

Well Curated

IMPORTER VINEYARD BRANDS
QUIETLY BUILDS A BLOCKBUSTER
PORTFOLIO OF ICONIC WINERIES

by Courtney Scheissel / photos by Doug Young

When Henri Gouges. Champagne Salon. Château de Beaucastel. These are industry icons known by emerging and established wine professionals alike, yet the name of the company responsible for introducing these wineries to the U.S. market—along with about 75 more—might evade the tip of many sommeliers' tongues.

Vineyard Brands, a national wine importer based in Birmingham, Alabama, features some of the world's most prominent family-owned wineries in its portfolio. The company itself, however, has managed to fly under the radar. Now five years into his tenure as President and CEO of Vineyard Brands, Gregory Doody wants members of the industry to familiarize themselves with this collection of prestigious producers, believing that the whole of Vineyard Brands is greater than the sum of its parts. It's a name every true enophile should know, as this low-key blockbuster is in it for the long haul.



The Vineyard Brands portfolio offers wines of the best quality and value from the most acclaimed wine regions on earth.



“The mention ‘Imported by Vineyard Brands’ means the best quality,” Vineyard Brands President and CEO Gregory Doody says.

Half-Century Evolution

“I’ve always been into wine,” Doody tells *The SOMM Journal* while sitting at a conference table in Vineyard Brands’ Manhattan office. It was that love of wine, in fact, that nearly spurred him to forgo law school in favor of the famed enology program at the University of California, Davis.

While Doody ultimately decided to continue on with his original plans, eventually building a successful career in corporate law, the urge to make a change arose again 20 years later. By then, Doody had decided to retire from practicing law and was instead seeking to finally pursue his passion for wine. After enrolling in New York’s French Culinary Institute (now the International Culinary Center), first in its culinary arts program and then in its intensive sommelier training program, Doody earned his Certified Sommelier accreditation through the Court of Master Sommeliers.

While there, he befriended some of the Master Sommelier instructors. Because of Doody’s law and business background, several of them suggested he explore the wine-importing business and urged him to reach out to Vineyard Brands upon learning he was familiar with the company. In a twist of fate, the then-President and CEO happened to be seeking a successor, and Doody promptly joined the team in 2013.

Though Doody’s law background focused on corporate restructuring, he’s quick to note Vineyard Brands did not need the kind of overhaul he’d formerly overseen. Rather than entering the new role with sweeping plans for change, Doody aimed to act more as a guide who could gently steer the company to further

success. “I view myself as the caretaker of the company for now, and I’ll end up passing it on to the next generation when the time is right,” he says.

Upon taking the reins at Vineyard Brands five years ago, Doody spent a significant amount of time speaking with the company’s founder—Robert Haas, who died earlier this year—to better understand the foundation on which Vineyard Brands was built. Many of the company’s winery relationships originated prior to its formal establishment in 1971, when Haas worked as the import buyer at his father’s Manhattan wine shop, M. Lehmann (which would later become Sherry-Lehmann).

Haas was among the first to convince the region’s producers to bottle their wines independently instead of selling them to négociants, and in addition to building a robust Burgundy portfolio after World War II, he also served as the sole importer of Bordeaux estate Château Petrus in the 1950s. In the 1960s, he began working with Famille Perrin’s Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. “Though we are 50 years old, we feel like a 100-year-old company because of the strong relationships that we have forged and maintained over the years,” Doody says.

True to Form

Until Haas decided to sell the company in the 1980s in order to launch his Paso Robles estate, Tablas Creek Vineyard, Vineyard Brands was largely a French wine importer with a specialization in Burgundy. Rather than sell to an outside company, Haas established an employee stock ownership plan to give his staff a stake in the business’s future. As the company entered this new phase, it also decided to expand the scope of its portfolio, and today Vineyard Brands works with producers in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the U.S., South Africa, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand.

“Our job is to have a well-curated portfolio with a mix of winery sizes, appellations, and price points, and we need to make sure that we actively represent all of our brands,” Doody says, adding that the company rigorously vets potential wineries to ensure they’re a good fit before adding them to the portfolio. All Vineyard Brands wineries must be family-owned and provide a “geographic fit” that allows the sales team to carry out this representation without conflicts. Most important, of course, is the quality of the wine itself. “If our name is on there,” Doody says, “we want people to have confidence that it’s an excellent bottle.”

According to Tylor Field, Vice President of Wine and Spirits for Mastro’s Restaurants and other Landry’s establishments, Vineyard Brands’ portfolio philosophy is intrinsic to its success. “If you’re looking for great wines of the world, Vineyard Brands has created its own niche,” Field says. “They’re the go-to for the best names—you know that a Vineyard Brands wine is going to be high-quality.”

Field has overseen purchasing, profitability, and training for beverage programs at roughly 135 restaurants for nearly 30 years, purchasing wines from Vineyard Brands throughout that period. He opts to feature several of the company’s wines—from high-end options like Henri Gouges to value-oriented sellers like Miraval—on the Mastro’s core list while assembling a set of standard bottles guests can expect at any of the locations he supervises. Field says it’s a move that’s essential when managing so

many beverage programs, as not every importer can offer its full portfolio at every location.

Of Vineyard Brands' ability to distribute in all 50 states, as well as Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, Field says "that kind of breadth is critical"—particularly for those who work with restaurants spread across 28 states. Doody also understands the importance of this expansive reach not only to national accounts like Mastro's, but to the portfolio brands themselves: In addition to filling out some of the key markets through the hiring of additional salespeople, Doody says he's also worked to make the teams more cohesive so they can work together as a true collective of individual markets.

An Esteemed Reputation

After graduating from culinary school with plans to hone his skills as a chef, Master Sommelier Drew Hendricks was convinced by a friend to instead pursue a career with a wholesaler: "Knowing that I wanted to learn more about wine, I was advised that working for a distributor would provide the best lessons," he recalls.

In 1999, Hendricks landed on the Domaines and Estates sales team at Southern Glazer's in Texas, where he first had the opportunity to work with Vineyard Brands wines. Though he later left the distributor side of the industry to become a buyer at high-profile restaurants Pappas Bros. Steakhouse and Charlie Palmer Steak, he stuck to his roots and included the company's wines on his list. "Selling or buying wines such as Domaine Ponsot from Burgundy

or classic Rhône examples from Famille Perrin—it's such a well-curated group of producers," Hendricks says. "The Haas family was a true pioneer in bringing these wines to the U.S."

Today, Hendricks remains close to the Vineyard Brands portfolio in his role as Director of Business Development—Fine Wine for Republic National Distributing Company. "Having a true perspective into the company gives me an advantage in selling the wines and also educating our team about the company's philosophy and work ethic," Hendricks explains. "Vineyard Brands' management, now continuing under the guidance of Gregory Doody, understands that employees really do have the ability to affect the business in a positive way."

In 2005, Hendricks founded the annual TEXSOM sommelier conference with business partner James Tidwell. It's since evolved into one of the most prestigious events of its kind in the U.S. in terms of industry participation, with Vineyard Brands serving as a sponsor "from the beginning," Hendricks says.

Doody may just be five years into his tenure with Vineyard Brands, but he's already garnered support from the company's employee-owners. "We are all excited to have Gregory on board," Hendricks notes. "He may be new to the wine business, but he excels at business sense."

From the company's Manhattan office and beyond, Doody relies on those very instincts to plan for Vineyard Brands' future as he spreads word of the iconic producers in its portfolio. "We know that we're going to be around for a long time," he says. S

Among the prestigious wines featured in the Vineyard Brands portfolio—and the one in Gregory Doody's glass—is the Mohua Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough.

