When the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians purchased 1,390 acres of Santa Ynez ranch land known as “Camp 4,” it included 256 acres of vines that were planted with 19 different grape varieties.

In addition to honoring existing contracts for the fruit, the tribe made a decision to embark on its own winemaking venture. In 2013, the tribe launched its wine under the label “Kitá,” which means “our valley oak” in the tribe’s native language of Samala.

Not only is the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians one of the few tribes in the United States that owns a vineyard and produces its own wines, it is the first that has one of its own members as the winemaker: Tara Gomez.

The daughter of a former tribal government official, Richard Gomez, Tara was a young girl when she first visited vineyards with her parents. By the time she was in high school, she knew she wanted to be involved in winemaking. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in enology from California State University, Fresno and after college worked in the wine industry at two local wineries.

She brings a unique perspective to Kitá Wines. In Native culture, balance is a part of every day life. Tara believes that in viticulture, or grape growing and winemaking, it’s the same concept. In grape growing, it’s a balance of the soil, the climate, the geographic region. In winemaking it’s a balance of the fruit, the acid, the alcohol and the structure of the wine.

Since Kitá has been in production, it has won nearly 100 prestigious awards, including the San Francisco International Wine Competition, the Women’s International Wine Competition, the Los Angeles International Wine Competition, and the Central Coast Wine Competition.

In addition, the California State Legislature issued a Certificate of Recognition to the tribe for being the “First Native American tribe to have a Native American winemaker, vineyard and winery operations run solely by tribal people.”

Uncorking those first bottles marked a great day in the history of Native American winemaking and a significant milestone in the history of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians.

Go to www.kitawines.com for more information on Kitá.