

# Starlite's Style



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

Starlite Vineyards (above); Persephone 2 by Peter Crompton at Starlite Vineyards (left)

**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 U.C. Berkeley and attended U.C. Hastings College of the Law from 1988 to 1991. His last job before graduate school was as a *maître d'* at Stars Restaurant in San Francisco. He is a



Arman Pahlavan with a number of Starlite wines

Partner at Perkins Coie, focusing his legal career in private equity and technology. He and Rina Pedroza-Pahlavan, his business partner, purchased the vineyards at their estate in Geyserville, California in 2001 and founded Starlite Vineyards in 2003. Their mutual passion for Starlite Vineyards has kept them running the boutique family wine business that they hope to turn into a legacy for their younger generation.

**VINEYARD BRIEF** Starlite Vineyards ([starlitevineyards.com](http://starlitevineyards.com)) is an ultra-premium boutique winery and estate located in Sonoma County's famed Alexander Valley. They commenced their winemaking journey with the Zinfandel that was already planted in the estate's vineyards. They defined their elegant and soft yet well-balanced style of 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 this varietal from California. Starlite Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon was released in 2011, and has been hailed as an elegant, European-style wine.

## What brought you to the wine industry and how has the brand evolved?

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 magnificent position with Stars restaurant in San Francisco. I was working with Jeremiah Tower, who was recently hired as Head Chef at Tavern on the Green. He is an amazing culinary expert, so my introduction to

the world of wine was through his knowledge and experience.

Stars was where the socialites would come and, in the '80s, Jeremiah started catering to the community in Napa. We would go to these amazing venues that were popping up in the area and it led to my aspirations 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 goal of learning what it means to be in the wine business. I partnered with a magnificent winemaker, who launched the brand for us with our Zinfandel.

We kept the palate of wines in the style that Jeremiah loves, which is European.

## Early on, was there a big education curve and has the business unfolded as you expected?

I didn't have any expectations because I was a novice when we started. It was about stepping into this thing little by little, but I used my instinct about where to go. I came to New York initially to see if we had a wine that would be appreciated as a real, fine wine. I never had the means to produce really low-end wines, which would require a lot of capital to make into a business. Instead, I approached it with an artistic nature, looking to create something beautiful and determine if there was a market for it. The plan was to take baby steps to see what we could create.

It's a sexy business from the outside but a difficult business in that it has become the hobby of many hundred-million-dollar gentlemen and ladies from other industries. To do it on a scale where you can preserve the artistic nature of this business and to do so in a way that somebody with a real job could afford to do it was not easy.

I came to New York with our first vintage, the 2003 wines, and I met with a host of wonderful palates in New York, who all thought I was doing something interesting.

It was clear from the response I received that there was something special about the

wine. It was softer with a higher level of acidity and there was a beautiful middle palate to the wines, so it really worked with fine cuisine. I had found my niche.

After a few trips to New York, we had about 15 of the top restaurants there that each took three cases, so 45 cases of wine out of our original 250 cases was gone. Then I went to San Francisco where I already had contacts and then to Los Angeles, and the remaining cases were gone.

Little by little, we expanded the amount of wine we produced. The second wine we put out was a Viognier, a northern French varietal. There are a lot of mediocre examples of this varietal in the market and I wanted to do something true to the Condrieu style of wine. I studied it and we produced a lovely wine using Condrieu techniques of vinification and refusing to use anything that is non-European in style.

We're also in the Alexander Valley so we planted some Cabernet on the property. I was invited to Brussels to work a tasting with the distributor of our Zinfandel. A fellow from one of the great Tempranillo producers was at the same venue and I thought it would be interesting to turn the Rioja wines on their head. Many of the Rioja wines have some Cabernet blend, so I wanted to put a little Tempranillo as a blend into our Cabernet. Once I did, it really stood out.

We've now released three vintages of the Cabernet – 2007, 2009, and 2011 – and we have 2012, 2013, and 2014 in the barrel. These are how we have made our mark in the Alexander Valley.

## With that niche, is it difficult to cut through the crowded market?

I'm no longer focused on a specific market and I have lessened my focus on selling to restaurants. I have a few in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. In 2010, we opened a wine-tasting on the property and we have since garnered many visitors – we have about 2,500 to 3,000 per year after five years. This has given us 15,000 or so people who have tasted our wines and viewed the unique nature of our property, which is a gem even though it's small. Many people have experienced our wines on site, and I try to be at the tastings to work the room myself and explain to people what we're doing. We're getting a magnificent reception because we stand out in terms of our flavors. ●