

Quality and Value



Kathryn Walt Hall; Hall Vineyard and House (center); 2008 Kathryn Hall Cabernet Sauvignon (right)

An Interview with Kathryn Walt Hall, Proprietor, HALL Wines

EDITORS' NOTE Since 1972, Kathryn Walt Hall and her family have been grape growers in Mendocino County. In addition to managing the family vineyard from 1982 to 1992, Hall has held numerous other positions. She began her public career as Assistant City Attorney in Berkeley, California. She was President of an inner-city development company and Partner of Hall Financial Group, Inc. She co-founded the North Texas Food Bank, served on the U.S. House of Representatives Hunger Advisory Committee, and was the Director/Vice President of the Texas Mental Health Association. She has served on the National Advisory Council on Violence Against Women and as a trustee of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. From 1997 to July 2001, Hall served as the U.S. Ambassador to Austria. She earned an A.B. in economics from the University of California, Berkeley, a J.D. from the University of California Hastings College of the Law, and an M.B.A. in February 2008 from the University of California, Berkeley—Columbia Business School.

COMPANY BRIEF HALL Wines (www.ballwines.com) employs organic small-vine viticulture, precision wine-making, wild yeast fermentation, and microblock blending. The vineyard encompasses more than 500 acres of classic Bordeaux varietals. HALL produces 17 handcrafted wines including its signature Kathryn Hall Cabernet Sauvignon.

Your brand has received much recognition. How has it evolved?

Our vision has changed some over time, as has the brand, but the core of who we are has not changed and never will. From the beginning, we wanted to create a brand for our wine that would stand for quality and value, and that had an integrity in that it reflected the terroir of the various vineyards whose grapes go into the various wines.

That has remained. From day one, we recognized that a wine should be tasty, but also interesting.

When you drink a wine, because there are so many great ones, you like knowing there are real people behind it. In our case, that has been true from the beginning and remains true today.

We have a team that is second-to-none and we all share a real pride in creating this quality experience for people who enjoy our wines.

How have you ensured consistency year after year? How much control do you have over it?

You can't control the weather, but you can control how you react to the weather and the various conditions for the vineyards.

It's about making sure we are in the vineyards as much as we need to be to react to the environment.

There is a delicate balance between having a vine where the grapes are exposed to the sun, which enables flavor development, with not having too much sun, which could cause the ripening to occur too quickly, because if that happens, you can't get all the flavor nuances.

Our consistency is a reflection of the beautiful vineyards and facilities we have, as well as how we manage our time and respond quickly to changing conditions.

How do you maintain a reasonable price point when you're providing such a quality product?

It's not easy, because value is such an important part of the wine experience. If you pay what you think is too much for a wine, you will never enjoy it.

People want to have different wines for different occasions, so we make 14 different Cabernets, and some are more expensive to make than others, and those costs are reflected in the price.

If we can offer very high quality wines at various price points, we're addressing the value component in the best way we can.

How do you differentiate within the industry? Is it more challenging to get the message out today?

How you get the message out has changed largely because of technology. You focus on being who you are – each winery has a personality. If you are in Napa Valley and go to different tasting rooms, you can get a feel of the winery in the first 10 minutes.

So you make the wines you like to drink from the vineyards that you have selected. The differences will be there for people to respond to.

Have there been opportunities to broaden into other categories?

Yes, we recently launched a new brand called Walt, which is my maiden name. We started making Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays.

We have had opportunities to broaden in terms of the varietals we make, and people

who have known us for our Cabernet know we're about quality and value, and offer interesting wines that don't just taste non-generic but that have a taste that reflects different vineyards.

How strong has the environmental focus been for HALL? Is that a major focus today?

My dad grew grapes and sold them to wineries, and he said, you never own a piece of land – you get to borrow it for a period of time. So you have a responsibility to take good care of it.

It also translates into quality of wine.

Is the Web site informational or does it drive sales? Is technology generally enhancing production?

We will always pick when the skin feels right in your mouth and when the taste is right – no machine is going to replace that. We will decide how long to leave a juice in contact with the skin based on the tastes.

However, we have metrics we can refer to as a result of technology that allow us to be more precise in terms of determining what degree we change the heat during the wine-making process.

When we select the grapes from the vineyard, we still cull out the grapes by hand from a cluster that doesn't have the same quality as the rest of the grapes in. It has been done that way for hundreds of years for quality.

However, we have been using new equipment for a few years called an optical sorter and you can program it so the machine knows what kind of grapes you want, and grapes that don't meet your specs are sorted out.

Human error occurs when we still hand sort. We find we lose fewer grapes and get better grapes by using the optical sorter.

In terms of how we sell, people are learning about us through blogs; word-of-mouth is now digital and we have developed a virtual community.

What was the vision for Kathryn Hall in the early days?

My dream always was that we would create wines that were broadly recognized for being approachable in taste and that when people visited us, they would feel welcome – there is no room in this world of wine for pretense.

We also wanted to have wines that offered quality and value at the same time. We recognize how lucky we have been, but we've also worked hard for our success. ●