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BY MARGUERITE THOMAS,
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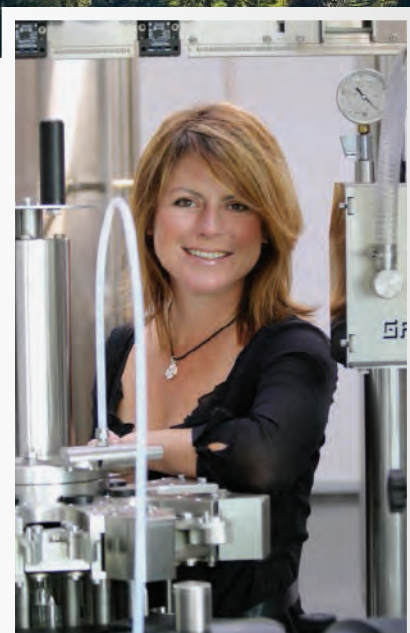
TEAM-PLAYING VINTNERS APPLY NFL LESSONS TO THEIR FAMILY BUSINESS

While the connection between football and wine may not be obvious at first glance, it's clear that John Kent Cooke, owner of Boxwood Estate Winery in Virginia, acquired some invaluable skills as former owner and president of the NFL's Washington Redskins.

Among the essential things he learned during his career in sports was to always aim for the top. During the Cooke family's leadership, the Redskins were one of the

most successful teams in the NFL. Another fundamental message he brought from the rough-and-tumble world of sports to the presumably more genteel milieu of wine is the importance of recruiting the best available talent.

Rachel Martin, Cooke's stepdaughter, has been a driving force of the Boxwood project from its beginning. With a bachelor's degree from Tufts University's School of Fine Arts, a love of wine, and innate managerial moxie, she fulfilled the one winery job require-



Rachel Martin is the driving force behind Boxwood Estate.

ment she lacked – in-depth knowledge of vineyards and winemaking. But no worries: Martin headed off to Napa Valley College to study viticulture and enology. She also worked on her French language skills, which were an important asset at her next stop, the University of Bordeaux, where she studied for a Diplôme d'Aptitude de Dégustation (DUAD).

In Bordeaux, Martin met vigneron extraordinaire Stéphane Derenoncourt, whose contact information she filed away for future reference. In 2005, she was appointed executive vice president of Boxwood.

Martin said that despite the family's decades-long business and

personal connections on the West Coast, when John Kent Cooke and his wife, Rita (Martin's mother), decided to open a winery, California was never a part of the discussion. "It was always about being in Virginia. Virginia has been our home for over 30 years," she said.

After purchasing a 150-acre farm in Middleburg, Va., where Boxwood Estate Winery would be conceived, Cooke's next priority was to build a team to steer the project forward.

VINEYARD PLANNING

Lucie Morton, the most influential viticulture consultant in the East today, was the obvious choice

to oversee Boxwood's vineyard establishment. The estate was purchased in 2001, but Morton didn't rush forward to get plants into the ground. Instead, she spent two years gathering soil samples and installing weather-recording stations throughout site.

The first vines – cabernet franc – were planted by laser, with subsequent plantings done by hand. The vineyards, which Morton designed to conform to the land's contours, are monitored by a GPS system customized to record the care and performance of each vine. (Seven acres have recently been added to the original 16-acre vineyard.)

A knowledgeable observer

might be struck by the spacing of Boxwood's vines. Traditional viticultural guidelines for the Mid-Atlantic region suggest planting at a density of 600-800 vines per acre, in the belief that improved airflow would help mitigate the effects of the region's notorious humidity. Morton, however, flew in the face of accepted wisdom by installing 1,600-2,000 vines per acre. Although it's a more costly approach, she believes this technique reduces the amount of fruit per vine, thereby promoting more even ripening. (Boxwood's sustainable vineyard boasts the tightest planting on the East Coast.)

It's hard to imagine a more fitting architect to design John Kent Cooke's winery than Hugh Newell Jacobsen. Based in Washington, D.C., a scant 90 minutes from Middleburg, Jacobsen is known for award-winning designs that often



The Boxwood winery is comprised of four interconnected buildings designed to let in plenty of natural light through glass cupolas. Photo: Kenneth Garrett

incorporate an elegant interpretation of American vernacular architecture. For Boxwood, he devised a

quartet of interconnected buildings whose design is modern, yet with forms and materials – fieldstone, seamed metal roofs, cupolas – that reflect 18th century Virginia.

