

Vintage Memories

Susan Sokol Blosser Reflects on a Lifetime of Winemaking

By Cindy Hudson

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Susan Sokol Blosser will tell you she's a farmer who is passionate about the land and growing grapes. She'll tell you she's passionate about her family, and the business she's worked hard to bring to the forefront of Oregon wines. But she'll also tell you that after 36 years of living those passions, she's looking forward to discovering new opportunities for her considerable energy as she transitions from president of Sokol Blosser Winery, a position she has held since 1991, to the honorary position of founder. She has a bit of time to ponder her options, as she intends to slowly phase herself out of day to day operations while she turns more and more details over to two of her three children, Alex and Alison.

Back when her love affair with land began, she was a city girl, a former debutante who had been raised by well-to-do parents on the east side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"It was a real surprise to me how much I love the vineyards. I could have lived my whole life in the city and never discovered that."

That discovery process began when Susan and her husband, Bill Blosser, decided on a whim to grow grapes on a hillside in Dundee back in 1970. There wasn't an Oregon wine industry then, and only a few other people in the state had planted vineyards. But she and Bill were fresh out of graduate school and expecting their first child. Their future was wide open, and they were willing to take risks to pursue their passions.

Their son Nik and the vineyard both arrived in the waning weeks of 1970, motherhood and farming merging for Susan in the beginning years of her adulthood. She carried Nik in a backpack while she ran the tractor to help plant Sokol Blosser's first five acres of grape vines. With the arrival in later years of son Alex and daughter Alison, the vineyard truly became a family affair.

In those days, she says, "we were totally focused on the vineyard and the winery, and we included the kids as much as we could. Despite all the struggle and hard work, I have such good feelings about the time when the kids were little. Those were good years."

Work in the vineyard was never-ending, especially after Susan began managing the land in 1980; the same year Bill became president of the winery. Growing up in an urban environment did nothing to prepare her for that. She celebrated small

victories like learning to oil the field equipment and becoming proficient at operating the vineyard's tractor. Susan was also very willing to take advice. Wine writer and longtime friend Heidi Yorkshire believes that trait has contributed greatly to her success.

“Every stage of her life Susan has always been open to learning from others with more experience. She is utterly unafraid of learning new things. She's also very persistent. She doesn't expect instant results, but she does expect results eventually. It's part of what makes her a marvelous person to be around.”

Persistence kept her going through the lean years in Oregon's wine industry. Sokol Blosser produced its first wines under its own label in 1977 and opened a tasting room the year after that. By 1980 there were 34 wineries cultivating over 1,200 acres of vineyards, and the Oregon Winegrower's Association had been established to represent the interests of the industry. But the big breakthrough didn't occur until 1985, when Oregon Pinot Noir came out on top of a blind head-to-head tasting with French Burgundy at the International Wine Center in New York.

“The tasting in New York City in 1985 was a real turning point for the industry. It woke up the country and put Oregon Pinot Noir on the front burner. But it took another 20 years for that to turn into a demand that we can't keep up with.”

The years of struggle took its toll on Susan's marriage to Bill, and in 1998, the couple separated.

“We had been so focused on building the business, but our relationship suffered. Still, we have a shared history that keeps us close today. We worked to build a business and helped to start an industry and raised three children, and we won't ever have that experience with anyone else.”

Susan is also quick to credit Bill's work as critical to Oregon's wine industry in its early days, especially his influence on land-use regulations to preserve hillsides in Yamhill County for agriculture at a time when only valley floors were being recognized for their agricultural potential. And Bill's interest in the environment was also influential in their eventual commitment towards creating an environmentally sustainable operation, a commitment that earned Sokol Blosser several firsts on the path to sustainability.

In 1997 Sokol Blosser was the first vineyard to be certified as “Salmon Safe” by the Pacific Rivers Council. Sokol Blosser's underground barrel cellar completed in 2002 was the first winery building to earn U.S. Green Building Council LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. Just last year Oregon Tilth bestowed USDA organic certification on its vineyards, making it one of a handful of Oregon's wine growers to receive that designation.

“We were always environmentalists, but in the beginning we looked down on organic. We thought of organic as ‘wormy.’ Then we started to understand how everything is connected, and the concept of sustainability became more prominent. Our goal now is sustainability across the entire operation. I believe it’s better for the earth, better for the vineyards, better for our employees and better for our customers.”

And she hopes this philosophy will guide the next generation as it continues the family business and its influence on the industry she helped found.

“Transitioning out as president has been a big emotional challenge for me because the winery is so much a part of me. I don’t think I’ll ever leave the winery, but I’ll be in more of an external role.”

Indeed with a new home on vineyard grounds next door to Alex and his family, Susan has solidified plans to stay physically close. Still, she has complete confidence in her children’s ability to take over the reins.

Alex and Alison “are both so capable that one does not stand out from the other. Together they’re bigger than either would be alone, and I think they recognize that.”

They also recognize the benefits of having their mom’s input on the business. Alison says of Susan, “She’s not just my mom, she’s my mentor too.” Alex describes her as “easily the best boss I’ve ever had.”

Where will Susan Sokol Blosser’s passions take her next? First she’ll be promoting her new book, “At Home in the Vineyard,” published by the University of California Press in August. She describes it as a wine book, a business book and a memoir.

After that?

“I look forward to learning how to play. I’m also very passionate about helping people learn about sustainability.”