

Nevada County's whimsical CEO

John Powers officially retired after a 31-year career as a software engineer in 1997. But he never stopped working.

At 66, he owns and operates Poohbah Industries, an Internet-based business that sells Palm Pilot software to wine, whisky, beer and cigar aficionados. It's called the Master Series — Wine Master, Whisky Master, Cigar Master — and it began when Powers grew curious about Palm Pilots. That's how many of his inventions start: Powers' interest piques and he sets out to develop his own use for a product. In this case, Palm Pilots were gaining popularity in 1998 and he coupled it with his interest in wine. He developed a software program that would allow him to categorize, record notes and rate wines.

"I just created it based on everything I would want to have in a program," Powers says. "Orders started coming in. But what was great was that all these suggestions poured in about how to make it better, and I incorporated those into future releases."

He's a different kind of CEO. Nowhere on his website (poohbah.com) will you find Powers' name. In fact, what you will find is a picture of Powers and his horse, Pepper, with Powers identified only as "Grand," as in Grand Poohbah.

Call it his alter ego and perhaps a nod to his whimsical side.

"In the opera 'The Mikado' the Grand Poohbah was the mayor I think. He always struts around. I thought it was funny," Powers says. "In people's e-mails to me, they get into the spirit of it too. Dear Grand, Grandest Poohbah ... it's tongue in cheek."

He and his wife, Janey, turned in their urban lifestyle nine years ago in Silicon Valley for the slower pace of western Nevada County, where they have a 35-acre ranch near Nevada City. There, they grow and sell hay, raise free-range chickens and sell prize-winning Hopeful Hill Rainbow Eggs (so called because the eggs naturally come in different colors.)

The ranch provided Powers with another idea, the Sunny Buddy. This measures the solar energy generated by solar panels, allowing consumers to calculate how much energy they are saving. Powers got the idea when he wanted to measure his own solar energy at the ranch.

"So this is still work, but with more freedom to choose what I want to do," he says. "I wouldn't call this retirement at all."

— Amy Yannello



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN POWERS