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LONG ISLAND

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2nd generation comes of age

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Jason Damianos points to the vine-stitched fields of his family's Pindar Vineyards and recalls he was 13 years old when he first worked this stretch of wine country in Peconic. This week, as the company celebrated a quarter century in the wine business, Damianos, 37, celebrated a milestone of his own: He was formally named Pindar chief executive.

Last weekend, Jason and his brothers, vineyard manager Pindar Damianos, and Alexander Damianos, who runs the company's Duck Walk Vineyards in Southampton, took over day-to-day operations from their father, Pindar founder Dan Damianos.

Jason Damianos said yesterday that his father will remain the key decision maker at Pindar, and run advertising, marketing and other functions, still working from the headquarters in Peconic.

But the three brothers, who had already been the key figures in running Long Island's largest vineyard, now take center stage in determining its future. Jason Damianos said his role will be that of lead decision maker should any question of strategy or operations come to dispute, which he doesn't expect. "We are very close," he said. "We work well together. We'll be working as a team."

New harvest, new building

As Pindar begins its massive fall harvesting, Jason Damianos said a new 37,000-square-foot building that contains a warehouse, barrel cellar, offices, fermenting tanks and a laboratory will play a role in his plans to continue to grow the business. Pindar will bottle about 100,000 cases of wine this year; he wants to expand that to 150,000 cases during the next five to 10 years.

Meanwhile, Pindar continues to plant new vines, with the aim of relying less on grapes brought in from outside regions. Around 10 percent of its wine is made from outside grapes. "Eventually, we'll be at 100 percent of our own," Jason Damianos said. "It just takes time."

Pindar has 425 acres under vine, with about 150 acres not yet planted. But that changes every year, he said, noting that Pindar planted 10 new acres of Riesling grapes this year.

In addition to his long history at Pindar, Jason Damianos has an extensive education in

vine cultivation and wine making. After earning a business degree at the University of Hartford, he moved west to earn a second degree in wine making at California State University in Fresno.

He then spent 2.5 years at the University of Bordeaux in France studying viticulture and oenology, coming up just shy of a master's degree. The experience "helped our business out enormously," he said.



Acreeage yield is up

A vineyard once content to yield 1 to 2 tons of grapes per acre now derives between 4 and 8 tons, he said. Jason Damianos is also owner of Jason's Vineyard in Jamesport, a 20-acre boutique winery with plans to bottle around 3,500 cases of high-end wine a year.

Production capacity at Pindar continues to increase. The new fermenting room contains stainless steel tanks with a capacity of 155,000 gallons, and a new 25-ton grape press allows Pindar to harvest and press grapes at the height of ripeness.

"We can pull in a lot more fruit on a given day," Damianos said. "It increased our efficiency by 1,000 percent."

Quality is the key

But cognizant that the giant of Long Island's

wine industry can be criticized as being too mass-market, he said all the improvements are aimed at enhancing the quality of Pindar wines. (The vineyard recently received a gold medal for its Pythagoras wine, he said.)

Calling the leadership transition "exciting news," Steve Bate, executive director of the Long Island Wine Council, noted Dan Damianos and Pindar have "done more than any other [local winery] in extending the reach of Long Island wines, throughout New York and the country."

But with Jason Damianos' expertise and education, he said, the winery has managed to keep an eye on quality. "They have, over time, probably won more awards" than most local wine makers, he said.

He said he expects Dan Damianos, who is on the council's board of directors, to remain active at Pindar and in the local wine industry. "We need him," he said. "We need his wisdom."

Jason Damianos said one part of Pindar's mission is to educate Long Islanders on wine. They start with the sweeter, less expensive wines like Pindar's Summer Blush or Winter White, "and then move up and into more sophisticated wines." Noting that wine consumption now outpaces that of beer nationally, he has no intention of letting Pindar's place in the market slip.

"Like any company, we want to increase sales and try to be profitable," he said.

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