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Vintner's institute heeds call of crises

Fritz uses Sebastopol winery as launching point to deliver global humanitarian aid

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Most vintners aspire to be lauded by the likes of Robert Parker. Lynn Fritz of Sebastopol's Lynmar Winery gets raves from former secretary of state Madeleine Albright and write-ups in the United Nations' UN Chronicle as well as in Decanter and Food and Wine magazines.

Fritz, a longtime Russian River Valley vintner and very successful entrepreneur - he sold his family cargo company to UPS in 2001 - is also the vision behind the Fritz Institute, a nonprofit organization devoted to applying logistical and technological know-how to the world of disaster relief.

"Fritz Institute's special expertise is in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and it provides the leading edge in logistics for that chain of need," Albright wrote in an e-mail from Washington, D.C., where she serves as chairman of the National Democratic Institute for

International Affairs, a nonprofit agency trying to peacefully expand democracy worldwide. "This is indeed a vital role, because when disaster strikes, help that arrives too late is actually no help at all, and even a few hours can spell the difference between starvation and nourishment, destruction and survival."

Fritz bought land in Sebastopol in 1980 as a family retreat from San Francisco and a respite from his life on the road as a busy executive, traveling to clients in more than 120 countries. Along the way, he developed a higher mission.

"I got a call from our office in Turkey after the earthquake in 1999 and it became clear to me there was no organization, no plan for what happened to the spouses and the children (of employees) in the event of a disaster," Fritz explained.

"I talked to a lot of our customers, big multinational companies around the world, and much to my chagrin, none of them did either," he continued. "I was highly disappointed, and thought we ought to be able to enact something on a local level when this kind of stuff happens."

He reached out to scholars, logistics and operations experts, as well as some of the largest providers of international assistance - CARE, Save the Children, Oxfam, Red Cross - to figure out a plan.

"We found these wonderful organizations were pretty lacking in tools and processes that would be typical for an even modestly run private company," Fritz recalled. "I thought, 'Your charter is so much more important than ours, you ought to have tools.'"

Thus began the transformation of Fritz from multimillion-dollar public company executive to head of a nonprofit group devoted to helping those who help others.

It's this emphasis on helping organizations execute better that is paramount to Fritz, who is in no way trying to push a public policy agenda.

"I'm not interested in why they're in one place or another, whether they're working on HIV/AIDS or sanitation or disaster relief," he said. "The reason there's no other organization like the Fritz Institute is that what we do is anonymous; we're the fire drill, the preparation."

The core of Fritz Institute's toolset is a free software program that aid groups can use to better manage what they do. With headquarters in San Francisco, the institute also has outposts in Nairobi, Kenya, and Chennai, India.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, based in Geneva, used the software to help deal with the tsunami that hit southeast Asia and eastern Africa in December of 2004. They have said it gave them a fivefold efficiency by helping to put donations and destinations together in one database.

Situated in one of the Russian River Valley's coolest areas, Laguna Ridge, Fritz's family

getaway was already planted to pinot noir and chardonnay when he bought it. For a decade or so, he was happy to sell his grapes to the likes of Merry Edwards, then at Matanzas Creek, and Tony Soter at Etude Wines.

In 1996, Fritz began replanting the 42-acre Quail Hill vineyard and using the grapes to make his own wines. Daniel Moore made the highly touted wines for years before leaving to found his own project, SoloRosa. Today Lynmar's winemaker is Hugh Chappelle, an alum of Flowers Vineyard & Winery on the Sonoma Coast, with Paul Hobbs consulting.

It was only after selling Fritz Companies to UPS that Fritz began to integrate his winery into his mission for the greater good.

"This is a unique piece of land," he said. "Around that I wanted to build a center of thought to bring people together from all over the world, an oasis for those who really want to do something, to express themselves."

Using its sleek tasting room designed with modern meeting spaces and peaceful vineyard views, Fritz hosts humanitarian groups from around the world.

The African Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies came to Lynmar Winery last summer to discuss ways of working together. The contingent

included representatives from Ethiopia, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire, Namibia, Nigeria and South Africa, an unprecedented gathering.

Also in attendance were Markku Niskala, secretary general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva, and Dr. Pierre Duplessis, secretary-general of the Canadian Red Cross, who presented Fritz with a bottle of wine from his family's Loire Valley chateau.

When he's not assembling some of the great minds to ponder big issues at his winery, Fritz is jetting across continents meeting face-to-face with humanitarian organizations or local government groups.

He also serves on the HELP Commission, established by Congress to evaluate the role of the United States in international relief efforts, and is a member of the World Economic Forum's Logistics and Transportation Governors.

"Disasters are growing, the world is getting warmer and there are bigger concentrations of people," Fritz said. "It's everybody's problem. What the world is paying for tsunamis and Katrina is a global problem and it can be fixed."

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