

VINTNER WITHOUT BORDERS



Photograph by
Buff Strickland

In California, Oregon and now Argentina, **Dr. Madaiah Revana** pursues *terroir* wines

By **Aaron Romano**

Madaiah Revana, a career cardiologist with 40 years' experience, is a master in the operating room. "I'm very good at what I do," Revana says. "I can do a heart cath in 13 minutes. But my passion is wine."

That passion took root in 1997 when Revana acquired one of the few unplanted sites remaining on the Napa Valley floor. Today, the doctor's 9-acre vineyard and winery in St. Helena is but a small part of his growing wine portfolio, which includes 55 acres and a winery in Oregon's Dundee Hills and 17 acres and a winery in Argentina's Uco Valley. Revana glows when he talks about each property. "The vineyards are where my heart is," he says.

Vineyards are far removed from Houston, where Revana, 72, lives and practices medicine, but an even bigger leap from his childhood home near Bangalore, India. One of 10 children, he hails from a tiny rural village that had no running water or electricity. The Revanas cultivated a variety of crops, and many of the doctor's fondest memories are of afternoons spent climbing mango trees or walking the fields with his father.

Revana admits his feet aren't between the vines as often as he'd like, but he keeps close tabs on the goings on at his three estates: Revana (Napa), Alexana (Oregon)

and Corazon del Sol (Argentina). He can rattle off barrel regimens, vintage variations and clonal makeups of the vineyards. “To me, this isn’t work,” he declares, referring to his involvement with his wine estates. But he finds commonalities between the fields of medicine and winemaking: “With cardiology, you have to be very precise and focused, and wine is very similar,” he says.

Revana’s focus has led to a pursuit of distinctive wines from all of his brands. Each of his wineries has produced bottlings that have earned outstanding scores of 90 points or higher from *Wine Spectator*, and his Revana Cabernet Sauvignon St. Helena 2007 took the No. 4 spot on *Wine Spectator*’s Top 100 of 2010.

But he isn’t satisfied with the status quo. “I’m always looking for a way to become better, even if it’s just a 2% increase,” he says.

“**D**oc is arguably one of the smartest guys in the wine business,” says Thomas Rivers Brown, who makes the wines for Revana’s Napa winery. “He’s the one guy I work with that is constantly trying to get ahead of the curve.”

Revana thrives as the idea man. Brown says many of his clients quickly get complacent, but Revana always explores ways to push quality. “Most let things play out once they get to a comfortable stage, but that’s not Doc’s personality; he treats the business like

a business, not a hobby,” says Brown, noting that the sense of constant evolution is what he appreciates most about working with Revana.

Bryan Weil, winemaker at Alexana echoes Brown. “Every time I talk with Doc, he asks if I need anything,” says Weil, noting that whether the subject is equipment or staffing, Revana keeps the dialogue open. “It puts a lot of pressure on us when we have all the best equipment and resources to make great wines,” Weil adds.

Revana walks the vineyards when he can, sometimes as early as 5:30 a.m. “It reminds me of walking the farm with my father,” he muses. Sometimes he simply takes mental notes. Other times he snaps photos and sends them to his vineyard manager.

But, he confesses, he was naive when he first arrived in Napa, and he credits surrounding himself with the right people for the ensuing success. He also admits he didn’t have a business plan when he arrived. “I still don’t,” he says, laughing. He assumed that like being a doctor, being a successful vintner was about hard work, good results and patient, or customer, satisfaction.

While Revana may not have had a clear vision at first, he was calculated in his methodology. He didn’t come in with deep pockets; he had some cash, but he also took out a loan to finance the St. Helena vineyard. It wasn’t until after the vineyard was paid off

that he parlayed the profits from the first wines and another loan to build the winery. Likewise, it wasn’t until the Napa winery was paid off that he moved on to Oregon. Ditto in Argentina.

There’s a recurring refrain in Revana’s life of starting from scratch and persevering. His family valued education, he says, and his eldest brother, who was a chemistry professor, took Revana under his wing and paid for his schooling. “I was supposed to be an engineer, but I quickly realized I wasn’t very good at math,” Revana says, adding that after his first time listening to a heart by stethoscope, his path became clear to him.

