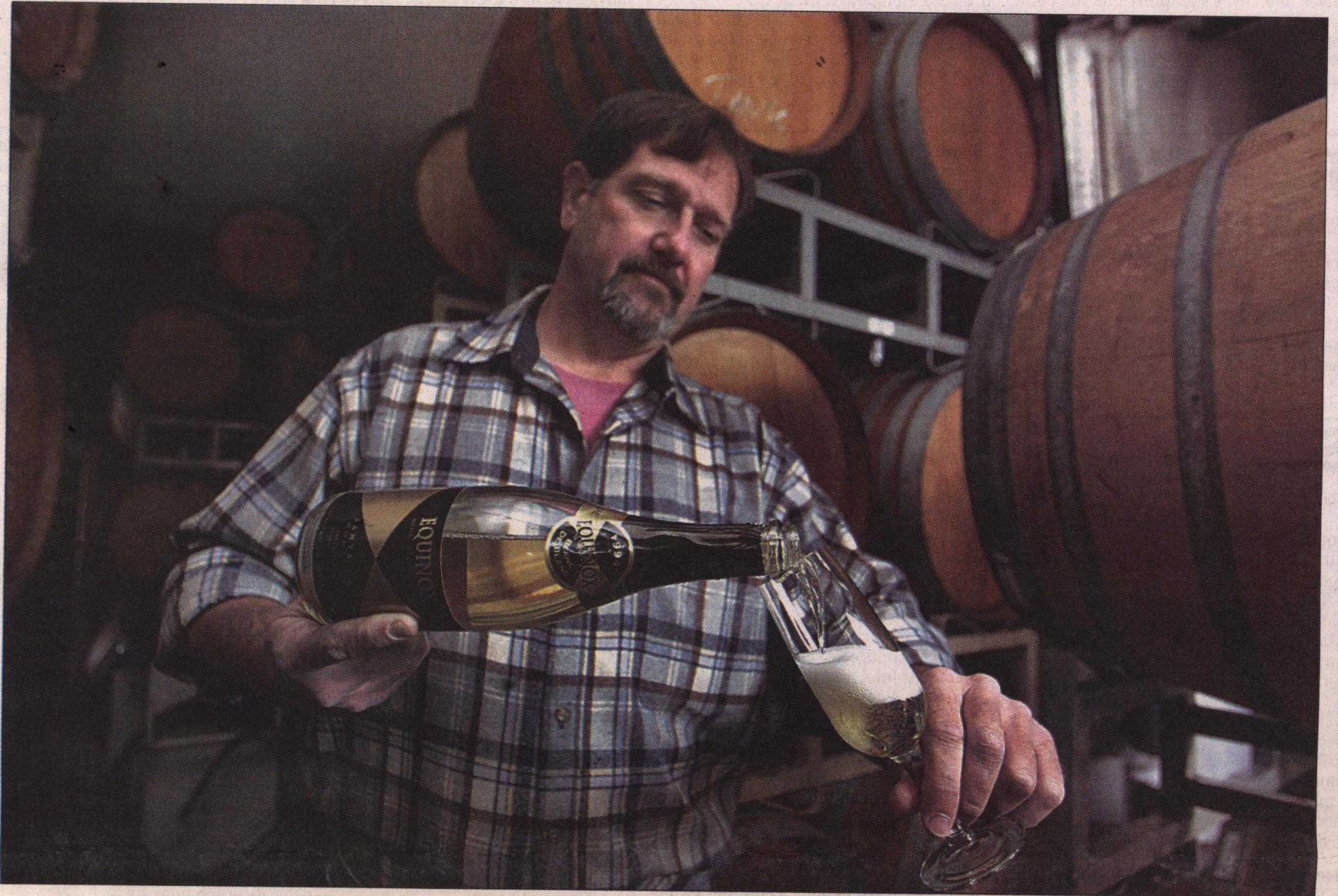


'Making champagne is what you do instead of having money.'

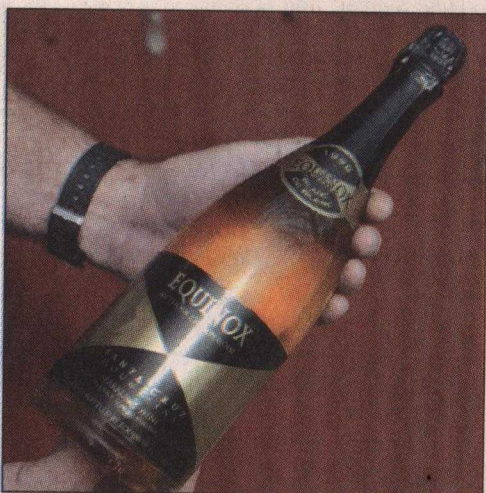
BARRY JACKSON, OWNER, EQUINOX WINERY

Champagne dreams



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Barry Jackson's Equinox winery is the only local vintner whose sole occupation is making champagne-style sparkling wine.



