

# Taft Street

## ga·ra·giste (ga-räh-jeest)

*noun.* Wine-making in less than château settings using select grapes in small batches to produce superb wines without pretense.

Like the renegade Bordeaux winemakers known as “Garagistes,” Taft Street began in a garage rather than a grand château, producing limited production, handcrafted wines from select Sonoma County vineyards.

Our goals have not changed. We make great wine; make it available at a fair price; and, most of all, have fun in the process.

Read on for our 30+ years as California Garagistes as told in conversation with Mike Tierney.

**1970’s.** The story begins on Taft Street in the Rockridge area of Oakland, not far from the University of California at Berkeley. My brother John was an undergraduate at Cal and I was a grad student. We both were cooking part time in Berkeley restaurants and became intrigued with the developing food and wine scene. We started making wine and John proved his talents early on. He soon made wine not only for himself but for a rapidly growing fan club of family and friends. His efforts during this time earned him a BEST OF SHOW AWARD at the California State Fair – the state’s highest honor for a home winemaker.

At that time in Berkeley there was an amazing business called Wine and

the People. Located on University Avenue in an old warehouse, owner Peter Brehm searched vineyards all over California and beyond for quality grapes for home winemakers. John took a job there when Wine and the People began importing winemaking equipment from Europe for small wineries and serious amateurs. Eventually Wine and the People became a winery with John as winemaker. It was there John met fellow employee Mike Martini, original Taft Street partner, later mayor and city council member of Santa Rosa, and currently General Manager of Taft Street.

At Taft Street we were busy. We turned the garage into something infinitely more useful than a storage area –

a home winery! We added wiring, a new layer of concrete; we even included an air-conditioned area for cold stabilizing white wines. Barrels, stainless tanks, a basket press and hand corker completed the scene. By the late 1970’s, we were making up to 1000 gallons annually. With a little quality control and an ever growing following who loved the wine, the house and garage on Taft Street gained a reputation of its own.

The fun continued and dreams began to form about making Taft Street Garage a commercial enterprise. We had everything but money. John and Mike Martini were not getting rich working at Wine and the People; my brother in law Arleigh Sanderson and I were not getting rich teaching school; and my brother Marty was not getting rich enough practicing law. I did, however, have a friend who was not only successful in business but also had a hand in a few start-ups. Andy Barlett became our first president, with the five of us mentioned above as vice presidents.

**1980’s.** We would be a small winery making limited lots of handcrafted wines. We would continue

what we had started in the garage, but since we were now a high-class organization we dropped “Garage” from our name. John and Mike Martini were put on the payroll immediately. They began a search for a winery site in Sonoma County, where my brothers and I had spent our summers as kids and felt a close affinity to the Russian River area. We found warehouse space in the sleepy town of Forestville and moved in early in 1982, just in time for that year’s harvest.



The Founders

Since we were the new kids on the block and wine was becoming a hot industry, we could not secure enough Sonoma County grapes to meet our needs. So we used some of the same sources we had from the Wine and the People days and secured Chardonnay from Sonoma and Santa Barbara, Pinot Noir from Monterey, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc from Napa, and Merlot from Sonoma. Total production from the 1982 harvest was about 1700 cases.

A year later I took a leave from my teaching job to open accounts in the San Francisco Bay Area. After securing a place for ourselves in the Bay Area marketplace, I returned to my day job, teaching part-time, but still filled my pickup truck with wine every day after school to service accounts. We later added wine brokers in the San Francisco and North Bay areas. As

months passed our reputation grew via word of mouth and several good reviews from wine publications, and a number of out of state distributors began representing us.

**1990’s.** Awards came. In one ten-year stretch our chardonnay was a Best Buy in the WINE SPECTATOR nine times. Our 1986 Russian River Chardonnay was awarded the Best of Show at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair, and John was name Winemaker of the Year.

During the 1990’s we expanded our production to meet national demand. Taft Street quickly grew from 20,000 to over 50,000 cases per year. We had to go out of Sonoma County to secure grapes for an expanded market; yet we saw a genuine excitement for the wines we were making from grapes grown in nearby Russian River Valley and other nearby vineyards.

We opened a tasting room and saw a strong local following develop. We then started to question the wisdom



The original Taft Street Garage, Rockridge, California

of developing a national market at the expense of focusing our efforts on Russian River Valley wines – our first love.

**2000's.** Our experience on the national stage demonstrated to us that small was beautiful, and with a renewed sense of focus on the Russian River Valley, we decided to concentrate on those wines originating in nearby vineyards. Working with local growers enabled us to create wines that reflected the individual quality of specific sites as well as showed off our own developed skills.

In 2007, we brought on winemaker Evelyn White, formerly of Clos Du Bois, and were excited to see her creativity immediately reflected in the wines. She is a perfect match for this enthusiastic family, and continues to innovate with each award-winning vintage. Growing pains behind us, Taft Street has returned to its “garagistes” roots and stayed true to a policy of quality local grape sourcing, moderate production levels, and competitive pricing.

**PRESENT.** With a strong sense of place and of family, we continue in the “garagistes” traditions to this day, producing limited production, handcrafted wines from select nearby vineyards. Our Marketing Director Jake Martini represents the next generation of the Taft Street family who live, work and play in Sonoma County. We plan to continue for quite a while.



Mike Tierney, Joe Keith, Winemaker Evelyn White, and Mike Martini



Sonoma County Harvest Fair Gold Medal Sweep



The Taft Street Garage Today

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