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Laura Catena

“Since I was young I knew I could help people.”

She is not only Catena Zapata’s Managing Director, but she is also a Biologist and practicing Emergency Physician in the United States.

By Sebastián Ríos.

The aromas at the winery, the place she used to visit when she was small and her grandfather, Domingo V. Catena, ran the family business... This is one of her most precious memories. “I used to make drawings and smell the odor of grapes and fresh juice while my grandfather tasted the wines; I loved that intense smell of grapes and I loved spending time with him,”

says Laura Catena (age 46), Managing Director at Catena Zapata. Laura Catena divides her time between the world of wine and her job as an Emergency Physician in San Francisco, where she lives with her husband and three children. With Skype as her favorite ally – even though she travels the world for half of the year – Laura has a hectic time – literally speaking – as she

pursues the dream she shares with her father: “to make Argentine wines that can rival the best of the world.” Even though working with her family seemed an inescapable fate, she decided to make her own way—the hard, long and less predictable way, which eventually took her back to the cherished aromas of her childhood.

Being born in a family with three generations in the wine business, what led you to study Biology and Medicine?

I studied Biology because I was fascinated by science, even though I also liked languages, history and mathematics. When I arrived at Harvard I took a class on evolution with Dr. Stephen Jay Gould and I knew right away that I had to be a scientist. First I studied Plant Biology and later on I studied Medicine.

What was your family’s reaction?

When I told my father that I wanted to study Medicine, he got angry. To me, that was kind of weird, since in the US being a physician is one of the most prestigious professions. I talked to my mom and she explained: “Your father dreams about you working with him.” Up to that moment, I had never considered the idea of working with my family. One day, my father came to visit me at Harvard, and told me about his dream of changing the Argentinian wine history and making wines that could rival the French. We used to talk a lot about vineyards and about his work. However, I had no intention of working with him. I was very independent and felt I had to make my own way.

How did you shift from Plant Biology to Emergency Medicine?

While I was studying Medicine at Stanford, I had

to rotate through different areas: surgery, internal medicine, pediatrics, etc., and I loved all of them. However, when I began working in the Emergency room, I knew I had found my place, the area where I fitted in. My grandfather Domingo Vicente used to call me “lauchita” (little mouse) because I was constantly running from one place to another. Also, in the Emergency room, there is a lot of human contact and people are very scared. I always knew from when I was very young that I could help people overcome fear and that made me feel useful. I wanted to help the world and Medicine seemed to be the best option. I never thought I could help people with wine. However, now, when I see the transformation going on in Mendocino wine regions, I feel I can contribute to society with my wines.

What led you to start working with your family?

In 1995, Wine Spectator magazine organized a wine fair and invited wineries with scores over 90. It was the first time they invited an Argentinian winery and that winery was us. My father said: “Please Laura come with us since none of us speak English very well.” And so I joined them. I remember I was standing behind a small table, next to the best wineries of California and France, and people stood in long lines to taste their wines. However, when they passed by our table they just looked at our main sign that said “Argentina” and just passed us by. I was so angry! The following day I called my father and said: “I need to start working with you because what you are trying to do is impossible.” As a physician I had always wanted to help people, but now I wanted to help my Dad. I remember saying: “I want to start working in the vineyard; I am a Plant Biologist! Also, I

want to learn what you are doing here in the U.S., too, because I live here and I can help you." When you joined your family's winery, there were not many women with relevant jobs in the world of wine. Was it hard for you to find your own place?

I was living in the U.S., where rights were relatively equal for men and women, so I never thought about that. It was harder to be Nicolás' daughter than to be a woman, and to come from the world of medicine where I was an expert, to the world of wine, where I had no experience. At first I had to deal with the fact that people listened to me because I was Nicolás Catena's daughter.

When do you think they stopped seeing you as Nicolás' daughter?

That was when we started doing research and we began to see the results. I began to study the vineyard in detail. If we wanted to make great wines, everything depended on "terroir," as the French say. And not just the vineyard, but each parcel and each plant, which is an ecosystem in itself. I'm the mother of the Catena Institute of Wine – all research is presented to me and I am the critic. I know a lot about viticulture and winemaking and I have a good palate, though I believe I have a better nose. Now, when we taste our wines, I am able to say to our winemaker that I don't like the oak in a certain wine for instance, and it is absolutely true.

How do you split your time between the winery and the hospital?

If you take Skype into account, I spend 80% of time in Argentina. I take the children at school at 8, and unless I play tennis with my friends, I'm busy with conference calls until 2 pm. Sometimes I receive samples and we organize

tastings and discuss the wines. I work at the hospital at nighttime and pretty much during weekends. I travel to Argentina during harvest time (February and March), in August, to perform the assemblage and one or two times more during the year, to taste the wines. I would say that I spend 6 months in San Francisco, 3 or 4 months in Mendoza and the rest of the year traveling the world.

Do you ever think of quitting your job at the hospital?

The hospital is my emotional life, and I will continue working there as long as I can. Besides, I have no fantasies about retirement. To me, wine is the amusing part: the hospital is the emotional side and wine is the fun.

Are any of your children interested in wine?

Luca (16) wants to be a physician; Nicola (9) wants to be a teacher, and Dante (13) wants to create things. The other day Dante said to me: "Sometime ago I thought I wanted to work with you and Nono (grandfather), but not anymore. I read that the orange flavor is the flavor preferred by most people, so I want to create an orange liqueur and sell it. I want to create stuff." To me, it is important that family members work at the winery. But I'll take my father's advice: he believes that you should not push anyone to join the family business; instead you should let them decide and come to it for themselves. And I believe he is right.