

Making wheelchairs out of wine

Lookout Ridge does it a bottle at a time

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PHOTOS ROBBI PENGELLY

On the isthmus of level land at the tiptop of Trinity Road is a magical place called Lookout Ridge. As wineries go, it's not easy to find: there's no sign to mark your arrival, no grand art announcing its intentions. Just a quick turn onto a snaking one-lane road that plunges and soars past ancient oaks, then hairpins toward and away from dramatic and spectacular views. At the end of the long lane a lone structure clings to a cliff, a maverick cement beauty of a building as original and iconic as the man who commissioned it.

Meet Gordon Holmes: publisher, investor, philanthropist. He is wearing the casual clothes of a gentleman farmer, his bright eyes hidden behind expensive shades. When he removes them to greet his visitor, they focus on their target with almost unsettling acuity. You sense immediately that this is a man not in the habit of being told "No," that he is accustomed to getting what he wants. In the spring of 1998, what Gordon Holmes'





Gordon and Kari Holmes at the house on Lookout Ridge. Behind them, the view goes on forever.

For every bottle of wine Lookout Ridge produces and sells, a wheelchair is donated to a person in need. It's simple math: one bottle sold, one chair delivered.

wanted was to add *vintner* to his résumé. So he cashed in his considerable holdings, and did.

Originally, the Holmes' lived here at the top of Trinity Road, high in the Mayacamas Mountains, surrounded by deer and coyote and miles of blue sky. Up in this deep silence with the very long views, Gordon and his wife, Kari, made a family. Gordon, Kari, Aly and Harry relished the wildness of the place, the uncompromising quiet of their hilltop. They moved tons of rock, planted acres of grapes, coaxed them to organic fruition and soon after bottled their first batch of wines. Walking up rocky slopes and down, tending their fledgling crop, the Holmeses felt they had found their Valhalla. Until the morning Kari woke up feeling strange. Her body was staging a curious revolt; ordinary movements had become impossible overnight.

"My wife, my partner, my inspiration," Gordon Holmes says, "has a very bad case of MS. You and I can get dressed in 10 minutes, 15 if we're feeling vain, right? It takes Kari an hour and a half." His face is a mask of frustration and regret, but pity is not part of the mix. When asked why Kari isn't assisted with these kinds of everyday tasks he lifts his chin and pronounces, "She's a proud, independent woman." With grit and determination they stayed on their mountaintop until the hardscrabble terrain finally proved too much for Kari. And then Lookout Ridge discovered its true mission.

For many, serious illness is the ultimate undoing, but for Gordon and Kari Holmes it was a call to arms. "There are 150 million people worldwide who have no legs, or no use of their legs," Gordon says. "Just imagine it. A hundred and fifty million people. It's incredible."

He and Kari were lucky, he continues, because they had ample means to provide her with a state-of-the-art wheelchair when her illness required it. But people living in poverty have no recourse, they are stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place: immobility and isolation,

or the ignominy of dragging themselves through the necessary tasks of life. Kari, now wheelchair dependent, and Gordon, her helpmeet and husband, felt deeply that both options were unacceptable. Almost overnight, like a bolt of inspired compassion from a vast, cloudless sky, Wine for Wheels was born.

The idea is simple. For every bottle of wine Lookout Ridge produces and sells, a wheelchair is donated to a person in need. It's simple math: one bottle sold, one chair delivered. There are no equivocations, no deferments, no red tape. Each bottle sells for \$100; the wheelchairs cost \$500 to \$700. So there is also no profit from the winery for the Holmes, but for Gordon and Kari, that's fine, too. In fact, Lookout Ridge loses vast sums of money each year, but the work they accomplish in lieu of profit is astounding.

In Mexico, on one of his first wheelchair delivery trips, Holmes met a small boy. "He was brought into the town square riding in a wheelbarrow," he recalls, his eyes growing misty. Holmes lifted the boy up and sat him in a wheelchair. "The look on his face now that he could get around by himself—wow."

