

# Kimmel Vineyards: Good Wine Flows From Challenging Times Part 1

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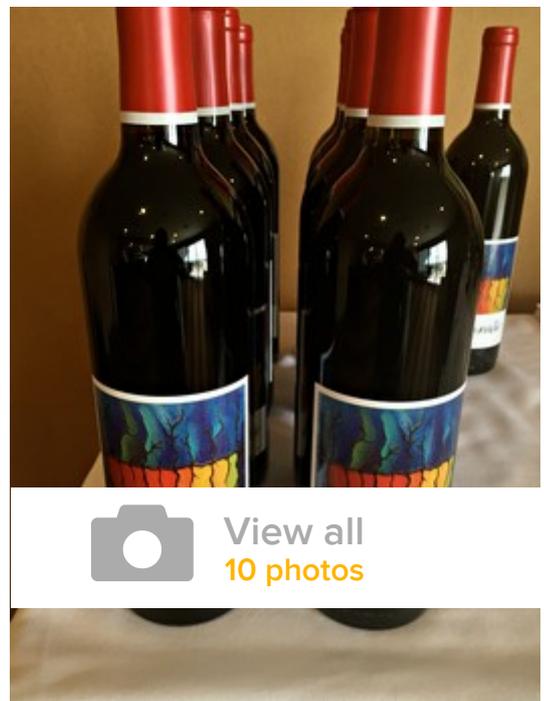
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Kimmel Vineyards, a relatively young Mendocino County winery, is the story of a family, a ranch, changing economics, and great [wine](#). It's the story of adapting to challenges and pushing boundaries, of thinking outside the box and carving out a niche where their wines can shine.

To avoid any confusion, Jim Kimmel is no relation to ABC-TV's Jimmy Kimmel, although they are email friends, touching bases every so often, with Jimmy occasionally buying Kimmel wine. It started three years ago, when Jimmy sent Jim an email after finding him online, introducing himself as Jimmy Kimmel who "hosts a late night show on ABC".

It's been quite a journey for Jim Kimmel, the wine producer. For over 50 years, [Kimwood Ranch](#), located off the beaten path in Potter Valley, has been a field of dreams for the family. Jim's father, Ed Kimmel, wanted to be a rancher, so in 1963, he purchased 1100 acres and a herd of cattle. But twenty years later, with the cost of water rising and the price of cattle falling, farming seemed a better option. With the explosion of vineyards in the region, Chardonnay was planted in 1986, followed by Merlot a decade later. Selling wine grapes to local winemakers was good business for awhile, until times changed in 2000, when the price paid for a ton of grapes was less than what it cost Kimmel to grow. Jim notes, "sometimes we ended up with more supply than demand", and with excess grapes on the vine, and bills to pay, Jim made the decision to bottle 300 cases of Chardonnay in 2007.

Jim didn't set out to make wine. It was a slow evolution, as economic forces pointed him to new frontiers, he



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realized that you “can’t make a business from 300 cases, I had to convert all what we were growing into the bottle to make money”. So, Kimmel plunged into the wine market, an untimely entrance as the Great Recession swept the nation. Marketing the wine from the ranch was problematic, located 2 hours north of San Francisco, a tasting room seemed out of the question. The small production, only 10,000 cases of their premium wines, didn’t entice distributors to jump onboard.

As the accidental wine producer, Jim discovered some of the cold hard facts of the business. “There’s a lot of wine out there, good and bad, and it’s difficult for the consumer to sort through all that... making the best wine won’t help with sales or success, it’s a challenge to get out there”. So, Kimmel made a plan, developing three tiers of wine, at different price points, that could sell in different arenas. Jim broke off from the herd of California wines, and took Kimmel Vineyards in a different direction.

Determined to grow the Kimmel brand, Jim left California behind, reaching across the country to Kroger and Walmart, offering his **Illuminate wines** for under \$10. His business plan, was that the entry level bottles would, as he says, “float the boat for the other two brands”, and introduce the consumer to their other high quality wines. Finding a friendlier business environment outside of California, he hoped to create a buzz about **Kimmel Wines**, and ultimately put the family business on solid ground.

Today, four generations of the **Kimmel family** are involved with the business of wine, from Jim’s mom, Lillian, who still lives on the ranch, to his two brothers, Gary and Dennis, who are close by, and their children have joined the team, working with winemaker Bruce Regalia and their vineyard manager Mark Welch. It’s the belief in quality and authenticity that draws them together, and the desire to make their family’s wine company prosper.

Kimmel notes that “it takes time to break in to the wine business”, and he’s giving everything he’s got to make Kimmel Wines a success. He’s working hard to make Kimmel Wines self-sustaining, not only for him and his wife Debby, but for his brothers and their extended family, creating a legacy that will be there for future generations of Kimmels to come.

continued in **Part 2**



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