

DEFINING *Luxury*

Consistency and Uniqueness of Style

An Interview with Violet Grgich, Co-Proprietor and Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Grgich Hills Estate

EDITORS' NOTE Violet Grgich grew up accompanying her father in the vineyards and cellar, doing everything from bottling line work to laboratory analysis and work in the tasting room. Grgich earned a BA in music from the University of California, Davis while taking classes in biology, chemistry, and enology. After graduation, she returned home to Grgich Hills to continue her education in the wine business, learning about daily operations of the winery. She received her Master of Music in harpsichord at Indiana University and then joined the winery full-time in 1988.



Violet Grgich

COMPANY BRIEF Formerly Grgich Hills Cellar, Grgich Hills Estate (www.grgich.com) was founded in 1977 by Mike Grgich and Austin Hills of the Hills Bros. Coffee family. Located in Napa Valley, California, all Grgich vineyards are certified organic, and the winery's 366 acres are farmed using biodynamic techniques. Producing 70,000 cases per year, Grgich Hills Estate markets fumé blanc, chardonnay, zinfandel, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, and dessert wine.

Your price points are very reasonable for such high-quality wines. Who is your target consumer?

Our target is anybody who enjoys fine wine. I'm very proud that both wine connoisseurs and those who know nothing about wine find our wines delicious. By keeping our prices fairly reasonable, we've been able to reach a larger audience, while maintaining our reputation for offering the very highest quality of wines.

How do you distribute your wines?

We like to focus on our tasting room, and we go outward from there. The more people we can get to the winery the better. California is our number one state, and we distribute directly to stores and restaurants there. We love our direct customers. We sell to all 50 states, and we also have some export distribution, which has increased over the past few years. Because everything is global now and people travel so frequently, it's important to have a presence in the best accounts in the best export markets.

How does technology affect the way wine is made?

Technology is certainly affecting how wine is made, but our goal has always been to keep

it as simple, handcrafted, and natural as possible. We realize that wine is an art, and technology is simply a tool. We try to get the best barrels, press, crusher, and racking system, but our focus is on handcrafting.

Is it challenging to differentiate in a market with so many competitors?

We are incredibly lucky that my father started this business in 1977 with the reputation as the winemaker who won the Paris Tasting of 1976. That story is only getting bigger; there are several movies in production now about that very tasting. So we were able to establish a brand identity and awareness a long time ago, and no matter how many new wineries there are, people still know us for our consistency and uniqueness of style. Also, we are the largest biodynamic producer in the United States, which differentiates us from our competitors.

What does biodynamic mean exactly?

Biodynamic farming uses practices that were prevalent several hundred years ago. It means being as natural as possible, creating a sustainable environment where everything lives in harmony. We help the vines become naturally immune to pests and diseases. We've found that our grapes have become much healthier and happier and produce much more balanced and intense varietal character. We also feel they will live a lot longer, and the older a vine becomes, the better the quality it has.

Does the Internet drives sales for the winery?

We like to reach people as directly as possible. We have a monthly e-mail blast that we send to people who sign up for our mailing list. We tell them what's going on in our vineyards and in the cellar. It gives them a much closer look at what we're doing and how we're doing it.

What experience do you offer for visitors to the winery?



Our winery building very much defines us. Our tasting room is not a big fancy place; it's actually part of the cellar. Visitors see aged plywood on the walls, because we invest our money in making the best wines possible. We have recently upgraded it by putting in a wine-tasting bar, but we're not here to show off. We're very much about being natural, simple, and down to earth.

Is winemaking an industry that offers significant growth opportunities for women?

Absolutely. I'm an only child, and my dad naturally assumed I could do everything, as did I. My father has always looked at people in terms of their strengths and qualities, regardless of whether they are male or female. Recently, there has been an upsurge of women in leadership positions, as well as cult winemakers who are women.

Your son was born in 2005. Do you want him to enter the business?

He's an individual and has the right to do what he wants with his life. I'm not forcing him to do anything, but I show him how much fun it is. He has been traveling with me since he was six weeks old, and he's already a veteran at wine tasting. His favorite food is grapes, so he's definitely on the road.

Working for a family business, can you ever get away from your job?

I remember being on my honeymoon, looking around for a place to sell wine in Norway. My family has certainly gotten used to it; it's part of our lives. However, I'm much better at finding time for my family than I used to be.

Do you have a favorite wine?

It's like having children – they're all wonderful. We don't make very many wines, but the ones we do make fit all ranges and styles, so there's always a right wine from Grgich Hills. ●

A cabernet sauvignon from Grgich Hills