

Winnis SC Weekly 8/12/81

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Hecker Pass Vineyards

AS WINE TASTING GROWS IN popularity, enthusiasts travel to more distant locales to sample the vintner's art. But often we forget the short stretch along Highway 152, mid-way between Gilroy and Watsonville. Here the Hecker Pass wineries produce some really good wines at very reasonable prices. So one summer afternoon, my wife and I took the drive up Mount Madonna to rediscover this local treasure.

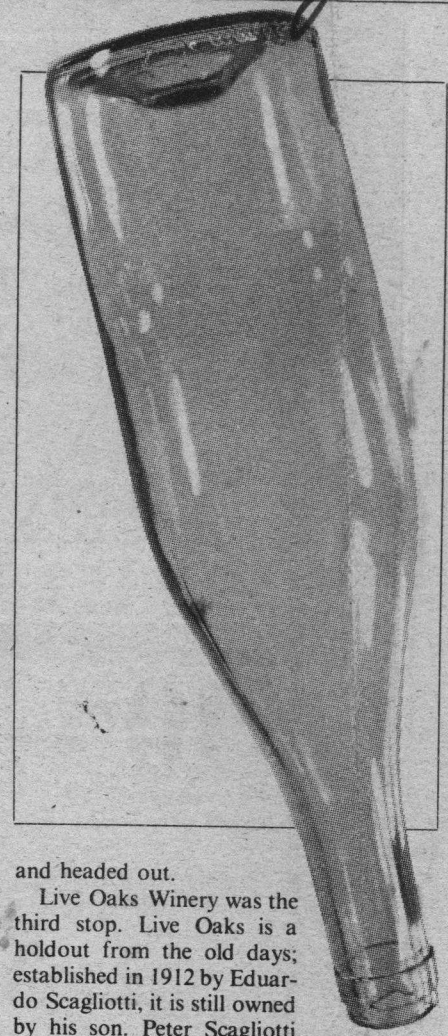
Our first stop was Hecker Pass Winery where Mario Fortino greeted us. Mario, the owner, winemaker, salesman and bartender, has been in business here since 1970, but in winemaking all his life. His father made wine in Italy where Mario lived until 1959. Although his first bottling was in 1972, the vineyards have been producing wine for 33 years.

"I started making wine like people do here," Mario explains. "But now, I'm back to the traditional Italian ways." The results are predominantly unrefined red varietals with full, rich flavor. And Mario prides himself on the fact that every bottle is priced under \$5. Although his best sellers are the lighter reds, such as the Petite Sirah "select" and Ruby Cabernet, we found the

heavier varietals more to our liking. The unrefined 79 Petite Sirah is a deep-colored, very potent wine; a wine that could be enjoyed tonight, or put away for ten years or more.

Next came the Fortino Winery, owned by Ernesto, a member of the world-renowned Fortino clan. His operation is larger, but still retains a homey atmosphere. While the hired hand minded the store, Ernie led a tour of the grounds. Rather than stainless steel, all of his fermenting tanks are redwood and the aging is done in oak. The aroma was astounding as we crawled along the tops of the twenty-foot tanks, and we anxiously returned to the tasting room where Jack Sparrow led us through a selection of over twenty varietals. Fortino Winery produces wines you may never taste anywhere else: a White Cabernet, a White Grenache, a Charbono. Their Burgundy is a smooth blend of Petite Sirah, Carignan and Zinfandel—and a bargain in the large bottles. We were particularly taken with the Rose of Cabernet, though. This is an excellent Rose, with all the fruitiness of the Cabernet grape.

