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THE tastingpanel MAGAZINE

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Report



Geoff Whitman, Executive Vice President of Sales for John Anthony Family of Wines, has long made building strong relationships the focal point of his successful career in winemaking, distribution, and sales.

The Connector

JOHN ANTHONY FAMILY OF WINES' GEOFF WHITMAN IS AN EXPERT IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

by Kate Newton / photos by Josh Reynolds

If you ask Geoff Whitman, he'll say he just might be able to trace the inception of his illustrious career in the wine industry back to an evening more than 20 years ago. The Executive Vice President of Sales for John Anthony Family of Wines still recalls it well: Then the bar manager at the Wine Cask in Santa Barbara, Whitman stepped away from his usual turf to wait on a table occupied by none other than Julia Child and Robert Mondavi.



The John Anthony Family of Wines portfolio includes JaM Cellars' Butter Chardonnay, flagship brand John Anthony Vineyards, and FARM Napa Valley.

Despite knowing admittedly very little about wine at the time, Whitman clearly made an impression. Child and Mondavi returned the next three nights and asked to be served by

Whitman, and several years later, he took a position at the Robert Mondavi Corporation after working as a fine wine salesperson in Los Angeles for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits. There, he began to expand his prowess in the distribution realm as he rose up the chain to eventually oversee sales for CWUS Western U.S. on-premise national accounts.

Many of the close relationships he built during that time have informed his approach to business throughout his career. "After 20 or so years of making these relationships, they've all made me the person I am today," Whitman says. "These are people you're going to be lifelong business partners with, but more importantly, they're like lifelong friends. I don't agree with the sentiment that business and friendships don't mesh, because this business is so social."

Whitman's own interest in winemaking has launched a slate of side projects over the years, including Ledbetter Wines with close friend and soul/R&B singer-songwriter Chris Pierce and Spaceman Wines with former Boston Red Sox pitcher Bill "Spaceman" Lee. Whitman also served as Co-Owner/Managing Partner and Assistant Winemaker for Rob, Jr.

and Lydia Mondavi's wine brands Spellbound and Medusa while working as General Manager of Michael Mondavi Family Wines and handling all of Folio's export business.

When he divested his partnership with Rob Mondavi, Whitman landed at John Anthony Family of Wines, which encompasses its high-end flagship brand John Anthony Vineyards as well as newer labels FARM Napa Valley and JaM Cellars. The latter is known for its incredibly successful Butter Chardonnay: "Since 2009 we've gone from 1,000 cases to nearly 1 million cases produced in 2017," Whitman says. "We finally won the Impact Hot Brand award even though we've had triple-digit growth every year for seven years."

Whitman credits John Anthony Family of Wines Founder and CEO John Truchard for giving him the chance to assemble a sales team he calls "hands down the best in the wine business" (members include Art Pinn, Kerry Guilfoyle, and Bill Stevens). "You realize you run in such small circles, but they touch these great, big, gigantic circles out there," Whitman adds. "Connecting people is not for any direct benefit of my own; it's because I like to see friends do well and I love to put good people next to each other." ■■



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