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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

He Used to Sell Pet Supplies. Now He Writes About Wine.

Don Sonderling says his new work is mostly “making friends over a glass of wine and talking.”



Don Sonderling, pictured with his wife, Lynn Sonderling, says he started writing about wine because he “wanted to learn more about the experience, about the people.”

PHOTO: DANA SALY

By Julie Halpert

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When Don Sonderling started working some 50 years ago, he did exactly what was expected of him. He entered the family business of wholesale pet supplies.

“At that point, you went to school, you graduated college and went into business,” says the 75-year-old, who ran the family business for 18 years before going to work for another company, one that made filters for home aquariums and lobster tanks in restaurants and supermarkets.

SECOND ACT

Who: Don Sonderling

Age: 75

Hometown: Woodland Hills, Calif.

Primary career: Pet supplies

Current path: Writer about wine

Why this path: “It gives me a lot of pleasure to share somebody’s personal story of what got them into wine and what their vision is.”

What he does now, by contrast, is something he is passionate about. He tastes and writes about wine and the culture surrounding its production.

Don and Lynn Sonderling visited the Central Coast wine country regularly long before Mr. Sonderling retired in 2005 at age 59. Mr. Sonderling says he would always marvel at the way wine brings people together. The more the couple visited the region, the more he learned about the vineyards and viniculture.

He started appreciating the differences in wines and grapes in his 30s, “and it grew from there,” says Mr. Sonderling, who describes his palate as decent. He says he’s able to pick out aromas and flavors most wine drinkers can’t, but he doesn’t compare himself with professionals.

Then, in 2012, with very little writing experience, he reached out to the publisher of the San Luis Obispo Visitors Guide.

“I wanted to learn more about the experience, about the people,” to show the personal stories of the winemakers, he says. Too many articles covering the wine industry at that time were written like travelogues, he says.

The publisher asked him to write a short piece as a test. He has been writing for that publication ever since, as well as for regional lifestyle and travel magazines and a website focused on the California wine industry.



Mr. Sonderling, who says he has a decent palate, doesn't compare himself with professional wine tasters.

PHOTO: ADELAIDA PITTS

Mr. Sonderling describes his new work as mostly “making friends over a glass of wine and talking.” His profiles about winemakers, their backgrounds and what led them to want to produce wine, he says, give readers a glimpse of what they will experience at a winery. “Everyone has a great story to tell, and I get to help do that,” he says.

His favorite wine is Syrah. “I love the first aromas,” he says. “The aromas may be earthy, spicy, full of big dark fruits.” When first poured, a young Syrah can taste like “a big brass band with fireworks,” he says. But with aging, and even if you let it sit in the glass a while, it develops a more luscious, subtle profile. “I never know what I’m going to get with that first sniff or first taste,” he says, “and I love the anticipation.”

Before the pandemic, the Sonderlings would head to Paso Robles twice a month for three to four days, and Napa semiannually. After an eight-month hiatus, they resumed traveling to both places in July.

It’s something that never gets old, Mr. Sonderling says.

“When you can sit down with a winemaker in a beautiful location and you’re sipping something that is new to you...it’s all exciting,” he says.

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. You can reach Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, and let us know how you’re starting over, at reports@wsj.com.

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