

Thirst for Excellence:

Marianne Lieberman '79



by Joanne Miceli



Marianne Lieberman '79's favorite wine is chardonnay, so, naturally, it was the first wine produced at Maple Springs Vineyard, her award-winning boutique winery located amid the beautiful hills of Bechtelsville, Pennsylvania. And, because she especially loves chardonnays from the Chablis part of the Burgundy region in France—"fruit forward, tasting of the rocky soil's minerality, not over-oaked and very little butter," as she describes it—that's the style of Maple Springs' now-flagship wine.

Her passion for fine wine and the attention she gives to its handcrafting are only part of the story behind Marianne's success in the wine industry. As Maple Springs' vintner ("a fancy name for owner," she explains), she has built a company that not only produced the 2017 Sommelier Judgment Day's "Best White Wine of Pennsylvania" but also incorporates her love of family and friends, her commitment to hard work, joy in lifelong learning, business savvy and, of course, her generous philanthropic spirit.

"I've always believed it's critical to have passion for your work in order to find satisfaction and be successful—however you personally define that," she said as she considered her path to winery ownership. "Inevitably, most of us will spend much more time involved with our work than any other part of our lives, so do it all in! My advice to anyone is to create a career that taps into your passions and mold it to fulfill your goals."

Clearly, Marianne has followed her own counsel over the past 10 years, as she has blended all of her passions into Maple Springs Vineyard and cultivated the business from the ground up.

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A Dream Takes Root

Marianne's first career was in advertising, and, over two decades, she traveled the world for agencies in Washington, D.C., Manhattan and, finally, as co-CEO of Interspace Airport Advertising, a family company she operated with her brother, *Mark Lieberman '74*. Although she loved much of her career, including the hard work that paid off in the exponential growth of Interspace and the eye-opening global experiences she regularly enjoyed, her constant travel took its toll on family life, especially after she and her wife, Carolyn Grant, adopted their daughters, *Meghan Grant '17* and *Clare Grant '19*.

However, Marianne had a plan for a second career that would keep her closer to home. She envisioned opening a microbrewery—both sides of her family had once been in the beer business, after all—but, over time, that dream changed to owning a vineyard and winery. Her family's growing appreciation for

fine wines played a role in the mind shift, as did the time Marianne spent in places like New Zealand and Australia, countries that were coming on strong in the world wine scene.

"Vintners there were proving you could make great wine outside of France, Italy and California, and forging the way for sustainable new-world growing and winemaking," Marianne observed. She believed the same could hold true in Pennsylvania, and she and Carolyn purchased their Bechtelsville farm property in 1995, with the goal of one day creating estate wines that could compete on a world stage. Just over a decade later, the winemaking dream began to actually take root.

“Good fortune found us,” Marianne said of the 2006 sale of Interspace, a milestone that allowed her to turn her attention to Maple Springs Vineyard. Two years later, after transitioning Interspace to its new ownership, she “bought a big tractor” and planted the vineyard’s first chardonnay vines.

A Growing Enterprise

It takes three years for a vine to bear fruit, and, as those first vines grew, so did Maple Springs’ production facility and professional team. One of Marianne’s key early hires was award-winning winemaker Jef Stebben, “a winemaker extraordinaire, part scientist, part artist,” Marianne said, noting, “We are fortunate to have him.” Under Jef’s guidance, Maple Springs produced its first 100 cases of chardonnay in 2011, which sold out in two months. The vineyard and winery have only grown from there.

Today, Maple Springs has 11 acres under vine, including varieties of pinot noir, albariño, grüner veltliner, syrah, rosé and other grapes used for blending. The winery boasts high-tech wine production equipment and an outdoor covered crush pad, plus a covered deck with a fireplace, outdoor patio and pool, catering kitchen and tasting room for private parties and events. Production of its handcrafted wines stands at 1,700 cases annually and will likely reach 2,000 cases in the next several years.

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The entire business has been built with an eye to sustainability, a model Marianne observed in her travels and took to heart. Forty-eight solar panels generate all the electricity needed, while seven geothermal wells tap the springs that bubble under the property to provide the 30-plus gallons of water it takes to produce every gallon of wine. The Maple Springs team reuses everything it possibly can, right down to the wash water and grape skins, which become fertilizer in the vineyard. Wine bottles feature recyclable screw caps and, recently, “kegging” some of the wine has reduced the need for bottles.

Maple Springs operates a unique business model in its

Wine Case Club, which gives members (300 families at present) a hands-on, educational experience of vine growing and winemaking. Each fall, member families help harvest the grapes and learn how to sort them on the production floor. In the winter, they taste their wine from barrels and discover the distinct aromas and flavors of

new French oak versus Hungarian oak versus neutral oak. They taste again from the tank after the wine is prepped for bottling, and, when summer rolls around, they enjoy a pool party when they pick up their case of wine. “These are opportunities rarely offered to consumers,” Marianne pointed out, “and they are really fun experiences to share with family and friends.”

