

## Meet Dana Volk of Dana V. Wines

*She did it for her kids.*

Through the years we've told the stories behind the creation of many small wine labels. Dana Volk's impetus is certainly the most grounded we've heard. She became her own boss to get the control over her work schedule necessary to be there for her children. Bravo.

Not that everything has been smooth sailing. While the label was originally called D Volk Wines, a name conflict arose with another winery. Dana is busy rebranding to Dana V. Wines now. Though a tasting room was not on her radar at the outset, an opportunity arose in Solvang, California that she could not pass up. Dana moved on that good fortune with moxie. She's got spine.

We met Dana in May, 2019 at an event celebrating Duvarita Vineyard. She brought her 2017 Duvarita Vineyard Pinot Noir to the tasting. We were as taken by that rich, aromatic wine as we were Dana's wine story. We reconnected after that visit to learn more.



Dana Volk (Photo credit to BOTTLE BRANDING)

### ***The Wine Write: What sparked your interest in wine?***

*Dana: It was funny. I didn't go to college for it. I went to Cal Poly and studied Food Science and Nutrition. That gave me a science background. I was a bartender and waitress as I worked through college, so I had an interest in food and wine.*

*The pieces fell into place after I graduated. I was unable to get into graduate school, so I took an internship at Edna Valley Vineyard. They saw I had some chemistry knowledge and thought I could be trained to do their lab work. I was hooked from day one.*



Photo credit to BOTTLE BRANDING

***The Wine Write: How was that first wine job?***

*Dana: I worked for Clay Brock. He was such a great guy, mentor, and boss. He taught me a lot. By the end of that harvest I knew I wanted to work in wine. Clay talked me into staying there. He said I didn't need to go to U.C.- Davis. He promised to teach me the winemaking part of the job. I did two vintages there before Kendall Jackson got hold of me.*



Photo credit to BOTTLE BRANDING

***The Wine Write: How important was that Kendall Jackson stint in expanding your wine expertise?***

*Dana: I sped up my wine education exponentially by working for a big company. They are a great enterprise. I moved around a lot with them working different production jobs. I became motivated to get my MBA there and they helped pay for that. I got to work on business plans. I did a lot of cost of goods analysis. I sat in on high level sales and marketing meetings. What twenty-five year old employee of a small winery gets to do that? I got a little bit of education in a whole lot of areas.*



Randy Ullom at a recent visit with Dana

***The Wine Write: How did you get started at Kendall Jackson?***

*Dana: My first exposure to Kendall Jackson was via Randy Ullom poaching me from Edna Valley Vineyards. He then sent me to Argentina to work a harvest. That was another wonderful winemaking experience. After that I returned to Sonoma. Most of my time at Kendall Jackson was spent up there.*



Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster

***The Wine Write: You made a lot of stops on your Kendall Jackson tour***

*Dana; Oh, I did. I was in my twenties then. The company was expanding really quickly. They had a hard time getting winemakers to staff all their new properties, especially the international ones. As an assistant winemaker I got to go to Argentina, Chile, and to Italy. I got to represent the company at winemaker dinners all across the country and in London. At that time of my life I could jump on a plane with two days notice.*

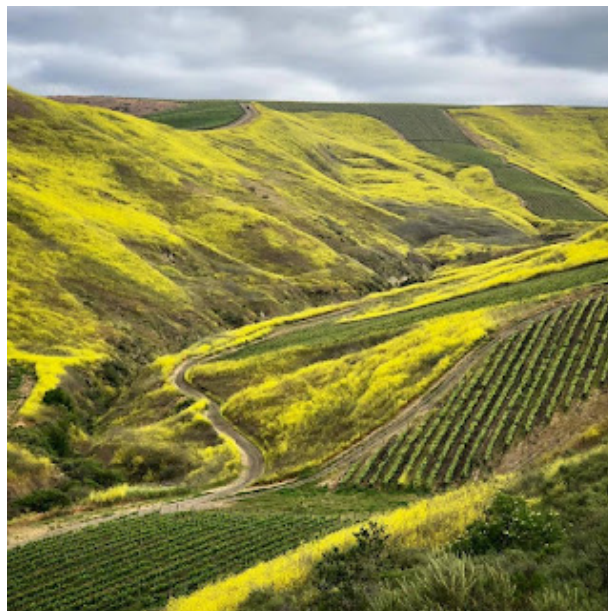
*I even did sales for Kendall Jackson for a year in Manhattan. I had gotten married and my husband was transferred to New York City to work in banking. It turns out I don't really like sales! I was sort of thrown to the wolves there. The Manhattan market is a really tough one.*



Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster Vineyard

***The Wine Write: You also lived in Hong Kong for awhile. Did you give up winemaking altogether during that time?***

*Dana: I did give up wine production, but I started my studies in the Wine & Spirit Education Trust program. I got my advanced certificate with honors. I was trying to keep in touch with the wine industry as much as I could. It's sort of ironic that the year I left someone started the first Hong Kong winery.*



Gorgeous view at John Sebastiano Vineyard

***The Wine Write: How was it to return home to Santa Barbara County?***

*Dana: Coming home was nice, but it was under some bad circumstances. I had gone through a divorce and was moving my kids home. My mother was sick, too. I returned in 2011 and immediately got a job at Bridlewood Winery as an assistant winemaker. Gallo owned them by then. It was nice to land there. That was the result of connections. One of the old Kendall Jackson winemakers, Dave Hopkins, was working there. He hired me for harvest and made a position for me after. That was so nice. I really needed that job.*



Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster

***The Wine Write: How much had the area changed since you'd moved away?***

*Dana: It was an eye opener. I hadn't lived here for twenty-three years. My mother was always good about sending me newspaper clippings and keeping me updated about who was going where and what new wineries were moving here. I was shocked at how much the area had grown. People look at me now like I'm a local, but I'm still really learning the area. There's so much new stuff here!*



***The Wine Write: What prompted you to start your own label?***

*Dana: My ex-husband lives in Miami. I don't have the day to day help for my children. Bridlewood moved their operations up to Paso Robles. At that point Kendall Jackson hired me to work for their Byron facility.*

*Even that forty-five minute commute each way was too long for me. I was missing too many school plays and other functions. My epiphany was when my daughter had her tonsils removed. I could only take one day off work because we were so busy. I knew then I needed to find some work with more flexible hours. That was the only way I could be here for my kids while they're still young.*

*That was my impetus. I wanted to start something to make a little money on the side and do some other odd jobs. I couldn't afford to be tied down to a nine to five job. I had no plans for a tasting room or anything big. This project would hopefully make me some money and keep me in the industry until I was in a position to go back to work full-time somewhere.*



Photo credit to BOTTLE BRANDING

### ***The Wine Write: What is the focus of Dana V. wines?***

*Dana: The weird thing was that there was not a focus initially. We grow so many different varietals here. We're so blessed with our microclimates and geography. I'm like a kid in a candy store. I want these grapes...I want those grapes. Should I focus on one thing? Probably, but I'm in an experimental phase. The brand is new. I'm discovering new vineyards. I'm really trying to showcase what the Santa Ynez Valley can do.*

*Pinot Noir has always been a favorite of mine. I make three different Pinots. I also love Rhone varietals like Syrah, both the cold climate and warm climate versions. I've seen a few things up in Paso that interest me, so you might see me doing more of a Central Coast focus. I look for good deals on pricing. I want my wines to be affordable. At my small production levels that can be hard. I'd love to have a lineup all priced below forty dollars, but it's difficult on some wines when you only make sixty cases.*



Duvarita Vineyard (Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster)

***The Wine Write: Did you have problems sourcing fruit when you started?***

*Dana: I was lucky to have some connections. Brook Williams and I go way back to the Kendall Jackson days. He was the head of marketing for the company in the Nineties. That's how we met. It's funny how we connected again. When I was in between the Bridlewood and Byron jobs I enrolled in a viticulture class at Allan Hancock College. I remember thinking I would be the oldest student in the room. I sat down next to this man who says, "Dana?" It was Brook! He had just bought Duvarita Vineyard and was boning up on viticulture.*

*The amazing part of that class was that he and I turned out to be two of the youngest students. There were all kinds of retired folks who had purchased vineyards in the room.*



***The Wine Write: Where are you making the wine?***

*Dana: I share a space on Second Street in Buellton with Mark and Wendy Horvath, who do Crawford Family Wines. Mark and I worked together at Carmenet Winery. That was around 1998. He has a warehouse space in Buellton. I stay out of his way and he stays out of mine. We have a very nice relationship. I rent his equipment. It works out great.*



### ***The Wine Write: How did the tasting room in Solvang come about?***

*Dana: Well, this was supposed to be a small brand. One of the only reasons I put a label on the bottles was to get it into a few restaurants. Some of my restaurant friends were asking for it. Before that I was literally writing on the bottles with a Sharpie for friends and family only.*

