ALLA WALLA, Wash. — At the center of this constellation featuring some of the wine world’s brightest stars stands Gilles Nicault alongside founding owner Allen Shoup at storied Long Shadows Vintners.

Some may not realize Nicault already was a standout winemaker in 2003 when he helped launch Long Shadows, transferring his talents from famed Woodward Canyon, just seven miles to the west.

“I didn’t deserve that luck,” Shoup said. “My life has been made up of a lot of fortunate situations, and Gilles is right there at the top.”

Their remarkable teamwork, stunning wines and seemingly endless string of successes prompted Wine Press Northwest to select Long Shadows Vintners as the 2018 Winery of the Year.

**BY ERIC DEGERMAN**

Long Shadows winemaker Gilles Nicault picks Cabernet Sauvignon samples from Candy Mountain Vineyard.

Richard Duval
Long Shadows Vintners as its 2018 Pacific Northwest Winery of the Year.

Fifteen years ago, Nicault’s choice to leave Woodward Canyon for this cutting-edge project was bittersweet for founding winemaker/co-owner Rick Small. “This was Gilles’ second time back with me because he had worked for me before, but I told Allen that it was such a great opportunity for Gilles and I was happy for him,” Small said. “Gosh, the times we spent with Gilles and (wife) Marie-Eve (Gilla) learning about French culture, their values and their appreciation for wine and food were such wonderful times. It changed our lives, and Gilles and I are still very, very good friends.”

Shoup, who resigned as CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates in 2000, already had signed up famed Bordeux winemaker Michel Rolland, John Duval of Penfolds Grange fame in Australia and Agustin Huneeus Sr. of storied Quintessa in Napa, who then brought aboard Philippe Melka. Also signed on were Napa Valley’s Randy Dunn, Armin Diel from Germany and the Italian father/son team of Ambrogio and Giovanni Folonari.

Diel recently has stepped away, as have the Chianti Classico producers, but their inspiration remains in the Riesling program branded as Poet’s Leap and the Super Tuscan-styled Saggi.

“It was an all-star team for real, and they were coming to Eastern Washington,” Nicault said. “This was Allen’s vision to bring all these winemakers, and it’s not just benefited Long Shadows. It’s benefited everyone in Washington state by bringing in their winemaking techniques, improving the quality in the grapes and the awareness of all these wines. All of these international winemakers have followings, so they are looking at our wines.”

Dunn produces the Cabernet Sauvignon brand known as Feather. Duval’s Syrah is called Sequel. For Melka, it is the Left Bank Bordeaux blend Pirouette. Rolland develops Merlot-heavy Pedestal.

Nicault and his team continue the traditions for Poet’s Leap and Saggi.

And then there’s Chester-Kidder, the blend of Syrah with Cab that Shoup and Nicault collaborate on by themselves. It is named for Shoup’s mother and paternal grandmother, and the 2014 Chester-Kidder ($60) earned a Platinum last year from Wine Press Northwest. The 2009 vintage was poured at the White House.

Shoup describes Nicault, who oversees 18,000 cases, as a “phenomenon.” “It comes across in everything he does,” Shoup said. “He does get upset if he finds bad glass in the bottling line, but otherwise he’s remarkably positive and that extends to the public.”

Nicault, the son of a wine merchant in Avignon, France, was 33 when he landed the job with Long Shadows, and while he hasn’t looked back, he continues to feel the pressure of the job. “This is Allen’s vision, and he has earned so much respect that I’ve always wanted to make the best wine in the world,” Nicault said. “Allen has given me all the tools for success, and I can’t screw up. I get to work with the best grapes, the best equipment, the best barrels. I have a great team here - and a great friendship with Allen and all of the winemakers.”

In the early days, there were more visits with Nicault’s mentors and wine samples being shipped across the globe to these international stars. In some instances, he’d fly to California to meet with Melka and Rolland. And now that Shoup and Nicault have focused on the core vineyards for their program, winemakers such as Dunn and Duval time their visits to the harvest for their wines.

“I love the communication and the direction that I get from the other winemakers,” Nicault said. “It is my job to make unique wine that’s going to reflect each winemaker’s style.”

Shoup is a man of intellect and understated elegance. His résumé in the world of luxury goods includes E & J Gallo, the world’s largest wine producer, and cosmetics giant Max Factor. He arrived in Washington in 1980 to work at what is now Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, where he spent 20 years. His resignation was by no means a retirement.

His storied career at Ste. Michelle included creating the Auction of Washington Wines in 1988 to raise money for Seattle Children’s Hospital. “There’s probably not a person in Washington who has been here a while who doesn’t know someone who’s benefited from the services of Children’s Hospital,” Shoup points out.

It has since included Washington State University’s winemaking program and grown into the fourth-largest charity wine auction in

Long Shadows Vintners
1604 Frenchtown Road
Walla Walla, WA 99362
Winery tasting room open by appointment
https://longshadows.com

Long Shadows Vintners
Tasting Room - Woodinville
14450 Woodinville-Redmond Road, #105
Woodinville, WA 98072

“Their friendship with Allen and all of the winemakers, and he has earned so much respect that I’ve always wanted to make the best wine in the world.”

