



PAT BROWN

MADE FOR THE MOMENT

By Rebecca Patrick

When he took the reins as CEO at Bloomington-based Oliver Winery last July, Pat Brown was walking into a Hoosier success story ready for the next chapter.

Out of 11,000 wineries in the country, Oliver Winery is the 30th largest – and the only one not on the West Coast. Brown’s charge, as he puts it, is to “leverage that uniqueness.”

Brown is more than up to the task.

A former executive at multi-national consumer products companies Unilever and Johnson & Johnson, he’s also had leadership roles with breakout brand KIND Snacks and WhiteWave, a global organic foods group that includes the Silk line of plant-based dairy.

Brown recently chatted with *BizVoice*® about his career and his plans to further put Oliver Winery on the map.

***BizVoice:* How did your professional path get started? Was sales always part of your plan?**

Pat Brown: “I always had this sporting background and (interest in) athletics and love team sports and working on teams. (So being) part of teams and working on bigger businesses and sales seemed to be something that was in my wheelhouse. Whether that be pharmaceutical or consumer products, and it ended up being consumer products with Unilever.

“I started out as a sales rep in Atlanta with 120 stores. I did resets (rearrangement of store/product layout) at Winn-Dixie’s from 10 at night until eight in the morning. So, that’s kind of how I cut my teeth was really in stores, street-level selling – just learning how stores worked, learning how brands worked, launching new products, etc. I went up the ladder from there into category management and then account management and then people management and then trade marketing.”

***BV:* What’s the best decision you’ve ever made, or any advice that you have for up-and-coming professionals?**

PB: “Part of the success of my career is doing things that other people won’t and saying ‘yes’ and doing things that maybe are nonconventional. I went to Walmart in 1999 with Unilever as a national sales manager on a \$300 million business there. Walmart was just taking off and they were the No. 1 retailer, but still in the industry there was a (thought of), ‘No, that’s not the place to go’. (Yet) I saw a bit of the future. I had gotten glimpses of how they work, and working with Walmart’s like getting an MBA in this business. (It was hard), but they’re fair, honest and focused on the right things. They’re focused on the consumer and the shopper. And if you focus on that with them, you’re going to be successful as a business.

“The other one is at the end of the day, it’s really about people. If you get with the right group of people who are all like-minded and driven, great things can happen.”

***BV:* You worked for so many different and amazing companies. Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you’re particularly proud of?**

PB: “The run at WhiteWave was pretty incredible. We were about a billion dollars; wasn’t a small company but wasn’t a big company. It was 2010 and we rolled up a bunch of better-for-you brands like Silk, Verizon Organic, etc.

“We built this thing from a billion dollars to four billion in seven years. It was well run and the best group of people – everybody on the same page. And we changed an industry. I think (the sale of WhiteWave in 2018) is still the largest transaction ever in the natural organic foods industry. It set the tone for what could happen and how the food industry could and should change. When I got there, (soy milk, organic milk



Oliver Winery’s hospitality roots have long paid off with Hoosiers. “(The company has) built such a strong, loyal following as a brand,” Brown notes. “You have a great experience when you go there. You love the wine. Then you’re in Kroger shopping for your dinner, and you pass a display with Oliver on it and your mind just goes, ‘Of course I need to pick that up!’”

and more) were for those crunchy people who hug trees and all that kind of stuff. Today, it’s mainstream. Almost everybody’s got it in their fridge. I would like to think that we helped mainstream better-for-you food in the U.S., and that’s a cool thing.”

BV: What would you say is your biggest strength that you bring to a company and to Oliver Winery?

PB: “It’s either building things or fixing things. Part of my career has been in supply chain as well. I was VP of supply chain at WhiteWave. So whatever’s interesting to build or fix; I don’t quite like to maintain things. The opportunity at Oliver to come and scale it – where everything else is in place, the production facility, the people and the products are great, the brand is great – that’s kind of what drew me to Oliver. It’s an opportunity to scale the brand with retailers. ... I know how to do that and I’m confident that we’ll make inroads and we are making inroads.

“... A lot of companies and brands we compete with, there’s no history. They haven’t been around for 52 years. (At) Oliver, there’s a founder’s story here that goes back to that American (Dream). If you work hard, you’re dedicated, you do the right things – you can be successful.”

BV: Let’s talk more about the attraction to Bloomington and Oliver Winery?

PB: “I was born and raised in Chicago (before attending junior high and high school in Miami), and we spent a lot of time up in Wisconsin and Iowa. We had a cabin up there. Gosh, the first time I was in Bloomington I’m like, ‘This could be Iowa, this could be southern Illinois, parts of Wisconsin.’ So, it felt like home a little bit because that’s where we grew up. Number two was Bloomington being a college town. I love college towns and college sports.

“Bloomington is a great town, and it comes down to they’re the darn nicest people in the world. And it’s reflective of the people I work with too. The most dedicated, earnest, hardworking people you’d ever want to be a part of. At this stage of my career, probably the No. 1 criteria is who I work with and who I work for. It just couldn’t be better people – from the Olivers to the executive team to the people running the bottling line to the people at the tasting room. There’s no pretension. It’s a lot of focus on the families and a lot of focus on community.”

BV: What are the cornerstones that you go by when you try to build or scale things?

PB: “Start with the right people. You already have some of the basics (if) you’ve got a great brand with great product. You add in the right people, and you get everybody pointed in the right direction with the right strategy and good things are going to happen.

“(Regarding Oliver Winery) I’m optimistic. We think differently than most wineries will, which will serve us moving forward. We’re looking at so many different areas for growth. You’ll see in the coming months and over the next year. There’ll be some pretty dramatic changes to the winery and what we sell, where we sell it and how we sell it.”

BV: Give us an idea of where Oliver Winery stands from a market standpoint and where you want to take the company?

PB: “We’ve been the No. 1 wine in Indiana for nearly 25 years, which I’m not sure in a state any consumer product has done that in a major category like this. And it’s not like we’re a close No. 1 and there’s somebody behind us. We’re so far ahead of our competitors.

“(What) we’re trying to figure out is how do we get that same feeling in Texas or Florida when people don’t have the ability to just drive an hour or two and go to our winery? So, that’s our challenge as we go into different markets: How do we gain that awareness and how do you bring the essence of the winery to people?

“You can look at it two ways. Like, ‘Oh, we’re not in California, so we need to hide from that.’ Or you can celebrate that you’re in the middle of the country with one of the biggest wineries. ... We have a story that I think we can tell better than we have in the past and leverage that.

“And get the right partnerships with the right retailers and this thing will be (even more) successful. I love bringing people to the winery. We brought Target here, we brought Walmart here, and their eyes just got so wide. They’re like, ‘I can’t believe this is in the middle of Indiana.’ They’re blown away by not only the tasting room but also the history and then the facilities ... which includes equipment that’s best in class in the industry.

“The response we get from people is pretty amazing. So, I’m optimistic. This is a great business, and great people. The industry is in a bit of a lull, but it’s been around for 10,000 years. I don’t think it’s going anywhere. ... We’re in a (strong) position, and we’ll come out of this stronger than we went into it.”

RESOURCE: Pat Brown, Oliver Winery, at www.oliverwinery.com