



Growing Starlite

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



Arman Pahlavan with a selection of Starlite wines (above);
Starlite road sign (left) welcoming guests to the vineyard (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Arman Pahlavan was born in Tebran, 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 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 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.

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. 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 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 is the strength of the Starlite brand today?

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 have 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 a large partnership 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.

There has been such a proliferation of brands over the years. Is the Internet the best way to get the message out about Starlite? How do you differentiate in the space?

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 through any other method of direct-to-consumer marketing.



We can try to promote our wines through the Internet and other mediums and those are all positive methods of drawing people to our brand. However, for people to fully understand what we do and our range of wines, in the end, they have to visit us.

What we do is unique. Not many wineries in California do what we do in creating a European-style of wine. It will be hard to find someone who says they do handcrafted European-style wines at any other winery.

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 is 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.

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.

There aren't many blending Cabernet with Zinfandel, but it has been a hallmark of what we do. Even with Internet marketing, people should still come and hang out with us at our tasting room overlooking our vineyard and talk about the wines to really understand the distinction.

Is this scalable? Probably not. Will that be a struggle in terms of building a big brand name? Probably. But this is what we love to do. I would not do it any differently.

How do you define the strength of Alexander Valley for winemaking?

The region is not well understood. There are a lot of great wineries here. Several wineries are coming from way up in the Cloverdale area to areas of the Alexander Valley close to Healdsburg and creating event spaces. The latest will open in 2018. The event center will bring thousands of people to the area on a weekly basis, so that will bring us some attention.

Within about a two mile distance from us, there are 50 new homes being marketed, and those will also bring additional people to our area.

For the past 16 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.

Looking at recent releases, will you discuss the investments you've made to maintain quality?

The sense of our quality starts in the vineyard. We make sure that things are consistently strong within the vineyard year after year. We also try to have a uniform method of vinification. We are only working with women winemakers. We think that they understand how to apply a more delicate hand to winemaking. This all works within the protocols we've set forth to follow.

This has all relied on our ability to work with our winemakers over the past 15 years to make sure they understand what we want to accomplish. We are very fortunate to be working with these magnificent winemakers who understand what we're doing. They have done a wonderful job. Our current winemaker, Leslie Cisneros, has done a fabulous job of getting what it is that we love in wine and translating that into a really beautiful product. ●