The modestly scaled buildings link together the tasting room, a fermentation chai, a bottling room, and the striking, circular barrel cave. The overall impression is sophisticated, yet bright and cheerful, with light flooding into the chai through glass cupolas. The structure's small footprint and well-organized design are not only important for the efficiency of the winery, said Cooke, but also good architecture is also a significant part of the visitors' experience.

Don't overlook the importance of architecture for the workplace culture: All that light coming in, for example, is one of the things that helps make this a good working environment. "I thank Hugh Jacobsen for this every time I see him," said Rachel Martin.

Purdue University enologist Dr. Richard Vine was brought in to consult on the winery's layout and equipment. Boxwood's press pad is state-of-the-art. Its chai is lined with Mueller custom-made 575- to 1,750-gallon stainless steel tanks (the large tanks are equipped with pumpover pipes). The below-ground circular cave houses French oak barrels sourced from a variety of cooperages, with wine pumped

internally into the barrels through stainless steel pipes to reduce the use of hoses. Wines are aged up to 12 months, and barrels are replaced on a three-year rotation.

In 2006, when Martin followed up on the contact she had made with Derenoncourt in Bordeaux, he hesitated. The word "busy" doesn't begin to describe his life. In addition to producing two personal wines located half a world apart (Domaine de l'A in Bordeaux and Derenoncourt California in Napa), he is a consultant to more than 60 different estates in nine countries, from Austria to Ukraine. So what was it that convinced him to come to an obscure American wine region known principally for its problematic weather, to work with an embryonic estate that had no track record and no winemaking experience?

"From the first time I met Rachel in Bordeaux, I was impressed by her passion for the project," Derenoncourt said. "I like that the family is involved, and that their ambition isn't just for personal success; they

want to help create a story, a tradition, for the whole region."

But there's more to it than simply liking the people involved. Presenting a challenging situation to Derenoncourt is like dangling catnip in front of a kitten.

"I love challenges," he admitted. "That's why I consult for wineries in places like Lebanon, Turkey and Syria. I don't go to the places that are easy and fashionable, and I'm not looking for projects that practically guarantee success. I'm not in South America or South Africa, for example. I love small family projects, and I know how to make good wine in places with challenging weather, even where humidity is high."

He added that it wasn't the Cooke family alone that attracted him to the project. "The entire team is fantastic," he said. "Lucie Morton, for example, has done great work on the vineyard."

VARIETAL FOCUS

When asked what grape varieties he thinks are best-suited to the site, Derenoncourt's answer was unequivocal: "Cabernet franc," he said. "It's difficult to ripen cabernet sauvignon completely here. Merlot does pretty well, but it lacks energy a little. Cabernet franc is definitely the best variety for this area."

As with the handful of other quality-oriented wineries in the Middleburg Virginia AVA (RdV Vineyards and Delaplane Cellars, for example), the red varieties of Bordeaux are the focus at Boxwood. The estate produces three red wines: Topiary (a St. Emilion-inspired blend dominated by cabernet franc, with merlot and malbec in supporting roles); Boxwood (Médoc style, with cabernet sauvignon plus merlot and petit verdot); and Trellis (a blend of all the Boxwood red-grape varieties). Two

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Stephane Derenoncourt's love of a challenge draws him to consult for wineries in lesser-known wine regions, such as Virginia. Photo: C. Goussard

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rosés are also produced, and sauvignon blanc vines have recently been planted. But there can be no doubt that red wine is what defines Boxwood.

“The focus at Boxwood has always been on balance,” Derenoncourt said about the style of the wines. “We want to show that balanced and elegant wines can be made here. We aren’t interested in big wines. Our philosophy is more old-fashioned, more Old World, maybe, with no vineyard irrigation, no high-alcohol wines.”

