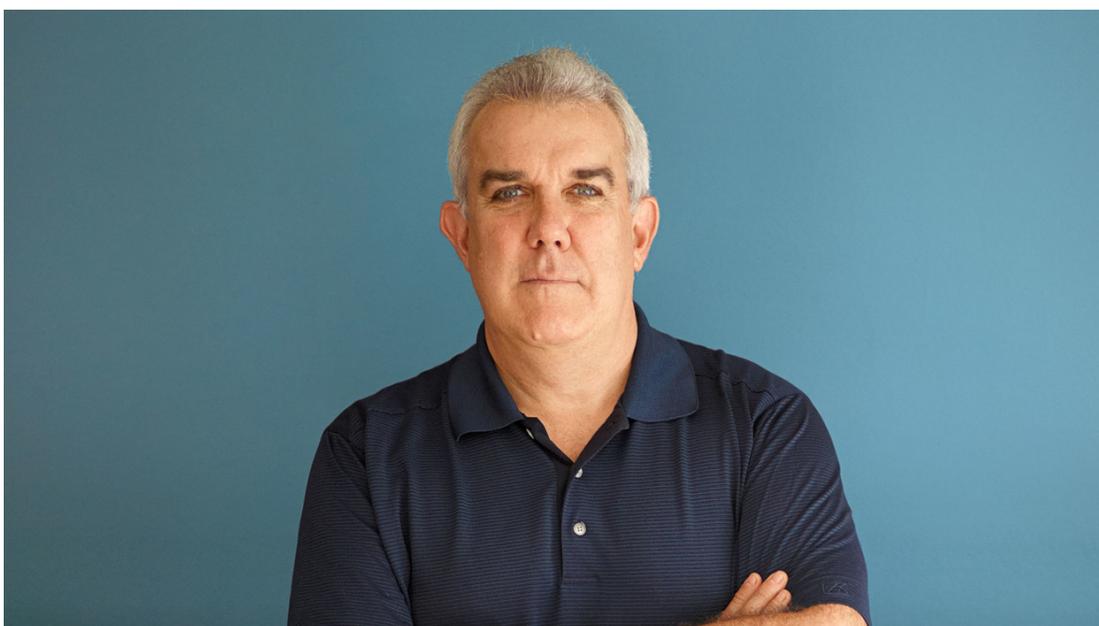


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## COLUMNS

### A Tale of Two Valleys

St. Supéry's development has been a tale of survival and success in the competitive world of the Napa's corporate winemaking culture



Kim Marcus (David Yellen)



**By Kim Marcus**

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Thirty years ago, one of the more ambitious winery and vineyard projects in Napa Valley opened its doors. Its development since

then has been a tale of one winery's survival and ultimate success in the highly competitive world of the valley's corporate winemaking culture. Along the way, a fascinating search for identity has played out in the complex mosaic that defines Napa today.

St. Supéry Estate and Vineyards was originally the inspiration of a French vintner from the south of France, Robert Skalli, who spent eight years looking for land where he could realize his vision of a 100% estate operation in the Napa Valley. He had been drawn to Napa, like many before and after him, by a friendship struck up with icon Robert Mondavi.

But Skalli's search took him not to Napa Valley proper but to Pope Valley, which lies over the Vaca Range in the eastern reaches of Napa County. In 1982, he purchased a 1,500-acre cattle spread today known as Dollarhide Ranch, and for the next seven years he developed the site and planted grapes. He did so with imported know-how from France and advice from locals alike.

Seven years may seem like a long time to get things going, but then again, Pope Valley is not the genteel environs of Napa Valley. Dollarhide is rugged and remote, with a resident population of howling coyotes, bears and bobcats, and it takes almost an hour to reach the ranch from St. Supéry's winery in the valley floor town of Rutherford. Skalli in part chose the Pope Valley site because land costs were a fraction of those in districts such as Rutherford (though he did buy 56 acres there as well in 1985, and today 45 acres of vineyards surround the winery) and because he could buy such a large, contiguous parcel.

But he also had an ace in the hole. When federal authorities approved the Napa Valley appellation in 1981, the entire county, including Pope Valley, was given the right to use the Napa Valley name. Today, Pope Valley, because of its under-the-radar status and surplus of unplanted level terrain, is one of the last places left to plant economically in Napa. Gallo, Hess, Terlato, Hall, Beringer and other companies have major holdings in the area but rarely advertise that they're using Pope Valley grapes for their Napa Valley wines.

St. Supéry is one of the few wineries directly identified with the region, even though it uses a Napa Valley label on its Dollarhide bottlings. It's a pity, because Pope Valley is a remarkable and distinctive region of Napa County and should be better known for its own spurs. It's a bit more continental weatherwise, with hot summers, and winters that can be surprisingly cold. And there's definitely a feeling of stepping back to an earlier time in a region dominated by large ranches, pickup trucks and cowboy hats.

Dollarhide encompasses 500 acres of vineyards. Its bread and butter over the years has become one of Napa's best Sauvignon Blancs. An early emphasis on Merlot at the site failed because of inferior rootstocks and because Merlot likes a more moderate climate. Twenty-year veteran winemaker Michael Scholz has recently finished a renovation of the estate, with an emphasis on replantings of Cabernet Sauvignon along with new plantings of Malbec and Petit Verdot.

Because his children were not interested in the business, Skalli sold his dream in 2015 to the luxury group Chanel, which also

owns properties in Bordeaux led by Château Canon and Château Rauzan-Ségla. It's indicative of the pricy realm that Napa has become that such a prestigious company, owned by billionaire brothers Alain and Gérard Wertheimer, sought its entry in Napa via Pope Valley—and a dash of Rutherford.

Today, under Chanel's ownership, St. Supéry has opened a tasting salon in Beverly Hills on Rodeo Drive. And its Rutherford winery offers a wine and culinary extravaganza for visitors. Chanel is on the lookout for new vineyards, in Rutherford and elsewhere in Napa, says CEO Emma Swain, who has led St. Supéry since 2009. "Our land holdings are extensive, and [Chanel is] impressed by our guest experience," Swain says, adding that Merlot is once again in the mix, but at Rutherford.

"It's been a great opportunity for us to share their knowledge," Swain adds. "They want to do what we do but do it better." France and the United States. Napa Valley and Pope Valley. Rutherford and Beverly Hills. Swain has her work cut out for her, but she's got some of the best raw materials around.

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