

Fifteen **FASCINATING** Oregonians

John Stuart

BY GARY CORBIN

CHANGING CAREERS AT AGE 52 — particularly, moving from the world of high finance to low prairie farming — might strike some people as a bit of a gamble.

But then again, John Stuart knows something about risk.

Stuart began his career in the health insurance industry in the 1970s in Las Vegas, selling and administering megapolicies to large hoteliers and casinos. "You might say I was lucky, or just lazy," he says with a laugh. "I looked around and asked, 'How can I make the most sales with the least effort?' There were these huge, growing labor pools and they needed insurance. All I had to do was walk in the door."

Doors opened, and business expanded. This was no surprise; in his graduate thesis at the University of Arizona, he predicted that Las Vegas would be the fastest-growing community in the country by 2000. "I was off by five years," he says. "It happened in 1995."

Before long, his eye for opportunity led him directly into the heart of the expanding world of casino gambling. In 1989, he invested in the Rio All Suite Hotel and Casino just off the strip. But even then, his reach began to extend to his future Northwest home.

"Since I was raised in Europe, I had developed a taste for fine wine at a young age," he recalls. "Then we sent our sommelier to Oregon and said, 'Find the guy, the best winemaker, the one making something special and different.'"

He found none other than Carlton's Ken Wright, whom John now describes as "a dear friend." Wright and other Oregon winemakers helped build the Rio's wine cellar into one of the finest in Vegas, if not the world.

Las Vegas changed, and John saw the change. "Not all of it was bad; a lot of it was good," he says, characteristically positive. "Still, people talk about the good old days, the days of frontier justice when the hotel's owner was visible in his own joint."

But the family casino is gone, replaced by mega-corporations with Ivy League MBAs at the helm. Casinos dot the entire landscape, not just the strip. In spite of



the bright lights, the big city was losing its luster. It was time for a new gamble.

An avid outdoorsman, John had fly-fished and hunted in Oregon. "I had a vision of reviving the family farm in a small town close to big-city amenities," he says. "I wanted to leave my kids a legacy of the land, rather than money."

Carlton's small-town values, simple rural life and beautiful scenery just staggering distance from over 100 wineries and Portland's cultural offerings fit the bill perfectly.

Together with his wife Judi, they established Abbey Road Farm in 2003, a bed-and-breakfast on a working farm complete with 53 acres of grass seed production, cherry trees and grazing animals. "We even make chevre cheese now," he says. "Every morning we milk the goats by hand."

With their background in the hospitality business, they have grand plans for their current venture, including a wine tasting room focused principally on Yamhill County wines.

But their vision extends beyond their own farm. "I want to be an advocate for the hospitality industry for the whole community," he says. "Talk about a clean industry. We invite people to visit, enjoy the fine wine and scenery, then wave goodbye as they happily return home, leaving all the beauty for us to enjoy."

One wonders how he manages to make the transition from Vegas glam to Carlton farm look so easy.

In response, Stuart chuckles and says, "I guess I'm just a lucky guy." ○