



# LAND OF ANDIS

**At this winery in the foothills, with its boutique wines and state-of-the-art tasting center, the two owners are having a blast combining retirement and fun with business and a new career.**

by  
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**M**ost of us have a retirement plan in mind—some are modest, others more ambitious. Few couples, however, conceive of a plan as grand in scope as Andrew Friedlander and Janis Akuna, owners of Andis Wines in Plymouth.

One of the most stunning and strikingly modern wine facilities in Amador County, Andis was built by the couple in 2010. Winery ownership represents a considerable departure from the duo's core professions—Friedlander is a commercial real estate agent, Akuna a certified financial planner. Residents of Hawaii, the two now spend a chunk of their year in Amador County overseeing winery operations.

## *In the Beginning*

In 2007, Friedlander sold his well-established commercial real estate business in Hawaii. (He remains the principal broker and is active daily in the business.) "I was about to turn 70," he says. "Janis said to me, 'We have to do something else.' I asked her what she meant. 'I don't want you sitting in a chair drooling. I'm not going to take care of you,'" he recalls with a laugh.

"He needed a new career," explains Akuna.

The couple had owned a vacation home in Napa for 10 years, >>



but the idea of being involved in the wine industry had never occurred to them. “We were just there to enjoy the environment,” says Akuna. Friedlander, however, was a devoted wine aficionado, and Akuna had a lifelong interest in botany. They briefly considered purchasing and operating a vineyard for Friedlander’s “new career,” but soon realized that owning a vineyard was “really just a lifestyle choice,” says Akuna. “We needed a *business* to run.”

Their thoughts then moved to winery ownership, and they began investigating possibilities in the region. But Napa “had become very corporate, very commercial,” says Friedlander. “It was too much for us.” Akuna remembers, “It was just bumper-to-bumper traffic at that point.”

They hadn’t considered Amador County for their winery plan. “I had [enjoyed] delicious wines from there for many years,” says Friedlander, “but we’d never visited the region.”

### *As Fate Would Have It*

Serendipitously, friends invited them to Plymouth for a winemaker’s dinner at Terra d’Oro winery, and it was love at first sight for both of them. “There were tractors driving down the road, there were real people, everybody owned their own winery,” says Friedlander. “It wasn’t corporate.”

Fate was busy at work: They met their future winemaker, Mark McKenna, that very night—he was the featured winemaker at their table. In addition to his work at Terra d’Oro, McKenna had a roster of clients for whom he custom-crushed and produced wine. The couple had an opportunity to try some of those products that evening in addition to what was being poured at the dinner. “That’s when I said, ‘Maybe we should do in Amador what we’re *not* going to do in Napa,’” says Friedlander. “I knew the fruit was very good here.”

In 2008, they decided—as Friedlander says—“to give it a try.”

“Mark told us right away,” says Friedlander, “If you’re going to do this, and you’re serious, then you have to buy grapes now and you have to start making wine. You can’t open a winery with no

wine!” The couple agreed, and “that really put our feet into it,” says Friedlander.

### *Upon This Hill*

McKenna launched Andis’ first wine production as the team looked for a site to build their own winery. “We were excited,” recalls Friedlander. “We had a vision for the kind of wine we wanted to make, but I had no idea about a building. I didn’t know where I was going to find land—there was nothing really available.” But his background in commercial real estate kicked into gear. “It was something I knew about,” he says. “So I started talking to people, and one thing led to another.”

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—ANDY FRIEDLANDER

After exploring a number of potential sites, they discovered their current 26-acre vineyard property. “It was perfect,” he says. “When Mark and I found it, I walked up to the top and said, ‘This is where we’re going to have our tasting room. And we’re not going to have walls, like most other places, we’re going to have views so people can come up and see how beautiful the vistas are with the vineyards and hills.’”

The couple hired local architects Pam Whitehead and Paul Almond of Sage Architecture Inc. to design the winery. Captivated by the Sage’s contemporary, dramatic designs and focus on energy efficiency, Friedlander didn’t mind that Sage had never worked on a winery project before. “He wanted to do something

different than what’s out there in Amador,” says Whitehead. She and partner/husband Almond found the prospect very exciting. “Because one of the things we really love is process,” says Almond. “Not just our own process, but the process of how things work. We had always been intrigued by [winemaking].”

The architects also recognized the importance of first impression for a commercial project of this scope, “particularly for a new winery,” says Whitehead. “The building is [an important component] to the branding of the wine, and Andy wanted to make a statement.”

