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PAN AMERICAN

A NEW CHAPTER IN CALIFORNIA WINE FOR PIONEERING CHILEAN IMPORTER ALEX GUARACHI BY BEN O'DONNELL

Alex Guarachi's 30-year career as a wine importer dates back to a time when Chile's modern wine industry was, as he puts it, "in diapers." This was in 1985, the year Guarachi, 60, began importing Chilean wine into the United States. A native of Chile but a U.S. citizen, he is a bridge between two eras as well as two continents.

Ever since he started as an importer, Guarachi has been in the thick of an international web that has drawn in some of the biggest players and finest wines in the Americas. In the late 1980s, he helped childhood friend Aurelio Montes launch and distribute Viña Montes, now among Chile's largest and most respected brands. And now, decades later, Guarachi is also a California vintner.

In the mid-2000s, Guarachi decided to put his wine money where his mouth was. He would create his own high quality wines, under his own name, from his adopted home of California. Guarachi Family Wines, a vehicle for mountain-grown Sonoma Pinot Noir and Napa Cabernet from promising under-the-radar vineyards, was born.

Wine was not Guarachi's original path. "I wanted to become the next Pelé," he laughs. Guarachi came to the U.S. from Santiago to attend California's San Jose State University on a soccer scholarship, and by 1982, he was preparing to sign professionally with the New York Cosmos, once Pelé's team. But during the NCAA playoffs, he twisted his left foot, fracturing a metatarsal. The injury sidelined him for six months just when he needed to shine.

So Guarachi found himself without direction in the Bay Area at the dawn of the Chilean fine wine scene. In 1985, he started TGIC Importers. (He recently renamed the company Guarachi Wine Partners.) "People said, 'Are you nuts? You cannot sell Chilean wine in the backyard of the California wine industry!'" Guarachi remembers. "And they were right. I would say for about six years of growth we were broke. People say, 'Well, I started in the garage.' But I was in the garage for like five years."

Business improved after that, as he continued to traverse the markets in the U.S. and the vineyards in Chile. He helped Montes seek out mountainside vineyard sites before most others dared, and even now, says Montes, "When I develop a brand or I have some sort of idea, my first consultant would be Alex."

Guarachi's forays into the production side of the business began in 2007. It's just 2,500 cases total right now, but he works with some of California's finest, including vineyard owners Andy Beckstoffer and Bill Price, winemaking consultant Paul Hobbs (an old friend from South American ventures) and winemaker Joey Tensley.

"Alex is a risk-taker—that excites him," says Hobbs. "He's a dynamic, hard-charging guy. So this is not going to be the guy that wants a 13 or 12 percent alcohol picnic wine. He wants a full-on wine, but he wants it balanced."

Despite some setbacks in the 2009 and 2011 vintages, Guarachi is positioning his winery for the long game. In March 2014, he purchased Meadowrock Vineyard, which covers 62 acres on Atlas Peak. Despite its Cabernet-friendly rocky, volcanic soils, the property is a "fixer-upper," says Guarachi. In time, he hopes to have single-vineyard and perhaps even single-parcel Meadowrock bottlings.

Less than a year before the Meadowrock purchase, Guarachi also bought 248 acres in Sonoma: the Sun Chase vineyard in Petaluma Gap. Neighboring

Gap's Crown—Guarachi makes a vineyard-designated Pinot Noir from both sites—has recently become a hot property for Sonoma Coast Pinot. Located at 1,200 feet, Sun Chase looks down at Gap's Crown. "We're at a higher elevation," he says. "Mountain grown!"

California has long been Guarachi's home, the place where he's chosen to leave a legacy for his children—more than 300 acres of prime vineyard land. Yet through his work as an importer, Guarachi has left a broader legacy as well. His passionate advocacy for Chilean wine has helped to open America's eyes to what the country is capable of achieving. □



Alex Guarachi, who helped launch Viña Montes in the United States three decades ago, is now in a second career as a vintner in his adopted home of California.