



PHIFER PAVITT

NAPA VALLEY WINERY

Georgia-native, vintner: Napa Valley bruised, needs support in recovery

KIM WADE, Savannah Morning News: October 31, 2017

The Savannah Food & Wine Festival begins next week, offering Savannahians a chance to meet West Coast wine leaders.

And for many of those, the recent devastating wildfires in the wine region has made this year a bit more challenging. One of those leaders is Georgia native and vintner Suzanne Phifer Pavitt.

Pavitt and her husband Shane Pavitt own a boutique winery perched at the top of Napa Valley in Calistoga, Calif., on 23 acres near the Silverado Trail. Phifer Pavitt Winery specializes in cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc, and their well-known Date Night brand is what draws the crowds to their tasting room.

And while that may seem very glamorous and charmed, Suzanne is quick to note, she's still just a farmer with strong roots connected back home to her family's farm in the northern hills of Ringgold, where she grew up on a 15-acre farm — the same farm where her family still lives and works. And she claims it's those Southern roots that give her the strength to persevere through the aftermath of the devastating wildfires that have swept through Napa and Sonoma Valley.

"We have to keep going," she said. "The alternative is to just give up. I'm a Southern person — I don't know how to quit, I only know how to find resolve and find a way to keep moving forward."

And while she, her family and community have truly endured devastation on their homes and land — as well as a great deal of emotional scarring — she asked the question, "Why add another level of devastation to the mix?"

That level she is talking about is the financial devastation she and her peers in the wine country are already starting to see. She explained they depend on tourism from October through December and many people have canceled their trips to California after hearing news of the wildfires.

"There has truly been a gross dramatization that our region is nothing but charred hillsides, and that isn't true. Most everyone has canceled their trips out here for the rest of the year. October and November are our busiest times with harvest season and farm to table dinners — this is our most vibrant time. But there is no one here to enjoy it."



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She said it's been hard for people in the California wine country to get back to normal after the wildfires when they don't have jobs. For example, during this time of year, she said she is usually so busy that visits to their tasting room are by appointment only. But when she spoke via telephone to Savannah Morning News, she said the tasting room is empty. There is no one there to sample her wine or enjoy her view of the valley — everyone has canceled their visit.

She said her message to Savannah is simple, "If you are on the fence about coming here or have canceled your trip, come back. Come on out. Let's not create another disaster within a disaster. Let's focus on the strength of the human spirit."

She described the beautiful view outside the French doors of her winery where she can see blue skies and autumn foliage. She said she and her family are "blessed beyond measure for so many reasons." Despite being forced to evacuate, their winery and home were situated in an area that was untouched by the fires.

"Some people don't realize that Napa Valley is 30 miles long and five miles wide. It is filled with several hundred wineries and the valley floor is unscathed. There is this overarching idea that it's all complete ash, but that's simply not true."

She described the moments leading up to the day Oct. 12, when she, her husband and their two teenage sons decided it was just too dangerous to stay at the house. Her sons lost their school in the fires. Fifteen families with students on their football team had their homes destroyed.

Some roads in the area are still closed and crews continue searching the valley with cadaver dogs to uncover missing people.

"We are here; we are bruised but not broken and I can say the same for Sonoma."

But like Suzanne said, she doesn't know how to just quit.

So, once the family returned home on Oct. 17 and had a chance to look around, it was time to harvest their cabernet crop.

"We came back on Tuesday and had to harvest on Wednesday and Thursday. We got the grapes into the winery. The fruit was beautiful. We sent it off to a lab to be tested and were lucky to find out it didn't have smoke taint."

She explained that she has learned through this process that smoke taint is not automatic to vineyards that experienced heavy smoke damage — there is a lot of science that goes into determining if a crop is destroyed by smoke.

The family actually waited out the fires in their old '67 Airstream camper in the middle of a friend's vineyard. "It was cramped," Suzanne said and laughed. "But we were safe."

So, what's next?



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Suzanne said she is busy harvesting her olive crop for their olive oil and they still have a lot of clean up left to do. She has to take a deep breath and pause before admitting the emotional healing will take some time.

But she said she is looking forward to making a return trip to the Savannah Food and Wine Festival.

Suzanne is hosting the sold-out Riverboat Wine Paired Luncheon Cruise on Nov. 10. Phifer Pavitt wines will also be featured at the James Beard Celebrity Chef Tour Dinner on Nov. 8 at 7 p.m. at the Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort and Spa. Tickets are \$189 and feature the award-winning James Beard Foundation's 'best chefs' of the South, Southeast and Southwest along with other great local chefs. The evening features a champagne meet and greet and each course is paired with top wines. Tickets are available at savannahfoodandwinefest.com.