

A vintage 20 years in the making: Alumni-owned winery rooted in innovation

Get to know the Minors this Women in Wine Day

By Megan Neely, ASU News
March 23, 2026

Before they were the owners of an award-winning California winery, Sean and Nicole Minor were two undergraduates at Arizona State University — unaware that their introduction would change the course of both their lives.

In the spring of 1986, Sean, a finance graduate, and Nicole, a communications graduate, met through the Tempe campus' annual Greek Sing event.

Nicole was the second in her family to become a Sun Devil. She had visited her brother who was studying at ASU when she was in seventh grade, and she had known instantly it was the school for her.

"I felt it, there was a heartbeat. The sun was shining and everyone was in shorts, and I thought, 'OK, I like this place,'" Nicole said. "I was drawn to communications because, truly, I wanted to be in the theater world somewhere. I was very comfortable and a natural at speaking with people, and it just spoke to me. That's how I got there."

As for Sean, he wanted to study business to set a good base for himself. His involvement in Greek life helped him apply what he had learned in the classroom to real-world situations.

"I was fortunate I had some leadership positions, so I interacted with a lot of different people on campus, not just people from the Greek system, but also the student body, and it was just an all-around amazing experience," Sean said.

Fast-forward 40 years, four children and a family business later, a recent trip back to the desert quickly resurfaced those early memories.

"It's fun to be back here and reminisce, walk the campus and remember all those great times that we had here at ASU. We grew up together here," Sean said.

(Video: {<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQWOCpNLLms>})

The road to wine

Through ASU's career services, Sean found a job in the wine industry right after graduation in 1988. As he gained more experience, he started to envision a reality where he and Nicole would begin their own brand.

Growing up in Kansas with a family that had owned farms, Sean knew what it felt like to see a product go from farm to table, and he wanted to carry that spirit through to winemaking.

"In winemaking, you're really taking it, shepherding it all the way. To see it sitting on a table and being a part of the enjoyment is something that's really special," Sean said.

Nicole said her passion for wine draws from her heritage and what happens at the family dinner table.

"We have four children, and I grew up in a big Italian family. We were noisy, but we sat at the table for two to three hours at a time. For us, wine is that time where you stop, breathe and you come together and turn off life for a little bit," Nicole said. "It's a great industry to be in, and it's a lot of fun. We thought, well, why can't everybody have this?"

The Minors also saw the price of wine continually rising, especially for a good bottle. They wanted to produce something to counteract that — taking their experience to create a brand that was focused on producing affordable wines that exceeded expectations.

As Sean puts it: "Good enough to enjoy Monday through Thursday in terms of someone's pocketbook but maintaining the quality that can be served on a Friday and Saturday for special occasions."

So when the right time came, [Sean Minor Wines](#) was created in 2005 (originally named Four Bears Winery after their four children), located north of San Francisco in Sonoma, California. Since its establishment, it has grown to become an international label and can be found in all 50 states and 15 countries.

A nose for opportunities

The Minors attribute much of their success to their experiences at ASU, from the leadership roles they held to the opportunities offered through their degrees.

One experience that Nicole said she is grateful for was a study abroad trip to Italy. She started taking Italian in college to fulfill her degree requirements and connect with her family roots.

"It introduced me to culture outside of the United States. I feel like that moment in time taught me that I could do anything. I can speak Italian, learn about a different culture and their methods, and I can learn about the Earth there," she said. "I can learn just about anything. I didn't just have to go to school and study the regular things, but I could turn it into whatever I wanted."

It also gave her skills she uses today at the winery.

“It opened up actual communication and speaking in front of people. Back then, there was no Google Translate; we had to look it up in a book,” Nicole said. “So I was pulling up my boots and going, and that's what ASU gave me.”

One of Sean's favorite courses in college was on entrepreneurship, where the class had to take a consultative approach to conduct a business analysis of an organization.

“Having individuals from different parts of the college participating in that project opened up my eyes to being able to work with other people,” Sean said. “I think the balance between the scholastic aspects, as well as some of the leadership positions I had in Greek life, brought all that together.”

He said ASU possesses an entrepreneurial spirit that gave him the experiences necessary to be successful after graduating.

“I was running my first winery as a general manager and president at age 35. I don't think I would have been able to do that without the experience that I had at ASU,” Sean said.

Family ties to the vines

But when it came to running a business together, it took more than just the skills and lessons the Minors learned at ASU; it was also having the support of each other to be successful.

Since the company began, Sean has been the primary winemaker, with Nicole taking on the role of marketing director.

“You have to have a strong partner that understands the sacrifices of it, but then also knowing that I felt very confident that we could work together,” Sean said. “I would stay in my lane and do what I do well, and she would do what she does well — the social media aspect, the label design and the marketing side of things. I was more the business and winemaking side of things. It's the perfect match.”

Their first release was a cabernet sauvignon with a bottle that paid homage to ASU's maroon and gold colors.

“It was very cool, retro. It had sort of a midcentury look and brought in the desert,” Nicole said.

Now, after 20 years of the winery being in business, their daughter, Elle Minor, has also joined the team as a winemaker. She has her own innovative ideas for the brand, such as fermenting sauvignon blanc in clay amphorae vessels, a type of container that was mostly used for storing wine in ancient Greece.

“Women in wine is an important aspect of this business. We're watching our daughter come into this business and say, ‘I want to do things that are a little bit different,’” Nicole said. “It offers different nuances to the wine, and she's not afraid to do that, which is great. I think the creativity that she has in wine is wonderful, and the support of women in wine is really beautiful.”

