

## Extreme Personality Wines



An Interview with Don Hartford,  
President and Co-Proprietor, Hartford Family Winery

**EDITORS' NOTE** Don Hartford has been immersed in wine making and winery management for the past 20 years. Prior to assuming his current post, Hartford had a successful legal career following his graduation from the Santa Clara Law School in 1982. He earned his BA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.



Don Hartford

**COMPANY BRIEF** Hartford Family Winery ([www.hartfordwines.com](http://www.hartfordwines.com)) was founded in 1993 as a result of Don and Jennifer Hartford's appreciation for the wines, people, and unique vineyards near their Russian River Valley home. Located in the Sonoma County town of Forestville, the winery is about 15 miles from the Pacific Coast. The winery's focus is on small bottlings of single vineyard pinot noir, chardonnay, and zinfandel. The winery has been recognized on several occasions by such prestigious publications as the Wine Advocate, Wine Enthusiast, and Wine & Spirits.

**Are you happy with the brand awareness of Hartford Family wines?**

Maintaining brand awareness is very important and challenging for a small wine producer. Much of what many wine consumers know about our wines is the result of word of mouth or from what is written about them in wine publications. I am happy that our wines have received some notoriety for having been served in the White House several times in the past 10 years. Also, in the past couple of years, Robert Parker has written some very nice things about our wines, and our wines have been rated in the Top 100 Wines of the Year by the *Wine Enthusiast* and *Wine & Spirits* magazines. So I am fairly happy about the level of awareness that our brand is gaining.

**What makes your wines unique in the competitive wine marketplace?**

It is significant to be able to explain what sets your wines apart from those of other wineries. At Hartford Family Winery, we deliberately set out to make wines that are not only delicious, but that have what I call "high personality" or "extreme personality." We look for vineyards that are capable of showing distinct and recognizable characteristics in the wines that are present year after year. Each of our pinot noirs, for example, is very different from our others in ways that tell the wine drinker

something about the wine's distinct vineyard source. This, I think, is fairly unique because it is very dependent on the difficult chore of finding a great vineyard source and much less dependent on winemaking.

**Are you considering adding new products in the future?**

We will be adding new vineyard-designated wines from time to time, as we have in the past few years. Having planted vineyards that are now 12 and 14 years old, which are finally coming into their own and showing us what they are, we can now increase the number of bottlings. Most years, we make about 18 different wines, and I'd say 15 of them are single-vineyard-designated bottlings, with fewer than 500 cases on average. Also, for each one of our varietals, we make one wine that is from blended vineyards. We will be able to increase the amount of wine made from these bottlings due to the greater quantity of grapes available from these sites. These wines are also delicious and provide a great way to grow our business.

**Is technology affecting the winemaking process?**

It is. When it comes to making wine, it's very important that you don't lean on technology too much. It's very important to respect tradition. If you take advantage of new technology, you need to be certain that it is not merely to make winemaking easier, but that it will improve the wine. Also, the utilization of traditional techniques is a means of differentiation. When it comes to artisan wines, such as the ones that we make, it's important that they look, feel, and taste like they're handmade. If you get too reliant on technology, they may start to lose that. So I'm open to it, but I'm very careful to make sure we maintain the character of our wines.

**When you're building a brand, you're involved in every aspect. As you've grown, have you had to give up some of that control?**

I'm happy to give up control, when I see things are working well. Part of my business philosophy is to inspire the people who are working for me through the articulation of my vision. I have seen the greatest success when people are allowed to execute against well articulated visions and goals. I think that a principal objective of a good manager should be to let people do their jobs by getting out of the way. ●



Jeff Mangahas

An Interview with  
Jeff Mangahas,  
Winemaker, Hartford  
Family Winery

**There's a phrase at your winery: high risk, high reward. What does that mean?**

For people to build character, they have to go through challenges. It's not different with grapes, from the standpoint that a lot of our vineyards have inherent risks associated with them. At Seascapes Vineyard, the harvest is very late. It's not uncommon for us to pick after the rest of the vineyards in Sonoma County have picked their cabernet. And the later the season gets, the more challenges there are from potential cold and rain. So there's risk involved, but the rewards can be very high in the sense that we get more concentration in the grapes, which lends itself to the personality of the wine.

**At which stage in the winemaking process do you know that the wine has come together well? Is it early on, or does it come later?**

It's completely on the front end. In some cases, I know in the vineyard when I'm tasting the grapes. I get a good feeling about what's going to be A-plus quality. I taste the wines regularly during the fermentation process. I am really attuned to what each wine is doing, how it's developing, and where it's going. And there are no surprises, because I've followed up on all the details. There should never be any surprises, because the incremental changes or deterioration of a wine is a slow evolution.

**Has your background in science helped you as a winemaker?**

No question. A lot of detail goes into making a bottle of wine, and having a skill set that is oriented toward science and investigation has definitely helped me manage those details. My degree is in molecular and cellular biology, and that background has helped me quite a lot. ●