

LEGAL LEADERSHIP: GENERAL COUNSEL ON NAVIGATING CHANGE

Delicato's General Counsel, Jolene Yee, on the Pandemic's Demands and an Industry in Flux

A crucial aspect of general counsel's role is to see multiple steps ahead, predict pain points, and plan for every eventuality. Fulfilling that responsibility is particularly challenging during periods of widespread disruption and social change. In Winston & Strawn's series *Legal Leadership: General Counsel on Navigating Change*, prominent legal chiefs weigh in on the short- and long-term ramifications of current events including the global pandemic, diversity and inclusion, and the economic, operational, and cultural impact of today's most pressing legal issues on their businesses and industries.


Jolene Yee is Vice President and General Counsel of Delicato Family Wines, one of the ten largest wineries in the United States. She spoke with Eva Davis, Managing Partner of Winston & Strawn's Los Angeles office and Co-Chair of its Private Equity Practice.

How has Delicato been affected by the pandemic?

Surprisingly, we were actually better positioned than we might have otherwise been because last year, our CEO and management team recognized that our industry was at a crossroads. We saw a flattening of demand in the wine industry after many years of growth, and the emergence of trends like Dry January and an overall focus on wellness. On the other hand, wine drinkers today are more knowledgeable and sophisticated, and are utilizing online resources for the research and purchase of wine, which presents challenges due to industry regulations. All of these issues led us to review anything that wasn't essential so that we could remain focused on what really moves the needle. This translated into our 2020 strategic goal: Focus on What Matters. When the pandemic hit, we were already more nimble and highly focused on streamlining our ways of working.

That was pretty forward thinking. How has the pandemic changed your priorities as general counsel?

Wineries have been considered "essential businesses" in California, so while our administrative functions have moved to working remotely, the winery itself has continued to be fully operational. So, my team and I have been collaborating with industry trade associations to develop standards to keep employees safe under these new conditions. I've also been much more involved than I was before in governmental affairs, communicating with both Napa County and the governor's office on issues like the reopening



of tasting rooms. And like many other companies, we've been closely examining our supply chain and our force majeure clauses. We're actually in the fortunate position of having increased demand for our product during the pandemic, and working to stay ahead of that.

What do you think the long-term effect of the pandemic will be?

We're looking at what we can learn from this experience, to see where we've become more efficient and more productive. Where we find efficiencies, I don't think we'll be going back to the way things were before. This is going to open up a number of questions: What sorts of flexible work arrangements do we want to offer for those whose jobs make it an option? How does more remote work change the skill sets we need? Can we hire from a broader pool of candidates?

Aside from the pandemic, what are some of the issues on your agenda?

Even though I'm general counsel, I'm very business-oriented in how I approach my role. You have to work hand-in-hand with your business partners. I restructured our legal team to assign individual lawyers to the various business unit heads. So our lawyers are in the business unit leadership meetings where the decisions are being made, and in the marketing meetings when potential trademarks are being hashed out. That way, we can be part of the business and part of the solution, instead of coming in at the end and saying, "No."

What are your thoughts on the role of women in the wine industry?

When I started at my first winery in 2002, I was the only woman on a six-person legal staff. The general counsel, who was a man, made it a priority to advance women in the profession, and his next five hires were women. That's an example of the level of commitment that's needed for greater gender equality. We started the Delicato Women's Leadership Initiative to help support the development of the women at our winery. I'm also part of a women's industry networking group that has sprung up organically, involving both female general counsel in the industry and female lawyers at outside firms who are involved with the industry. All of us, men and women, need to commit to move the needle.

What do you miss in this time of lockdowns and social distancing?

Professionally, I miss the spontaneity and creativity that comes from being able to physically meet with my team. Personally, I miss being able to cheer my kids on as they are out in the world, at baseball games, theater, and so on. And I miss playing live with my band, The Sirens, where I sing and play keyboard. We had just lined up some gigs when the pandemic hit. Instead, we're now writing and recording some of our own material. All in isolation, of course!



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Legal Leadership: General Counsel on Navigating Change is brought to you by [Winston & Strawn's Women's Leadership Initiative \(WLI\)](#). The WLI is a cornerstone of the firm's diversity and inclusion programs aimed at increasing hiring, retention, and promotion of women lawyers. Click [here](#) to see all of the interviews in this series.



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