

No Tasting Room, No Problem: Wineries Train Hospitality Staffs to Work the Vineyards

BY STACY BRISCOE



Winery tour guide Diana Gonzalez at Dos Búhos / Photo courtesy Viñedo Dos Búhos

It's been almost three months since wineries around the world closed tasting room doors, leading to the suspension—whether temporary or permanent—of many hospitality workers.

A few were able to shift their skillset into the digital sphere; others have filled in as couriers. But some wineries have trained their hospitality staffs in other areas of the wine trade.

By bringing their front-of-house teams into the field to help with leafing, wire removal and other agricultural pursuits, these wineries impart useful skill sets to those who might have been otherwise unemployed during the shutdowns.

“When shelter-in-place took effect, we did curbside for, like, a day,” says Paul Clifton, director of winemaking for Hahn Family Wines in the Santa Lucia Highlands, CA. “We didn’t feel right about exposing our employees because we didn’t know how bad this thing could get.”



A tasting room staffer helps shoot thinning vines at Hahn Family Wines / Courtesy Hahn Family Wines

Wanting to keep his staff safe—and employed—Clifton decided to train his five full-time tasting room employees on basic, but very essential, springtime vineyard duties: thinning/suckering, leafing and wire moving.

“The hope is that even if the tasting room opens, they go back out there,” Clifton adds, stating that he plans to keep one acre of vines reserved for the hospitality crew to maintain through to harvest as well as the actual winemaking. “There are a lot of winemakers who haven’t even done that.”

Michelle Aydelotte, general manager of Bodega Dos Búhos in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, also found ways to pivot to maintain both employees and vineyard operations.

“We knew that our staff would be unable to find more work during these times and most likely would not have any savings at all,” she says. “How could we let them go? How could we not stand by them?”

The estate recently increased its vine plantings by 27 acres over the last three years, so Aydelotte’s staff learned how to nurture new, young vines, which includes selecting single canes for future trunks, staking the thin trunks for positioning and protection,

and forming what will eventually become double cordon trellising.

“What was amazing is that we taught them very difficult tasks that normally would be done by a vineyard management crew,” says Aydelotte, admitting she was at first hesitant about the cross-departmental training. “But they did [those tasks] just like those with years of experience.”

Aydelotte plans to make vineyard training an annual spring tradition.

“I think the biggest challenge was making the psychological commitment from indoor to outdoors, especially as it is now early winter,” says Bruce Dukes, chief winemaker of Domaine Naturaliste in Margaret River, Australia.

Of his three full-time hospitality staff, two opted to transition into the vineyard, “embracing the major challenge with gusto,” he says. Once the cellar door reopens, Dukes plans to keep the hospitality team involved in vineyard management, “albeit on a smaller scale.”

He calls the cross-department training “an opportunity created by COVID.” It has given his hospitality team a greater appreciation of vineyard work and an emotional connection to the vines. “I believe you can only get an emotional attachment to vines by having the opportunity to work with them,” says Dukes. “[They] will always have an attachment to the plot of Cabernet vines they trained.”

In the Uco Valley of Mendoza, Argentina, family-owned Domaine Bousquet’s hospitality sector includes both a restaurant and the winery tasting room. “Not one employee was fired or suspended,” says Co-owner Anne Bousquet.

Not only were hospitality staff trained in other sectors of the business, including vineyard and winemaking operations, the estate also opened up three new positions for their bilingual tour guides: business intelligence, sales assistance and e-commerce.

“These are new projects that we always wanted to start but never had the time,” says Ignacio Martinez Landa, marketing and communication director. According to Landa, the U.S. is Domaine Bousquet’s largest export market, but previously had very little support in sales, market research, or e-commerce. In fact, the company only recently made online sales available to their U.S. market.

“We will ask our tour guides if they want to go back to hospitality or stay in these positions once we reopen,” says Bousquet. “If they wish to go back, we will staff these positions with new hires.”



Comments