### *It’s a Process*

Andis was laid out from a functional aspect first, then the aesthetics were conceived. “For Andy and Mark, it was always about the winemaking first,” recalls Whitehead. “So everything came back to, ‘What’s the process, how do we make the best wine, how does the building support that?’ The design of the building was purely a framework around the process.”

Adds Friedlander: “I told them, ‘We want to build a winery, and you put a skin on it and make it green.’”

Drawn to clean lines and modern architecture, “Andy wanted to do something that would be an attention-grabber and a draw,” says Whitehead. “He didn’t want to be like everybody else.” In rural Amador County, populated by “barns and old buildings,” Friedlander wanted, she notes, “to raise the bar.”

“I’m a firm believer that you have to create something different, whether people like it or not,” agrees Friedlander, “because that way they will remember you.”

### *Outstanding—Or Standing Out*

Friedlander succeeded in his vision. The 17,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art winemaking facility, constructed by Sacramento’s Sunseri Associates Inc., is a definite attention-grabber. Constructed of shiny, prefabricated metal, it’s perched atop a pretty knoll off Shenandoah Road. The facility features



vertical corrugated siding, and a large canopy overhangs on the north, west and south sides of the building. One of the most arresting features is a beautifully textured, 300-foot accent screen wall adjacent to the visitor entrance, created from old barrel staves. “It looks kind of like a large-scale woven fabric,” says Almond.

“Tourists, for the most part, love it,” says Friedlander. “But our contemporaries in the area asked, ‘Why did you build a used-car lot,’ or an airport, things like that.” He chuckles. “We got a lot of that, but we’ve made friends here, too.”

Pam Whitehead says that the shock factor is always going to be true of modern architecture. Part of the population, she points out, says, “‘Whoa, this is different, and I don’t like it.’ But there are [others], particularly in more creative fields, who just love [Andis] *because* it is different, and they’re happy to see that there is something unique there.”

Any resistance to the building’s avant-garde design melts away when visitors enter the tasting room, says Whitehead. “Because of all the glass,” she says, “people forget that it’s modern. That doesn’t matter [anymore]—it’s just a nice space to be in.”

The sleek, sun-flooded tasting room has windows on three sides, which offer spectacular views of the surrounding

vineyards and grassy outdoor picnic area, furnished with colorful shade sails. The lengthy tasting bar is fabricated from sustainably harvested Lyptus wood, capped with a concrete countertop, and there are several cocktail tables scattered throughout the bright, airy space.

#### *Green Machine*

Aesthetics aside, Friedlander and Akuna’s winery project also realized its goal of energy efficiency: Andis exceeds California’s stringent Title 24 Energy Compliance requirements by more than 15 percent. “Andy knew we always design with passive solar in mind,” says Whitehead, “and it’s pretty expensive to run a winery, so we [looked at] whatever could be done from that aspect. We set up the building to be very passive solar with its orientation on the site, with the overhangs, window placements and insulation.”

#### *How’s the Wine?*

Winemaker Mark McKenna has been busy building a reputation for Andis’ wines, which already have garnered a number of industry accolades, including the praise of noted wine expert Darrell Corti and, for its 2011 Sauvignon Blanc, the No. 20 position on *Wine Enthusiast* magazine’s illustrious “The Enthusiast 100 of 2012” list.

McKenna’s portfolio of wines is large. “One of the cool things about the foothills,” says McKenna, “is our ability to work with a very diverse range of varietals. Most wine regions you think of [specialize] in maybe one or two varietals, but here we can do everything from Zinfandel and Barbera, which are really the core varieties of this region, to the traditional Rhône varieties like Grenache and Mourvèdre, to others like Cabernet Franc, Primitivo and Sauvignon Blanc.” Andis even offers a Rosé and a Meritage blend, he points out proudly. His goal, he says, “is to make delicious wines that make people smile.” Wine, he adds, “has too often been held up as something that’s intimidating or confusing, but it’s supposed to be pleasurable, so we set out to make wines that bring people pleasure.”

That feeling of pleasure extends to Janis Akuna and Andy Friedlander, who both agree that the reality of Andis Wines is far better than the vision they had initially. One of the best surprises for Akuna is the “people part of it,” she says. Visitors show up at the winery “and they’re just happy to be there. It’s so much fun!”

The rest of it, she adds, “is business.”