

# SACRAMENTO Business Journal

## **BUSINESS PULSE SURVEY:**

[What would best attract people and improve business on K Street in downtown Sacramento?](#)

## **Sales up, not sideways**

Movie appearance of Fiddlehead wine sparks first year in the black since '96

Sacramento Business Journal - March 10, 2006

by [Celia Lamb](#)

Staff Writer

In October 2004, the wine-snobbish movie "Sideways" put a cluster of Santa Barbara vintners, including Fiddlehead Cellars, on the map.

Fiddlehead crushes grapes and makes wine in the Santa Barbara region, but a navigator would have to take a detour about 400 miles north to reach the brain of the operation. Kathy Joseph started the business from a Davis office in 1989, and she said she has no desire to leave the town. "I want to be exposed to a greater population than just people who are making wine," she said.

Joseph owns a vineyard in Santa Barbara County, buys grapes from Oregon growers and makes wine in a converted industrial building that houses about 15 wineries in the town of Lompoc. The Davis headquarters location makes sense because it's about halfway between the growing regions and close to the Napa Valley, a "resource of wine minds," she said.

Fiddlehead uses only pinot noir and sauvignon blanc grapes. The winery lucked out in the movie "Sideways." The film showed plenty of wine consumption and celebrated the qualities of pinot noir. But Fiddlehead's sauvignon blanc got a little extra attention during a scene at a restaurant. Maya, the love interest of main character Miles, said she knew the winemaker and praised the wine, aged 12 months in French oak.

"On a sauvignon blanc?" Miles replied. "This is good. Little hints of cloves."

The movie had a dramatic effect on Fiddlehead's sales. Joseph expects revenue of nearly \$2 million this year, up from less than \$1 million in 2005. Gladys Horiuchi, spokeswoman for the Wine Institute trade group, said the "Sideways" boost could reverberate for years. Joseph, however, is being cautious and methodical.

### **Playing it safe**

Joseph could expand production at her 5,000-case winery. She produces more pinot noir grapes than she needs. But she opts to keep the highest-quality fruit and sell the rest. She said she might raise prices if demand stays high. "With the amount of effort that goes into making my wines, they should be more expensive," she said. But she worries about losing loyal customers. "You can't all of the sudden jump from a \$25 bottle of wine to a \$40 bottle," she said. "The wine industry doesn't work that way. Your customers revolt."

Fiddlehead's Sacramento-area buyers include about 16 high-end retail shops and restaurants. Joseph's winery has recovered from a slowdown that started after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"We're getting calls from people in Japan who have seen the movie," Joseph said. "They're coming to California to see the wine country. Not Napa Valley. Santa Barbara. Anyone making pinot noir will tell you their sales have gone wild." Horiuchi of the Wine Institute said, "Some people didn't even know wine was being produced in Santa Barbara" before the motion picture.

### **Pinot noir pours fourth**

Pinot noir demand was already on the rise before the movie. An increase in spending on luxury goods and a depletion of inventories accumulated after 9/11 contributed to a healthy market for wineries. But the "Sideways" effect was dramatic. U.S. sales of pinot noir jumped 16 percent to record highs within a few weeks of the movie's release, according to consumer research firm ACNielsen. Global pinot noir sales rose a whopping 77 percent in the year ended Feb. 11.

The second fastest-growing wine type, pinot grigio, had only 26 percent growth. Merlot, dismissed in "Sideways" with an epithet from Miles ticked up only 0.9 percent, although people still drink more merlot than any other wine except chardonnay.

Horiuchi thinks it's likely that people years from now will recall Miles and Maya's romance with pinot noir. People, she said, still remember Orson Welles' pitch 30 years ago extolling Paul Masson for "selling no wine before its time."

### **Humble beginnings**

The movie buzz has given Fiddlehead its first profit since 1996, when Joseph bought her vineyard.

Joseph grew up in the Chicago area and came to California in 1980 for a summer job with Simi Winery in Sonoma County. She liked it so much she switched her career plans from medicine to winemaking and completed a graduate degree in oenology and viticulture at the [University of California Davis](#).

In 1984 she started commuting to Napa County and five years later she decided to strike out on her own with Fiddlehead Cellars. She started from scratch. "I had neither vineyards nor a winery," she said.

From the start she was a pinot noir fan. "It has a much broader appeal to a variety of palates," she said. "I say people start out drinking cabernet sauvignon and then grow up to pinot noir. Cabernet is a starter wine because it doesn't have the nuance and elegance (of pinot noir)."

At first she bought grapes on long-term contracts with growers. But she coveted independence. In 1996 she bought property in the Santa Rita Hills, chosen for its soil and climate conditions.

"It's the hottest spot for pinot noir in the world," she said.

She still buys from other vineyards. Each fall she fork-lifts boxes of sauvignon blanc grapes onto a truck in Oregon's Willamette Valley and greets the shipment two days later in Lompoc, near Santa Barbara. Then she and a full-time assistant winemaker begin what she describes as a "gentle" but intense winemaking process.

"We're maniacs in the cellar," she said. "We're devoted to meticulous details."