That look was a milestone. "Kari and I used to just write a check," he goes on, explaining their new approach to philanthropy. "We're not doing that now." Lookout Ridge has placed more than 2,000 disabled people into state-of-the-art all-terrain wheelchairs, and they've done it by crafting some very good wines.

Execution of the plan—though unique to the industry—was morphological, and Holmes' business background proved a useful template. Back when he was publishing trade magazines for Wall Street, when his gut told him a sector was about to get hot, he'd hire a specialist to shepherd just that one subject: an energy czar to hawk utility, a metallurgist to track gold.

Why not apply the same approach to the craft of winemaking, Holmes thought? Why not hire winemaking rock stars to produce the single varietal about which



Gordon and Kari sit suspended over their mountain aerie on a platform at the end of their winery cave.

“I think of bottles, because each one means another person gets mobility. Close your eyes and try to imagine them.”



Kari, who prefers the background to the limelight, had a thriving career in design, diagnosed her own illness before doctors could tell her what she had, and inspired the founding of Wine for Wheels.

they were most passionate? Why not entice a pinot noir god to make your pinot noir, and a chardonnay queen to make your chardonnay? Why not seek to differentiate Lookout Ridge’s wines not by vineyard designation, but by *winemaker* designation?

Holmes approached some of the finest winemakers in the business and, to a man and woman, they said “Yes.” “Yes,” said Greg Lafollette and Cathy Corison; “Yes,” said Marco DiGiulio and Andy Erikson, “Yes,” said Gerhard Reisacher. Yes, of course, they said, to the idea of giving needy people the simple privilege of mobility. As Erickson explained, “It’s a no-brainer.”

And Phil Coturri, the dean of Sonoma Valley organic vineyard management, came on board to ensure the Lookout Ridge vineyards were ecologically green.

And that’s how the genius behind labels like Flowers and Kendall Jackson (LaFollette), Corison (Corison), LoKoya (DiGiulio), Screaming Eagle (Erikson), and

Delectus (Reisacher) came to collaborate on Lookout Ridge’s remarkable project.

Philanthropically, of course, the idea was inspired. But what about the wines? Do these vaunted vintners put the same effort into Lookout Ridge they put into their own prestige labels?

Gary Vaynerchuk, the Wine Library hyper-host with a reputation for telling it like it is, tasted a three-bottle selection from Lookout Ridge and anointed Erickson with 95 points for his 2005 Bordeaux blend, Cathy Corison with a 93 for her 2005 Napa cabernet and Marco DiGiulio with 91 points for his Lookout Ridge estate cabernet. Other experts have bestowed similar scores.

Gordon Holmes, though relatively new to the business of wine, is no stranger to the pleasures of it. As a boy, his first job as a runner for a premium wine shop in Los Angeles involved delivering rare bottles to Hollywood big shots and collectors. Then he was, a gangly underage delivery boy, being led through the cellars of wealthy men, thousand dollar bottles of Chateau Lafite in tow, his eyes agog. He saw what money and power wrought, and decided early on to capture his share. His parents didn’t know what to make of this awkward adolescent with his growing collection of wine futures stashed in a cool dark corner of the basement. But Holmes knew even then who and what he intended to be.

Now Gordon Holmes has a new vision. “I want,” he says, “to reach into the hearts of people and awaken them to what they’re meant to do.” Of his team of angels, the super-talented winemakers who gift their time and expertise to his project? “It’s the winemakers who do the magic,” he says humbly. “I’m just the glue.” The project gets bigger with each passing year, but Holmes demurs when asked how many cases Lookout Ridge produces. “How many cases do I make?” he repeats, his bright eyes ablaze. “I don’t think of it like that. I think of bottles, because each one means another person gets mobility. Close your eyes and try to imagine them,” he says. High atop his mountain, at the edge of a rocky outcropping, surrounded by soaring hawks and sun and forever vistas, he does. 5