Barry Jackson's bone-dry Equinox champagne style sparkling wine is the only one of its kind in the Santa Cruz area.

Where to buy

WHAT: Equinox Winery of Boulder Creek.
PRODUCT: Limited production of vintage Blanc de Blanc and extended tirage cuvee.
PRICE: Ranges \$30-\$40 a bottle.
AVAILABLE: Shoppers Corner, K's Liquors in Capitola, Breadstix Deli in Aptos, and by mail order.
DETAILS: 338-2646.

Boulder Creek winemaker lone area vintner crafting only sparkling wines

By PEGGY TOWNSEND
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Prohibition played havoc with Paul Mason's champagne-making operation in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

But the clever Frenchman, who had been making champagne in the coastal mountains since 1892, was undeterred.

He won a special dispensation from the government to sell "medicinal champagne."

Which is the kind of resourcefulness anyone who makes champagne for a living has to have, according to Barry Jackson, the only Santa Cruz vintner devoted exclusively to making sparkling wines.

"Making champagne," says the owner of Equinox Winery, "is what you do instead of having money."

Sitting in the cool and yeasty-smelling tasting room of Storrs Winery, Jackson revels in the idea of being kind of a rebel winemaker.

He's not ashamed to say he's never made a profit, or that it's an uphill battle to get people to drink sparkling wines for dinner instead of just at weddings.

But, he says, making champagne is a kind of high art — one that involves patience, hard work and a certain amount of courage.

Ask him if it's easier to make wine than champagne, and he doesn't even have to think before answering.

"Oh god, yes," he says.

But he wouldn't have it any other way.

Shake it up, baby

Equinox sparkling wines had an inauspicious beginning.

On Oct. 12, 1989, clusters of rich grapes were plucked from Trout Gulch Vineyards outside of Aptos and pressed into juice for the winery's first vintage.

By Oct. 17, the juice was fermenting nicely in barrels stacked at Storrs Winery in downtown Santa Cruz, where Jackson makes his champagne.

But at 5:04 p.m. everything changed.

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Champagne

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Shock waves from the Loma Prieta earthquake roared through the winery.

Jackson remembers standing in the middle of stacks of wine-filled oak barrels as the temblor hit.

"Barrels full of fermenting wine were bouncing 5 feet into the air, puking Chardonnay," says Jackson, sitting back in a folding chair, sipping a glass of his sparkling wine.

"Wine was spewing up to the ceiling. It was literally raining Chardonnay."

Equinox Winery lost half its first vintage.

It could have been a sign, but it didn't deter Jackson, who runs a winery consulting business to support his champagne-making operation.

Today, he's got 26,000 bottles of sparkling wines aging at the Old Novitiate Winery in Los Gatos.

A cuvee of California

Jackson has come a long way from his days as a teenager making bootleg applejack with his friends in the fields of Fresno.

Today, he's making award-winning sparkling wines with rich, complex tastes that are praised by wine magazines.

His sparkling wines, he says, are made from the best of French and California techniques.

'I do this because I choose to. Because if you're in the wine business and at all creative, you want to do your own thing.'

BARRY JACKSON, OWNER, EQUINOX WINERY

Taking a cue from the Champagne region of France, Jackson only uses grapes from the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation.

"The best sparkling wines come from cool growing districts" like that of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Jackson says.

Harvesting his grapes late to get the richest flavor, he uses a whole-cluster press technique and doesn't squeeze the life out of his grapes.

Big wineries get 160 to 170 gallons of juice out of a ton of grapes and some come close to 200 gallons, Jackson says.

"We only press 130 gallons of juice out of a ton of grapes," he says. "The remaining portion doesn't make good wine."

He also doesn't ferment his wine in stainless steel tanks like most sparkling winemakers do.

He ferments his in oak barrels.

Each of his bottles then age for at least four years "en tirage," or in contact with the yeast sediment.

"It develops a flavor that is very distinct," Jackson says. It makes his sparkling champagne bone dry and layered with flavor.

It also makes for an expensive proposition.

Because there's a huge time lag

between money expended and money collected, making sparkling wine is not for the faint of heart.

Or light of wallet.

Jackson has to fight people's perceptions that sparkling wines are just for weddings and celebrations and has to keep his price low in order to get the word out about his product. (His champagnes sell in the \$30 to \$40 a bottle range.)

He also has to fight the assumptions that French champagnes are better than California sparkling wines.

So Jackson keeps his "day job" as a consultant to fund his passion.

Wearing faded blue jeans and battered hiking boots, Jackson says the creativity and intricacy of making sparkling wines is what keeps him in the business.

"It's taking something that is intrinsically unbalanced and making a wine with balanced aromas and flavors," he says.

"I do this because I choose to.

"Because if you're in the wine business and at all creative, you want to do your own thing."

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