

PHIFER PAVITT
Date Night
Napa Valley

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How a date night became a wine — and a Calistoga winery

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The owners of Phifer Pavitt Winery in Calistoga are a little unusual these days. Neither rich nor coming from the wine business, they followed a path that was once familiar: They bought some property, started making wine in a leased space from grapes they bought, and then built a winery and tasting room.

They're only now looking seriously at planting grapevines on their small property on Silverado Trail.

PHIFER PAVITT WINE
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Suzanne Phifer grew up on a farm near rural Ringgold in Georgia while Shane Pavitt was raised in coastal Manhattan Beach, where a large yard contained a patch of grass and a few flowers.

They both loved wine, and even after they married in 1998, they maintained the tradition of a date night with wine. On one extended date night in Italy, they vowed to move to the country and start a winery.

They looked up and down the California coast, and in 1998, found what they wanted, a 24-acre unplanted hillside parcel in Calistoga with neighbors like Araujo Estate.

Suzanne was then in high-tech sales, while Shane worked in finance, which he continues while she runs the wine business. While living in Marin County, they began building a house atop the property with plans to add a winery later. In the meantime, they had two sons, Jackson and Rhett Pavitt, now 11 and 9.

In 2005, they created the winery, a virtual winery at that point, and produced their first release. The Pavitts came up with the idea of calling the wine Date Night over several years of their own date nights.

They source cabernet grapes from organically farmed Temple Family Vineyards in Pope Valley. The vineyard was designed and planted by Arthur Spencer 15 years ago. The vineyard is at 670 feet altitude in loam soil, with the vines spaced at 7 feet by 5 feet.

The farming incorporates many features to support its organic commitment — barn owl boxes, indigenous legume cover crop for beneficial insects and soil fertility, ladybug plantings and night harvesting.

As the dust settled from building the home, the Pavitts decided to move ahead with a winery. They found a 19th-century barn in Franz Valley west of Calistoga and moved it to the site in 2005.

The winery, designed by architect David Holscher, has a board-and-batten façade and a metal roof, a classic example of a Napa Valley barn.

The interior shows the classic barn framing and the walls are corrugated tinsplate. It looks as if it's been at the site for more than a century. A 1947 Farm All tractor outside completes the illusion. The light fixtures are made from historic barbed wire, and life-size drawings of cowgirls decorate sliding blackboard doors. The tasting bar upstairs is an enormous slab of fallen black walnut wood with naturally jagged edges. Seating is on burlap-covered hay bales and the large room seems destined for a barn dance.

Their first crush at the winery was in 2011. The wines are made by Ted Osborne and Gary Warburton. Osborne makes fewer than 500 cases a year of the Date Night cabernet. The

current vintage is 2009, and it sells for \$80 at the winery or from the website, DateNightWines.com.

He uses minimal manipulation in producing the wine. The 2007 got a 94 from the Wine Spectator. They made so little wine the next year that they didn't submit it.

The other winemaker is Gary Warburton, Shane Pavitt's stepfather, who makes the Date Night sauvignon blanc from Juliana Vineyards in Pope Valley.

Warburton started making wines with friends in Manhattan Beach. After spending many years as a helper, he began making his own home wines and over 15 years has won numerous awards for his creations.

When the Pavitts bought their property in Napa Valley, he took time from his dental practice and enrolled at UC Davis to earn a degree in enology.

For the past six years, he has been helping build the Phifer Pavitt Winery and produced his first commercial wine, the Date Night sauvignon blanc. He also acts as assistant winemaker on the cabernet.

Most of the wine is sold direct, but they have distribution. The wine is especially popular in the South, including Nashville, Tenn. perhaps partly due to Suzanne Phifer Pavitt, with her soft Southern accent, holding dinners and making visits there.

The Pavitts' next step is to plant vineyards on their property. It's so hilly that only 2 to 3 acres are plantable, but the vineyard will add a welcome element next to the restored barn winery.

The winery is at 4660 Silverado Trail just north of Dunaweal Lane in Calistoga. It's not marked by a sign, but there's a two-dimensional statue of a cowgirl in the yard.

The staff welcomes visitors by appointments Mondays through Saturdays for tastings at 11 a.m. or 1 p.m. at a cost of \$25 each. To make an appointment, call 942-4787 or email suzanne@phiferpavittwine.com.



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