

# Creative Anarchy

An Interview with Barbara R. Banke, Chairman and Proprietor, Jackson Family Wines



Barbara R. Banke

**EDITORS' NOTE** One of the industry's top executives and innovators, Jackson Family Wines' ([jacksonfamilywines.com](http://jacksonfamilywines.com)) Chairman & Proprietor Barbara Banke has spent the last two decades leading the company she co-founded with her late husband, wine icon Jess Jackson. In addition to their flagship Kendall-Jackson winery, Banke and Jackson shaped nearly two dozen premium wineries across Sonoma, Napa, Monterey, Santa Barbara and Mendocino counties. Today, the Jackson Family Wines' portfolio is a global collection of world-class estate vineyards and wineries, including acclaimed properties in Oregon's Willamette Valley, France, Italy, Chile, Australia, and South Africa. Banke takes a hands-on role developing and promoting the Jackson family's wine estates, as well as in new vineyard acquisitions and a broad range of other strategic initiatives. A well-known philanthropist, Banke is a passionate advocate for children's and educational charities around the country. Most recently she was the Chair of the Sonoma County Wine Auction raising a record-breaking \$5.2 million for the local

community. She and Jackson committed nearly \$4 million to the Jess S. Jackson Sustainable Winery Building at UC Davis, designed to train the next generation of winemakers in sustainability practices. In addition, Banke and her family contributed \$500,000 to help launch the Family Justice Center Sonoma County, assisting victims of domestic violence. She is also a global ambassador for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. When she is not sourcing new vineyard sites, Banke is active in Stonestreet Farms, the family's Lexington, Kentucky-based equestrian racing stables. Stonestreet Farms has produced Horses of the Year Curlin and Rachel Alexandra, as well as Eclipse Award winner Good Magic and Cartier Award winner My Miss Aurelia. Banke is a graduate of UCLA and Hastings Law School. A former land use and constitutional law attorney, she spent more than a decade arguing cases before the United States Supreme Court and Courts of Appeal. She raised three children with Jess (Katie, Julia and Christopher Jackson), who are each involved in Jackson Family Wines.

**You are a leader in the wine industry with Jackson Family Wines, a leader in the horse industry with Stonestreet Farms, and a leader in philanthropy. Do you see these three areas as interrelated?**

I am a farmer. I raise horses, I raise grapes – we make highly-acclaimed wine and we make champion racehorses.

**What have been the keys to Jackson Family Wines' strength and leadership in the industry?**

We have a concept that I call creative anarchy. You start with a really good piece of land, you grow great grapes, you find someone special to make the wine, and you get out of the way. We let our winemakers have the freedom to do what they do best and our job is to provide them with the resources they need to create great wines.

**What are the characteristics you look for when hiring your winemakers?**

We look for people who are great at what they do, and will fit into our family culture. We have hired people who may not have had a tremendous amount of experience but were super talented and have been able to grow with the company. Sometimes we hire the ones with experience, and other times we hire ones who we know have the talent and the palate to do something special.

**Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for Jackson Family Wines?**

My kids might not react too well if I said we were going to add new wineries but all joking aside, wineries require a tremendous amount of attention in building the team, finding the right winemakers and taking care of the property. Having said that, there are always a few that we have our eyes on and we also plan to develop the existing wineries that we have even further.

**How did Jackson Family Wines adapt its business to address the challenges caused by the pandemic and how proud are you to see the resilience of your team during this uncertain time?**

I am very proud of our team. We have people that sell wines to restaurants and build relationships with restaurateurs, but there were no restaurants open. We had to put some of our great sommeliers on grocery store accounts during this time. We did not layoff people, instead we asked them to pivot as we needed to sell more



*A selection of Jackson Family Wines*

wine off premise in stores and direct – we all did what we needed to do to make it through. I am really proud of the way our team responded and adapted during this unprecedented time.

**Jackson Family Wines offers a wide selection of wines. How do you describe the range of offerings that you provide?**

My husband used to say that he wanted to be the best damn wine company in the world – that describes our strategy pretty well. We make the best wines and we have them at different price points. Some of our offerings are in large quantities and others are very limited, but the common factor is that they are all the best quality.

