



The judges like Chuck Devlin's wines

Green Sheet

Capitola, California

Green Sheet, Wednesday, October 21, 1981

Newcomer makes his mark

By JEFF HUDSON

CHUCK DEVLIN's winery is fairly new — the first crush was in '78, the first wines were released the following year. But he is no stranger to the area or to wine making.

The son of an orthopedic surgeon, Devlin was educated in local schools and graduated from Soquel High. While in high school he worked for Bargetto Winery, and when he went away to college he took a degree in Fermentation Science from UC-Davis. For the next few years he worked for several wineries, including Napa Valley's Louis Martini and Santa Clara's Llords & Ellwood. But by the late 70s he was gravitating back to Santa Cruz County, spending his weekends working on a winery of his own.

Devlin Wine Cellars is a small outfit, producing some 2,000 cases annually. Devlin produces no more than four wines in a given year — this year he's crushing only two, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. "It's about all one man can do by himself," Devlin says.

Devlin Wine Cellars keeps a pretty low profile locally — no signs point the way to the hilltop near Cabrillo College where Devlin makes his wines. The winery itself is a small, unpretentious, barn-like building. There are no weekend tours, no ads on radio or television. The only time the public is invited is an annual open house, usually held in the fall.

But despite the low profile and the limited production, Devlin's wines have been winning notice. His '79 Paso Robles Zinfandel just won a Gold Medal at the Los Angeles County Fair, beating out older wines from several established names. And a few weeks earlier the '79 Livermore Valley Zinfandel took a Bronze at the Orange County Fair. "There were 160 zinfandels (at the Orange fair)... you really have to stand out to get noticed," Devlin says.

Devlin's '79 Chardonnay has also won high marks, "a real find" according to one reviewer. His '79 Sauvignon Blanc and '78 Pinot Blanc were also well received, the latter having sold out some time back.

As a small producer, Devlin does not use much of the high tech equipment employed by "the big boys" (as he calls them). The bottles are filled and corked by hand, set aside and then labeled a few days before shipment. "It's not the most efficient system," Devlin admits. "But sometimes you find a 'leaker.' I pull out anything that looks funny. The quality control goes way up."

According to Devlin, the labels proved to be one of the unexpected pitfalls of wine making. In fact, release of his current Chardonnay has been delayed because of problems with the labels. "The paper manufacturers don't tell you that you need a special kind of glue — the glue people don't tell you their glue will only work on certain kinds of paper..."

Devlin finds his white wines sell better than reds. "Some people will tell you that this isn't true for small producers, but I don't believe it." He has no trouble getting stores to stock his Chardonnay and other whites, but the same stores were reluctant to take on the reds (until they started winning prizes). Still, he'd like to try some "really meaty reds. When we get big enough I'd like to do a Charbono or a Barbera. If I could get three tons of good Charbono, I'd probably do it now, but it's a commercial risk."

Devlin gets his grapes from as far away as Edna Valley (near Paso Robles) and Cloverdale (in Sonoma County). "It's very important to have confidence in the vineyard," says Devlin, who's happy with the ones he works with. His location above Soquel has "excellent weather for wine making" with a steady year-round climate.

But oddly enough, Devlin's wines are perhaps easier to find in the Bay Area and Los Angeles than they are here. "I have people selling for me there," he explains. "Locally I do it myself, and I'm too busy with the winery to be a good salesman."

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