



WINES THAT DELIVER

BY PATRICK MCNEIL

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By JEFF BURKHART | jeff@thebarflyonline.com | Marin Independent Journal November 13, 2018 at 12:00 pm



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2016 ELLEN REDDING PINOT NOIR

Nicasio native tells family story in Wines That Deliver

Change is coming to West Marin. Whether it is carried on the newly repaved Lucas Valley Road or the helicopter doing a location scout for Lucasfilm overhead is uncertain. But it is coming, as surely as the fiber optic internet truck inching slowly down that new roadway.

Patrick McNeil, 45, sits on the porch of his family's home at the end of Lucas Valley Road, just across from the heart of the town of Nicasio, a property his family has owned since the 1860s. His aunt Martha, who taught at the one-room school in Nicasio for 16 years, still lives on the property.

Just off that little Nicasio square, across from the baseball field, sits a little old, red building that used to be a butcher shop owned by the McNeil family. It has no running water and no electricity, at least not yet. Inside hangs an old butcher shop sign that says: "We Deliver." And for the better part of a century the McNeil family did, by horse and buggy, all over Marin County. That building will soon be the home of McNeil's newest wine business, named appropriately, Wines That Deliver.

"I grew up drinking Stag's Leap petite sirah," McNeil says. "My father purchased Stag's Leap Winery back in 1970, along with Carl Doumani. Both the Doumanis and the McNeils lived at Stag's Leap Winery."

It was the first of many stops in the wine business for McNeil. He graduated from the University of California at Davis with a degree in international relations and English in 1996, and started selling wine in 1997.

THE BUTCHER SHOP - NICASIO, CA

TEL. (707) 254-0440 **WEB** winesthatdeliver.com **EMAIL** patrick@winesthatdeliver.com

"I took all the winemaking classes that I could," he says. "Because that is what got me there in the first place." Back then it was possible to take wine classes at UC Davis without a major in wine science, enology or viticulture. These days those courses are reserved for people majoring in the wine sciences.

"My dad was the type of person who didn't overspeak and his comment to me after graduation was simply, 'Get a job.' His second comment was, 'Pick up the phone book.'"

Those were McNeil's first cold calls, and he was good at it. Within five calls he got a hit. It was Pellegrini Family vineyards in San Francisco.

"He threw me a book with a lot of Italian imports and a couple domestic wines and said, 'Go out there and make some friends. We'll see how you do.' And that was it."

After Pellegrini, McNeil worked for Chambers and Chambers, then Cain Vineyards, making friends along the way. He worked with Napa Valley legend Dave Phinney, whose Orin Swift Cellars created the celebrated wine the Prisoner. "I helped launch the Prisoner nationally in 2004. Taking something from about 500 cases to 30,000 cases, then to 50,000, then 80,000," McNeil says

McNeil then began to make his own wines under a couple of labels, and in 2010 had built himself a decent-sized distribution company.

"At some point you have to transition from building everybody else's brands to building your own brand," he says.

McNeil had always thought of having a Marin-based wine business, but how does one make something so specific, so regional, work?

"You have to do the whole thing from start to finish, it has to be your story, you have to develop the branding," he says. "You have to be able to tell your story, make the wines, sell your story and sell your wines. If you can do all of that, then it is possible."

And the story he decided to tell was his own family's story.

"The main story and the main wine is the Ellen Redding Marin County Pinot Noir. The first vintage, 2015, released last year was sourced from Chileno Valley. The new 2016 vintage is made with grapes from West Marin's Stubbs Vineyards," he says.

The labels for Ellen Redding Marin County Pinot Noir harken back to McNeil's grandfather's wooing of his grandmother through the local mail. More than 50 envelopes with notes to her exist, and those now serve as the labels for the wine.



Bright black fruit notes make this low-production (120 cases) West Marin pinot stand out. No jammy fruit here, instead you get cleanly crisp invigorating well balanced acidity. Great with food, or on its own. It really does shine and has pretty low alcohol to boot at 14.2 percent (\$36).

"Napa cabernet is great, but the old field blends; like the old Stag's Leap indiscriminate vines: Carignane, petite sirah, syrah, grenache, some of that stuff is still there. I think those are the coolest wines in Napa," McNeil says.

To that end McNeil also makes Brainchild wines; a red petite sirah based blend from the Napa Valley based on his family's history there (\$36), a low-production Brainchild white wine blend of vermentino and grenache blanc (\$18), as well as Paydirt, another red blend from Paso Robles.

"I make wines in Paso, and in Napa. And all are based on relationships I have made over the years. I have worked with at least 250 different wineries over time," he says.

"Go out and make some friends" has been McNeil's mantra, and ironically that mantra has brought him full circle back to his family's roots in Nicasio.

"This story took a long time to unfold. Over 100 years, in fact. I'm just hoping that my production doesn't take that long to unfold," he says with a laugh.

The Wines that Deliver shop in Nicasio is slated to open on Memorial Day of next year. In the meantime, McNeil's wines can be found on menus throughout Marin County and at his website, winesthatdeliver.com.

Jeff Burkhart is the author of "Twenty Years Behind Bars: The Spirited Adventures of a Real Bartender" and an award-winning bartender at a local restaurant. Follow him at jeffburchart.net and contact him at jeff@thebarflyonline.com.