



Rocco Lombardo

Wine importer and distributor

What led you to a career in fine wine?

My family. Being a first-generation Italian American, wine is an important part of my culture and was always on the table at home. Both my uncles were wine importers, and I was recruited into the business by one of them.

What has been your greatest moment, professionally?

The resurrection of Wilson Daniels to its previous heights when it was under the leadership of the founders, Win Wilson and Jack Daniels. When I took on the leadership of Wilson Daniels in 2015, the company had been in decline for about 15 years. In the nine years since, we have increased the employee base and our revenues five-fold.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Without a doubt, Covid-19. We represent some of the world's finest wine producers, and 60% of our sales are in restaurants. The shelter-in-place orders that took hold in the second quarter of 2020 were very difficult for our business model. We decided at that time not to reduce headcount or furlough our employees. We opted instead to strengthen our presence in the market through outreach, such as virtual meetings and sample mailings. Where many companies took a step back, we took a step forward, and that's something I'm very proud of.

What's the most common misconception about your job?

Mainly, preconceptions about the romantic elements of wine. When you tell people you're in the fine wine business, they imagine you drinking classic bottles at extravagant dinners with friends and colleagues. While that is an aspect of what we do, it's a small aspect – at the end of the day, we're running a business. The energies and strategies that are essential for running a wine business are no different to those of any other successful commercial endeavour.

What pressures come with importing some of the wine world's biggest names?

Fulfilling high expectations. These are wine labels with long, important histories and celebrated reputations. They need to have very high standards, or they wouldn't be where they are today. I would like to think that at Wilson Daniels, we have similarly high standards that meet their expectations.

And the perks?

The biggest perk without a doubt is getting to work with such amazing and historically important families. Knowing their wines intimately, visiting them at their estates and tasting the new vintages year after year is something only a select few are privileged to experience.

What keeps you up at night?

A sense of responsibility to our team. If anything causes some restlessness, it's the need to continue to secure a successful path for this company and all of the people we employ.

Which US regions currently excite you?

Oregon's Willamette Valley, for sure. Its northern position and proximity to the Pacific allow for great tension, expression and elegance in the Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. I'm also excited by the higher-elevation Napa vineyards, like those in the Diamond Mountain District AVA, which is home to the Davies family and the historic Schramsberg estate.

What's your go-to pizza wine?

My family's roots are in Sicily, so I often find myself reaching for Feudo Montoni's Lagnusa, which is a vibrant, elegant expression of Nero d'Avola, produced at high altitude. **D**

Rocco R Lombardo is president of major US wine importing and marketing company Wilson Daniels. Since his appointment in June 2015, Lombardo has added several world-renowned family-owned vineyards to the company's portfolio (including Domaine Faiveley, Gaja, Familia Torres and Commanderie de Peyrassol). Today, Wilson Daniels is recognised as a front-runner in the US fine wine industry.