative, visual and provide direct connections to wineries thousands of miles away. It's been an excellent platform for education and has also shown us that you can still achieve great results, get people involved, and cut down timing constraints. Of course, we still prefer to meet in person as relationships and stories are uniquely conveyed through our senses, but that said, there is such great value in technology.

**How important has it been to build the Empson USA team and will you highlight the strength and expertise of the workforce?**

It is absolutely crucial to have a strong team and it's thanks to ours that we have the reach we do. We value their wine knowledge, savviness, endurance, and the relationships they have built over the years. It's not solely important to make the placement, but also to keep it. We constantly look to expand our team and build our core structure so we can provide the best services, satisfying market demands. We are grateful to our customers who by supporting us give us the means to build and evolve each day.

**How do you focus your efforts leading Empson USA and what are your priorities for the business?**

Well to start, it's not just about me, it's about us. I have been very blessed to grow up in the industry and I am so fortunate to be supported by such an amazing team, which is like family to me. I work with a day-to-day team in different countries to make sure the health of the company is on track. My utmost joy and top priority is to maintain a healthy company. Difficulties and changes are inevitable, and my aim is to try to be flexible and innovative while maintaining our key messages of integrity, family, unity, and quality. These core values are what motivate us and give us purpose, drive, and excitement for tomorrow. The most important outcome is that we ensure our clients are happy and our relationships continue to blossom.

**With all that Empson USA has accomplished, are you able to take moments to celebrate the wins?**

We do. Our successes are celebrated knowing that our work has paid off and that we have conveyed our message to the people who enjoy our wines. At the end of the day, this is still a people business and it's the people who make it a living, breathing entity, just like wine itself. Working with wineries for generations and being able to tell their stories is the greatest gift and a reminder that it's not just about the wine, but the people, and that never gets old. ●