

AMERICAN WINE AWARDS

IMPORTER OF THE YEAR



Vineyard Brands; Birmingham, Alabama

2009

"In a year that has exalted value wines, Vineyard Brands is ahead of the pack, with a global array of appealing wines under \$20 - among them La Vieille Ferme from France, many of the wines from Spain's Marqués de Cáceres, Doña Paula from Argentina and Villa Maria from New Zealand, That's impressive for a business that was built on, and maintains a portfolio of, some of the greatest French wines in the world, with highend Burgundies, benchmark Rhônes and Alsace stars. Says president Jerry Neff, 'It's unusual to marry high-volume brands with high-quality estate wines and make a company work.' One key to Vineyard Brands' success: It's the only major employee-owned wine importer. Founder Robert Haas gradually handed it over to his staff through an innovative stock-allocation plan. 'It's a huge motivating factor for everyone,' Neff says.

This year, the nominations from our 33-member panel of top sommeliers and retailers read like a Who's Who of American wineries and winemaking talent. Many thanks to this year's American Wine Awards judges: *Annette Alvarez-Peters, Gillian Ballance, Trey Beffa, Chris Blanchard, Andy Chabot, Bill Floyd, Shannon Fristoe, Darryl Joannides, Michael Jordan, Michael Kaminski, Peter Kasperski, John Lancaster, Kerrin Laz, Laura Maniec, Dan McCarthy, Kevin Mohalley, Jay Murrle, Jeremy Noye, Rajat Parr, Jesse Rodriguez, Jim Rollston, Lisa Rongren, Jesse Salazar, Margaux Singleton, David Stevens, Bernard Sun, Todd Thrasher, Gerald Weisl, Karen Williams, Jeffrey Wolfe, Wilfred Wong, J. Jeffrey Woody and Sebastian Zutant"*



Jerry Neff, Vineyard Brands President

Photograph: Leisha Slowikowski