



FERMENTATIONS
BY JACKIE LANTRY
PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN HARDER

SAKONNET VINEYARD

The Cock Crows but the Hens Deliver the Goods

With its shingled buildings and rolling fields surrounded by stone walls, Sakonnet Vineyard is quintessential New England. Fifty acres planted with vinifera varieties stretch, row by row, across the vineyard property.

On a crisp fall day with crystal clear skies, the work of the harvest is well under way. Inhaling draughts of grape-infused air, I arrive to witness the season's harvest and take a closer look at the Rhode Island vineyard that has been producing award-winning wine for over 30 years.

Winemaking is an industry predominated by men. Although more and more women are making their mark in the industry, it is rare to find a winery that is owned by a woman, with its vineyard managed by a woman and its wine made by a woman.

Sakonnet Vineyard in Little Compton is just that. A computer search, albeit brief and not very scientific, unearthed other woman vintners but no other teams, at least in the United States, made up of women running a winery.

So, how does this affect wine, if at all? When I made my visit to Sakonnet Vineyard, I called on the women in charge and posed that very question.

Susan Sampson, along with her husband Earl, has owned Sakonnet Vineyard for over 20 years. "We were summer people here," said Susan. "At the time Earl owned a small part of a Sonoma vineyard. When the opportunity came up to buy this place we jumped right in. A little knowledge can get you in a lot of trouble!" she said with a grin. The trouble, it seems, has been worth it.

"When we began, people didn't believe you could grow grapes in Rhode Island. As it turns out, our maritime climate and soil conditions are very similar to that of the Loire Valley in France," said Sampson.

Under their guidance Sakonnet Vineyard has gone from a small business to being named the Best Winery in New England by Boston



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Magazine in 2006. It has produced winners in both domestic and international wine competitions including the Monterey International, the San Francisco International, the New World Wine Competition and the Tasters Guild International. And along with fine wines, they've produced a winning team of women who influence every step of the winemaking process.

If you ask Susan Sampson how having women in charge has affected Sakonnet Vineyard, she'll tell you...with enthusiasm.

"Women are nurturers, they're patient," said Sampson. "Men tend to do things by the book; they follow steps in a process, where women will let their instincts guide them."

Not to be sexist but many of the traits one might associate with women are evident at Sakonnet Vineyard—the pristine condition of the fields, the spotless fermentation room and the pastoral grounds, for example. Even more than the physical attributes, the employees' longevity, dedication and allegiance to the vineyard are striking.

Everyone I spoke with said all employees, not just women, have been encouraged to develop and use their strengths and abilities. In general, people who begin at Sakonnet stay at Sakonnet. Employees rise from within to fill the top jobs (like the vineyard manager, vintner and business manager.)

"We didn't set out to have a strong representation of women at Sakonnet, it just evolved that way," explained Sampson.

When I first met Elaine Bernier, Sakonnet's vintner, she was at the top of a 15-foot ladder peering into a gigantic stainless steel fermentation tank.

"It smells like peaches," she said. "I want to stay up here forever." Her voice echoed as it made its way down to me.



Clockwise from left: Lorraine Frank, vineyard manager; Elaine Bernier, vintner; and Susan Sampson, vineyard owner.

Bernier grew up on a farm nearby the vineyard. She has worked at Sakonnet since 1984 when she showed up one day for picking. “The whole ‘women’ thing—it wasn’t planned, it just evolved. Many of the people who work here are working mothers. The schedule can be flexible, making it a good place for working moms,” she said.

Bernier moved up from picker to “tie-er” (someone who secures vines to an arbor) and then to pruner, all the time absorbing the intricacies of how to coax wine out of grapes. In 1995 then-vintner John Sotello needed an assistant and Elaine was ready for the job. She continued as assistant when Christian Butkze replaced Sotello. When Butkze left in 2005 and the Sampsons were looking for a replacement, they asked Elaine to do the job.

“Everything in a vineyard improves with age: the earth, the vines and the shared knowledge. We knew Elaine was ready to be vintner and it’s worked out beautifully,” said Sampson.

Bernier considers herself the caretaker of what the growers and pickers bring to her. She stresses the team effort it takes to craft a bottle of wine and feels a responsibility to her co-workers.

Sue Souza, a 17-year veteran, started as a bookkeeper and has moved up to general manager. She sees a real difference between the male vintners and Bernier. “Elaine is patient. She coaxes the grapes and cares about the wine as if it was a child. The grapes are her vinebabies,” said Souza. “This place is run by women. They know what needs to be done and do it.” She also feels Sakonnet has not “grown” into the premier winery in New England as much as it has been nurtured into that position.

Joetta Kirk, vineyard consultant and former vineyard manager, has worked at Sakonnet Vineyard for over 24 years. “I was hired because I

could drive and fix a tractor,” she said. She had managed an orchard in Canton, Massachusetts, where she pruned trees, grew vegetables, mowed in summer and plowed in winter. When that came to an end, she said fate brought her to Sakonnet. “It was an absolute match. I fell into heaven,” said Kirk.

When asked why so many women have done so well at the Sakonnet Vineyard, she thought for a moment. “This is a fun and progressive place to work, a very dynamic place. It’s flexible, women can work here and still take care of home.” The staff has worked itself into such a good system they don’t have formal hours or shifts. “There’s not a lot of structure and it’s mostly local people. We work as a group,” said Kirk.

Lorraine Frank, the current vineyard manager, is a Kirk protégé. She started at the vineyard 23 years ago to make some extra money for Christmas. Working her way up through the ranks, she became assistant vineyard manager seven years ago and recently took over as vineyard manager when Kirk decided to reduce her hours and become a consultant.

I watched as Frank carefully wove the canes onto the trellis, coaxing them up from the good earth toward the warm sun. “The canes fill the trellis and the new shoots come off the canes,” she explained. She worked silently while I looked on. “It’s sad when the harvest is over,” she said. Working at her side was daughter Theodora, who started as a summer worker and also works the harvest.

Back in Sampson’s office she tells me, “We are an agricultural business, this is a local farm. We grow a local product using local help and we’ve grown up together. It was never planned, it’s just happened that we’ve developed a winery and supported families along the way.”

Sampson has made a mark by providing an example of strength and competence. She’s also coached and coaxed employees to move beyond their comfort level, to stretch themselves and grow like grapes on a vine. eR

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