

# Betty O'Shaughnessy

## To this Napa Valley Vintner, the American Dream is the Deal

You could have bet Betty O'Shaughnessy would enter the world of wine with a...wow!

"That is what is amazing about the American Dream," she says from her home in the spectacular Napa Valley. "People can come to these shores with their last \$10, no shirt on their back and, if they are motivated, be hugely successful."

To identify with the classic rags-to-riches tale is too cliché for O'Shaughnessy. She is a woman of more singular style. And really, it isn't as if she arrived on Ellis Island from some less-than land to create a gorgeous hilltop Valhalla – O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery – that today bottles a Cabernet Sauvignon so exciting that its second release sold out in a startling four months. The success story of this clever and committed aircraft owner begins much closer to home – in a small farming town of southern Minnesota.

No hot water. No refrigerator. No bathtub. And to her, worst of all: no books. The daughter of a truck driver who suffered from depression to the point of being hospitalized, O'Shaughnessy's childhood deprivation was her personal less-than world.

"I grew up fast," she says. At the same time, she adds, "I learned how simple life can be, and how very little we need."

Total up the little O'Shaughnessy needs with the abundance of blessings she adores, and it is clear the girl who graduated first in her high school class would not let a lack of hot water stop her. On fire with a love of learning, she went on to excel at the University of Minnesota, acquiring a degree in education and mathematics. "I like challenge!" she laughs in an under-

statement characteristic of her graceful, soft-spoken manner. "I don't tolerate boredom very well at all."

This is pretty obvious: the challenges just kept coming. O'Shaughnessy married her college sweetheart, gave birth to three daughters, and spent two decades as the consummate corporate spouse who grew used to traveling by company jet. As her



lifestyle soared, so did she: A longtime wine and food aficionado, she perfected such a culinary finesse that she opened a cooking school in her Minneapolis/St. Paul-area home.

"The harder you work, the luckier you get," she says. This is precisely why Mrs. O's Cooking School was the kind of hit that saw O'Shaughnessy, today a passionate master of the fusion cuisine ("it's the American style!") with which she pampers

her frequent oh-so-appreciative dinner guests, extend her reach even higher into The Dream, American-style.

"I love buildings," she says simply. This statement is classic O'Shaughnessy. From an uncomplicated affection, the woman who says she enjoys "a high energy level" let her daughters leave the nest, each a sterling expression of their mother's great challenge, fulfilled. "I needed to raise fine, capable and independent individuals who would be good stewards of their talents," she says of her cherished successes, all of whom have made O'Shaughnessy a delighted, and devoted "grandmom": Susan, a Fargo, ND philosophy professor; Kelly, a high-tech executive in the Silicon Valley; and Shannon, a Napa Valley homemaker. Then she got busy. "Trying new things seems to be a pattern in my life," she says, so why not? O'Shaughnessy did what she does: "I initiated a new learning curve." In the go-go '80s she became a real estate investor and developer so astute that today her personal pride stands in the Minneapolis skyline as a glorious Gothic Tudor testament to her enterprise – this, a rehab of a downtown YMCA that was so exquisitely O'Shaughnessy-ized it was placed on the National

Historic Register.

You might suspect those Minnesota winters would get to her, eventually. You are right.

"I came to the Napa Valley as a tourist," she says, and wouldn't you know? "I fell in love with the beauty of the land, the vineyards and the climate." Of course, it is one thing to be wooed and seduced by the beauty and romance of a place. It is quite another to be Betty O'Shaughnessy. But



O'Shaughnessy and winemaker Sean Capioux with the vintage (and the Learjet) that define delightful success.

because Betty O'Shaughnessy is...well, Betty O'Shaughnessy, there was this thought: "To be human is to dream, to quest the unknown, to climb the next mountain," she says. So yet again, why not? *Wine*. "I have always felt one with the soil," she says. "Growing things brings peace to my days."

From her seedling of an idea, O'Shaughnessy stretched herself ever farther – higher – into the firmament of the American Dream; by now it was pretty glittering with her architecturally spectacular Howell Mountain winery and her own snazzy Learjet 31A to zip around in. Now, *this* is a blessing, she says. As her winery's sole sales and marketing person, O'Shaughnessy travels constantly. But with the zippy little Lear, "I spend a lot more nights in my own bed," she says.

"My goal is to make the best possible Cabernet Sauvignon from my mountain

properties," O'Shaughnessy says of her treasured hilltop terroir. It is "God's country," she says, and from the aromatic vines to the dazzling valley view, it infuses her with courage and strength, daily. "It is my land," she says, "and I feel one with it." Credit all you want the astonishing gifts of her winemaker, Sean Capioux, for bottling a 2000 vintage, the first for O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery, that was said by one critic to be "the latest cutting-edge discovery for consumers and collectors alike." Capioux's follow-up, a bold and delicious 2001, was said by another to be utterly "remarkable." But there has to be a bit of Betty O'Shaughnessy in the bottle to make her wine such a wonder. And there is.

"I have a fascinating life," she says. What else might you expect when "avid" could be O'Shaughnessy's middle name? An avid reader, avid bridge player, avid rare-orchid cultivator, she is also an avid

world hiker. The vintner with good friends is trying to trek it all, from the fjords of Norway to the rain forest of New Zealand, from the peaks of the Canadian Rockies to the glaciers of Patagonia. Really, she says of her many thrilling moments that include such tiny, perfect times as when, she says, one of her grandchildren sees her, lights up, and "with joy jumps into my arms," "it doesn't get any better than this."

Still, even as the American Dream lives so sweetly in her life, O'Shaughnessy's childhood story isn't all that far from her heart. Recently, she created The O'Shaughnessy Foundation to sponsor research into the manic-depressive illness that colored her early family years with a feeling so far removed from the happiness she today spends not one second taking for granted.

"I find life precious," she says, sure to reach, ever reaching, yet higher into the dream. "There is still so much more to do!"