

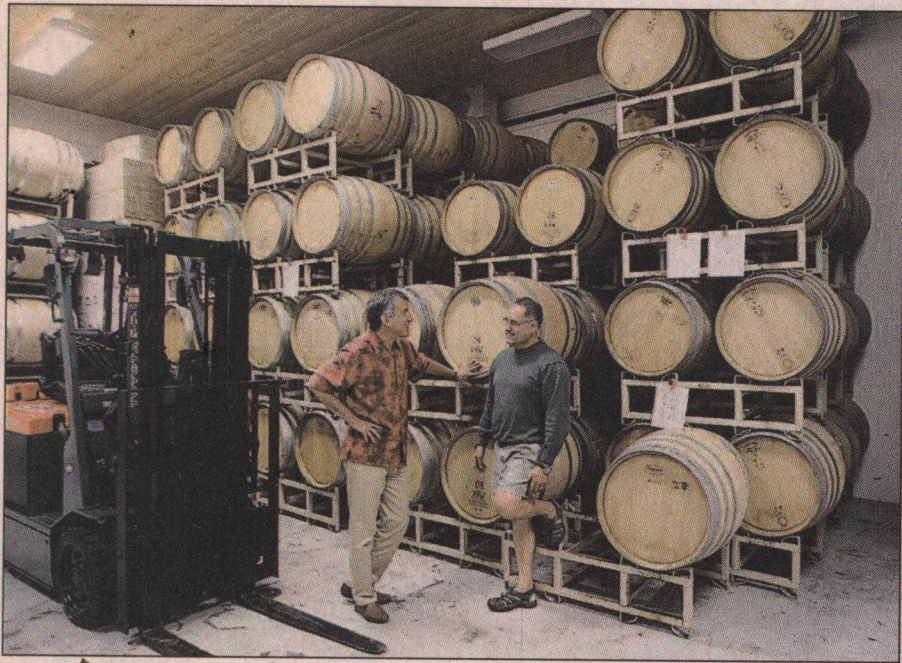
What's old is new again

Wineries

10-19-11

Vine Hill Winery continues historic vineyard's grape-growing tradition

AT A GLANCE VINE HILL WINERY



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Vine Hill Winery owner Nick Guerrero, left, and winemaker Sal Godinez talk in the barrel room. BELOW: Guerrero walks the same land that brothers George and John Jarvis worked in the 1870s, when the area was producing about 14,000 cases of wine a year.

WHAT: Owner Nick Guerrero and winemaker Sal Godinez make wine with a focus on pinot noir and grapes grown in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

TASTING ROOM: A part of Surf City Vintners, 402 Ingalls St., Santa Cruz. The hilltop winery, at 2300 Jarvis Road, is open on the third weekend of the month.

HOURS: Vine Hill tasting room opens noon to 5 p.m. the third Saturday and Sunday of the month. [Westside tasting room will soon be open four days a week.] Tasting fees varying according to wines poured. Wine club available.

I MAKE WINES: 'To last.'

WINES: Pinot noir, Chardonnay, syrah and other reds under the Vine Hill, Cumbre and Gatos Locos labels

FAMILY: Wife Celeste; children Nico, 16, Andreas, 13, and Mariana, 11

OUTSIDE THE WINERY: Guerrero has a master's in public health and spent years as a health care consultant. To relax, he runs, walks, reads and spends time with his family.

INSPIRED BY: 'A pursuit of something greater than self,' says Guerrero.

PRODUCES: 3,000 cases a year

WINEMAKER SELECTION: 2007

Cumbre Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains, Raffaelli Vineyard, \$59. Tasting notes: 'This pinot has aromas of rich earth, blackberries and a hint of orange zest. With flavors of cherries and current with a touch of white pepper spice on the finish. ... The presence of medium tannins and acidity along with a pleasant minerality give this wine a layered complexity.'

RECOMMENDS: Storrs Winery

EVENTS: Passport Weekend Wine and Cheese Tasting, noon to 5 p.m. Nov. 19-20, at the hilltop winery. All participating Santa Cruz Mountain Winegrowers wineries will be open that weekend.

CONTACT: www.vinehillwinery.com, 831-427-0436

Getting to Vine Hill Winery is a bit of a treasure hunt. As you ascend the twisting track of Jarvis Road, it's hard to believe 330 acres of contiguous vineyards once thrived at the end of the path. You travel a steep track bordered by dark redwood forest before breaking through to the hilltop, where native landscaping, the worked iron of a modern winery and vineyards spill down



STACEY VREEKEN
Wine Press

the other side of the hill.

This ridgetop property has a history of growing grapes. John Jarvis, a Santa Cruz County supervisor, established the vineyard in the 1870s, and the grapevines thrived until phylloxera wiped them

out in 1898. The Locatelli family kept zinfandel growing through the first half of the century, and David Bruce planted pinot noir in 1968. Nearby, with the property long since divided, the Smothers Brothers made wine under the name Vine Hill Inc., and today Love Apple Farms sits downhill from the winery.

Ken Burnap, in search of the perfect pinot noir, took over the hilltop in the mid-1970s as Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyards, and after a longtime collaboration, winemaker Jeff Emery assumed leadership when Burnap retired in 2002. In 2004, the property was sold to Nick Guerrero.

Today, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyards and Vine Hill Winery have tasting rooms nearby in the Surf City

SEE VINE HILL ON D5



VINE HILL

Continued from D1

Vintners complex, and the legacy of the property as vineyard continues.

When Guerrero assumed ownership, the vineyard was in need of updating. Everything was pulled out and started anew, with eight acres of pinot noir, Chardonnay and syrah, so far, on 26 acres. Vine Hill's first estate vintage was one barrel in 2009, and the winery is producing 12 estate barrels this year.

"This place is made for making a fine wine," says Guerrero, pointing out that in the 1890s, 90 percent of the wine from the area was grown on Vine Hill.

The ridgetops of the Santa Cruz Mountains, with their exposures to sun and cooling winds, offer structured pinot noirs with tannins, acids and spice.

"The spice is white pepper for pinot, and black pepper for syrah. It's definitely a mountain spice. And acids are a hallmark of the Santa Cruz Mountains," says Guerrero.

With the area's long season, or hang time, and exceptional growing conditions, the winemaker has a "broader ability to let the wine do its own thing," Guerrero says.

He is lavish in his praise for winemaker Sal Godinez, who has worked at Freemark Abbey and Saintsbury.

"My training is as a wine consultant. I feel Sal is a better winemaker than I am," he says.

Guerrero calls his background blue-collar. Born in Chico, his father was a Safeway manager, and the family lived in a series of towns. Drawn to the science and romance of winemaking, Guerrero started his career with a degree in fermentation science from UC Davis in 1987.

"I was looking forward to working hard out in the field, being contemplative in the cellar and I ended up not taking a job in the wine business," Guerrero said, adding that he turned down offers from wineries in Napa, even Pennsylvania. "Because growing up the way I did," taking a job as brewing supervisor at Anheuser-Busch in New Jersey was more practical and lucrative.

Yet the "what-ifs" haunted him.

Through the years, he led winemaking tours for a series of informal groups, who later became the investors for Vine Hill Winery.

"It's this idea of being associated with something noble," Guerrero says about making wine. "If I'm going to make wine in Santa Cruz, to me, the clear red wine on this side of mountain is pinot. There wasn't even a second choice."

Contact Stacey Vreeken, the *Sentinel's* former Food & Wine editor, at staceyvreeken@gmail.com.
Wine Press appears monthly.

Visitors to Vine Hill Winery have a top-of-the-world view.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