Even with all the distinctive touches she has made part of her company’s DNA, Marianne proudly asserts that the wine itself



Marianne trains Wine Case Club members to harvest grapes.



The Maple Springs name honors Marianne’s grandmother, Helen Maple Doern, mother of **John O. Doern '48**.



Clockwise from top left: Giant syrah clusters; Maddie the horse shares her field with rows of pinot noir vines; Hellcat Vineyard.

is what sets Maple Springs Vineyard apart from its competitors. “Our product is truly great,” she said. “That we are on the wine list in top restaurants in Philadelphia, resorts in the Poconos and across Pennsylvania attests to our quality. Restaurants bring their serving staff to Maple Springs for training, and sommeliers and chefs love our wines, especially because they are farm-to-table.”

A Vintner’s Life

So what does a workday entail when you own a winery? “What’s great is there is no typical day!” Marianne said enthusiastically. As the leader of Maple Springs’ talented, hardworking team, she might be tending the vineyard, running a sales meeting, bottling wine, hosting an event for 150 members, calling on restaurants, harvesting grapes, preparing a budget or doing something else entirely. “I make sure we’re all paddling in the same direction,” she said, “and that everyone has the resources to do what they do best.”

While the variety of her days suits Marianne, she also finds comfort in the annual rhythm that naturally encompasses the vineyard and winery. Fall harvest leads to winemaking, holiday events and budgeting. January brings bottling and barreling of Maple Springs’ various wines, and then member barrel-tasting events and the release of the newly bottled wine. Next, it is on

to early spring pruning in the vineyard. May brings bud break and the start of the busy growing season, while June features blending events with tastings from the tanks and bottling of chardonnay and reds. Veraison—when the grapes change color and build sugars—happens in July, and August wraps up the year with new wine releases and Wine Case Club pool parties. Then the cycle begins again with harvest in September.

Learning as much as she can about the industry has been a big part of Marianne’s life as a vintner, and she concedes that there is no end to what you can learn about wine. She recently completed a winemaking certificate at the University of California Davis, and she and her family visit vineyards and wineries around the world.

“We’ve been from Spain to Chile trying to learn, and we’ve experienced great camaraderie with other winemakers,” she said appreciatively. “As soon as they find out we’re in the business, we get a soup-to-nuts tour and taste their best and worst. They graciously share all their vineyard challenges and winery secrets, too, and then send us off with free wine!” Those experiences, as well as the warm reception she and her family have received at restaurants that serve Maple Springs’ wines (“they treat us like royalty!”) are among the most pleasant surprises Marianne has realized since becoming a winery owner.

Working Hard to Give Back

Besides developing high-quality, artisan wines, Marianne's biggest goal for Maple Springs at its outset involved her family. "I wanted our kids to see old-fashioned, dirt-under-the-nails hard work, and the vineyard has that in spades," she said. "Meg and Clare have not only worked with us in the vineyard, they've also been part of the building of a small business and they've experienced what that takes. They both have a great work ethic," she added with obvious pride, and, 10 years into the business, she is happy to have met that goal.

Another Maple Springs goal that is close to Marianne's heart is just coming to fruition: This year, the company formally launched its Maple Springs Foundation that supports annual charitable giving.

Her plan since founding Maple Springs has been to share its profits with local, regional and global causes that enrich the lives of others, and, in doing so, share the principles of philanthropy with her daughters, Wine Case Club members and everyone who enjoys Maple Springs' wine. "It's all about working hard to give money to our communities and the world," is how Marianne succinctly sums up a big part of Maple Springs' mission.

Blair Academy is among the beneficiaries of Maple Springs' philanthropy, and that comes as no surprise when you consider

Marianne's love for her alma mater and her deep and ongoing involvement in the School as a former class representative, a dedicated Blair parent and a Trustee since 2009. She credits Blair with a role in her success today, noting that the leadership opportunities and classroom experiences she enjoyed as a student certainly helped her in her first career that made Maple Springs Vineyard possible. "Blair helped me gain the confidence to build businesses unafraid, to pursue passions

to their fullest, and to enjoy and find satisfaction in my work," she said. "In addition, Blair made me a lifelong learner."

Among the many gifts Marianne has shared with the Blair community has been her

passion for wine. She has hosted alumni and parent receptions at Maple Springs Vineyard and provided wine for special adult events at Blair. "I'm very proud of the wines we produce at Maple Springs, and it's really very special to me to serve them to faculty and fellow alumni, parents and Trustees. These are my peers, my friends and my School—it's quite a thrill!" she said. In June, Maple Springs' keged wines will be tapped at her 40th reunion, and there is no mistaking the excitement in her voice when she adds, "I can't wait!" ■

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Maple Springs' "Dinner under the Stars" event celebrated the 10th anniversary of the vineyard's Old Dutch field.