

European Style Wines

An Interview with Arman Pahlavan, Proprietor/Executive Manager, Starlite Vineyards

EDITORS' NOTE Arman Pahlavan was born in Tehran, Iran and moved with his family to the U.S. He graduated with a BA degree from U.C. Berkeley and attended U.C. Hastings College of the Law from 1988 to 1991. His last job before graduating from college was as a *maitre d'* at Stars Restaurant in San Francisco. He is a Partner at Perkins Coie, focusing his legal career in venture capital and private equity. He purchased the vineyards at his estate in Geyserville, California in 2001 and founded Starlite Vineyards in 2003.



Arman Pahlavan

WINERY BRIEF Starlite Vineyards (starlitevineyards.com) is an ultra-premium boutique winery and estate located in Sonoma County's famed Alexander Valley that produces European style wines. Starlite commenced its winemaking journey with the Zinfandel that was already planted in the estate's vineyards. Its elegant and soft yet well-balanced style of Zinfandel had its inaugural vintage in 2003, and has maintained a consistent quality and character with subsequent vintages. In 2007, the winery expanded its offering to include Viognier and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Viognier has received acclaim as one of the most beautiful expressions of this varietal from California. Starlite Vineyards' Cabernet Sauvignon was released in 2011, and has been hailed as an elegant, European-style wine. Starlite also began producing a Rosé in 2019 that is known for its complexity and depth as the result of an artisanal crafted blend of estate fruit.

Will you discuss your vision for creating Starlite Vineyards?

I came to it through my love of wines. It was a passion that grew when I was younger. I was working my way through college and landed a great opportunity with Stars Restaurant in San Francisco. Stars was where the socialites would come in the '80s, and it started catering to the community in Napa. We would go to these amazing venues for hosting Stars catering events that were popping up in Napa and it led me to aspire to someday own a vineyard.

When the opportunity presented itself many years later, we bought this property in the Healdsburg area on Highway 128. It had a farmhouse built in 1912 and we put our flag down

with the aspiration of learning what it means to be in the wine business. I paired with a magnificent woman winemaker who launched the brand for us with our Zinfandel.

The vision was to create an ultra-premium boutique winery, and the largest production we have done has been 1,200 cases of one vintage which shows our commitment to quality, not quantity. We do it almost as an art form in the wine business. The labels for our Cabernet bottles have images of my art collection of classic contemporary artists, which makes the wines even more special.

What have been the keys to Starlite Vineyards' strength over two decades?

The strength of the brand has changed from being a focused brand in the wholesale and restaurant markets to a brand that is much more in the consumer market. We shifted our focus more toward consumer marketing and sales so we're putting less effort into promotion in the wholesale market than we are in the direct-to-consumer market today.

That is the difference we have from the wineries that have unlimited resources or have large financial partners behind them where they can spark capital and conduct marketing efforts. We have to figure out where to concentrate our efforts that will give us the biggest bang for our buck. Direct-to-consumer provides us a channel to get the largest margin for the products so, from a financial perspective, it is the most cautious and reasonable method of managing the finances of the business.

Will you highlight the guest experience when visiting Starlite Vineyards?

The truth of the wines only becomes apparent when people come to visit us because, for the direct-to-market and direct-to-consumer business, the only way to develop a following is for people to come sit with us at our facilities and enjoy the wines onsite. There is no other way to differentiate ourselves through any other method of direct-to-consumer marketing.

What we do is unique. Few wineries in California do what we do in creating a European style of wine. It will be hard to find someone who says they create handcrafted European style wines at any other winery.



Starlite Vineyards in Geyserville, California (above and opposite page)

Producing European style wine means that we have softer tannic structure and a willingness to try blends like the Spanish and Italians. For example, our Cabernet has a blend with tempranillo. It's not a normal blend. I have recently heard that others are doing it, but I didn't know that when we started; it just sounded right to me. Also, I have only worked with women winemakers and the woman's touch to winemaking also has something to do with the softer style of our wines. Women generally have more patience and the elegance of their work shines through with our wines.

There also aren't many producing Viognier. In 2007, we started with this varietal in the Alexander Valley. No one was doing that at the time and there are still only a handful of wineries doing it. The Viognier we produce is completely European in style. We utilize the barrel-fermented winemaking technique. I don't know if anyone else is doing this, but it's not something that many people aspire to do.

Is the Alexander Valley region well-understood for its leadership in winemaking?



An assortment of Starlite wines

The region is not as well-understood as it deserves. There are a lot of great wineries there. For the past 20-plus years that we have been doing this, there has been a great deal of attention on the town of Healdsburg and the Alexander Valley and it has been developing as a destination. People can taste the wines produced in the Valley and gain an appreciation of what we do.

What have been the keys to producing such a consistently high-quality product year after year?

Consistency is key, and we have remained consistent by limiting what we're producing. Once you expand what you do, you will run afoul with quality controls. I may be a contrarian in this respect, but I believe this philosophy is true. There are a lot of fantastic winemakers that produce 10,000-15,000 cases of wine, but even for them, their darling wine is a vineyard designate that produces less than 500 cases.

Consistency comes from having the vineyards being from our estate, as opposed to going and buying fruits; it comes from having proprietors involved continuously in overseeing all operations including the farming, vinification, branding, and marketing as well as being directly involved with the sales of the wine to the consumers at the winery; it comes from caring about the vision as opposed to changing it based on the financial ups and downs of the markets.

Are you able to enjoy the journey and reflect on what you have built?

One of the wonderful things about Starlite is that I have a home on the premises, and when I have an opportunity to visit and interact with guests at our tasting room or enjoy the amazing scenery, it provides an opportunity to reflect and appreciate what we have built. It has been an amazing journey, and I am excited for the future. ●