Following his studies at the University of Mysore in India, Revana accepted a residency at Coney Island Hospital in New York in 1973. When he arrived at the airport, he had only \$8 in his pocket. “The hospital sent a car for me, but I didn’t know how to look for it,” he recalls. “I was young and in America for the first time.” He hailed a taxi and negotiated with the hospital to loan him money to pay for the cab and have the cost taken from his first paycheck.

REVANA CALIFORNIA



WINE HIGHLIGHTS



**Cabernet Sauvignon St. Helena
Revana Estate Vineyard 2016**

93 | \$165 | 1,200 cases made

**Cabernet Sauvignon
Napa Valley Terroir Series 2016**

91 | \$105 | 2,200 cases made

◀ **Winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown**



WINE HIGHLIGHTS

**Pinot Noir Willamette Valley
Terroir Series 2016**

94 | \$35 | 5,286 cases made

**Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Revana
Vineyard 2016**

93 | \$49 | 2,553 cases made

➤ **Winemaker Bryan Weil**



Later, he moved on to Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia for his internal medicine residency, and then to Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas for cardiology training. In 1978, he relocated to Houston to start a private practice. “And that’s where my wine story started,” says Revana with a big smile.

Revana found himself surrounded by friends and colleagues who had a taste for fine wine. Though his first taste of alcohol hadn’t come until after he’d graduated from medical school, he eagerly joined a wine tasting group and starting learning, tasting and even collecting.

On a trip to Tuscany in 1996, he decided that he should have his own vineyard. “I almost bought property there but realized it was not practical because of the language and distance,” he says. But it wasn’t long before he realized his dream. While in Napa for a medical conference, a friend introduced Revana to a realtor. “I didn’t tell anyone, not even my family, that I was looking for a place to plant a vineyard. I thought they might discourage me, or tell me I’m crazy.”

Revana was shown an unplanted parcel along Highway 29, north of St. Helena. He purchased 11 acres in two separate plots, combining them into one in 1997. He enlisted respected vineyard manager Jim Barbour, who has planted and managed some of Napa Valley’s most prized vineyards, including Grace Family and Hundred Acre, to plant the vineyard. He hired cult Cabernet winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett to make the wines. Brown took over as winemaker in 2011.

The philosophy behind all Revana’s estates is to explore *terroir*. The St. Helena vineyard is 9 acres broken into nine individual blocks. Brown points to the vineyard orientation as being

a significant factor. “Block six in the northwest corner is the best location,” Brown says, adding that a portion of block six is often bottled by itself. Brown ferments each block separately, pulling together the final blend for the Cabernet Sauvignon St. Helena Revana Estate bottling with an eye to achieving a vibrant and plush style that is more fruit-forward than that of many St. Helena Cabernets. Brown says there’s never a problem getting the site ripe, even in cool years.

In recent vintages, Revana has, with Brown’s guidance, expanded its portfolio, purchasing grapes to make vineyard-specific wines from other districts within Napa Valley as well as a regional blend, the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Terroir Series. Total annual production is about 3,500 cases.

The Oregon venture was just as fortuitous, and equally the result of a wine passion, in this case for Pinot Noir. Revana first looked in Sonoma but ultimately ventured north to Oregon’s Willamette Valley. In 2005, he made arrangements with winemaker Lynn Penner-Ash, whom he had met through mutual friends, to make an Oregon wine from purchased grapes. The plan was not to buy vineyards or even start a new brand.

But then he was shown 80 undulating acres in the Dundee Hills,

with swaths of rugged forest serving as backdrop to 16 already established acres of vines. Revana quickly scrapped his original plan, buying the property and dubbing the brand Alexana after his daughter, Alexandra. The debut vintage was 2006. The winery was built in 2012. The vineyard now totals 55 acres, planted predominantly to Pinot Noir, with some Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Gris. The site has 18 different soil types spread over 32 blocks, with 10 different Pinot Noir clones planted.

“The estate is so complex, and there are so many variables, but when you pull it all together, the thumbprint of the estate really shows,” says Weil.

