



Pursuing a Passion

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 B.A. from UC Berkeley and attended UC Hastings College of the Law from 1988 to 1991. His last job before graduate school was as a *maitre d'* at Stars Restaurant in San Francisco. He is a Partner at Squire Sanders focusing his legal career in private equity and technology. He purchased the vineyards at their estate in Geyserville in 2001 and founded Starlite Vineyards in 2003.



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VINEYARD BRIEF Starlite Vineyards (www.starlitevineyards.com) is an ultra-premium boutique winery and estate located in Sonoma County's famed Alexander Valley. They commenced their journey to make their own wines with the Zinfandel that was already planted in the vineyards. They defined the style of their Zinfandel with an inaugural vintage in 2003 and have maintained a consistent quality and character with subsequent vintages. In 2007, they expanded the winery's offering to include Viognier and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Viognier has received acclaim from the sommelier community as one of the most beautiful expressions of that varietal from California. Their Cabernet Sauvignon was released in 2011 and has been hailed as an elegant and European-style wine.

How did you get into the wine business?

My love for good food and wine comes from my early days as a student at UC Berkeley. My family moved to the U.S. from Iran in 1977 and we left most of our assets in Iran. So I had to put myself through Berkeley and I worked in the restaurant business most of my time as an undergraduate. The most elevated job I held was at Stars Restaurant in San Francisco. It was the beginning of the California Cuisine movement and Stars was the place to work and get an education in culinary arts. I developed a love for beautiful food and wine and got one of the best educations anyone could receive in service and refinements. At Stars, there was an underlying but abstract concept of excellence and on the wine side, it was largely a European selection. It was the place to be. That was when I fell in love with the aesthetics of vineyards and hoped to own a winery someday. So several

years later, when I had saved some money, I purchased a little vineyard in Alexander Valley and that was the beginning of Starlite Vineyards.

It is an expensive business to get into, so I did this for the love of it. I didn't have the big dollars to get into it so, in some ways, I'm an anomaly in the high-end wine world; it was mostly about passion, luck, and hard work. To the extent that you have the love but not the cash, you have to outshine others in quality to be successful there. From 2003 to 2010, we

mostly sold wines to the high-end restaurants throughout the U.S.

In 2010, we finally opened our tasting room, which was made possible by funding from the Small Business Administration.

How do you create a wine with such consistency and quality in the market?

I try to create something that I think is magnificent, and if not, I will dump it because I have a huge love for the arts and wine at this level is art. In some way, it is not too much different than what Modigliani did with his paintings.

I'm lucky to have a palate and a concept that came together in this venture. When we bought the vineyard, there were some vines planted on the hill. But I knew nothing about wine-making, so this came together because I paired up with one of the magnificent winemakers in California to define our wines.

We purchased the property in December 2001 and the Zinfandel grapes were under contract with Kendall Jackson. But it was clear that once the contract came up again in two or three years, no renewal would be forthcoming.

In 2003, we created 250 cases of our own Zinfandel. The joke is that I'm not a fan of Zinfandels. So we tried to create something I would love, which we refer to as a 'Claret' style of Zinfandel. I love Château Margaux, the great Bordeaux wines, so as a joke we created Château Margaux out of Zinfandel grapes, but stylistically it worked. It's a more restrained Zinfandel with a higher level of acidity and it's more aromatic, but we ended up with something that would match the great culinary arts that were going on with many of the great chefs in New York and San Francisco.

In 2005, I came to New York with the Zinfandel and sought out a handful of the top sommeliers. They all felt that what we were doing with the Zinfandel was different in style with a high level of acidity to it; it wasn't jammy or fruity, but there was plenty of expression of the California fruit in it, and the sommeliers opened the market for the wine. DB Bistro was the first place to take it, then Alain Ducasse, Le Bernardin, Chanterelle, Veritasse, Gotham, and Craft, among others.

So that is how we launched our wines. Overall, something like 21 restaurants in New York opened markets for us.

How did it evolve and what brought about the expansion?

I wanted to venture into white wine after the Zinfandel. What's specific to our Zinfandel is that it has gorgeous aromatics; a beautiful, soft tannin structure; and fruit components.

So I paired the white wine varietals down to the Viognier, because it also produced a spectacularly aromatic wine to match the aromatics of the Zinfandel. We wanted to create something that had the refinements of the French vinification techniques. So I studied Viognier wines and decided to create a Viognier that was 'Condrieu' in style.

The next wine we did was a Cabernet Sauvignon. We planted a European clone of Cabernet in the vineyard to see what would come of it. The first vintage of the Cabernet was in 2006 and it was very soft. So instead of producing it as a stand-alone wine, we tried blending it with the Zinfandel to see what we could get. For the Zinfandel, we were trying to do something 'Claret' in style and the Cabernet added a beautiful mid-palate to the Zinfandel. Even though Cabernet is not a normal blend for the Zinfandel, it worked well because it came from the same hill with the same soil. So the fruit profile matched. The 2007 vintage of the Cabernet was a blockbuster. It has gorgeous aromatics, beautiful expressions of plums and cassis, and very soft tannin structure. So we have killed two birds with one stone with our Cabernet. We have created a spectacular wine that can stand against all the Napa giants and it is a lovely blend wine for our Zinfandel.

Did you always know this would work?

The accomplishment has come because of my love for this work. ●

Starlite vineyards (left); Starlite Viognier, Starlite 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon, and Starlite Zinfandel (right)