

Optima Winemaker

Mike Duffy

For Mike Duffy, winemaking is a calling, a life-long ambition that had its genesis in the family garage in the northern California town of Redding. There, young Mike would take flats of homegrown strawberries, peaches and blackberries and craft them into wine, working alongside his father, Bill, whose sideline hobby was making what Mike calls "really bad beer".

Below: Owner/Winemaker Mike Duffy



"I had so much fun making the wine that few fruits escaped my grasp. One time we even raided the rose bushes in the neighborhood so I could make a rose peral champagne," he remembers.

The family owned Duffy's Liquor Store had an extensive wine section for the era. Mike's mother, Della, encouraged the locals to learn more about wine by conducting tastings and actually organized a formal wine appreciation society with about 30 members. Mike worked in the store, soaking up as much knowledge as he could. By the time he was a sophomore in high school, he had declared Enology as his major and set himself on a track to pursue a degree at the University of California at Davis - considered by many to be "the Harvard of winemaking."

Mike likes to point out that he finished the four-year Enology program at UC Davis in only three and a half years. When he finished his studies in 1981, Mike was already employed as the Assistant Winemaker at Trefethen Vineyards in Napa Valley. "I was very motivated to earn my degree and start working after being a broke college student for so long."

In 1983, Mike moved to start-up winery Balverne, located in Sonoma County, which specialized in white wines. Mike, preferring to make red wines, got the bug to make wine on his own, and Optima was born. Mike moved to Field Stone as winemaker in 1988, studying under the legendary Andre Tchelistcheff. For nine years, Mike worked full-time at Field Stone, saving weekends to tend to his own fledgling winery. By 1997, Optima had become self-supporting and had grown to an annual case production of 4,000, enabling Mike to devote all his attention to his life-long dream. Today, Optima produces outstanding Cabernet, Zinfandel, Chardonnay and a limited amount of Zinfandel Port, all under Mike's watchful eye.

Mike's approach to winemaking combines art and practicality. "I've always liked the creative side of agriculture and to me, winemaking is the ultimate artistic job if you're going to pursue agriculture as a career," he says. Yet, while Mike believes every winemaker has an artistic soul, he credits much of his personal success to his love of mechanics. Stop by the winery and you're as likely to find a piston on his desk as you are a corkscrew.

"My dad was once a service manager for NCR and in the garage with the wine and beer, we always had a project or two that we were working on. I actually got my first job with Trefethen because I could make wine and fix a pump or run a bottling line. And while some people wax romantic about the art of winemaking, I firmly believe you have to have a bit of a mechanic in you to make all the parts work together," he muses.

Or, as some might say, Mike Duffy, winemaker and mechanic, sure makes a well-built wine.

