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CBS sportscaster Nantz found 'calling' in wine venture

Nantz and importer/distributor Deutsch's meeting of the minds has brought success in creating affordable, Old World-style lineup

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Jim Nantz returns to Houston this week as one of the best-known play-by-play men in sports broadcasting. The five-time National Sportscaster of the Year will be here, of course, to cover the Final Four for CBS. Nantz's network for the past 31 years. But he also returns to the city that launched his career as a TV journalist (at Channel 11 in the early 1980s) with a new job title.

Nantz has become what the French call a "vigneron." That means he can walk into any number of Houston's high-end restaurants this weekend and proudly order a wine that he's personally invested in, financially and emotionally. By trade, he remains a "caller" of games, not a maker of wines. But "The Calling," the bottled result of a partnership between Nantz and the prominent wine-and-spirits importer/distributor Peter Deutsch, couldn't be a more all-consuming (no pun intended) adventure.

It's neither a hobby nor a vanity product nor a branding opportunity for Nantz, who turns 57 in May. He needed any of the above like he would have needed a hole in his headset. The man is all over the TV screen. In February, it was the Super Bowl. Now it's the Final Four. Next week? The Masters. He was the first broadcaster ever to put his face on all three events.

"Honestly," Nantz insists, "if they never put me on television again, that would be fine as long as I could still tell stories. I never got into (TV) to seek attention. I recoil at that. So why would I go into the wine business to get attention?"

Note that the word "Nantz" appears



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nowhere on the bottle. Straight away, in one of their early brainstorming sessions, Deutsch wanted to know if that mattered to him. He acknowledged it was his way of finding out where Nantz was coming from. Together, they agreed the Nantz name likely wouldn't help sell the wine. The Calling name, however, spoke to their mission as fledgling vintners and also played off Nantz's professional forte.

"We agreed that we wanted to create a lineup of wines that, somewhere down the line," Nantz says, "had a chance to be one of our next great premium wine brands." In short, another Caymus. A Jordan. A Silver Oak.

"But," he adds, "they also had to be affordable and approachable."

Mission accomplished. Locally, Spec's has been a vital supporter of The Calling lineup from the get-go and currently sells all six of the wines at prices ranging from \$24.99 for the Gold Label Chardonnay to \$52.99 for the Our Tribute red blend. Enough Houston restaurants carry the wines as well that Nantz was hesitant to attempt to list them, saying, "I'd hate to forget somebody." (Note the accompanying "Sommelier's pick" from Vallone's Scott Sulma.)

Originally from New Orleans, Nantz came to town as a scholarship golfer at the University of Houston, where he found himself rooming with Blaine McAllister and Fred Couples. The latter would win a Masters green jacket one day. Although their golf arcs diverged, few would argue that Nantz has been any less successful in his chosen profession, which has afforded him the opportunity to travel extensively.

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Countless nights on the road afforded Nantz myriad opportunities to acquire an appreciation for fine dining and, with it, fine wining. The more he tasted, the more he wanted to taste, and eventually the idea of creating something of his own took hold. But starting from scratch seemed a daunting task considering that, despite his personal celebrity, he had no serious wine-industry contacts.

In fact, the evening he met Deutsch at a restaurant in Greenwich, Conn., Nantz and his attorney were reviewing plans for a visit he had been able to arrange for the next day in New York with Marvin Shanken, publisher of the Wine Spectator. Meanwhile, only the night before had Deutsch finished reading Nantz's best-selling book, "Always By My Side," written as a tribute to his Alzheimer's-afflicted father, and it had touched him deeply.

"I'm very close to my father, too," says Deutsch, whose dad, Bill, founded Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits in 1981. "Then I looked over at the next table, and Jim was sitting right there. I couldn't believe it."

He introduced himself and told Nantz how much he had enjoyed the book. Nantz thanked him and, making small talk, asked Deutsch how he made his living.

Bingo.

"When I spoke with Marvin," Nantz recalls, "he told me Peter was somebody I needed to get to know."

A couple of months later, they met for a brainstorming dinner. Deutsch was intrigued, to be sure, but also wary because, he says, "There are lots of celebrity wine brands in the wine cemetery because people forget that it's always about what's in the bottle. I was very blunt with Jim. I needed to understand his intentions."

Planning began in earnest soon thereafter. The first releases, an Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon from the Rio Lago Vineyard and the Our Tribute, came to market in June 2012. Seeing a bottle listed for the first time on a restaurant list - Al Biernat's in Dallas - was "a big thrill," Nantz acknowledges. "I said to myself, 'I can't believe we got here.'"

A pair of Russian River Valley chardonnays and two pinot noirs from same have followed with respected winemaker Dan Goldfield now in charge of the cellar. Total production is up to 30,000 cases, enough for reasonably wide distribution.

Having moved to Pebble Beach, only a few hours south of the California wine country, Nantz makes a point of getting up to Sonoma as frequently as he can, and both he and Deutsch closely monitor production every step of the way, serving as active participants with Goldfield in the barrel-tastings that determine the final blends. Their personal palates demanded Old World-style wines - Burgundy is a shared reference standard for the chardonnays and pinot noirs - but wines that also showcased the opulent fruit California has to offer.

"We wanted to produce a wine that over-delivered for the price," Deutsch says. "With Jim, it's always about perfection. He's a guy who pushes for excellence at every turn. He's always thinking we can do better. That's the world he lives in. I'll admit I was honored when he first approached me. I'm a huge sports fan. Obviously, I knew what he'd accomplished professionally."

Nantz concedes, "I'm a total detail freak. You can't give me enough minutia. This has been a lot of work for both of us. But, like broadcasting, it's not exactly manual labor."

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