

Gambling on Wine

Chumash put their stamp on a new vintage

BY FRANK NELSON

A new Santa Barbara County winery called Kita, expected to debut its first wines in March, is already making history even before a glass has been poured.

The name was chosen through consensus by the 136 members of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians to mark the tribe's entry into the world of winemaking. Kita means "our valley oaks" in the Chumash language.

Though a handful of California tribes make wine, the Chumash have a unique claim, says vice chairman Richard Gomez. "We are the first Native American tribe to have a Native American winemaker, and whose vineyard and winemaking operations are run solely by tribal people."

That winemaker is his daughter, Tara Gomez, who has been working toward the success of this venture since the Chumash bought almost 1,400 acres owned by the late Fess Parker three years ago.

Known as Camp 4, the land lies east of Highway 154 roughly between Baseline Avenue, which gives access to the vineyard, and Armour Ranch Road, about two miles from the Chumash casino at Santa Ynez.

The tribe says this is ancestral land, bought primarily to accommodate housing for tribal members. But the purchase, reportedly for close to \$40 million, also included a 256-acre vineyard, which has prompted the Chumash to diversify into the wine business.

"As part of the tribe's economic development, we decided to continue farming the vineyard," Richard Gomez said. "We saw it as a business that fits within our geographic area, and we saw it as a means of enhancing our Chumash brand."

Tara Gomez, 39, first became interested in wine-making while at St. Joseph High School, Orcutt, and completed a Bachelor of Science degree at Fresno State, graduating in 1998 with a

degree in enology, the study of wine and wine-making.

"There were about 100 of us who first started in the program. But with all the chemistry and science involved, it's not that easy, and only about 12 of us graduated," Gomez said. "I think I'm the only Native American winemaker in the United States."



BELOW The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians bought almost 1,400 acres from the late Fess Parker three years ago. Known as Camp 4, the spread included a 256-acre vineyard.

LEFT Tara Gomez may be the only Native American winemaker in the nation.

RIGHT The winery is releasing five wines this month, including whites sauvignon blanc and grenache blanc, along with reds syrah, cabernet sauvignon and grenache.

PHOTOS COURTESY SANTA YNEZ BAND OF CHUMASH INDIANS

Gomez, a regular traveler to Spain and France over the past 10 years, has long been intrigued by European wines and winemaking.

Earlier this year she returned to France for a two-week working holiday, meeting winemakers and collecting ideas specifically about such varieties as pinot noir, syrah, grenache and carignan.

These are among the 18 Rhone and Bordeaux varietals that the Chumash have inherited at Camp 4, and Gomez is now intent on creating some outstanding European-style wines in the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley.

“The focus is going to be more on fruit-friendly wines. Nothing that’s really bold and over-the-top. These are more elegant, more soft ... more easily paired with any type of food.”

She says core whites will be sauvignon blanc and grenache blanc, with the main reds being syrah, cabernet sauvignon and grenache. “Those are

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the five that are going to be released in March.”

Gomez says the tribe is being careful to take small, steady steps in its new venture, following sustainable, natural farming practices, and creating a quality product.

In 2010, Gomez processed just three tons of fruit; in 2011, when the vineyard was leased back to the Parker company, the tribe’s harvest jumped to 28 tons; then last year, after selling fruit to 72 other wineries, the tribe kept 38 tons itself.

“We’re still a boutique winery,” she says. “I don’t want to make the mistake of bringing in so much tonnage but yet not having the market to be able to sell it because we’re not established, because nobody knows us.”

As this gradual process unfolds, Gomez has found herself making initial batches of wine using the press, tanks, forklifts and other equipment and facilities

of a friendly neighbor, Rideau Winery.

Owner Iris Rideau has been very impressed by Gomez. “She’s very dedicated. She’s an extremely hard worker. She works long nights, long days, and then she goes in and does office work.”

Gomez, who heads a team including vineyard manager Rudy Bravo and Ben Merz, of Coastal Vineyard Care, describes her approach as “very hands-on.” During the harvest, for example, she’s there at maybe three or four in the morning running quality control as the fruit is being trucked into the winery.

“I want to be involved in every aspect because I guess I really like it,” she says.

Kita will now share space with other winemakers at the Santa Rita Hills Wine Center, in Lompoc, where Gomez believes the tribe can consolidate for the next few years, producing around 6,000 to 8,000 cases annually. Eventually, they could opt to build their own winery at the vineyard.

The Chumash are considering a number of outlets for their wines: a tast-



The Chumash tribe is the first Native American tribe whose vineyard and winemaking operations are run solely by tribal people. PHOTO COURTESY SANTA YNEZ BAND OF CHUMASH INDIANS

ing room at the Lompoc center and perhaps a wine club, their local fine dining establishments at The Willows, Root 246 and Hadsten House, plus other Native American casinos in California and beyond.

— Frank Nelson is a Santa Barbara-based freelance writer.

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