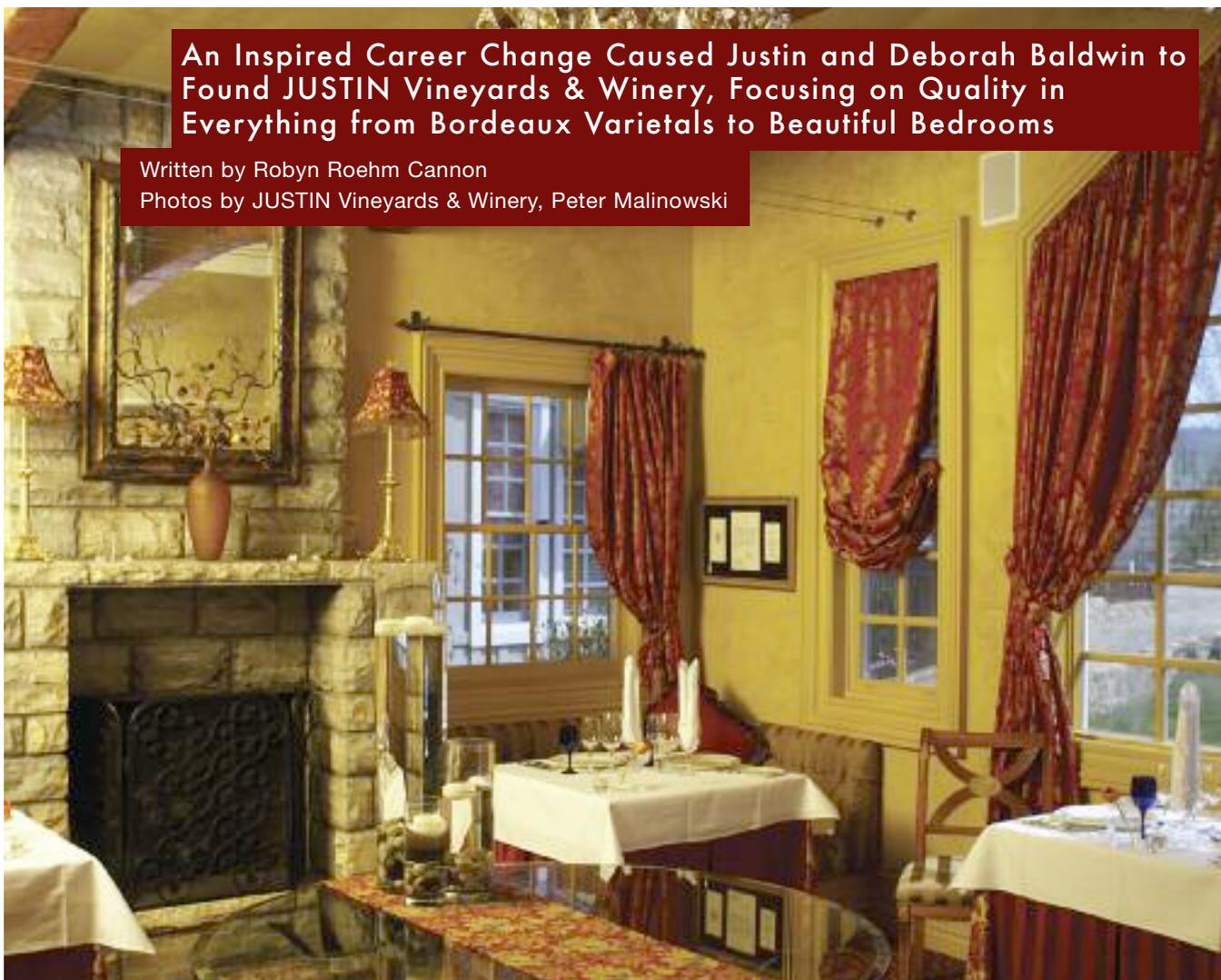


Industrial Revolution

An Inspired Career Change Caused Justin and Deborah Baldwin to Found JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery, Focusing on Quality in Everything from Bordeaux Varietals to Beautiful Bedrooms

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Photos by JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery, Peter Malinowski



It's been said that if you really want to change your life but don't know how to go about it, sometimes it's worth jumping off a cliff and figuring out how to fly on the way down. In a nutshell, that sums up the story of Deborah and Justin Baldwin, owners of JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery in Paso Robles, California, a few miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. But here's the longer version:

