

Featuring a Cask of Thousands: Four California Tribes Are Leading the Native Way Into the Wine Business

By Lisa Gale Garrigues July 11, 2012



Tara Gomez, 39, tastes wines still aging in oak casks in the cellar of California's Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians. She is the first Native winemaker with a degree in enology to manage both the vineyard and the winemaking components of a wine business. (By Lisa Garrigues)

Tara Gomez has found her life's passion, and she's eager to share it. Whether she is in the middle of a sun-soaked vineyard thinning shoots or inside a wine cellar carefully measuring the worth of a Cabernet or a Grenache against her palette, you can tell this is a woman who knows her grapes. "This one is not quite ready," she says as she siphons a bit of Grenache from an aged oak barrel into an empty wine glass in a wine cellar in Solvang, California. "We had an unpredictable spring, so the 2011 wines will be bolder than the 2010's. In winemaking, you can do everything you can, but you still have to consider the influence of Mother Nature."

Gomez, 39, of California's Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, is the first Native winemaker with a degree in enology to manage both the vineyard and the winemaking components of a wine business. But the Chumash are not the only Califor-

nia tribe to recently become involved in winemaking. The Lytton and Dry Creek Rancheria Bands of Pomo Indians and the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation have all purchased vineyards in the past year, signaling growing tribal involvement in California's wine industry.

For Gomez, her love for the art and science of winemaking began with an infatuation with science while she was growing up in Paso Robles, California, peering at insects with her toy microscope. When her parents took her to visit the local wine cellars, the musky smell of the wine, the aged oak barrels and the large silver vats made a lasting impression, even though she was too young to taste the wine. By high school, she knew what she wanted to do: become a winemaker. "It's important to find your passion in life, to find what gets your adrenaline going. For me, this is it."

After graduation, she enrolled in Fresno State's enology program, along with 100 other students. She was one of only 12 students who made it through the program—she was the only Native American to graduate, and the only graduate who did not come from a winemaking family.

After graduation, she went on to do an internship with Fess Parker Vineyards near Santa Barbara, where she was eventually hired as an enologist. Later, she worked with J. Lohr, for nine years. While there, she started up her own label, Kalawashaq, which means 'shell of the turtle' in the Samala language. In 2008, she worked for two years at a start-up winery in the tiny Catalan village of Castell D'Encus, in Northern Spain, an experience that had a profound effect on her. "It was awesome. It brought me closer to the wine experience. You can see more of the passion for winemaking in the people. It's not just making a living."

She returned to California when the Santa Ynez band purchased 1,390 acres from Fess Parker in 2010, land that had been home to their ancestors. Two hundred and fifty six acres were vineyards. The purchase price was reported by the *Santa Maria Times* at \$40 million. In Gomez's lifetime, the Santa Ynez Band, like other California gaming tribes, has moved from poverty to power. The tribe's 142 members now own three hotels as well as the Chumash Casino.



Richard Gomez, Tara's father and vice chairman of the tribe, tastes wine straight from the barrel. (By Lisa Garrigues)

But wealth has also brought resentment from local residents and resistance to tribal expansion. "We bought the land because we wanted to build more housing for our tribal members," said Richard Gomez, Tara's father and vice chairman of the tribe. Local residents have filed lawsuits to block the Chumash from building homes on the land they purchased from Parker. "They are afraid we're going to build another casino," said Richard. "But that's not true."

While they continue to apply for permission to build housing on part of the land, the tribe has asked Tara to manage the vineyards, a job she is all too willing to do. She is eager to apply what she learned in Europe, and try to blend the Old World with the New. "You see a lot of these California-style wines that are really focused on higher alcohol, richer characteristics, whereas I like to focus on more elegance, more showing the freshness of the fruit and showing the terroir of where the grapes come from, the region," she says.

In 2010, the Santa Ynez Band produced its first grape harvest of just three tons. By 2013 they will be bottling 1,400 cases of the 2010 reds and 2011 whites, offering a Cabernet, Syrah, Grenache, Pinot Noir, Grenache Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc. The wines will have low, medium and high price points, and the one person marketing department, for now, is Tara Gomez.

The Santa Ynez Band has not yet decided on a name for their wine. "We want something that comes from our culture but also something that everyone can pronounce," says Gomez.

Getting the wine from the vineyard to the bottle can typically involve 16-18 hour days for Gomez, a hands-on manager whose activities might include checking on the health of the grapes alongside her team of seven agricultural workers, driving a tractor at midnight to bring in the harvest at just the right moment, or standing on a ladder next to one of the large silver vats with a long pole to 'punch down' the fruit that rises to the top of the vats.

Sustainable farming practices and a good relationship with the agricultural team are crucial to her. In the vineyards, roosting houses for hawks and owls—predators who will eliminate birds and rodents that might damage the grapes—tower over



Gomez stands by the Syrah grapes in the tribal vineyard. (By Lisa Garrigues)

the green vines, and cover crops are used to attract insects away from the grapes as a way to avoid using pesticides. “We follow these principles so that we can preserve the land and pass it on to the future generations, also to teach them to carry on these practices,” she says. “It’s about showing the respect—really respecting the land and finding that connection to the land, to the soil, to the climate, to the region itself.”

Gomez finds both challenges and advantages in running a winemaking business the Native way. All major decisions must be arrived at by the consensus of the tribal council, so she has learned to be patient as she tries to grow the business. But one big advantage is the support and collaboration she has received from other Native winemaking tribes. In May, she and her father traveled to Sacramento to show their support for the product launch of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation’s Séka Hills label, which will include olive oil and organic produce as well as wine.