Full-bodied advice

One of the biggest lessons Nicole said she took away from her time at ASU is to make the jump when possible.

“When I landed here, I felt like I could do anything. Maybe it’s the sun, the palette of the surroundings or the people, but I think that if you overthink it, you’ll never do it,” Nicole said. “... We never felt like we were taking risks here; we felt like we could do anything.”

For Sean, the people around him helped make his time at ASU a success. His mentors were resources he could lean on for help and advice.

“I’m just always amazed at how many students around us who graduated at the same time have been so successful. We have governors that came out of this university, we have entrepreneurs and business leaders that have been unbelievably successful,” Sean said. “Being able to call on those resources as a graduate or as a current student is just invaluable.

“The environment here at ASU just provided a way to find your place and really grow within that place. So it was something very special.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Nicole and Sean Minor, owners of Sean Minor Wines, met while attending Arizona State University. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU

Text image(s)



The original label under Sean Minor Wines' previous name, 4Bears. Photo courtesy of the Minor family

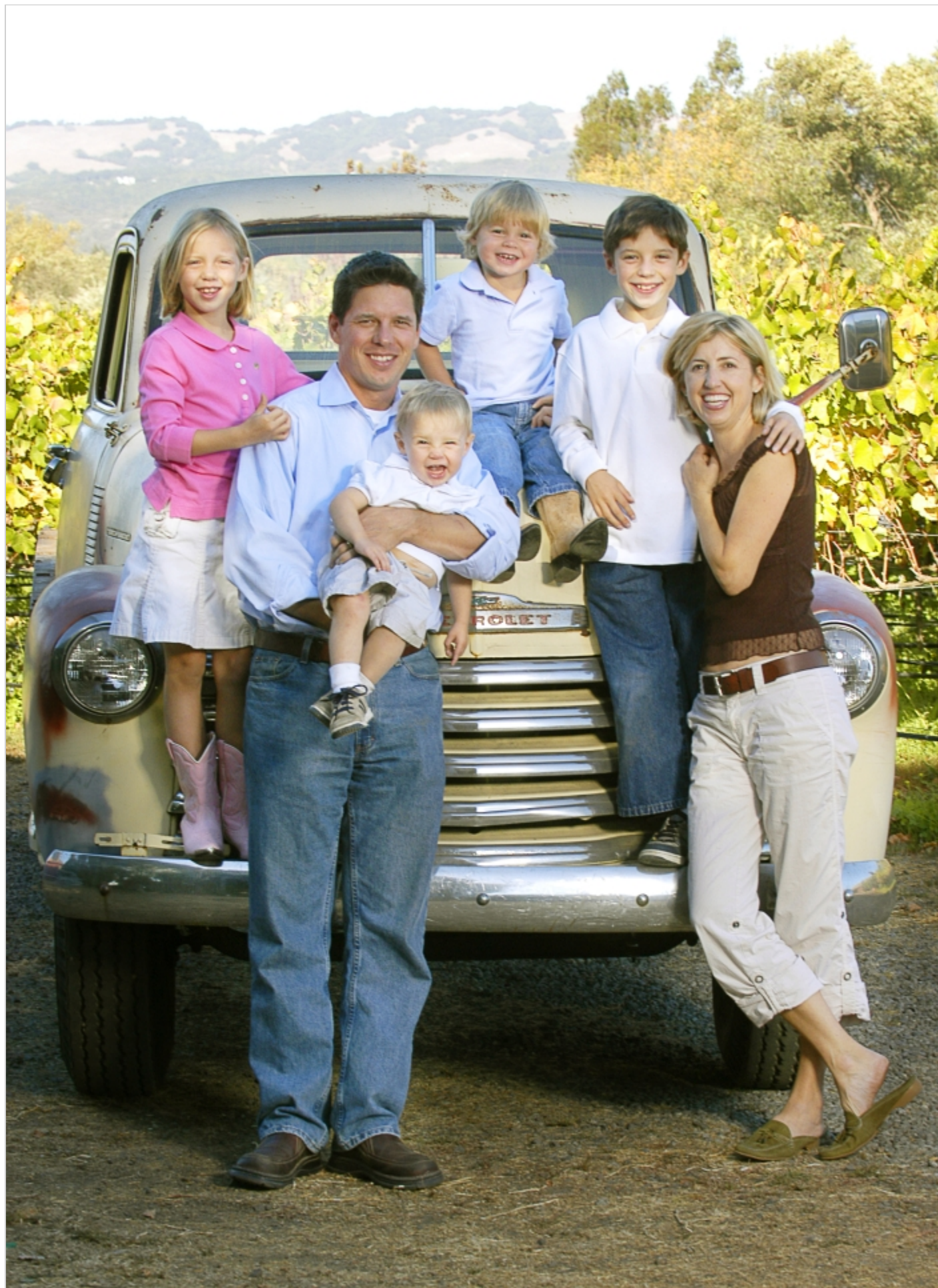
Gallery



Nicole and Sean Minor at Sean's ASU graduation in December 1984.



Sean and Nicole Minor skiing in Flagstaff in 1987.



Sean and Nicole Minor with their four children (from left) Elle, Charlie, Jack and Nick, in 2005. Elle now works for the business as a winemaker.



Sean Minor checks on sauvignon blanc grapes during a harvest season.



Nicole and Sean Minor at the bottling line doing inspections.



Sean and Elle Minor pose for a photo in the vineyard during the 2023 harvest season.