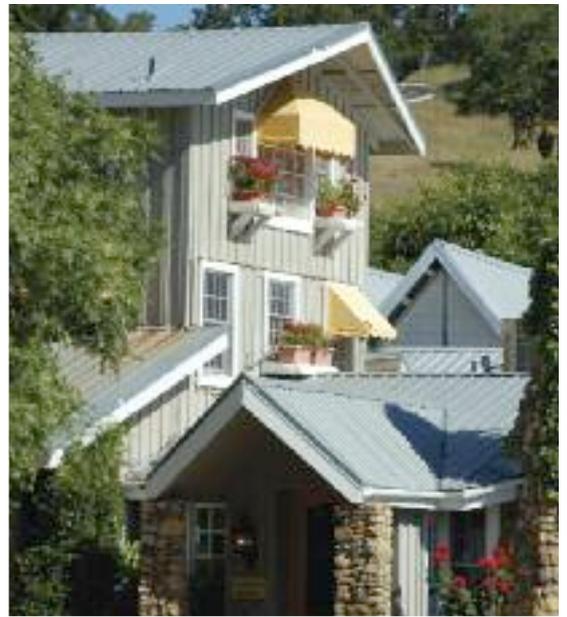
In the early 1980s, Justin and Deborah were living separate lives in Los Angeles with successful careers, he in investment banking and she as a mortgage broker. His hobby was wine, and as an escape from the world of finance, he purchased 160 acres of land in "Paso," an agricultural area two hours from Los Angeles in San Luis Obispo County that would one day become the state's largest stand-alone wine-growing region.

His first Bordeaux varietals were planted in 1981 while Justin was still living and working in L.A., "goofing around with his tractor and pursuing his passion" on weekend visits.

In 1988, he met Deborah while financing another property purchase. When his deal went through, he invited her to celebrate over dinner. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The couple moved to the property in 1991 and began to bottle wine and develop a brand for their product. At the time, there were only 250 wineries in the state of California and eight in Paso Robles.

"We left our jobs in L.A. and dove in head first," Deborah recalls. "The winery led us, we pushed it, and we worked ourselves like crazy. Slowly it took off, and we wanted to lay the groundwork



in the event that we became successful, so we developed relationships with distributors and hired a marketing company.”

For the first ten years, the couple lived in a small apartment above the original barn and stored their tractor below. Eventually, they turned the garage into a barrel room, opened a tasting room, and added other winery buildings in subsequent years.

Their luxurious JUST Inn was built to accommodate guests in 1992, and an intimate, regionally focused dining room, Deborah’s Room, followed a few years later—in an unexpected way. Deborah remembers the day when a couple who had booked a suite at the Inn inquired as to the location of the restaurant. When they were told that there wasn’t one, the wife announced, “Well, this is lovely, but we can’t stay here.”

“And so,” Deborah recounts, “they got in their fancy Mercedes and left! It was then that we decided that we should address the idea of dining at the Inn. Well, you learn as you go.”

For years, the pair traveled around the country presenting their wines and telling their story. “People would say, ‘Where? Where in Napa are you from?’” says Deborah. “Most people had never heard of Paso Robles.” But finally, in 1997, a coveted spot on *Wine Spectator’s* “Top 100 Wines” list put JUSTIN on the map.

Today, the winery and Inn operation employs 60 people full-time—“a little city,” as Deborah refers to it. JUSTIN’s annual production is 60,000 cases of Bordeaux-style blends and single varietals that are distributed in retail stores and fine restaurants in 50 states and 20 countries. Four suites will be added to JUST Inn by 2011, and the couple hope to achieve the elite Relais & Chateaux rating, which will rank their property among the top 500 hotels and restaurants worldwide.

“We always strive to be better,” comments Deborah, “but we’re not growing our quantities—we’re growing our quality.” To that end, the Baldwins have engaged renowned Bordeaux-trained Napa Valley vintner Philippe Melka to help them develop the estate’s reserve portfolio, and they annually host chefs from across the country for elaborately themed wine dinners in Deborah’s Room.

Recently, one of Deborah’s former colleagues came for a visit and said, “We couldn’t figure out why you were leaving L.A., Debby. You had such a successful career in banking...We thought you’d lost your mind...But now I get it.” Deborah laughs, adding, “We love it here. On a sunny day, this is just like being in the south of France.” ■