

# The Start-Up Winery IV: full speed ahead

Jane Firstenfeld



Patrick Smith and partners enjoyed their Australian jaunt, where they toured the old-vine vineyards with David Powell at Torbreck.

the winery has found a home on a 100-acre parcel where the partners are building 32 custom homes.

“We own it,” Smith crowed. Located outside of Woodinville, “It’s a 35-acre, estate-style piece of land, with mountain views and natural ponds.” The partners, professionals in construction and development, plan to convert an existing structure into a banquet room and tasting area, and will undertake construction of a proposed 18,000-square-foot, mostly subterranean structure for production and wine storage.

“We believe we could begin construction as soon as Jan-

*Continued on page 32*

Welcome back to the ever-evolving saga of two start-up wineries. When we embarked on this project starting in our January issue, I was hardly expecting all the drama our subjects have experienced and shared with us. I wondered if there would be enough news to sustain the series. I know Old Field’s Patrick Smith and Howell at the Moon’s Marc Cohen were not anticipating the detours and roadblocks they described in the May installment. Thankfully, many of these have now been overcome by

their dogged persistence in the face of adversity, and both are now firmly on track to achieving their parallel goals: to create a boutique winery and produce the kind of wines they love.

## Don’t Call It Old Field

Freshly returned from the 10-day “research” trip the Old Field partners had enjoyed in Australia, an ebullient Patrick Smith was bursting with news. His start-up in Woodinville, Wash. has a new name: Highbridge Estate. When I delicately pointed out that, to my knowledge, the partners did not *have* an estate, Smith happily set me straight: After months of nonstarters,

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite unforeseen setbacks, both start-up wineries are now back on track and moving ahead.
- Patrick Smith and his partners finally chose a name for their boutique winery, though not in the manner that they had expected.
- Marc Cohen activated his use permit just in the nick of time, then faced another challenge when his winemaker quit.
- There seems to be a certain rhythm to the first months of a start-up: one step forward, two steps back.



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# Gas Permeable "C-P" Wine Maturation Vessels

## The New Way to "Barrel Mature" Premium Wines

Passively micro-oxygenate wine by natural air-O<sub>2</sub> permeation through ultra-clean, food grade HDPE

**NEW:**  
600 gallon compact, stackable "Cell" with galv. frame & base valve.



Optional base stand & valve



Drop-in "Quickplank" packs for all sizes. Choice of French or American oak

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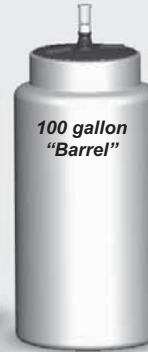
Hermetic screw lids on all, plus optional ferment locks, etc.



200 gallon "Soldier"



50 gallon "Tube"



100 gallon "Barrel"

**HOW "C-P" VESSELS WORK:**

The most commonly used sizes of oak barrels mature wine by diffusing 20 to 30 mg. (15 to 22 cc) of air-oxygen per liter of wine per year (mg/l/yr) through their semi-porous staves. Each year, approx. 10% of this initial permeability is lost by progressive clogging of the barrel wood with wine solids.

Flextank's taint-free, controlled permeability vessels are made from a special gas-permeable polyethylene material. They are deliberately elongated and thin-walled to the correct geometry & wall thickness to "mimic" typical barrel diffusion rates.

Thus, they permeate air-O<sub>2</sub> at the same rate per liter, in the same natural way, as typical 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> season barrels.

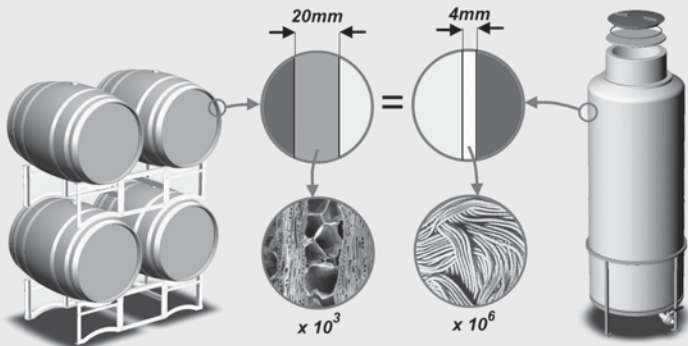
Flextank vessels can be used side by side with barrels, as no change of cellaring practice is required.