Resort as well as 15 acres of vineyard on their 11,000 acres of farm and ranch land in Northern California’s Capay Valley, produced 1,500 cases of wine in 2011, and plan to ramp up to about 3,500 over the next two to three years. They currently offer a Viognier white, a Tulumuk’a cabernet/Syrah blend, and a rosé of Syrah. The Viognier has already won a Best of Class Award at the 2011 California State Fair, and a Gold Medal in Lodi’s 2012 Consumer Wine Awards. They have their wines crushed by Revolution Vineyards and bottled by the winemaker Blake Kuhn. The Yocha Dehe run the first Native-owned vineyard to place their wines on supermarket shelves, with products currently available at Nugget Markets in Sacramento, the Ferry Building in San Francisco and other outlets.

The Yocha Dehe, who own the Cache Creek Casino

Yocha Dehe tribal chairman Marshall McKay is also a proponent of sustainable practices as well as of building relations with neighbors and with other California winemaking tribes. “There’s so much potential and I think other tribes understand other tribes. There’s less competition and less jealousy than there was twenty years ago, and I think that’s due to a more complex economy and to more complex issues. We’re seeing that it’s good to collaborate with other tribes.”

“We’re not forgetting about the other farmers in the area,” adds tribal council member James Kinter. “We’re trying to partner with a bunch of people. We want this to work. It’s important that we stick together in this realm.”

Like the Chumash and the Yocha Dehe, the Lytton Rancheria’s April purchase of 269 acres from Jordan Winery, including 110 acres of vineyard, is part of their plan to diversify their business and not rely so much on casino income, said tribal attorney Larry Stidham. The tribe paid \$13.3 million for the land, which is located near Windsor, California, in the renowned wine-making region of Sonoma County’s Alexander Valley. It contains mostly Cabernet, with some Merlot and Chardonnay. “There are about 100 acres that are up to par, that are fully marketable. It’s extraordinarily good for vineyards,” said Stidham, adding that the Lytton will add rootstock to invigorate the remaining acres and work towards full production of the land in three years. The tribe plans to hire a development and operations person and sell most of the grapes on the bulk wine market.”

For the 270-member Lytton Rancheria, which owns the San Pablo Lytton Casino in the San Francisco Bay Area, purchasing this vineyard is particularly meaningful, said Stidham, because “it’s right next to land that was illegally taken from them by the federal government.” The Lytton Rancheria was dissolved in 1958, though it successfully regained Federal tribal recognition in 1991. “Their primary reason for buying the land was really sort of a present to the elders,” he said. “They haven’t gotten the exact parcels but darn close, and I think that’s significant for the tribe itself.”



Tara Gomez aims to create elegant wines that exhibit “the freshness of the fruit” and show the “terroir of where the grapes come from, the region,” she says. (By Lisa Garrigues)

Also located in Sonoma County’s Alexander Valley, the 1,000-member Dry Creek Rancheria Band of

Pomo Indians purchased 310 acres of land from the Proschold family last August, which included an easement for access to and from the reservation as well as 130 acres of vineyard that had been leased to Murphy-Goode vineyards. This purchase made them one of the largest vineyard owners in the Alexander Valley.

The vineyards, said tribal chairman Harvey Hopkins, just happened to be a part of the property we purchased. They contain Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewrztaminer, Sauvignon Musque and Cabernet. "It's a valuable asset to the tribe," he said.

The Dry Creek band plans to manage the winemaking business with the help of wine consultants as well as the executive management team of their River Rock Casino. Dry Creek will bottle the wine under their own label, Bellacana, which combines the Italian word for beautiful with the Pomo word for river. This harvest, they expect a yield of 10 tons each of Cabernet and Chardonnay, which will give them about 600 cases of the Bellacana label to be used privately and sold at the tribe's casino, with the remainder of the grapes to be sold to other vineyards. "We're still pursuing a lot of different ideas in how we're going to market that, and what our price points are going to be, it's still all kind of in the works at this point," said Vineyard Manager Christina Lozano.

Dry Creek envisions not only selling their wine to casinos and other tribes in the United States, but also eventually going international. "Hopefully it becomes similar to other Alexander Valley wines which are world-renowned, and will be exported to other countries. It'll take us a few years to get there but that's the grand plan," said Hopkins.

The plan will also include education for tribal members who want to learn the winemaking business, a wine cellar, and a tasting room, he said. "We're over halfway there, the crop is doing well, the vines are looking beautiful. From the casino, you can look out over the deck, you can see the tribe's land—it really looks amazing."

For all four of the winemaking tribes, the views they now have of their own vineyards are a far cry from just a generation ago, when many California tribes were looking at cultural disintegration, poverty and rampant disease. Their casino-generated wealth has already given them the opportunity not only to insure health, education and cultural revival for their tribal members, but to buy back some of their land and have an impact on the land and communities around them. Now, these four tribes may also be able to influence the palettes of wine-drinkers everywhere. "The tribe really helped me get my education," says Gomez. "Now I'm giving back to them. So it worked out quite well. Everything fell into place. It's pretty exciting."

In the Chumash Wine Cellar, doing what she loves, Tara Gomez raises her glass in a silent toast.



Gomez smells the powerful aroma of the wine made from grapes grown near Santa Barbara. (By Lisa Garrigues)