**There has been such a proliferation of wines entering the market over the past years. How challenging is it to differentiate in the industry?**

You have to communicate directly, and we have a lot of direct operations and partnerships with distributors who know us and understand our quality and value. We are getting more into digital communications and are adding a few people to our advisory board who have expertise in digital communications and direct-to-consumer business. This is a real opportunity for us going forward.

**Will the wine store and brick and mortar remain relevant as consumers buy more wine online?**

If you go into a wine store and you see what they call the “wall of wine” it is an experience and there are people who can direct you and educate you about the different wines. They can ask your taste preferences and what viticultural areas you like which provides human connection and builds a relationship. It is very hard to replace the human touch and personal relationship.

**Will you highlight Jackson Family Wines’ commitment to sustainability?**

The wine world has experienced a series of events relating to climate in the past few years, such as wildfires and drought, and we are focused on making sure we are resilient and proactively addressing the issue of climate change. We see this as our responsibility to the next generation of people in our family, in our company, and in our communities – we feel a strong moral responsibility to lead in this area. We have committed to cut our greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 and become climate positive by 2050. We are partnering with other

wineries around the world in this effort and co-founded with Spain’s Familia Torres an organization called International Wineries for Climate Action (IWCA) whose mission is to galvanize the global wine community to create climate change mitigation strategies and decarbonize the industry. We currently have 27 members from around the world and are proud of the commitment and progress we have made in this work.

We are also focused on water and working on ways to conserve more water and become more water secure in the future. It is important for the industry to work together and



*Barbara Banke with one of her Thoroughbred horses*



*Jackson Family Wines' vineyard in Veeder Park, Napa*

collaborate in these efforts in order to make the most impact in addressing sustainability and the impacts of climate change.

**Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in the wine industry?**

The opportunities are there, and I tell young women to go for it. Today, half of our winemakers are women and we have more women in leadership roles than ever before. There are opportunities for women across marketing and PR, sales, production, vineyards, finance, and more. This is a great industry and I encourage young women to give it a try.

**Where did your passion for horses develop?**

My husband was great, but he was driving me crazy because if he did not have enough to do, he would micromanage everything in the wine business. I told him he should get a hobby, which was in 2008. He had been in the horse business much earlier in his life when he was helping his uncle who had a breeding operation and a few racehorses. My husband decided to go to the horse auction and buy a racehorse. He went into partnership on a horse and then proceeded to buy more and then bought a farm since he needed a place to put the horses. It happened pretty rapidly and I was not very involved in it at that time.

He then bought part of a horse named Curlin who was fabulous and that horse got me hooked on Thoroughbred horses. We would go to the races with Curlin and it was not about whether Curlin was going to win, it was about how much he would win by – it was really fun.

At that time, my husband got sick and for us to continue this focus, I was going to need to get more involved and take it over. I wanted to continue this passion although I must admit that today I may be a little overcommitted with so many horses and so much property.



*Trace Ridge vineyard in Knights Valley in Sonoma County, a Jackson Family Wines' property*

**You have been a leader in philanthropy and support many causes. How do you approach your philanthropic work?**

We have buckets where we focus our efforts. In the horse world, this is aftercare where we donate to organizations that focus on the care, retraining and rehoming of racehorses once they leave the racetrack. My daughter, Katie, is also very involved in our philanthropy and we also focus on children's charities where we can make a difference.

**You have had many people in the company who have worked with you for a long time. How do you think they would describe your management style?**

I think they would say that I am collaborative and fairly even keel. I try to be a calming influence and to be there to support their needs.

**As the company has grown, has it been important to keep a family culture?**

This is important to us. Rick Tigner, who is our CEO, was hired as a young salesperson when he was 29 years old. He worked his way up and is an impactful and inspiring CEO. Many of the people who are with us have been here a long time and we see them as part of the family. We think of ourselves as a family company.

**Do you take time to reflect and celebrate the wins or are you always looking at what is ahead?**

I am always thinking about tomorrow. There are times when you can't help enjoy the moment, such as when I went to Royal Ascot to watch one of our horses, Lady Aurelia. We knew she was fast, but when she came out of the gate in a sprint race and won by eight lengths, that was a "wow" moment.

I am also so proud of our people and to work with family and see them grow and take over. It is really special. ●