

New wine

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WINERIES



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Don Brissender, left, and winemaker Gregory A. Bruni at new winery.

New winery has grape expectations

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THE VINEYARD hasn't been planted yet and dust is still flying over the construction site of Bear Creek Road's newest winery, but all signals are go for a grand opening in May at Byington Winery, according to general manager Don Brissender.

He's working for his father-in-law Bill Byington, owner of Byington Steel in Santa Clara, at the new winery situated on 60 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

"Bill's always had an interest in good wines, and he has the resources to do it," Brissender said of the winery. "When he does something he always goes first class."

First class it definitely appears. Ground was broken for the multi-million dollar facility last spring, and crews have been busy this month laying custom-made tile, painting and putting the finishing touches on the winery, which will produce four varieties: pinot noir, chardonnay, fume blanc and cabernet sauvignon.

The Visitors Center features a tasting bar, stone fireplace, windows to view the barrels, tanks and winemaking processes, and an outdoor picnic area complete with barbecue facilities and a panoramic view of the Monterey Bay.

Upstairs is an owner's suite for overnight stays and a balcony that runs the length of the building, which will overlook eight acres of pinot noir grapes to be planted in the spring. Most of the grapes used to make the four varieties produced by the winery will be shipped in from premium wine grape companies, according to resident winemaker and consultant Greg Bruni.

He has a degree in winemaking from UC Davis and is working on a master's degree in environmental science at San Jose State University. Bruni's expertise and the company's dedication to quality have paid off already. Byington's first vintage was in 1987 and their pinot noir won a bronze medal at the first — and only — wine show they entered last year. The winemaking is being handled by Bruni now in borrowed space at a San Martin winery.

"Mr. Byington bought me my own barrels, my own press and my own processing equipment," Bruni said. "I'm really a small winery within a big winery right now. It's kind of like being a chef — the pots and pans you use make the real difference."

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Bruni has been in the business since he was 13, when he started working in the family winery.

IT TAKES time to make good wine, and even more time to grow good grapes, Bruni said. The vineyard planted this spring won't be productive for another three years, but it will last to the ripe age of 60 before the vines begin to "poop out," he said.

"We'll have a minimal crop in 1992, but the vines won't really be at their peak of maturity until they're about 12 years old," Bruni said.

Even at their peak of production, the eight acres of pinot noir grapes will yield just about 20 tons of grapes annually, he said. That comes to about 1,400 cases of wine, a fraction of the planned annual turnout of 25,000 cases.

"...The main thing we're trying to achieve here is quality," Bruni said. "We don't want to start off with 15,000 cases of wine and have to push, push, push — because then compromise happens. Our maximum ultimate capacity will be to sell 25,000 cases annually."

Picturesque views and the pastoral scene grace the front of the winery, but the real business goes on in the back. Trucks drive the grapes around to a state-of-the-art crusher, where a giant screw-like device turns the grapes into juice. Inside the winery are stainless steel tanks for fermenting the grape juice, a laboratory for testing and research, and oak barrels for aging and enhancing flavor.

The limited production of Byington wines.

high-quality grapes and state-of-the-art equipment lead to a pricey bottle of wine at an average retail of about \$15, Brissender said. But, he said, the company provides some support to restaurants that handle their wines.

"The Byington family has been in this area for years and the family really supports local business," Brissender said. "If we have a wine-by-the-glass program going in a local restaurant, we bring in friends and have a party to kick it off — things that a lot of other wineries can't do because they aren't in the area."

CONCERN FOR the surrounding community is a real motivator at Byington, Bruni said. He doesn't use the term "organic" because "that doesn't really mean anything," he said.

But, he says, "We're going to be emphasizing environmental responsibility. There will be no pesticides used. We'll use predator control."

"For example, if we had a real problem with leaf-hoppers, rather than going in and spraying to kill the leaf-hoppers, we're going to plant special host trees and bushes. In these host plants lives a wasp that will come in and eat the leaf-hoppers."

Other "predators" include Bruni's dog Cooper and a one-eyed cat, Winchester. Cooper will keep the deer out of the grapes and Winchester's in charge of rodent control, Bruni said. That makes birds about the only problem facing the grapes, and nets will protect the crop rather than shotguns, he said.

Byington growers won't use herbicides either, he said, and have already planted cover crops to conserve topsoil.

"Rather than spraying for weeds, we plant our own 'weeds' and cultivate them," he said. "This is particularly important with the rainfall we get up here. It aids in soil conservation, while herbicides disrupt the natural bacteria in soil."

Water conservation and irrigation are also concerns for Byington, he said.

"We're going to be good neighbors, and we want our neighbors to know that we're conservation conscious," Bruni said.

Brissender said he plans to start marketing Byington wines in Santa Cruz later this month. Byington's visitor's center will be open for tasting in May, and tours can be arranged by calling the winery.