Gilles Nicault, Long Shadows Vintners
“Anyone who has gone to Provence has come back and wondered, ‘Why aren’t we drinking something like this back home?’”

Allen Shoup, founding owner of Long Shadows Vintners

the U.S., a benefit that has raised more than $41 million.

Shoup’s accomplishments at Ste. Michelle included the collaboration with the Antinori family of Italy that in 1995 became Col Solare, now a grand property and winery on Red Mountain.

Its inspiration was Opus One, the joint venture between Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe de Rothschild. Mondavi became a cherished figure for Shoup.

“He had so much influence over me in so many ways,” Shoup said. “He was like a second father.”

Mondavi was an early supporter of Long Shadows and there were plans for him to be a partner, but he became ill and died in 2008 at the age of 94. Shoup delivered one of Mondavi’s eulogies.

Like Col Solare and the Eroica Riesling project, which Shoup also developed for Ste. Michelle, Long Shadows was designed with sommeliers in mind.

“Anyone who makes fine wines sees themselves for white tablecloth restaurants and sees that as a significant part of their business, but now with so many wine collectors and serious wine drinkers, that allows us to sell more than 50 percent direct to the consumer,” Shoup said.

That magnificence has trickled down into the predictable success for Nine Hats, a reference to the nine principals involved at Long Shadows.

“We would have these barrels of very expensive and very good wine that didn’t make the blends of these folks,” Shoup said. “The fastest-growing category is the $30 and under, so we decided to take it further. We don’t serve it any longer in Woodinville, and never served it in Walla Walla because we wanted to protect the Long Shadows Vintners name.”

The second label, which Shoup first sketched out on a restaurant napkin, has become so successful that it now has its own tasting room in Seattle’s SODO Urbanworks.

“It just doesn’t stop,” Nicault said. “The name, the packaging, everything has been incredible.”

This winter, Shoup became a restaurateur by opening Nine Pies, a pizza bar and full-service restaurant led by executive chef Cary Kemp that’s adjacent to the Nine Hats tasting room.

Shoup often gets asked about a 10th “hat” to Long Shadows. Sparkling wine is a glaring absence, but it isn’t a fit for a winery devoted to the Columbia Valley.

“You would be competing against such an established and powerful image in Champagne,” Shoup said. “No one has made $100 sparkling wine in the United States, and in Washington we don’t even grow the most important grape (Pinot Noir) for it.”

Nicault quips, “The only thing I want to do with bubbles is drink them.”
Over time, however, they’ve created a Chardonnay called Dance as well as brands with tiny production called Shoup (a red Bordeaux blend) and Côte Nicault, a tip of the cap to the Rhône Valley’s GSM blends of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. Nicault works closely on it with Tedd Wildman’s remarkable StoneTree Vineyard on the Wahluke Slope.

The second generation at Long Shadows seems firmly in place with young Ryan Shoup, who manages the tasting rooms, and stepson Dane Narbaitz entrenched as president. His background includes sales positions with Kendall-Jackson and Mondavi, where Opus One was part of his portfolio. And the remarkable rosé of Pinot Gris — Julia’s Dazzle — is named after Narbaitz’s daughter and was inspired by Domaines Ott, a storied rosé producer in Provence.

“I wanted to do something like that while I was at Ste. Michelle, and I probably should...
have done it sooner for Long Shadows because I bought so many cases of Ott for my wife,” Shoup chuckled. “Anyone who has gone to Provence has come back and wondered, ‘Why aren’t we drinking something like this back home?’ It’s perfect for a sunny afternoon on the patio with a ham sandwich or eating cheese.”

A voracious reader, Shoup, 74, spends a minimum of four hours a day with three daily newspapers and magazines such as The Economist.

“I’ve always got six or seven books going, too,” he said.

An inductee into Legends of Washington Wine Hall of Fame in 2014, Shoup has begun to slow down, devote more time to family and reach out more often to close friends such as artist Dale Chihuly and longtime LSV partner Agustin Huneeus Sr., whom Shoup likens to “a brother.”

“My wife and I are traveling a lot more than we’ve ever been able to,” Shoup said, enjoying times in Montenegro and London while looking forward to Sun Valley, the Caribbean and Lake Como in Italy for a friend’s wedding.

Seemingly the only topic that strains his bond with Nicault is the Frenchman’s passion for motorcycles. Shoup would rather Nicault, who became a U.S. citizen in 2012, shift more to hiking and spending time with his two teen-aged children and Marie-Eve Gilla, founding winemaker for Forgeron Cellars in Walla Walla.

“One is a dirt bike; it’s a Yamaha 450 WR. The other one is a KTM 1290cc Super Adventure,” Nicault said. “I followed Allen’s advice in 2017 and got rid of my Triumph 1050 Speed Triple in 2017. It was too much of a beast.”

Shoup admits, “I’m very upset with that. He thinks he’s on the Autobahn, and it would personally destroy me if he ever got injured, but we hug every time we see each other. I literally love him. He’s become a part of my family.”

**ERIC DEGERMAN** is co-founder and CEO of Great Northwest Wine. Learn more about wine at [www.greatnorthwestwine.com](http://www.greatnorthwestwine.com).