

# WINE ENTHUSIAST

## “It’s Fun to Hire the Winemaker and Then Let Them Do What They Do,” Says Randy Ullom, American Wine Legend | Wine Enthusiast’s 2022 Wine Star Awards

BY JIM GORDON



Image Courtesy of Kendall-Jackson

### The Most Popular Chardonnay in America Didn’t Happen by Accident.

Randy Ullom, the man directly in charge of America’s No. 1 selling Chardonnay, is widely admired for his diligence, patience and pure winemaking talent. No less important is his knack for mentoring younger winemakers during an exceptional 47-year career.

As the senior vice president and winemaster for all Kendall-Jackson wines (the biggest division of Jackson Family Wines), he oversees a massive program of vineyards, winery facilities and employees from his base in Santa Rosa, California, while still handling some of the detailed quality control chores of a winemaker.

These include running herd on a multitude of vineyard managers and growers up and down the coastal counties and tasting and approving every single lot that is bottled under the K-J brand. He also oversees the Jackson operations in Chile.

The steady quality and value of Vintner's Reserve wines under Ullom's direction have grown the brand to 3 million cases, about two-thirds of which is Chardonnay. It's a testament to the talent of this mustachioed, soft-spoken but determined winemaker and the team he assembled that the last six releases of this high-production Chardonnay have all scored 90-plus in Wine Enthusiast blind tastings while retailing at \$17 or less.

No one appreciates Ullom's mastery more than Bob Cabral, now owner of his self-named winery and winemaker for Three Sticks Wines, both in Sonoma County, California. Ullom hired Cabral as his assistant winemaker at DeLoach Vineyards before Ullom moved to K-J in 1993, and Cabral eventually to nearby Williams Selyem winery.

Cabral recalls that one day at Williams Selyem his winemaking staff was excited about a 96- or 97-point magazine review for their Allen Vineyard Chardonnay. In the same issue, K-J Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay got 92 points. "I had to tell them that we should be able to get 96-97 with only 175 cases, but if you can make 800,000 cases and get a 92—that's when you're a great winemaker. Randy does that year in and year out."

Ullom grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan. During his college years he took a three-year break and trekked through the wine regions of Chile. That's where his lifelong interest in grape growing and winemaking began. He returned to the U.S., earned an associate degree in viticulture and enology at the Ohio State University and worked initially for eastern wineries before moving to California in 1981.

He began making wine for Cecil DeLoach and was named vice president in 1991, before K-J founder Jess Jackson recruited him to revive the Edmeades winery in Mendocino County. Ullom says that what really hooked him was Jackson's interest in having Ullom also establish a winery in Chile, Vina Calina.

Additional international challenges for Ullom included creating vineyards and production facilities for Bodega Tapiz in Argentina and starting a project at Yangarra Vineyards and Winery in McLaren Vale, Australia. Hiring the right people to manage these far-flung properties was a challenge that Ullom enjoyed.

"It was a great opportunity to meet people around the world, always enlightening and humbling at the same time," says Ullom. "It's fun to get a project going, hire and train the winemaker and then let them be, let them do what they do. It's especially good if you set them off 15 or 25 years ago and they are still there; they must be doing something right."

In 1996, Ullom met an intern, Dana Volk, working at Edna Valley Vineyards in San Luis Obispo. He learned that she spoke Spanish, hired her and sent her to work a year in Chile and Argentina.

"Randy was crazy, but in a good way," says Volk, now owner-winemaker of Dana V Wines in Lompoc. "Working the crush, we'd get emails at all hours of the night. We'd joke about it, but I am just like that now. Randy expected a lot and we all delivered. Such a great person to work for, so kind and so willing to help and teach everybody."

Bob Cabral shares a similar perspective: "I like to say I've never made a great bottle of wine by myself. It takes a community or a team of people. Randy raised a lot of people up and made them a community, so you ended up with this great final product. He taught me that."