*Eighteen months ago the Peterson family that owns property in Solvang came to me. I know them very well. They told me that a hair salon was moving out of one of their buildings and they thought the space would be perfect for a tasting room. I told them I only made two hundred fifty cases of wine. I wasn't really ready for a tasting room. Then I saw the space. It's amazing. It has an outdoor patio, too. I grabbed it thinking I would sort out all the details later.*



Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster

### ***The Wine Write: How has it worked out?***

*Dana: It took me about six months to get all my permits. I was able to bump up my production last year. I made a white wine that I could sell right away. I jumped in with both feet and find myself managing a tasting room along with everything else I do. It all snowballed really, really fast.*

*I love it in Solvang. I've always loved wine education. In my first year in business, ninety-five percent of the people that walked in had no idea what a wine tasting was about. They literally did not know what to do. They would leave after enjoying themselves and purchasing a bottle of wine. That's a great outcome for them and me.*



Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster



***The Wine Write: Is Solvang changing in terms of wine focus now?***

*Dana: It is. More and more tasting rooms with a higher quality of wine are coming to town. Sanger is next door to me. They are great. A higher level of wine consumer is starting to come to Solvang. We still get the tourists who are new to wine, but we also see customers with more experience. I try to have a little bit of everything for everybody. It's all been so well received. Our reviews have been so nice. That makes me happy.*



***The Wine Write: How do you accommodate that dichotomy in your customer base?***

*Dana: We're doing two tasting lists. I'm creating a Reserve list. It will include my more expensive wines like the Duvarita Pinot and my John Sebastiano Vineyard Syrah. The Cabernet I'm making will go on there. More of my esoteric wines will land there. My regular list will be less expensive and include a number of blends. With more production now it's easier to separate the lists*



***The Wine Write: Are you still on the lookout for more fruit sources?***

*Dana: I'm always looking for new vineyards. I just picked up Spear Vineyard Syrah for the 2019 harvest. I'm in Block 19 at the top of the hill. I was very lucky to get that.*

*I have my core vineyards. I love the Camp Four Grenache for my Rose'. People really like it. My Sauvignon Blanc comes from Curtis Vineyard. I love its flavor profile. I relish my Pinot Noir from Duvarita Vineyard and want to keep that going.*

*This past harvest I got my first Cabernet Sauvignon from Happy Canyon. That was driven more from the tasting room. Customers were asking for a Cabernet. I had no interest in making one before that. I had been in Napa and Sonoma before and done that. After tasting some of the Happy Canyon Cabernets from local producers, I thought it might be fun to make one. It won't be released for another year. It's tasting great in barrel.*



Photo courtesy of Heather Daenitz @craftandcluster

***The Wine Write: What's the best way for my readers to source Dana V. wines?***

*Dana: The website is probably best. I have no distribution. The wines are available in some local restaurants. Of course, I'd love to see them come to the tasting room!*



Photo credit to BOTTLE BRANDING

## ***The Wine Write: How has it worked out being your own boss?***

*Dana: I work three times as many hours now, but the hours are flexible. They're my hours. I'm not missing school functions now. I work really hard from 8:30 to 2:30 every day. In the afternoon I'm driving kids everywhere. I then start working again around nine at night until about midnight.*

*It's been great. I have a lot of ideas for the business. Sometimes I feel like I'm not moving fast enough. At the same time I'm stretched pretty thin as a single mom. I'm so thankful I can be there for my kids. I'm a little tired. Maybe it's time to hire some help. Hopefully in the next year or so I can get someone to take over the wine club for me. I can see harvest coming and I'm already wondering how I can do all that!*



Our guess is that Dana will figure it out...probably on the fly. Her track record for making decisions under the gun has been pretty decent to date.

Hers is a feel good wine story. Her passion for wine is worn on her sleeves, but it's a passion for a cause. The kids come first. In a world filled with self glorification, that's a refreshing attitude.

The wines reflect Dana's passion for what she's doing and for the marvelous places where they are grown. The lineup is wide enough for everyone to find a favorite. We've linked up her website. Start drooling.

And if you're in the Solvang area, put down your selfie sticks and get into the tasting room to see for yourself. A fun time is guaranteed. You might just learn something new about wine, too.

***[Dana V. Wines \[http://www.danavwines.com/\]](http://www.danavwines.com/)***