

WINE IN YOUR SPARE TIME

Winerie's 1029-08

Vino Tabi helps you create your own vintage

By **STACEY VREEKEN**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — For Katie Fox, making wine with the 12 families in her co-op wasn't enough. The former global marketing expert started fooling around with wine as a hobby and found she was more and more entranced by the whole process, from choosing grapes to blending wines to bottling her creations.

Soon processing 10 tons of grapes a year just wasn't enough.

So Fox, along with her partner Doug Feinsod and winemaker Jeff Ritchey, started Vino Tabi, a do-it-yourself version of winemaking, nestled at the back of the Swift Street Complex along with the other wineries of Surf City Vintners.

"Now I have bigger toys," said Fox about her jump to making commercial wine.

Tabi is Japanese for "journey," which forms the premise behind the business. Fox, Feinsod and Ritchey guide customers through the process of making their own 60-gallon barrel, which results in 24 cases of wine.

How much does it cost? Well the first lesson in winemaking is: grapes are expensive.

Depending on what types of grapes are chosen and where they come from, a barrel can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$15,000. That translates to \$18 to \$60 a bottle upon completion.

Those who are interested in dabbling can purchase a ¼ barrel for \$1,300 (6 cases) or visit for a tasting or blending experience.

Those who opt for the whole experience receive instruction on how the wine is made and can be as involved or aloof as they want.

Process of winemaking

Behind the tasting room is where the winemaking journey starts. Steel tanks hold recently harvested, crushed and de-stemmed cabernet sauvignon, while pinot noir rests in smaller bins. Racks containing barrels are sprinkled around the room, and an alcove contains a nest of glass and chemistry equipment.

This year's harvest has delivered a low yield with small fruit, which result in intense wines, according to Ritchey, who also has his

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On the Net

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Doug Feinsod pumps over a vat of fermenting grapes at Vino Tabi's winery at the Swift Street Complex.

Front row, left to right: Val Ahlgren, Linda McHenry, Dexter Ahlgren, Doug Fletcher, Eleanor Ray. Back row, left to right: Dave Benion, Nat Sherrill, Paul Draper, Russ Walker, Ken Burnap, Jan Sherrill, Chuck Devlin.

Contributed photo



These folks were making wine before its time

By **JUNE SMITH**
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They were engineers, doctors, professors, an airline pilot and a restaurateur. The common thread holding them together was a fiery drive to grow and produce premium wines from the Santa Cruz Mountains, an area with a highly regarded history of grape growing, but that in those days had yet to find a place on the viticultural map.

These vintners of the 1970s demonstrated pioneer spirit

by planting premium grape varieties, unlike in previous periods when ordinary table grapes were commonly used. And because there was not an abundance of flat land, some had to plant their vineyards on steep terrain.

Val and Dexter Ahlgren were individual pioneers in the true sense of the word, building their house and winery with redwood logs milled themselves, with only the help of local carpenters. With vision ahead of its time,

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they also created a rainwater collection system for their one-acre vineyard.

Like any farmer dealing with agricultural crops, these vintners gambled with the elements of nature: Would rain come at the wrong time or would the fruit all ripen at once? There were ongoing problems with gophers, birds and deer.

Fran Bennion, now retired from Ridge Vineyards, reports that when purchasing their property, they knew they would need to install a deer fence. "But we made the mistake of not keeping an eye on the bottom of our fence," she says. "Deer are quite adept at burrowing underneath, especially when it goes over gullies."

Traumas involving brakes failing on mountainous roads or trucks getting bogged down in mud were, and still are, common. Bob Roudon and my late husband Jim Smith of Roudon-Smith Winery once had to remove a tree, so that a huge grape delivery truck could make the turn onto the winery property.

During that time, wineries in the region faced challenges in marketing. The health benefits of wine were not as well-recognized as they are today. Legislative issues cropped up often; Val Ahlgren spent valuable time educating the public about a ballot proposal for huge increases in federal and state taxes on wine.

Sandy Obester was responsible for starting the nationwide effort to get reciprocal wine shipping laws passed and was invited to the signing ceremony with then-Gov. George Deukmejian.

After attending the bill-signing ceremony in Sacramento, the Obesters drove to Santa Cruz, where they were guests at a wine-tasting at Lupin Lodge, a nudist colony. At dinner, Obester was seated next to a nude, overweight man, who told her he was an undercover CIA agent. From that day forward, when the couple was asked to describe a typical day as winery owners, this is the day they humorously portrayed.

Recently, 16 of these original Santa Cruz Mountain pioneers marked the 35th anniversary of the establishment of their wine association. The long overdue reunion took place at the Templeton apaca ranch of Nat and Jan Sherrill, now retired from Sherrill Cellars, founded in Woodside in 1973.

