



Two Twin Citians are a long way from their wineries

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Bill Spell and Nigel Avery have two things in common: They live in the Twin Cities, and their wineries make tasty pinot noir a long way from here. From there, their stories diverge, often mightily.

Spell is a lifelong resident, Avery a transplanted New Zealander. Avery is a former Olympic weightlifter; Spell's heavy lifting has come in the financial world. Spell's winery is a tiny Sonoma-based operation, Avery's a colossus making 600,000 cases going to 75 countries.

But a passion for fermented grape juice and a competitive, perfectionist bent come to the fore when talking to both men.

These are their stories:

A true pinot-phile

Now president of Spell Capital Partners, Spell has spent decades building up expertise in mergers and acquisitions, raising capital and financial management. Oh, and wine, particularly pinot noir.

He loves it, he says, "because of all the nuances associated with it. It's a difficult grape to grow. It's difficult to make good wine out of it. That said, when you do a good job, it's got an aroma and flavor like no other wine. I can enjoy the nose as much as tasting it. And I love the way it pairs with food."

So naturally, when he and his wife, Tiki, decided to start a Sonoma County winery less than a decade ago, the goal was to make high-end pinot noir. And with a financial maestro's experience, he mapped out the business plan carefully.

Just one problem: Their first vintage was 2007, and by the time the wines were released, the Great Recession had hit the market.

"It was not the best timing from the standpoint of ... people spending a lot of money to buy high-end wine," Spell said. "But it also gave us the time to learn about vineyards and buying and selling grapes. There was an opportunity because of a lull in wine economics to learn the business and get our vineyards set up.

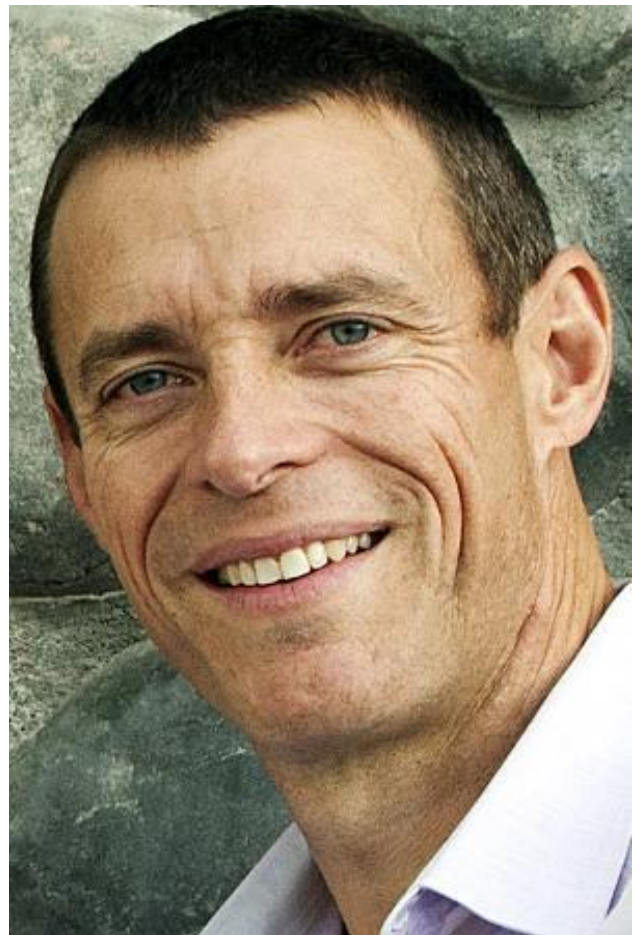
"The 2013 vintage, which is in barrel, is the first one where we're really comfortable with the four vineyards, with the owner and the vineyard managers and the quality of fruit."

While the Spells get their grapes from Sonoma (Marimar Estate



Bill and Tiki Spell of Spell Vineyards.

Provided photos,



Nigel Avery

and Terra de Promissio vineyards) and Mendocino (Weir and Alder Springs), their winemaking pipeline has a distinctly

Feed Loader,

Minnesota flavor. Bloomington native Shane Finley was their initial winemaker, and his recommended replacement, Andrew Berge, spent his teen years in the Twin Cities and earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural engineering from the University of Minnesota.

The Gopher State connections weren't by design, Spell said. "I think there's a certain culture and attitude and attributes you have with a Minnesotan," he added.

(The Spell single-vineyard wines retail for \$72 and the Nichole's Blend pinot noir for \$39.)

Fit for a different gig

At 46, Nigel Avery's days of representing New Zealand at international competition in three very different sports (track and field, bobsledding and weightlifting) are well behind him. So are the 75 pounds he has shed since participating in the 2000 Olympics and winning two gold medals in the 2002 Commonwealth Games as a weightlifter.

While Nigel was out doing his Kiwi homeland proud, his dad, Graeme, had launched a winery in 1997 and roped in Nigel to help market Sileni Estate in the Eastern Hemisphere.

The winery, named after a man-horse who served as a tutor to the Greek wine god Dionysus, "was a little retirement project for my dad that kind of got a little bit out of hand" in its growth, Avery said.

Last year, he assumed the role of CEO for the subsidiary Sileni Estates USA. Minnesota was a natural home base for the avid duck and deer hunter.

Sileni's offerings provide great value in the \$12 to \$15 range. The sauvignon blanc is a bit rounder and more balanced than most New Zealand renditions; the chardonnay and pinot gris show lovely fruit at just the right ripeness and with minimal intervention, and the pinot noir has lovely interplay between softness and tartness.

All the bottles come with screwcaps, and with good reason in the wake of rampant cork taint.

"In the early 2000s we were getting one out of eight bottles returned. People thought the wine was bad," Avery said. "We switched [to screw cap], and almost overnight we stopped getting bottles back.

"I think the Portuguese were sending us second-grade cork, from the bottom three feet of the tree. Now the cork they send is fine, but for the fresh and fruity style we make, it's better to have screwcaps."

Spoken like a true Minnesotan, with directness and quiet pride.

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