

Wineries

1982?

Mountain High

Joe Tarantino

The home and winery of Jerold O'Brien is situated on a 17-acre hilltop between two awesome ridge lines of the Santa Cruz Mountain Range. His Silver Mountain Vineyards overlooks the northern part of Monterey Bay and most of Santa Cruz, which, from 2,000 feet, looks like a mesh of forms poking skyward.

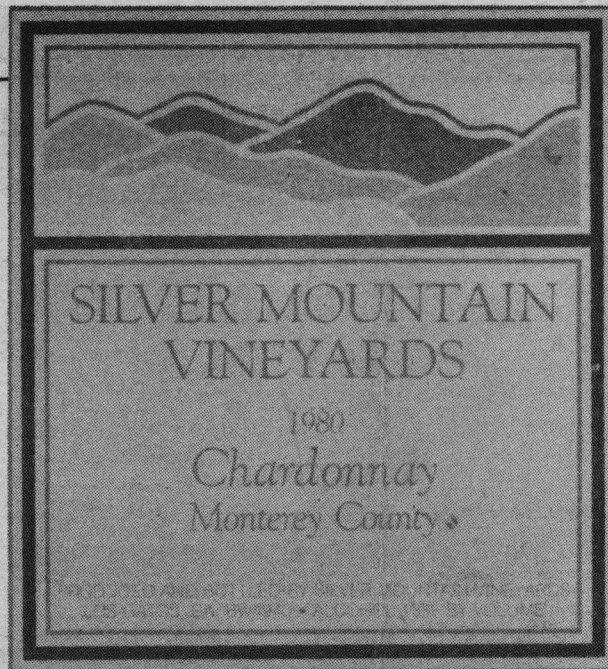
"When I found this place it was an abandoned pear and prune orchard planted just before Prohibition," says O'Brien, a fortyish man of medium build, with youthful, moderately tan features. "Before that it had been a vineyard — planted, I think, to Chasselas grapes. At the bottom of the hill is a small stand that comes up year after year, no matter how I turn it under."

O'Brien concedes that he learned the history of the area only after he moved here. "The lady who sold this property to me lives just down the road. Her family homesteaded this property at the turn of the century. At that time, 3,000 acres of vines inhabited Santa Cruz County. Now there are less than 300."

O'Brien's fascination with wine began while he was in the military. He spent a good deal of time in South America and discovered many of the wines of Chile, Peru and Argentina which were not exported. Upon discharge in 1969, O'Brien settled in San Francisco because it allowed him easy access to the heart of the wine country, where he spent much of his spare time. Gradually, O'Brien was seduced by the grape.

"The more I learned about wine, the more I wanted to be involved with it. I looked in Napa and Sonoma for land, but didn't find anything appealing. I came south because my wife wanted to live near the ocean. I also had a gut feeling that the Santa Cruz Mountain area was as good as Napa. It was a newer area, with a pioneering group of wine settlers. There were only two or three well known wineries down here, but I liked what they were doing.

"Ten years ago there wasn't much mountain acreage in Napa devoted to grapes and not much enthusiasm for them. But mountain grapes impart a greater intensity of flavor and



character than valley floor grapes. Also, the people who live in the mountains support a different philosophy of life, and it shows in their wines."

O'Brien is indeed an advocate of the mountains. The name Silver Mountain Vineyards was chosen to reflect the origin of the wine. The beginning of the winery is another story. O'Brien actually settled in Los Gatos in 1973 after securing his property. It took three years before construction commenced, then two years to gain County approval for his project. But by 1978 O'Brien was a mountain resident. Unfortunately, his wife decided to separate from him that year, causing obvious personal disarray. O'Brien remained undaunted. He maintains a quiet disposition — modest, friendly, yet private.

Silver Mountain Vineyards is actually three distinct, though closely spaced, parcels totalling ten acres. O'Brien has plans for two more acres, all of which should mature by the 1985 growing season.

"I chose to grow Chardonnay because I wanted to make a Burgundian wine," he says. "Originally, I planned a half

wine lines

Chardonnay, half Pinot Noir vineyard, but I decided to specialize because Chardonnay is easier to make and I feel more confident making it. It is also the wine I most like to drink."

O'Brien is not a man possessed of great means. That is to say, his facilities, even when expanded, will not permit more than a 2,000 case per year production. His winery is a bit bigger than a two-car garage. Within its walls he makes and ages Chardonnay from grapes grown at Ventana Vineyards in Monterey County, and Zinfandel, the grapes for which come from select California mountain vineyards. These are the only two wines O'Brien plans to make.

A pleasing characteristic of Silver Mountain wines is their agreeable prices. The debut 1980 Chardonnay retailed for \$9.50. The 1979 Zinfandel, O'Brien's first, was \$5. Subsequent vintages will be equally priceworthy. This price structure is not intended as a statement about quality. Rather, O'Brien means to make a statement about the overpriced efforts of many wineries.

"I am learning to make wine as I go along," O'Brien says. "But I have plenty of experience participating in the winemaking process. I apprenticed for several years at Chalona Vineyard in Soledad [famous for Chardonnay] and at Joseph Swan Vineyards in Sonoma [famous for Zinfandel]."

By December O'Brien will have released 450 cases of 1981 Ventana Vineyards Chardonnay. Snap it up if you like wines with a touch of oak, solid fruit, balance and earthiness. But best of all, it is a wine enjoyable in its youth. As for the Zinfandel, be prepared for the 1980 vintage — low in alcohol, fairly intense, yet with the finesse of a claret.

"I came here for a dual purpose," says O'Brien, "to live and to make wine. I doubt I'll ever make a profit. I know I couldn't afford to buy this land today. Land prices are one of the things that prevent grape growing up here. The demand for homesites is very strong and a piece of property can cost \$200,000."

Fortunately, Silver Mountain Vineyards was born before the boom. And Jerold O'Brien is here to stay. □

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