



MAGIC IN THE VINES

*Harvesting the vines
by night*

MT VEEDER MAGIC VINEYARDS IS ONE OF THE MOST EXCLUSIVE OFFERINGS IN THE GLOBAL WINE-MAKING AND LUXURY INDUSTRIES. NESTLED IN NAPA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA'S WINE-MAKING HEARTLAND, ITS FOUNDER KAREN CROUSE EXPLAINS HOW SHE COMBINED 'PERSONAL' WITH 'PREMIUM' TO BRING AN OFFER LIKE NO OTHER TO THE MARKET.

What is Mt Veeder Magic Wines?

Mt Veeder Magic Vineyards is an offer to very, very well-established gentlemen

who have most of the finer things in life two, three or four times over, most importantly wine collections. About a third of them travel privately. They're constantly looking for something to add to their collections, something rare, something no-one else has, something that they don't have or didn't know existed. My offer is very personal, it's very premium. I have a vineyard on Mt Veeder. My grapes are hand-farmed; everything we do is by hand. I have 7,000 vines and it takes us three weeks for all of my crew to go vine by vine, pruning the way it needs to be pruned. We farm by hand; there's very minimal machinery. The grapes are harvested in October and go to my winemaker. He hand-crafts the wine over a two-year period. I have 16 acres of vines, 14.7 of cabernet sauvignon and 1.3 of Merlot. The wine that we hand craft is 100

per cent Mt Veeder; it's a cabernet sauvignon and our formula is roughly six to eight per cent of my merlot goes into it and we make that determination each year depending on the taste

What my clients are buying is not just the finished wine because after we make the wine, I have a graphic designer and I help my clients tell their story. There are two labels – a front and a back. And the back is typically their story. What are you saying as you're pouring your wine for friends and family and business associates? I capture that for them on the back. And then whatever it is that they feel portrays that is what their front label looks like. I help them design it and then we hand label every bottle. And then what my clients receive is 288 bottles – 24 cases – of this wine that they

have experienced along the way. That's what shows up at their home or homes and they add that to their wine collections.

How much is the offering valued at, and how do you typically go about selling it?

It's US\$20,000, but you don't have to worry about anything; I'm taking care of it all in a very premium way. I don't sell. I simply let people know that this offering is available. I'll explain that it's my vineyard. The fact that my wine is from my vineyard that I have 100 per cent control over and I can guarantee that from start to finish the whole process is in my control is a huge deal. I also explain to them that of all the wines in the Napa Valley, Mt Veeder wines account for somewhere between one and two per cent. To have a Mt Veeder wine with your label is impossible to get. I'm the only one offering this. If you've got a wine cellar with all these amazing wines from around the world and money is no object and you just want to enhance the rarity and specialness of the wines and the quality and the premium then this is for you. The reasons to do it are many: to celebrate something, an anniversary, a birthday, the birth of your first grandchild, to thank your client base, to celebrate an anniversary, to get together as a group, to create a club and have a label for that.

How did you come to winemaking and what inspired you to create this offering?

I worked for American Express for about 16 years. I went from sales to marketing to public relations to branding. They trained me very well.



Karen Crouse checks the grapes for readiness

I'm able to use those skills in my own business now. The reason that I started is actually a funny story. My husband and I have lived in Napa now for 25 years. Back in 2007, my husband decided that he had to have this property of 80 acres with 16 acres of vines. One day he came home after riding his bike up Mt Veeder, which is a feather in your cap if you can ride that steep hill, and he came home with a real estate listing. I joked that this was his midlife crisis. And when we went to take a look at it, it was so dishevelled. It looked like a jungle which had not been manicured or cared for. I didn't want it because I couldn't see what he could see. We were told that it was a revenue generating property, meaning that the grapes grown on that property were pre-sold to a winery. That is gold here in Napa.

What have been your best vintages?

I would say that 2012 was a history-

making year because we had come off two very difficult seasons in terms of weather. 2012 was excellent for everyone. But I think my 2013 is absolutely my best vintage yet. We had an early growing season which meant that when it was time to harvest the weather was still warm so we were able to harvest row by row; we literally walk the rows and taste the grapes to decide when to pick. 13 and 14 were actually similar years and they both allowed us to really dial it in and walk row by row, taste the grapes and maybe decide that the flavour profile wasn't what we needed and then tape it off so that when we went to pick we wouldn't pick past that. I was able to pick 100 per cent at the flavour profile and lightness that I wanted in 2013. I don't pick just once. In 2013 I picked six times.

Where are your clients from and do they like to get involved in the process with you?

The bulk of my client base is within the US. But I have clients in St Martins, in England, in China, in Mexico. 99 per cent of them don't want to get involved. They're very five-star gentlemen. They're not really about walking in my dirt. But they love hearing about it; they love it when I send them videos of the process. They do come to visit and I will give them a barrel taste out of the barrel at my winemaker's winery. They really enjoy that. But we're finishing the renovation of the farmhouse on the vineyard and I will be getting them up there. So I will be able to bring them up in a very civilised way. Whether they'll walk in my dirt or not remains to be seen! ■



From vine through barrel to bottle, every part of the Mt Veeder Magic Wines process is done by hand