

From the Sacramento Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/news/2021/04/08/la-mesa-vineyards-plymouth.html>

Tech-savvy entrepreneur breaks into Amador wine scene

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Côme Laguë never intended to buy a vineyard, let alone make wine and develop what would become La Mesa Vineyards.

Laguë, along with his wife Charlene Li, were just looking for a getaway in Amador County, but when the perfect property became available with a vineyard planted on it, the entrepreneurs couldn't resist applying their startup and tech experience to the rural Shenandoah Valley wine region.

"We just loved the area, we loved the wines," said Laguë, who explained they would often drive through Amador County from San Francisco couple on their way to a family camp in the Sierras.

They found a piece of property there that they loved, but it came with 5 acres of a dark-skinned grape known as primitivo planted on it.

"We wanted to taste wine," Li said. "Not to have a vineyard or anything."

Nonetheless, they purchased the property anyway, in 2011. A contractor who was working for the couple convinced them to try using the grapes to make a barrel of wine themselves. From there, they were hooked. While they tried to get their wine into retail stores and restaurants, they didn't have much success, and ultimately decided a tasting room was the best place to sell their wine.

Laguë and Li may not be the obvious choice to break into the Amador County wine industry, but Don Hutchison, a longtime



DENNIS MCCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Côme Laguë recently opened La Mesa Vineyards in Plymouth with his wife Charlene Li. He's pictured here with a special new winemaking tank.

friend of the couple, wasn't shocked.

"Of all my friends, I was least surprised to find that Côme was doing a winery," Hutchison said.

Hutchison has worked with Laguë for decades as investors in startups, and they've also served together as board members for various firms.

A graduate of Harvard Business School, Laguë has founded nine startups and invested in many others. He remains CEO of Zetta Research, a company he founded that manages a portfolio of technology patents.

But Hutchison said Laguë also went to Africa to work on a telecommunications company, and ended up helping build a tea farm.

"Côme's an excellent business man in the technology area, and particularly as a CFO-style executive, but he's also very interested in projects that are hands-on," he said.

Li, also a graduate of Harvard Business School, is a New York Times bestselling author of six books focusing on digital transformation and leadership for businesses. She advises Fortune 500 companies on these topics. She also founded an industry analysis firm that was acquired by Prophet Business Transformation Consultants, where she still serves as a senior fellow.

Li said that their experience with starting businesses helped them stay agile during the Covid-19 roller coaster of closures, reopenings and ever-changing regulations.

"Just being entrepreneurs, we can make plans, but we also know that plans never work out the way you want them to," Li said.

They broke ground on the tasting room in Nov. 2019. By February the shell of the building was finished. Then the pandemic started, and winery tasting rooms were forced to close.

"Panic sort of hit," Laguë said. "There was no clear path to reopening."

Laguë said that when outdoor tastings were eventually permitted, they were at an advantage because they were still in the process of building the tasting room.

"We still built a beautiful inside tasting space, but we also built a beautiful outside tasting space," he said.

The couple made the decision to retain the staff they had hired, even though the tasting room was closed.

"The one thing that we had learned from managing teams, was that your people absolutely have to come first," Li said.

This proved to be a good decision.

“When things reopened again MLK weekend, we went from zero to 100 in one day,” Laguë said. Other wineries had let staff go during the closure, and scrambled to replace them.

“It’s just really hard to recruit in this industry right now,” he said. “Retaining staff is a key important issue.”

Their staff includes a full-time vineyard manager, which is unusual for a vineyard as small as La Mesa’s. Most use independent labor, who usually work for multiple wineries.

“Now we have complete control, and I think being able to control the process from vine to bottle is a key advantage,” Laguë said.

They hired experienced winemaker Antonia de Heinrich and Christine Martinez as tasting room manager.

Li said Martinez has been instrumental implementing her and Laguë’s vision for the tasting room, which is designed to encourage socializing and offers sweeping hillside views.

“We really do think of ourselves as an experience organization that just happens to sell wine,” Li said.

They selected Canada-based e-commerce company Shopify for their sales and reservation system, instead of some of the systems specifically designed for wineries. Laguë explained those systems didn’t allow for all the options they wanted.

Li has been able to use her coding experience to quickly build new online tools for the winery and implement them.

Within their sales system, employees working the tasting room can take notes on each customer, so the next time they come in or make a reservation the tasting room manager can provide them a more personalized experience.

The choice to go with Shopify also proved crucial during the closures, when they had to pivot almost entirely to online sales.

Laguë said as La Mesa continues to find its way, he and Li are staying agile, testing new things and taking a trial-and-error approach to learning and launching new ideas.

One of the innovations that came out of the pandemic was the carafe-tasting experience, which requires less contact between the server and customer. Laguë built wooden flight boards that fit carafes of wine, similar to a beer-tasting flight. This allows the customers to pour and taste at their own pace, and go back and forth between different wines. Laguë said they are also working on labeling each wine with a QR code, which the customer could then scan with their phone to see videos of the wine being made and learn more about each wine.

“Covid has changed all the rules about how the winery business works,” Li said.

Li said adapting to these new rules means being open to new ideas, suggestions and advice, both from staff and customers.

“There’s no such thing as a bad idea,” she said.

The Essentials

La Mesa Vineyards

Owners: Charlene Li and Côme Laguë

Address: 13200 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth

Employees: 5

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