

Six Sigma[®] Ranch, Vineyards & Winery

the Unusual Suspects

Six Sigma becomes a partner in quality at five unexpected places

BY JAMIE FRIDDLE

It is in the places where Six Sigma is least likely to be found that a philosophy of quality can have the most impact. Admittedly, Six Sigma is a discipline as much as it is a way of thinking about processes, and doing it right can require more resources and expertise than are typically available in small businesses and nonprofit organizations. Yet an application of Six Sigma at just such a place can result in much-needed improvements. In some cases, the impact can be dramatic – turning imminent failure into long-term success. In the following U.S. organizations, Six Sigma is clearly making a difference.

Grape Logic

Six Sigma Ranch and Vineyards, Lower Lake, Calif.



Is winemaking art or science? According to Kaj Ahlmann, it is both. He is in a position to know: Ahlmann is a practiced mathematical statistician (he studied variance analysis in Copenhagen, Denmark, under noted Danish statistician Anders Hald), and the owner of a vineyard in Northern California.

The native Dane loves wine. He grew up around it as a child in Europe, enjoyed it as a business student in France, and by his adult years had fixated on

the Spanish Tempranillo as a real champion grape. When he stepped down from his role as head of

GE's Employers Reinsurance Corp., he returned to the fruits of his childhood. In 2000, he and his wife, Else, bought 4,300 acres 10 miles from the Napa County-Lake County line for a vineyard.

"When I started in the wine business, I wanted to produce a quality product," Ahlmann said. "And I started from the top. 'Why don't we call this thing Six Sigma Ranch to indicate that it's going to be a slightly different operation?' I looked at the entire process, from doing the research before you plant the vineyard to producing the wine. It's a very well-defined process, and in every step of the way you can actually apply Six Sigma."

Ahlmann currently sells five wines on the market and by the end of the year plans to sell seven wines that range from Cabernet Sauvignon to Sauvignon Blanc to his beloved Tempranillo.



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