

All in the Family

By Constance Hale '79

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FOR COURTNEY KINGSTON '92, being part of the family team means being at her kitchen table in a two-story tract home near Palo Alto, California, pandemic or not; her co-workers are in Princeton, New York City, and the Casablanca Valley in Chile. She travels to Chile about every other month (when there's no pandemic raging) and uses WhatsApp to meet with far-flung relations.

Courtney is head of sales and marketing for Kingston Family Vineyards. She describes herself as a “misfit”: an MBA who works on a family farm; an international businesswoman who is also a suburban mom.

After graduating from Princeton with a degree in Latin American studies, Courtney moved to San Francisco and worked at Deloitte & Touche as a consultant for California wineries. She entered Stanford Business School and then moved to high-powered tech jobs. At 30, knowing the corporate grind wasn't for her, she decided to help the farm.

“We knew nothing about vines, but we had land and Chilean know-how — and a soil engineer who pronounced the land ‘un wow lugar,’” Courtney says.

Soon Courtney was helping her family find new purpose for the 7,500-acre ranch in Chile where her father, Michael '62, had grown up. Founded by her great-grandfather, a miner who had left Michigan for Chile in the early 1900s, the ranch was supplying 5 percent of all the fresh milk to the capital city of Santiago, but it was subject to the vagaries of commodity pricing. The Casablanca Valley was developing a reputation for crisp white wines. Courtney started talking



KINGSTON
FAMILY
VINEYARDS



Courtney Kingston '92 and her father, Michael Kingston '62; behind them are the family's vineyard, Chile's Casablanca Valley, and the Andes mountain range.

Photo: Kingston Family Vineyards

with her brother Tim '87 and wrote a business plan for a vineyard “in the hills where the cows didn't want to go.” After much research and some inquiries with California wine powerhouses interested in expanding into Chile, the family used savings to plant the first vineyard. Courtney led sales and marketing and signed on as CEO, with her brother Tim '87 advising as a founding partner. Their father, who had worked for Citibank and lives in Princeton, stepped in as CFO. Tim's wife, Jennifer Pickens Kingston '87, is COO. Michael's sister Sally and her husband, Enrique Alliende, oversee day-to-day operations in Chile.

Some of the world's oldest vines grow in Chile, because the country escaped the phylloxera epidemic of the 1800s. Cabernet sauvignon and carménère have been its signature red grapes, but the Kingstons gambled on pinot noir and



Engaging MBA guests inside the winery.

Photo: Kingston Family Vineyards

syrah, sensing that the hilly Casablanca Valley would welcome cool-climate reds. They invested in vines, a winery, and a tasting room. They did not invest in salaries (“My husband is in tech, thank God,” says Courtney), office space (“The North American HQ is in my house”), or unnecessarily expensive equipment (“We MacGyver everything”).

She calls it “organic growth”: Move forward steadily with your employees and partners; value generations of the community as much as generations of the family.

They partnered with a winemaker from a Napa winery esteemed for its pinot noir; he took a look at the Casablanca Valley and said it reminded him of Santa Barbara County with higher mountains. As it turned out, the soil was almost pure decomposed granite and, together with the intense afternoon sun, gave the red grapes great color.

In 2003, the Kingston Family label produced 450 cases. The winery now makes about 3,500 cases a year, crushing 10 percent of the grapes they grow and selling the rest. Meanwhile, Chile has become the seventh-largest producer of wines in the world.

Courtney has become an adherent of the “evergreen business” way, in which a company remains privately owned, focuses on long-term outcomes, and avoids raising capital that puts money before mission. She calls it “organic growth”: Move forward steadily with your employees and partners; value generations of the community as much as

generations of the family. She created the winery’s education program; the Stanford Business School has written cases on the winery’s story. Students “read the Stanford cases and then come visit us as a class,” Courtney explains.

The education program saved the winery in 2020. Before the pandemic, about 20 percent of the winery’s 5,000 guests each year were students visiting through the education program. The rest were mostly adventurer travelers visiting the glaciers or the desert and hitting the winery as an aside. “They’d visit our winery and become lifelong customers,” says Courtney. But the winery shut down the same week that California did. Chile declared a state of catastrophe and its borders were closed.



Chilean Winemaker Amael Orrego and Courtney Kingston in the vineyards.

Photo: Kingston Family Vineyards

The hospitality-driven marketing was gone. Then something happened. “Professors and MBAs familiar with our story asked if we could host their class discussion of the Kingston/Stanford case via Zoom,” she says in a phone conversation this spring. “We ship wines directly to the MBAs’ homes, and we all raise a glass together.” Recent additions include wine tastings for tech companies and what she calls “Uncle Ernie’s 80th-birthday celebration.”

“With each virtual class, with each bottle we taste,” she says, “we send money back to Chile to pay for our team.” The education program, she says, “brings my whole self, and our whole family, full circle.”