

PHIFER PAVITT
Date Night
Napa Valley



It ain't called 'Cowgirl Cabernet' Calistoga vintners create 'Date Night' Cabernet Sauvignon

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By David Stoneberg



With a roaring fire in the background, Suzanne Phifer Pavitt lifts a glass of the 2005 Phifer Pavitt Date Night Cabernet Sauvignon, which was released in October. She and her husband, Shane, made 300 cases.

There's a drawing of a smiling cowgirl on the inaugural 2005 Phifer Pavitt "Date Night" Cabernet Sauvignon.

Is it a drawing of Suzanne Phifer Pavitt? "No," she said, "but people tell me it could be." The Calistoga vintner calls the cowgirl "a class act, who's living in a tough time, but is still a lady." She adds, "It looks like she's going to get her husband in order."

Will the cowgirl have to resort to drastic measures? "No the threat of a lasso in her hand is enough."

Even though Phifer Pavitt owns 14 pairs of cowboy boots — and wears them every day — Phifer Pavitt insists she was not the model for the cowgirl, which was drawn by her husband's

uncle, George Francuch. "Use your imagination of who she is, but really it is not me." Besides, the wine is not called "Cowgirl Cabernet," but instead "Date Night."

“We tried to think of something other than our names to put on the label, and we thought of ‘Moxie,’ which is a cola in the Northeast, so we couldn’t use it because of trademark restrictions,” Phifer Pavitt said. But she and her husband Shane decided on “Date Night,” which is the once-a-week date they have with each other, an effort to connect despite their busy lives.

“Every good decision we’ve ever made occurred on ‘Date Night,’” Phifer Pavitt said. Her husband concurs: “The ‘Should I take that job’ decision happened on Date Night. The ‘Let’s make babies’ decision happened on Date Night. And the decision to put an offer on what would become the Phifer Pavitt property happened on Date Night. From our perspective, every decision we made together on Date Night gave us results that exceeded our expectations.”

Shane and Suzanne have been married nine years; their sons are Jackson, 6 and Rhett, 5.

Phifer Pavitt was sitting in the dining room of their Tuscan-style home, talking about her life, offering home-made biscuits, coffee and worrying about not having jam or apple butter to put on the biscuits. It’s a measure of her Southern upbringing that she wants her guests to be at ease and well taken care of. A fire burns in the fireplace and provides warmth and cheer on a cloudy and chilly winter day.

After a while, Phifer Pavitt opened a bottle of Date Night, to let it breathe a little. She said the 2005 vintage is nearly 100 percent cabernet with “just a whiff of petite verdot.” The grapes were grown by Arthur Spencer at his Temple Family Vineyards in Pope Valley and were harvested on a “nearly ice cold October morning,” according to the tasting notes. The winemaker is Ted Osborne, assisted by Phifer Pavitt’s father-in-law, Gary Warburton. “Shane’s parents are very involved in the wine making,” Phifer Pavitt said. “It’s a family affair and Gary loves Ted and wants to make a good wine.” She adds the grapes are grown organically.

Only 300 cases were made, and after pulling 40 cases out for their library wines, Phifer Pavitt said they only have 100 cases left. How did they sell 160 cases of wine? “It’s all about friends and family and word of mouth,” she said. “We open a bottle with friends and they like it and buy it.” The wine is on the list at Solage and a Tennessee distributor has approached the vintners about selling their wine. Osborne was going on a trip to meet this distributor and he invited Phifer Pavitt to join him. “He’s just crazy about the wine,” she said.

The couple and their two children are living a dream — one that began with a whirlwind romance. Four months after they met, the two were married, but not until Shane had received permission from Suzanne’s father. “It was the proper thing to do,” she said simply.

During their romance, they were in Red Bluff and were looking at a property that was hundreds of acres. He loved it, but she did not. So, they kept looking and thought they’d buy an acre, with a fixer-upper on it. Instead, on Good Friday, they met with a real estate agent and looked at 23 acres that had been in the same family since 1890. The property was used as a cattle pasture. This time, Shane said, “No way.”

After walking the property, they went to dinner at Catahoula in Calistoga for their weekly “date night.” Phifer Pavitt said she had just read “Under the Tuscan Sun” and they enjoyed the

restaurant's food and a great bottle of wine. Although the property was not cheap, they decided to buy it. So they wrote up the offer on the back of a menu and faxed it to the owner. It was accepted.

They started dreaming about the property and realized they needed a barn. Through friends, they found a 100-year-old barn on Franz Valley Road that they could have, as long as they dismantled it. They carefully tore down the barn, had the plank siding resurfaced — you can still see some of the yellow paint — and rebuilt it on their property, at the corner of Dunaweal and Silverado Trail. It was finished in 2003. It may become a small winery.

They dreamed about building a Tuscan home and using the barn as a small winery. In the midst of their plans, they began a family and they worked and planned so Phifer Pavitt could retire from business life. That same year, 2004, they began building their dream home and Phifer Pavitt served as project manager, hiring all the subcontractors she needed. It took two years and they moved into the home in November 2006.

Today, Phifer Pavitt runs the business from a home office and sells the wine on their Web site, www.phiferpavittwine.com, and runs the business from her home. She says simply, “My priority is my boys. I’m here for them. Yesterday was Asian immersion day at school and I went there to be with my boys.” Afterwards, there was time enough for business and to sell a little wine. “I love my life and love the wine,” she said.

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