

LIVING THE DREAM

Article Mary Welch

Most wineries start as a family business. Phifer Pavitt is not one of those. Some wineries are owned by a company with a lot of money and a business plan. Again, not Phifer Pavitt.

Instead Phifer Pavitt was hatched when Ringgold, Georgia-born Suzanne Phifer Pavitt was drinking wine with her husband, Shane Pavitt, in Italy and played a game of 'What if.' Both wrote down what they would love to do in 10 years. It turns out that Phifer, who at the time worked for a Fortune 500 company, and Pavitt, a stock trader, had one common dream: to own a small boutique winery and make artisan wine.

"I'm a girl who loves a project and over the next year our date night would be going all over the western half of the U.S. looking at different places. The path led us to 24 acres of never developed land in Calistoga, CA," she says. "We made an offer on the back of a restaurant's menu, sent it to the owner and 30 days later, we owned some 'potential'."

For the next couple of years, Phifer Pavitt and her husband worked on clearing the land and talking about the 'potential'. "It was a great adventure and it was all on-the-job training. With the wine business, you don't mess around. It's costly and time consuming."

The duo decided to make what they liked to drink, which was Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. "The joke was that the worst case scenario was that if no one like it, our family and friends would still drink our wine," she said with a laugh.

They partnered with the Temple Family Vineyards' Lakespring Ranch, an organic estate vineyard that produces grapes with intensely favorable berries. The Sauvignon Blanc comes from the Juliana Vineyards ranch, also known for excellent fruit.

"We didn't have the 'if you build it, they will come,' philosophy. We have been incredibly blessed. My intuition told me that if we stuck to our guns and did what we believed in and were good stewards of the land, it would happen."

Today, the winery produces between 1,600 to 1,800 cases of award-winning Date Night wine a year. It's called Date Night because every important decision the couple ever made occurred on date night. About 85 percent of the wine is sold directly to those on their mailing list or who visit the winery in person. It is also available in a few restaurants nationwide, including C&S Seafood in Smyrna.

Like any successful entrepreneur, the biggest challenge is controlling the growth, getting things done while still being hands on. "I can't clone myself. I am the brand ambassador but it gets more challenging each year." Shane serves as the company's CFO and full-time dad to their two teenage sons.

For Phifer Pavitt, her life in the Napa Valley is much different from her years in north Georgia, where her family didn't even drink. Though it seems as if the life she created is the one she is supposed to be living. She has cultivated her dream with passion and a strong desire to responsibly care for the land. And with perseverance and hard work, Phifer Pavitt is making her dream reality.

"I believe in karma and I have a Southern work ethic. When Shane asked my father for my hand, he told him he could if he could handle me." Adding, "I'm a bit of a pistol."

Those who have tasted Date Night are thankful for that spirit.