

EXPLORING WINE WITH TIM FISH

## Sonoma's Pioneer of Organic Vineyards Passes the Torch

After helping show how organic farming could produce better wine, Phil Coturri is ready to retire. Don't expect him to leave the vineyards behind, however



By [Tim Fish](#)

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Phil Coturri has spent his life in vineyards. Now 73, and after finishing his 60th harvest as of 2025, he's ready to pass the torch ... sort of. "I'm not really retiring. I'm changing my level of responsibility," says Coturri, with a laugh.

"Yeah," says his son Sam, who is often alongside his father. "He's cutting his time from 80 hours a week to 40."

An avowed San Francisco hippie, Coturri moved to Sonoma Valley as part of the back-to-nature movement of the early 1970s. Despite his thinning hair, he still looks the part, with a long ponytail in the back. His beard is thick with gray. He's been known to wear tie-dye shirts and freely quote Beat poets.

Coturri is considered by many to be the father of organic grapegrowing in California. Though the concept of organic vineyards—and by extension other practices such as biodynamics and regenerative farming—are now in the mainstream, when Coturri was starting his Enterprise Vineyards back in 1979, few grapegrowers applied those principles.

Coturri showed what those principles could do. Today, Enterprise handles the farming for approximately 600 acres across both Sonoma and Napa, a footprint that gives Coturri's holistic approach a platform to influence others.



### Showing What Organic Can Do

Enterprise's current client list includes [Laurel Glen](#), Old Hill Ranch, [Kamen Estate](#) and [Repris](#) in Sonoma County, along with [Mayacamas](#) and [Oakville Ranch](#) in Napa. The Coturri family also makes a small amount of wine under their [Winery Sixteen 600](#) label.

Coturri is stepping down as CEO of Enterprise, turning over the day-to-day details to sons Max and Sam, COO Mireia Domènech López and Rodrigo Soto, the former estate director at [Quintessa](#) who now runs his own [Far Mountain](#) project in the Moon Mountain

appellation. But Coturri still intends to work in vineyards, keeping a close contact with farming.

About 60% of what Enterprise farms is Cabernet Sauvignon, with Zinfandel and Grenache second and third. All of the vineyards Coturri works with are farmed organically. Many clients also opt for biodynamic farming. Biodynamics is a holistic, borderline mystic, farming practice, based on the writings of Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner. Some consider its practice more demanding than organic.

“I jokingly say, ‘I was raised a Catholic. I don't need another religion.’ But I buried a lot of horns,” says Coturri, referring to the biodynamic tenet of burying cow horns filled with manure in the vineyard, theoretically to channel cosmic forces to improve soil fertility.

One of Coturri's biggest undertakings over the years was [the redevelopment of historic Mayacamas Vineyards](#) in 2012. “It was a real honor to do it. That's an iconic piece of ground that was not neglected, but was stuck in a time warp,” he says. “We were able to bring it into the 21st century, but maintain the Mayacamas style.”

Coturri was also instrumental in [establishing the Moon Mountain District AVA \(American Viticultural Area\)](#) in 2013. He has been [farming in the area](#), a roughly 17,000-acre section of the Mayacamas mountains above Sonoma Valley, since he started in the 1970s.

### **A Life Among Vines**

Coturri concedes that it's difficult to let go of the reins but jokes, “It's harder to get up in the morning than it used to be.” He makes plain he won't miss dealing with government agencies and constant compliance issues. “I'm tired of all the bullshit that we have to put up with,” he tells me. “Plus we always need new energy, the next generation.”

The handover of his company's day-to-day will allow him to focus on what he loves most: being among the vines. [That's something he has loved since his childhood](#). His parents had a second home on Sonoma Mountain, and the family spent weekends and summers there starting in the mid-1960s. As a child, on the last day of school, his parents “dragged us out of the city to Sonoma.”

During that period, the young Coturri worked for his neighbors on Sonoma Mountain, cutting lawns and doing other chores; by age 14 he was working in a vineyard. When he was about 16, a neighbor gave him a magazine about organic gardening, which was just becoming a thing. He devoured it. “Organic just made sense to me,” says Coturri.

His father learned how to make wine from his Italian family in San Francisco, and Coturri and his brother Tony carried on the tradition.

After graduating high school in 1970, Coturri moved permanently to Sonoma in 1972 and attended Sonoma State University. He started as a biochemistry major but flunked out the first year and then switched to contemporary American poetry.

In 1979, one of his first vineyard-management clients challenged him to apply organic principles to winegrowing. It wasn't an easy task. Organic gardening resources were expanding, but there was little research available on organic grapegrowing. Coturri had to figure out many of the principles and practices by himself.

Now, that means he avoids synthetic pesticides and herbicides, and doesn't use fertilizers, even organic ones, preferring soil-nourishing cover crops like bell beans. Beehives (for pollination), owl boxes and raptor roosts (to keep out pests) are standard in his efforts to keep vineyards healthy.

After decades of on-the-job learning and accumulated experience, he's the sage of California vineyard organics. "The whole thing about the vineyards we work with is to emphasize *terroir*. As a lifelong organic farmer, that's the most important thing that we could bring to the table for winemakers and the wine-drinking public," he says.

As he moves to a more scaled-back profile at the family company, he is nostalgic. "I cannot see a year going by without cutting grapes and harvesting. My whole time clock is built around the life cycle of growing grapes."

That's what 60 harvests will do.

### **Visit and Taste at Winery Sixteen 600**

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