Working closely with head winemaker Josh Gerard, Derenoncourt visits Virginia six or so times a year to taste and advise. Gerard, whose early training was in New Zealand, came to Boxwood from Pennsylvania’s Karamoor Estate. This fusion of Gerard’s eastern sensibility and experience with Derenoncourt’s French/interna-



Although the winery also produces two rosé wines, Boxwood’s focus is firmly on reds. Photo: TJK Photography

tivated by Cooke during his life in the world of sports: Create strong fan support. If the public doesn’t come to you, take the product to the public. This is accomplished by Boxwood via three contemporary tasting bars established in the greater D.C. area: Reston in Virginia and National Harbor and Chevy Chase in Maryland.

The tasting bars are branded simply as “The Tasting Room Wine Bar & Shop,” and Boxwood wines share the spotlight with wines from around the world, including those made by Derenoncourt for other wineries. “Our inspiration for the tasting bars came with the development of the Enomatic self-serve tasting machines, which dispense wine to consumers via a prepaid wine card,” Martin explained. Her brother, Sean, manages the Tasting Room business.

One advantage of the tasting bars, Rachel Martin pointed out, is



Boxwood’s tasting bars showcase Boxwood wines alongside wines from other parts of the world.

that they give the Boxwood team a chance to show its products against the world’s wines. Another advantage is that it offers a built-in method for promoting and selling Boxwood wines. Fifty percent of the

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tional perspective seems to be working to advance Boxwood’s objectives, which are decidedly global, as opposed to simply local, despite the estate’s relatively modest production (about 2,500 cases per year, with a maximum target of 3,500).

Unlike many small eastern producers whose mission is to sell the bulk of their production at the winery, Cooke and Martin have a broader vision – one that requires perseverance. “I pursued Paul Grieco relentlessly until, after four years, he finally put the wines on the list at Hearth Restaurant in New York City,” Martin said.

Boxwood wines are also sold in Washington, D.C., and exported to Great Britain through New Horizon Wines.

“We want Boxwood to be part of the conversation about food and wine,” Martin said, “and to get that, we won’t go with just any distributor – we want to be in a portfolio with other quality-driven wines. It’s important for me to have sommeliers recognize our wine.”

Locally, Boxwood’s presence is growing thanks to a unique marketing concept based on another cul-

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estate's production is currently sold on properties owned by Boxwood.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

As with many family-run businesses, decision-making at Boxwood is a collaborative effort.

"Let me give you a typical example of one of our weekly meetings," Rachel said. "My father and mother, and my brother and I, were sitting around a table talking about pricing. Somewhere along the way one of us brought up the point that this wine is expensive to

make, especially since we are constantly reducing volume to increase quality. But after more discussion we ultimately agreed on introductory pricing, even though it is well below our production cost, so that people would try our wine." Boxwood's wines range from \$14 to \$25 a bottle.

"As relevant issues and questions were raised, discussed and resolved," she continued, "everyone had input. This is how we make all our decisions at Boxwood – as a family."

Boxwood is certainly not the first winery to be launched by a comfortably endowed family, but many things have set Cooke's venture apart from similar projects. In addition to the strategic decision to sign on the best winegrowing talent available, another shrewd step was the choice to be guided by local as well as international expertise. Recognizing and cultivating potential talent, whether from within one's own family or outside the immediate circle of friends and relatives, can be another useful building block for a company.

Nothing, however, trumps Cooke's ability to blend together a passion for wine with sound business principles and a willingness to sidestep tradition in favor of innovation.

Even so, Derenoncourt is cautiously optimistic about the future. "Look, we've already made some very good wine at Boxwood," he said. "I am having fun with the project and I am happy to be contributing to its success. But there is no guarantee. Wine takes time, so we will see in a few decades."

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Marguerite Thomas is a Baltimore-based journalist and photographer who contributes wine-related articles to several national and international publications. She is the author of the books "Wineries of the Eastern States" and "Visiting East Coast Wineries."
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Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwmmmedia.com.

BOXWOOD ESTATE WINERY

- + **Year Founded:** 2005
- + **Principals:** John Kent Cooke, president; Rachel E. Martin, executive vice president; Sean D. Martin, vice president
- + **Wines:** Boxwood Estate, Topiary, Boxwood Trellis, Boxwood Rosé
- + **Annual Case Production:** 2,500
- + **Vineyard Acreage:** 23
- + **Major Varieties Planted:** Cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot

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