Alexana produces 17 bottlings, ranging from 100 to 1,500 cases each, with eight exclusively from the estate; total production is roughly 12,000 cases annually. The Pinot Noir Dundee Hills West Blocks Sedimentary Soils 2016 highlights elegance, earth and minerality, while the Pinot Noir Dundee Hills East Blocks Volcanic Soils 2016 offers a deep well of concentrated fruit. The Pinot Noir Dundee Hills Revana Vineyard 2016 conveys the estate’s *terroir* in a plush, expressive style.

Revana’s latest venture, in Argentina, was more of an impulse decision. During a 2008 visit, he was introduced to Michael Evans, CEO and co-founder of the Vines of Mendoza—a company that sells parcels of land to buyers interested in planting vines. “So I bought a couple acres,” Revana laughs.

He asked Santiago Achával, a consultant for the Vines of Mendoza, to make the wines. Much to his surprise, Achával advised him to grow something different than Argentina’s signature Malbec. “We had a hunch that Rhône varietals would ripen well in our poor, rocky soils,” says Achával.

The vineyard site lies in an ancient, stone-covered riverbed at the eastern base of the Andes, at 3,600 feet of elevation. Meaning “heart of the sun,” Corazón del Sol is named in honor of Revana’s son, Arun, but is particularly fitting for the roughly

“WITH CARDIOLOGY, YOU HAVE TO BE VERY PRECISE AND FOCUSED, AND WINE IS VERY SIMILAR.”

—MADIAH REVANA



CORAZÓN DEL SOL

ARGENTINA



WINE HIGHLIGHTS

**Malbec Los Chacayes Gran Reserva
Revana Vineyard 2016**

94 | \$75 | 200 cases made

**Magma Revana Vineyard
Los Chacayes 2016**

92 | \$45 | 190 cases made

► **Winemaker Santiago Achával**



300 days of sunshine that the region experiences each year.

Rhône and Bordeaux varieties are planted among three distinct blocks on the estate. Still, like nearly all Argentina wineries, Corazón is focused on Malbec, producing five different versions along with Bordeaux-style blends, a Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre blend, and a varietal Grenache. Annual production is around 7,500 cases.

Corazón was among the first to plant Grenache in Argentina, which according to Achával was part of an industry challenge to innovate. “There was a desire to explore the silky texture of Grenache as a contrast to the velvet of Malbec,” he says.

Corazón del Sol has had its growing pains. Prior to 2014, the wines were made at the Vines of Mendoza co-op, but that arrangement didn’t work out long-term, so Revana decided to build his own winery. Achával points out that Argentina’s unstable economy also presents challenges. The brand is expected to break even this year, which Revana says is relatively early for a new winery in Argentina. Yet he confides that he still worries that this project may not achieve the excellence of his others.

The first commercial vintage was 2011, and thus far, the sample size is limited. Revana and Achával discovered that the wines needed a little extra bottle aging before release, so the 2016s are just now hitting the market.

The 2016 Malbec Los Chacayes Gran Reserva Revana Vineyard displays elegance and power, balancing complex and concentrated flavors with fresh acidity. Magma is a Malbec blend that is pure and focused, with plenty of intensity but also crunchy acidity. It’s balanced by Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon,

offering more nuanced fruit flavors and intense herbal accents.

Revana is adamant that he no plans to further expand his portfolio. “I looked at an opportunity in Spain but didn’t want to dilute the brand,” he says. But there is also no thought of selling. “What I have done is for passion, it’s not for ego, or money,” says Revana. And the future? For someone who is already of retirement age, he has no intention of slowing down.

“I think about [retirement], but I talk about wine every day,” he says, noting that if anything, he wants to spend more time in the vineyards after he hangs up his stethoscope. He adds that Arun has shown interest in the business but that plans for succession are still being ironed out.

The doctor-vintner says he feels very fortunate to be where he is today. “Coming from nothing and becoming a successful cardiologist, and then entering the wine business and starting from scratch ...,” he trails off. “Persistence, hard work and attentiveness, that’s my wine story,” he says. Then he pauses. “Or rather, we are still creating it.” □