See diagram and graph below:

**INTERNATIONAL PATENTS PENDING**

### Why waste time & money on short-lived barrels? There IS a better way!

"C-P" Polyethylene Permeates (i.e. diffuses) Air-Oxygen



Cost >\$1.00 /L/year (Fr.)

Cost <\$0.08/L/year (Fr.)

**NO TOPPING NEEDED:** C-P polyethylene is near-impermeable to water and ethanol vapour. These vessels DO NOT require topping.

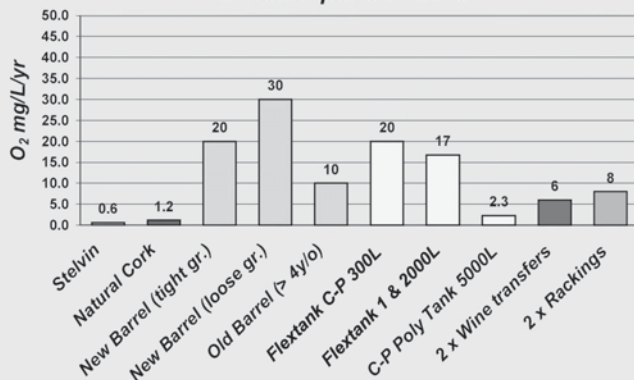
**BETTER VOLATILES RETENTION:** Oak barrels wick out & evaporate fruity ethyl esters & aromatic compounds from wine, whereas Flextank units do not. Users over three vintages in Australia report SUPERIOR matured wine quality to that from top quality French or American barrels.

**GREAT COST SAVINGS:** Users report oak maturation costs of LESS THAN 5 CENTS/LITER using quality Oak adjunct, about 1/8<sup>th</sup> to 1/10<sup>th</sup> the cost of using barrels replaced at 5 yearly intervals. You pay for the oak adjunct wood used, not for the costly & wasted barrel making artisanship.

**HYGIENIC, LONG LIVED:** Very easy to clean, tartar doesn't stick and the material doesn't stain, there is no porosity or "grain" to clog. Unlike barrels, these vessels retain their permeability indefinitely. They can also be C.I.P. sterilized to remove infective yeasts such as brettanomyces.

**MULTIPLY CELLAR STORAGE CAPACITY:** The fork-liftable, tippable 600 gallon vessels stack sidewise like books in a bookshelf as well as two high. Similarly tall & compact, a single "layer" of the 300 gallon size is equivalent to 5-high barrel tiers. Depending on layouts, up to a 5-fold capacity increase in high headroom "cellars" can be achieved by adopting Flextank vessels.

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**Torbreck proprietor David Powell (left) with Patrick Smith and his partner Daniel Ferrelli.**

uary,” pending approvals from Snohomish County, according to Smith. “We’re having architect meetings right now, and our winemaker, Chris Upchurch, is working closely with us on the design,” Smith said in late May.

At the same time, the partners were meeting with graphic and Web designers. “We’re running up on a label deadline,” Smith said, noting that, now that they’ve settled on a name, they need to get TTB label approval before they bottle their first vintage in 2007.

And just where did the name Highbridge come from? The partners had set off on their Australian expedition in search of winemaking tips, architectural inspiration and a name, with backstory, for their winery. Was the new moniker perhaps a tribute to Sydney’s famous Harbour Bridge? Nope. It turns out the newly purchased estate is situated on Woodinville’s Highbridge Rd.

So, failing a name, what did Smith and partners find on their much-anticipated trip Down Under? “We drank a lot of wine, met a lot of friendly people and soaked up a lot of culture,” he said. “We saw much of the Barossa Valley and McLarenville, and were fortunate enough to spend a day with David Powell, of Torbreck. He showed us around all his vineyards and properties and facilities. We learned a lot about the vineyard business—how he secured the fruit and the properties; different strategies that hopefully we’ll be able to apply.”

They hope, too, to apply some of the architectural details they noted; particularly, “A lot of (concrete) block on the facings, red stone and blue stone. We will employ some of that on the part of our winery that shows,” Smith said.

