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Winning streak for domestic Sangiovese

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For two years running, Windsor Oaks Vineyards' winemaker Julie Hagler Lumgair has claimed the National Women's Wine Competition "Women Winemaker's Challenge, Judges' Choice Award" for her Chalk Hill Super Tuscan, a $45 blend of 75% Sangiovese, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Syrah. Windsor Oaks Vineyards & Winery [not to be confused with Windsor Vineyards which specializes in custom-labeled wines for corporate gift programs] overlooks the Russian River Valley and spans the Sonoma Coast, Russian River and Chalk Hill AVAs. Lumgair and her husband Douglas along with partner Bob Stein farm 250 acres on their 710-acre estate from which she selects some of the choicest lots (about 5 percent of the estate's fruit) for their Windsor Oaks wines. The estate grows twelve different varieties and sells fruit to 35 different winemakers but Lumgair's own portfolio draws plenty of attention; she makes dozens of wines including Pinot Noirs from at least four different clones and has all but mastered Sangiovese, a finicky variety that requires no less than ideal site selection and extremely low yields for optimal quality.

Plantings of Sangiovese in California peaked in 2000 and though early efforts with the variety were underwhelming and overpriced, winegrowers have worked out the kinks and are producing single varietal and blended wines that are performing well both at retail and in wine competitions. Lumgair who only sells her wines direct saw her Super Tuscan sell out immediately after the announcement of her repeat win at the NWWC. "Given the success the variety is now enjoying, we expect to see more Sangiovese blends entering the market over the next few vintages." Sangiovese wines from Livermore and Napa Valleys, Calaveras, Lodi, Lake and Santa Barbara Counties, Paso Robles, and the Sierra Foothills have received gold medals in the several of the state's largest wine competitions.

Lumgair's blend falls into the New World definition of Super Tuscan, a term that was coined as a catch-all phrase for wines with a significant Sangiovese component - in this case 75% - that have been blended with international varieties like Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon. Oddly enough, many of the Italian wines like those produced by Sassicaia and Ornellaia that first came to fame as Super Tuscans do not include Sangiovese and are stylistically closer to red Bordeaux blends.