

# Truckee woman making her mark with family wine



Lori Barra of Truckee is bringing her family's Mendocino County wine – Mia Bea – to the greater Lake Tahoe area. Photo/Kathryn Reed

## By Susan Wood

Family traditions mean the world to Lori Barra, a Truckee woman who's pouring her heart into her family's wine business.

When she's not helping travelers fly the friendly skies at the United Airlines ticket counter at the Reno-Tahoe International Airport, Barra, 61, is marketing her family's Mia Bea varietals.

Created from a small vineyard on 60 acres, Mia Bea gets its name as a tribute from Barra's father, Pete, to her mother, Beatriz, who died in 2012. Pete Barra is the 89-year-old son

of an Italian farmer-grape grower who turned his love for his wife and decadeslong work growing premium wine grapes at the headwaters of the Russian River in Mendocino County into a lasting legacy for his children and their children.



Mia Bea Chardonnay is crisp and a bit fruity.

Photo/Kathryn Reed



Mia Bea's Petit Syrah is winning awards.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

An image of a red rose dominates the Mia Bea label, signifying

the romantic flower Pete often gave to Beatriz.

“He always had a thing for roses,” Barra said of her sentimental father. Now when she visits the farm in Calpella near Ukiah, her father puts a rose in her room as an extended gesture of her Dutch mother’s presence.

The tender loving care of the actual winemaking is paying off with accolades. The 2014 Chardonnay has raked in six awards in six competitions, including a silver medal at the Grand Harvest Challenge Wine Competition in Sonoma County in 2016. Last year, it won bronze under the unoaked category at the 2017 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

A recommendation of Barra’s winemaker, the unoaked nature of the Chardonnay rolls off the tongue with more of an earthy, slightly fruity richness not found in traditional, buttery, oak-barreled Chardonnays.

“I’m over it,” Barra said of the trendy buttery Chards.

She likes her Chardonnay with spicy food, especially Asian dishes. (This reporter discovered it pairs well with Mahi Mahi tacos.)



Pete and Beatriz Barra's love continues to shine through Mia Bea wines. Photo/Provided

Barra said friends who don't usually like Chardonnay have been transformed by trying Mia Bea. For Barra, that's the satisfaction of her work. She enjoys the pleasure of introducing the wine to people she knows and meets.

Nonetheless, she also realizes the wine business needs to grow and extend its reach from the small operation run by her father, the winemaker and her two sisters. Mia Bea has averaged between 200 and 250 cases in each of its two years in existence, with plans to somewhat expand without losing its small vineyard appeal.

While the family has been in the grape growing business for decades, the actual wine making side is a new endeavor. No tasting room exists – yet, but Mia Bea wines are available through a couple of wine clubs.



Pete Barra is happiest when he is working in the vineyard. Photo/Provided

Beyond its white wine, Mia Bea's Petit Syrah is also gaining its own acclaim, winning the same awards in the same competitions under the estate grown certified organic fruit designation. Barra admitted that her father – who doesn't use chemicals – was eco-friendly in his vineyards before it was cliché.

Forging ahead, the family and its winemaker are experimenting with a Pinot Noir, which often thrives in the moist coastal ranges.

The family patriarch has shown little sign of wanting to slow down, content that his children are chipping into a business that essentially got its roots in Italy over multiple generations.

“My sisters and I are committed to keeping the business going,” Barra said, realizing that her father is aging.

The U.S. Barra clan went back to Europe to research and trace the extended family history. The elder Barra found his relatives and shortly thereafter returned for a large family reunion in Italy. It was pure joy for him to receive that type of validation to 60 years of his life’s work in the United States.

“He would rather be in the vineyard than anywhere else,” Barra said.

The life of the grapes and the process involved is something Barra grew up with and never tires from.

“I like seeing how wine complements food and how we always had big family gatherings to celebrate that. As an adult, I enjoy seeing other people enjoying the wine,” she said of the most amazing thing about running a wine business.



The morning light shines on the Barras' vineyards.  
Photo/Provided

How Barra ended up in Truckee is a familiar tale. After leaving the farm and attending college, she came to Tahoe "to ski for a winter and fell in love with the area," she explained. That was 30 years ago.

The settling down in a mountain town represented quite a departure from Mendocino County, where she grew up knowing the Fetzer family "just down the road," she said.

In charge of sales, Barra would like to do expand its market in the Lake Tahoe area.

"We're feeling confident about the wine. But the challenge we face right now is since it's not familiar, how can we get people to pick it off the menu?" Barra said since the wine received award titles.

Currently, the Barra family has nine accounts carrying Mia Bea wine – three markets and two restaurants. In the Tahoe basin, Spindleshanks at the Brockway Golf Course in Kings Beach where her son lives and the River Ranch in Tahoe City have the Chardonnay. With the marketing help of her daughter in San Diego, she hopes to find new locations. Both restaurants have expressed interest in selling the Syrah.

So far, Spindleshanks manager Steve Marks who buys the wine for the restaurant likes what he sees from the Chardonnay.

“It’s a crowd pleaser – fruity and easy drinking. It stands on its own,” Marks said. He added the appeal is with a certain patron that likes an unoaked variety.