

## Landmark's Three Principles

An Interview with Mary Colhoun, Coproprietor, and Eric Stern, Winemaker, Landmark Vineyards



**EDITORS' NOTE** Mary Colhoun assumed her current role when her husband, Michael, became President of Landmark Vineyards. Colhoun is engaged in educational and philanthropic activities and is a member of Les Dames d'Escoffier International and the President's Advisory Board of Sonoma State University.

Before Eric Stern was promoted to his current position in 1993, he was Assistant Winemaker with Landmark since 1989. Prior to this, he apprenticed at Acacia and Carmenet wineries. Stern's career in wine began in Boston where he worked as a wine shop manager, sommelier, and salesman for a distributor of fine wine. He is a graduate of New York University's Washington Square College and received a second undergraduate degree in enology from California State University, Fresno, in 1983.

**COMPANY BRIEF** In 1989, John Deere's great great granddaughter, Damaris Deere Ford, relocated Landmark Vineyards ([www.landmarkwine.com](http://www.landmarkwine.com)) within California from Windsor to Sonoma Valley, where she built a Spanish mission-style winery. Damaris's son and his wife joined as partners, and in 1993, they hired world-renowned consulting enologist Helen Turley to work with winemaker Eric Stern. Landmark's signature wine, the Overlook Chardonnay, has appeared on the Wine Spectator Top 100 list six times since 1997.

**What is Landmark recognized for and what does it represent?**

*Mary:* We stick to three principles: First, we have a family story, which drives our commitment to excellence; second, we make wine the best way possible, cutting no corners and committing to brilliance; third, we keep our wines at price points people can afford.

**Does the range of wines you offer remain consistent or are you growing into new areas?**

*Eric:* We have diversified. We're doing more single-vineyard wines because the wines are quite unique and consumer interest has multiplied.

**Is it challenging to differentiate and can a brand in this market be unique?**

*Mary:* It's tremendously challenging. I don't know how a consumer goes into a store and figures out which bottle to pull off the



Mary Colhoun



Eric Stern

shelf. But our three principles help us through this competitive time by building brand loyalty and getting the wine out there.

*Eric:* The consistency of our production team at Landmark has given us credibility vintage after vintage. There are six key people in production, and the average term these people have served at Landmark is 18 years. Very few can say that among the competition.

**Are you happy with the way the distribution channels work and do you see any changes as you look to the future?**

*Mary:* It's a challenging and volatile time. Many distributors have been bought by the big guys. The flip side is, as consolidation occurs, many new smaller distributors grow. We recently made a distribution change to a company of eight people – I look in these salesmen's eyes and see the fire in their bellies, which is exciting. Also, we've opened a new Tasting Room in San Francisco, taking wine to the traveler who doesn't have the extra day to get up to wine country. We have a flexible approach because it's a changing time.

**You mentioned single-vineyard wines. Is that a focus and do you see growth in that area?**

*Eric:* It's become a focus. For 2007, we have two single-vineyard chardonnay productions that are limited: Bien Nacido and Heintz. We also have a single-vineyard chardonnay called Lorenzo that is broad market. Kanzler Vineyard and the Solomon Hills Vineyard are two of our limited production pinot noirs.

**Could you have imagined the explosion of interest in pinot noir and do you see strong growth in that area?**

*Mary:* It's an explosive growth. I was at a tasting in South Beach right after *Sideways* was released, and I couldn't pour pinot noir fast

enough. People get how beautiful, velvety, and sensual a pinot noir can be.

**What is it about the culture at Landmark that has kept you there for so long, and when you started, could you imagine being there 18 years?**

*Eric:* I came to this industry at age 40 after several other careers and interests, and I never foresaw being with this occupation or one company this long. Part of it is the management. It's a family-owned company, and Mike and Mary Colhoun are the most supportive employers. They entirely buy into the quality issue with wine and are unwilling to compromise. They understand the financial commitment it takes to make great wine, and they support me every step of the way. It has been a lifelong dream come true.

**When you look at the wine-making process, at what stage do you know the quality of that wine?**

*Eric:* Pretty early on. You have a good sense of how the aromas in the cellar are progressing even before you call it wine. Even in just tasting the grapes in the vineyard, it's pretty apparent.

**Did you know early on that you were going to end up in this business?**

*Mary:* It was a total shock. Mike's mother, Damaris, bought property and built her own winery. About a year into the process, she needed help with the business and offered us the opportunity to get involved. A year later, we packed up, moved to California, and reinvented ourselves as winery owners.

**How do you focus your time and what is your role within the organization?**

*Mary:* As the marketing/public relations side of the equation, I protect the image of our brand and present Landmark in the best light. If I had my druthers, I'd spend more time working in the garden and making sure that the place was beautiful, but I go out in the marketplace a lot. If a salesman or somebody needs coverage, I end up doing that too.

**With a family business, is it difficult to turn it off and are you able to get away from it?**

*Mary:* It's a lifestyle business, so it's inevitable that when we're all together, we're discussing it. It's all about the table, the meals, the sharing, so it's hard to separate winery lifestyle from business. ●

*The picturesque Landmark Vineyards*