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Karen Cakebread has launched her own wine label named for her mother, Ziata.

J.L. Sousa/Register



Karen Cakebread explained that she came to Napa Valley from the “other valley”— Silicon Valley. Growing up in the South Bay, she met her husband, Steve Cakebread, while working at Hewlett Packard.

Later, the two moved to Napa Valley and Cakebread worked for a time in the family business, Cakebread Cellars.

While the couple is no longer married, Cakebread still has wine in her blood. She started her own wine brand, Ziata Wines in 2008. “I did not plan my life to be in the wine industry,” Cakebread said. However, “It was my journey and I’m thrilled.”

10 Questions

Where did the name Ziata Wines come from?

It’s named after my mother’s and grandmother’s middle name Annunziata. They were from a village outside of Naples. I wanted it to be connected to me. My mom (now) lives in St. Helena, and she is thrilled to have wine named after her.

You’ve done a lot of trekking in different countries. What do you enjoy about that?

It’s so fascinating to learn more about a culture. I just love the villages and the people. It’s very humbling to see how fortunate we are and how much we have available to us. I always feel so much more grateful when I come home from a trip like that. I’ve been to Africa, Turkey, Nepal, Mongolia and India. There’s something about the mountains that are very spiritual for me.

Do you miss the tech industry or Silicon Valley at all?

No. I don’t miss the traffic, the work hours. If anything I miss having the pulse of what is happening and what’s coming down the line. But I am a country girl through and through.

What's new at your business?

I am working on a red wine blend of Bordeaux varietals. Also my home vineyard has just started producing grapes this year. I will be looking at doing something fun and special with this vineyard.

What is the biggest challenge your business has faced?

Cash flow. For my company there are two cash flow crunch times a year. Once at harvest when purchasing and crushing grapes. Then again during bottling when outlay of cash is necessary for packaging supplies and bottling expense. Depending on the varietal, it can take six months to three years before the wine goes to market. A lot of cash goes out before it comes back.

Which three people would you most like to have dinner with?

My grandfather, Domenick Ruggiero
Michelle Obama
Jon Krakauer, adventurer/writer

If you could give your younger self any advice, what would it be?

Follow your heart. Listen to your intuition. And don't be afraid to do something new.

Whom do you most admire in the business world?

Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard, Warren Buffett, Steve Jobs. I worked for HP when Bill and Dave were at the helm of the company. Their philosophy on running HP shaped my own business values. The bios about Buffett and Jobs are a fascinating peek into the minds of these successful men.

Which other business person(s) would you like to see featured in "10 Questions for..."

Polly Ogden – residential designer/builder

Chris Patrick – owner of Sportago

If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be?

At home in Calistoga with my lab, Neela.

Do you have any advice to someone who wants to get into the wine biz?

Have a lot of money. Cash flow is a tough thing in this business.

What job would you like to try/not try?

Try: crew on America's Cup boat

Not try: accountant/wine compliance

What was your first job?

I was a waitress at a seniors home in Palo Alto while in high school.

What's the worst job you ever had?

Telephone sales for household products produced by a non-profit. Another part-time job in high school.

How did you get into this business?

While working at HP in Sunnyvale I met and married my former husband, Steve Cakebread. I started working for Cakebread Cellars in 1989 while he continued his career in technology.

What's on your to-do list?

Always on my list is adventure travel with good friends.

What is one thing you hope to accomplish in your lifetime that you haven't yet?

I'd like to take singing lessons. I love music but can't carry a tune. My friends would be happy too since they have to listen to me.

If you could change one thing about your business, what would it be?

I'm such a small producer I would love to sell most of my wine direct to the consumer.

What's something people might be surprised to know about you?

I wanted to be a firefighter.

Reach Cakebread at 942-5779 or ziatawines.com.