



Featured California Winegrower: Dennis Atkinson Southern San Joaquin Valley

“At Tejon Ranch, we’ve been entrusted to take care of the land and its assets. We don’t have a view of just what’s good for next week or next year; our vision is for the next 20 – 25 years.”

Consider Dennis Atkinson, small-town kid who trained his sights on big-time farming. And made it.

Dennis is vice president of agriculture at Tejon Ranch, 60 miles north of Los Angeles. Founded in 1843 and formed from several Mexican land grants, it’s the largest and among the oldest working ranches in California.

It’s easy to understand why Dennis has spent 30 years here. There’s the “office” that covers 270,000 acres of oak-dotted hills and blue-skied vistas. Where grazing cattle share the landscape with mountain lions and bears.



Dennis’s job? Overseeing thousands of acres of winegrapes, almonds, pistachios and row crops.

It’s a big responsibility for a man who didn’t grow up in a farming family. Raised 45 miles away in Shafter, Dennis inherited a strong work ethic from his parent’s who moved to California from Oklahoma. “They taught me to be honest, fair, straightforward, and look for opportunities,” Dennis remembers.

Just out of Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, Dennis zeroed in on an entry-level opportunity at Tejon Ranch. And, except for a short time at another agribusiness company, Dennis has worked here ever since.

It’s been a perfect fit. “The best job in the company,” says the man widely known as “Dennis from Tejon.”

With Dennis at its helm, Tejon Ranch is working on sustainability in its farming and ranching operations. State-of-the-art drip irrigation. Drought-tolerant vines. Dennis and his team also have begun planting vineyards at the astonishing elevation of 3,000 feet.

For all his responsibilities, Dennis remains the steady, unpretentious product of his parents’ upbringing. Still lives in the same house he bought after college. Still loves Marlene, his wife of 31 years. Dotes on their two children, now attending California colleges.

And still loves the simple things: A day on a boat catching fish. Riding his bike. Skiing on a mountain when it’s 28 degrees and there’s a foot of fresh powder from the night before.

Small-town kid at heart? Unabashedly. Big-time farmer? Absolutely. Industry consensus? One of the good guys.

On California’s wine industry: “It’s challenging, exciting and rewarding (if you can make the first two work).”
On the future: “Tejon Ranch has been around for 160 years, and we plan to be around at least 160 years more.”
For inspiration: “Just driving around the ranch. You never know what you’re going to see: deer, wild turkey, and pigs, streams, wildflowers.”
Education: Cal-Poly San Luis Obispo, Wildlife resource management