

A Home-Grown Identity

When a hole got punched in last year's American Harvest Workshop, the team at Cakebread Cellars didn't spill a drop.

BY KRISTY ALPERT

NOW KNOWN AS ONE of the most foodie-friendly vineyards in Napa Valley, Calif.—offering a sold-out American Harvest Workshop each year and tons of culinary programs and events—Cakebread Cellars hasn't always been a beacon for gastronomy.

When the parents of current owners (and brothers) Dennis and Bruce Cakebread first started in the wine industry, they didn't expect to see great success so early on with their variety of Chardonnay. To enlist some help with the harvest, Mrs. Cakebread enticed her sons' college friends to the property with the promise of a free meal.

"We were all volunteer-based then," Dennis Cakebread says. "So my mother felt challenged because after a little while you

can't keep serving turkey and Swiss or ham and whatever. So then she started working on her wine and food pairings and became very good at it."

It was since those early days of cooking up feasts for friends and family that Cakebread Cellars has solidified its reputation as a community of foodies and lovers of the common table.

"The fun part about wine is that it always builds a community," Dennis Cakebread adds. "The way I enjoy wine the most is when I go out with my friends and do something fun and then come back and have some wine and recount the day. That's what we've done with the American Harvest Workshop. The whole idea is to create memories, and it's all about community and friends."

Cream of the Crop

The American Harvest Workshop started long before the prevalence of farmers markets in the 1980s as a way to promote local purveyors, introducing chefs and residents to the people raising quail or oysters and the artisans making gourmet cheeses or growing radishes. Cakebread Cellars was no different than local oyster farmers, working to develop certain flavors that sit nicely on the palate.

But although the American Harvest Workshop started as a grassroots campaign to meet the neighbors, so to speak, the event has grown into a five-day, multiple-event workshop that puts an intimate group of chefs, guests and farmers on a wild tasting exploration through the vineyard. The event kicks off with a farmers market where 20



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purveyors set up in the courtyard at the winery and is followed by a thank-you dinner on the Pecan Patio to start the week off right. The next few days are full of exploring the vineyards (grape picking, picnics among the vines, etc.), elaborate meals (including hand-rolled tortillas for a brunch in the hills overlooking the winery) and decadent evenings spent laughing after a great chef-driven

menu of local foods and even-more-local wines.

In a lot of ways, the event has become a living thing over the years, something Special Events Coordinator Shelly Van Zandt attributes to the identity that has grown from the vineyards (and not the other way around).

“The Cakebreads wanted people to come

together and enjoy this wonderful wine with good company and good food and show that it’s not just about the wine or the food, but it’s all about bringing it all together with friends,” Van Zandt says. “It just started off slow and small and progressed into this larger event, and now it sells out every year. The dinner sells out, the farmers market sells out and we already have a wait list for the five-day program.”

With so many moving parts, it would be easy to lose track of the strong identity that's been carefully cultivated over the past 27 years of hosting this event—especially for newcomer Van Zandt, who's only been with the vineyard for six years, planning alongside workshop host and chef Brian Streeter, the culinary director who has been the face of the event for the past 26 years. Last year's challenge for Van Zandt was suddenly finding herself needing to fill both her own and Streeter's shoes for the workshop.

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An Engrained Culture

The event was already off to a great start. The first day had gone off without a hitch; Van Zandt's table settings and signage throughout the farmers market and thank-you dinner were a hit, and all the guests' personalities were meshing perfectly. And that's when things took a slight turn.

"Our second day, Brian's wife became ill and he had to remove himself from the program," Van Zandt says. "He was away from the program for a couple of days so the rest of the team had to pick up because we couldn't stop. He's the director and he's the one who's leading the crew. I'm there to make sure everything goes correctly, but he's the one who travels full time with those people from morning to evening. So even with him gone, we had to continue on. That was a huge challenge because I was already working 12-hour days and our team is relatively small."

Fortunately, the Cakebreads believe in their identity so deeply that they begin engraining their culture on the first day of their vineyard-to-cellar training program, where each employee cross trains in every job at the vineyard, spending time with the viticulturist, the

winemaker and visitors center representatives. Not only was Van Zandt able to fall back on her corporate training, but she was also able to rely on her relationships with her co-workers and their common belief in the mission of the event.

She quickly found herself delegating tasks to her dedicated crew while tag-teaming hosting the events with her boss, Bruce Cakebread, and still finding time to make it home for a healthy night's rest each evening.

"Other than chef Brian not physically being there, the guests didn't know there was a piece missing," Van Zandt says. "It went great. We were always there or the Cakebreads were there. It is amazing how you unite when faced with a challenge. Bruce and I kind of bonded with a mindset of 'Let's continue on.' It became, 'I'll meet the shuttle here and take them there and then you can meet us here and go from that point.' That's never happened before."

When It's All Said and Done

For Van Zandt, being prepared by observing how her co-workers worked during the non-stressful times and being fully invested in the culture of the company really paid off when push came to shove. But even when there's not a piece missing, she jokes that the job of an event planner at a vineyard is ultimately about going with the flow [pun intended].

"The most challenging part of this event is trying to find all the right personalities and hoping that everyone mixes," she says. "Every year is a different year. We get different personalities. You have 10 people who are going to work with five chefs over these five days and if they don't mesh, then I don't feel like I did my job right. Dennis and Bruce do a good job hand-selecting the chefs, but the rest of the weekend is about creating an experience where everyone can come together and find out who they are while they're here."

"On the last day we have a roundtable breakfast, and it's our way of thanking our guests. We talk to them about these five days and what it's meant to them, and we've had chefs come to tears because they were so touched and moved by it all and they just want to go back and spread the word and share their experience. So after all is said and done, it is so rewarding to hear them talk like that because you feel like you've accomplished what you set out to accomplish." ■

ALL HANDS ON DECK

Shelly Van Zandt, special events coordinator for Cakebread Cellars, offers these tips for preparing for an all-hands-on-deck moment.

- **TRAIN.** Immerse your employees in the business by having them try out other job responsibilities. They'll learn the full importance of the team and, who knows, maybe they'll bring new insight to an old process.
- **SELECT.** Choose people early on who will represent the company's identity well.
- **EXPLAIN.** Find and/or create moments to reiterate your organization's identity. This can be through fun "family" dinners, weekend retreats from the office or even just a little handwritten note to say thank you for a job well done.
- **BUILD.** Trusting your team goes a long way, even when things are going smoothly. Get to know your team (names, family members, likes/dislikes, etc.), and create moments or plan team-building exercises where they can easily learn about each other as well.
- **LET GO.** When something comes up, and something will come up, roll with it and trust that the whole program isn't going to fall apart just because one part is missing.