The next establishment on our agenda was the Thomas Kruse Winery, across the street. We had met Tom before, so we weren't put off by his newest sign: "If you do not intend to buy, do not plan to taste." But no one was around except Rex the dog; we patted him on the head



and headed out. Live Oaks Winery was the third stop. Live Oaks is a holdout from the old days; established in 1912 by Eduardo Scagliotti, it is still owned by his son. Peter Scagliotti wasn't in, so our host was Mitzie Takemoto, perhaps the only Japanese winemaker in the state. "It's a mysterious job," he intones while pouring. "Like making music or drawing pictures—you never know exactly what's going to come out." Live Oaks does not make a really outstanding wine. But since their most expensive bottle is \$2.77, that really isn't

a criticism. The Burgundy is a smooth five-year-old blend that can be bought in a four liter bottle for \$5.50. We enjoyed the Haut Sauterne, a very pleasant light blend with a good fruity finish.

Our expedition over, we turned back towards Santa Cruz. We regretted missing Thomas Kruse, though, so we stopped again on the way home, even though it was nearly five o'clock. Tom was sipping brandy in the kitchen and invited us in. We sampled a glass of Zinfandel while we discussed winemaking over the kitchen table. In spite of his offbeat sign and somewhat officious manner, Tom is really sociable. "The sign is one of various combinations of insulting signs I've tried," he explains. "I had one that charged a dollar per person—applicable towards any purchase—which I thought was fair. But some bourgeois in white shoes came in one day and got in a real snit about it. A couple days later a guy from the BATF made me take it down."

Tom's winery is a small operation—10,000 gallons was his largest annual production—which is the primary reason for his conservative approach to tasting. He does seem to have a love-hate relationship with his customers though. "I enjoy meeting people—the interesting ones. But you hear such stupid questions. After the first rain of the season this guy asked me, 'Do you think the rain will affect the drought?'" Tom's wines are like his

character: straight-forward, earthy, and intense. "Wine-making as an expression of social convention is much too restricting," he says. "I'm at an age where I want to express myself through my wines." His self-expression is admirably reflected in his six varietals.

The '79 Zinfandel is a heady, heavy-bodied wine, very tasty, and should mellow nicely with age. His '78 Cabernet is quite good and enjoyable despite its young age. His only two blends (ignominiously labeled Gilroy White and Red) are a bargain hunter's delight—soft, well-balanced, and ready-to-drink. And there are still a few cases of an excellent Champagne made from Cabernet Sauvignon. This is a sparkling rose that could accompany a picnic or a filet and lobster banquet. This week he plans to release a new Sauvignon Vert—a white varietal that is rarely seen, but which produces some very tasty wine.

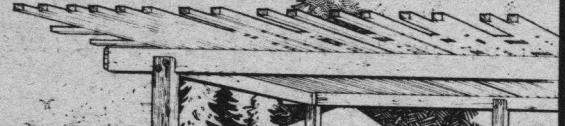
Tom's background as a winemaker is unusual—no family tradition, no degree from Davis. He began as an amateur in 1963 with an ancient hand press bought for \$25. A friend, John Roffinella, taught him the basics; the rest has been self-taught. "this is my tenth crush at the winery, and I've learned new things each year," reflects Tom. "You hear people say they have thirty years experience; but really they have one year of experience repeated thirty times. You have to learn

and grow." One of Tom's unusual decisions has been to run a half-price sale on cases. Since his most expensive wine is only \$7.50 (cheap to begin with for a good Champagne) this is a sensational bargain. A 100 percent Cabernet for \$3 is unheard of.

Tom plans to keep the winery small. He makes the wines single-handedly while his assistant, Karen Kerns, helps with everything else—bottling, labeling, bookkeeping, tasting, etc.—and he seems to enjoy it that way. In the aging barrels now are a 1980 Grignolino—a very unusual grape of which only 200 acres are planted in the state—and an '80 Zinfandel which he believes will be his best. Whatever else he decides to do, you can bet it won't be run-of-the-mill.

The Hecker Pass tour is a delightful experience for anyone who enjoys wine. We went on a weekday and saw only a few people at each stop. The proprietors are friendly and unhurried, dispensing both wine and information liberally. And you can discover what Tom's newest sign says, or buy tickets for the upcoming Hecker Pass wineries' annual extravaganza—by all reports, a great event.

Pasatiempo Inn
Santa Cruz Resort



the wine bar
at the farm