No time was lost before bottles were uncorked and memories flowed as freely as the fine wine. Thirty-five years didn't erase one iota of the friendship and camaraderie felt among these winemakers.

It seemed like only yesterday that this group of winery owners, including David Bennion of Ridge Vineyards, Ken Burnap of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyards, Dexter Ahlgren of Ahlgren Vineyard and Bob Mullen of Woodside Vineyards, began to share dinners and discussions about grape growing, winery administration and the joint ordering of supplies. In 1973, an unofficial association called The Santa Cruz Mountains Vintners was formed.

Bennion and Burnap thoroughly covered the area's mountainous terrain to create a boundary for the appellation. In 1979, 19 wineries, known as the Santa Cruz Mountain Vintners, successfully applied for federal recognition from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. This was to become the first American Viticultural Area in the United States to use the European model of defining borders based on climate, altitude and viticultural ability, rather than political boundaries created by county lines.

Bob Mullen, who still owns and operates Woodside Vineyards, says, "I guess the real gritty story is how we all hung in there for so long without making any money — most of us held our 'day jobs' for a number of years, just to afford staying in the wine business."

Those in the group attending the reunion (many are retired) were Fran Bennion representing her late husband David, the Burnaps, the Ahlgrens, Bob Mullen, the Obesters, the Starks of Page Mill Winery, the Roudons and myself of Roudon-Smith Vineyards, Jerold O'Brien of Silver Mountain Vineyards and the Gehrs, formerly of Congress Springs Vineyards and now owners of Daniel Gehrs Wines of Santa Barbara County.

A highlight of the gathering was a vertical tasting of 10 early Gemello wines, supplied by the Obesters. John Gemello was Sandy's grandfather.

At the close of the reunion, after picking up the collection of empty bottles, Nat Sherrill proclaimed it to be "a classic Santa Cruz Mountains get-together."

Robin Gehrs was more poetic, saying, "It was delicious in all senses of the word."

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Wine

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own Sensorium label. The winemaking process for these grapes is just beginning.

The pinot noir in the small bins are being "punched down" while fermenting, a process that blends skins and juice to develop a wine's flavor and add color in its first couple of weeks.

Pumping over is like punching down but on a much bigger scale. Climbing a ladder to the top of the steel tanks, Feinsod makes adjustments, then sprays grape juice out of a huge hose, pumping over to fill another nearby tank, and decorating the wall in a bright purple hue in the process.

"Oops," says Feinsod with a grin. In an atmosphere of learning at Vino Tabi, you laugh at small mistakes.

After two weeks of stirring and fermenting, the liquid takes another week to settle and clarify.

Ritchey describes how this process begins giving the wine character and intensity and develops tannins. It's also where winemakers look for problems to occur.

"You have to know how everything ticks," Feinsod said. Novice winemakers are guided through the process, tasting the murky juice on its fermenting journey to the clear liquid poured into barrels.

"You know we have to taste wine here everyday," Feinsod said with a smile. Even curious patrons at the tasting bar can sample the wine in steel,



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Vino Tabi's winemaker Jeff Ritchey works closely with owners Katie Fox and Doug Feinsod.

although you have to be a bit brave to swill the cloudy fluid.

After the wine and skins mix and it settles, the juice is put in barrels for six to 20 months depending on the type of wine being made. The wine is also put to the chemical test, balancing temperature and sugars and tasted in the barrel.

"We monitor by taste and mouth feel, smell it to make sure it has good aroma and most important part, spit," said Ritchey, demonstrating with a sample of Mt. Eden Chardonnay.

These guys aim to set newcomers at ease and are not adverse to a little joking around to get their point

across. Unlike many winemakers who pursue a certain flavor profile they enjoy, the winemakers here are open to a wide range of tastes brought to them by their customers.

"That's where the winemaker's talent comes in," said Fox. "We're capable of custom-making wine in any style that the customer wants," said Ritchey.

But when pressed, each describes a favorite varietal. "Cabernet sauvignon is the king of wines, but pinot noir is the Holy Grail," said Feinsod. "Pinot is the most difficult to grow and make."

"It would be cabernet," for Ritchey. "You can do so much

with cabernet, with blending, with the oak profile. You can push it around. It's very forgiving."

Fox said she is more of a white wine lover, "Pinot gris from the Russian River Valley. Chardonnay grapes from the Santa Cruz Mountains are exquisite. It's got balance, is nice and crisp. The wine makes itself."

But at Vino Tabi, "It's about the customer's journey, not mine, not Doug's," Fox says. "It's sharing (winemaking) with other people. I'm surprised at how addictive it is and it amazes me how interesting it is."