The 2005 Highbridge wines are still in barrels, and “tasting really good,” Smith said, noting that Washington’s 2006 vintage is shaping up to be outstanding. Of course,

even though the property has ample acreage, Highbridge won’t be growing its own estate wines. “Vineyards don’t grow very well on this side of the (Cascade) mountains,” Smith acknowledged. This year, the partners are in negotiations with Eastern Washington vineyard owners, “either to purchase (vineyards) or for long-term contracts,” he reported.

### **Brighter Days On The Mountain**

In our May installment, Marc Cohen was scurrying about Napa County, frantically trying to obtain sufficient permits to activate Howell at the Moon’s winery use permit, which he had only recently—and accidentally—learned was on the brink of lapsing. He can now breathe a little easier. “I was able to activate my winery use permit two days prior to expiration,”

he said, “But the county needed more information on the road improvements I had proposed. As a result, I needed to hire Albion Surveys to adjust the setbacks from my creek, to be able to adhere to environmental setback regulations. This cost almost \$3,000 and still counting.”

Another setback: Sarah Gott advised Cohen in April that, with twin infants and a toddler at home, she could no longer be his primary winemaker. Cohen set about interviewing applicants, and, on Gott’s recommendation, hired Timothy Milos, winemaker at Girard Winery. The UC Davis-educated Milos took the helm May 1; for continuity, “Sarah will remain a consultant winemaker,” according to Cohen.

With his vineyard complete—the vines are now 2 to 5 years old—and having survived the rainy, cold winter with no ill effects, “a result of outstanding *terroir* with excellent drainage,” Cohen’s pruning regimen consists of two-cane pruning (removing 1-year-old wood) and suckering (removing new wood on shoots). “This year, the 5-year-old vines were mature enough to permit two shoots on the vine,” Cohen said. “We predict this year’s crop should be similar to last year’s, which was almost 11 tons. The 2- and 3-year-old vineyards should be productive in 2007, and

the grape crop should increase as the vines mature,” he observed.

He has planted cover crops between the rows: blando brome grass and rose clover. “These grass cover crops grow at different times to enhance nitrogen fixation in the soils. They are also good for erosion control, growing fast enough to create a deep root system to hold the soils,” he said.



**When you’re starting a new winery, there are always important decisions to be made, like what color to paint Howell at the Moon’s administrative building.**



A cover crop of clover helps fix nitrogen in soil, prevents erosion and adds fragrant decoration to Howell at the Moon's vineyards.

In late May, Cohen reported that he was on the verge of securing a business line of credit from Tamalpais Bank in Marin County. "The president, Mark Garwood, has been helping me secure the proper amount of credit to finish construction of the winery," he said. "When the loan is finalized, the project should move at a much faster pace."

Meanwhile, renovation of a former dwelling into an office and guest facility was almost complete, and Cohen was choosing paint for the exterior. He was also anticipating

the Napa Valley Jewish Vintners' event to benefit the Napa Center for Jewish Culture," he said, noting that this would be the group's first annual event.

Cohen expected his Web site, howellatthemoon.us, to be up and running by June 24. "Since I am only producing 225 cases of 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon, which is to be pre-released in November, my marketing efforts have to be realistic," he said. "Wine, a new wine bar and shop in San Francisco, will feature my Cab once it is released."

two opportunities to show off his 2003 Cabernet on the same day in June. "In the afternoon, I pour at the Howell Mountain Vintners Association charity event to benefit the schools in Angwin. In the evening I will pour at

Having faced, and cleared, more hurdles than anyone could have anticipated, Cohen summed up his experience to date in words that any potential winery owner would be wise to heed: "The project takes an enormous amount of energy, with roadblocks and unplanned expenses along the way. It seems I take one step forward and two back, but that is intrinsic to the challenge of trying to create something exceptional, and based on your passion."

We'll hear again from our two start-ups in September. ■

### U.S. Added 460 Wineries In 12 Months

The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) released new data showing that, as of mid-April, there were a total of 4,280 wineries in all 50 U.S. states, an increase of 460 within the last year. In 1995, the U.S. was home to only 1,817 wineries.

According to Bill Nelson, president of WineAmerica, which analyzed the data, grapegrowing and wine production are now an attractive business model for family farmers, with grapes the sixth largest crop in the U.S. Nelson also said that state regulations have changed to make on-site sales and direct shipping easier for small wineries.



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