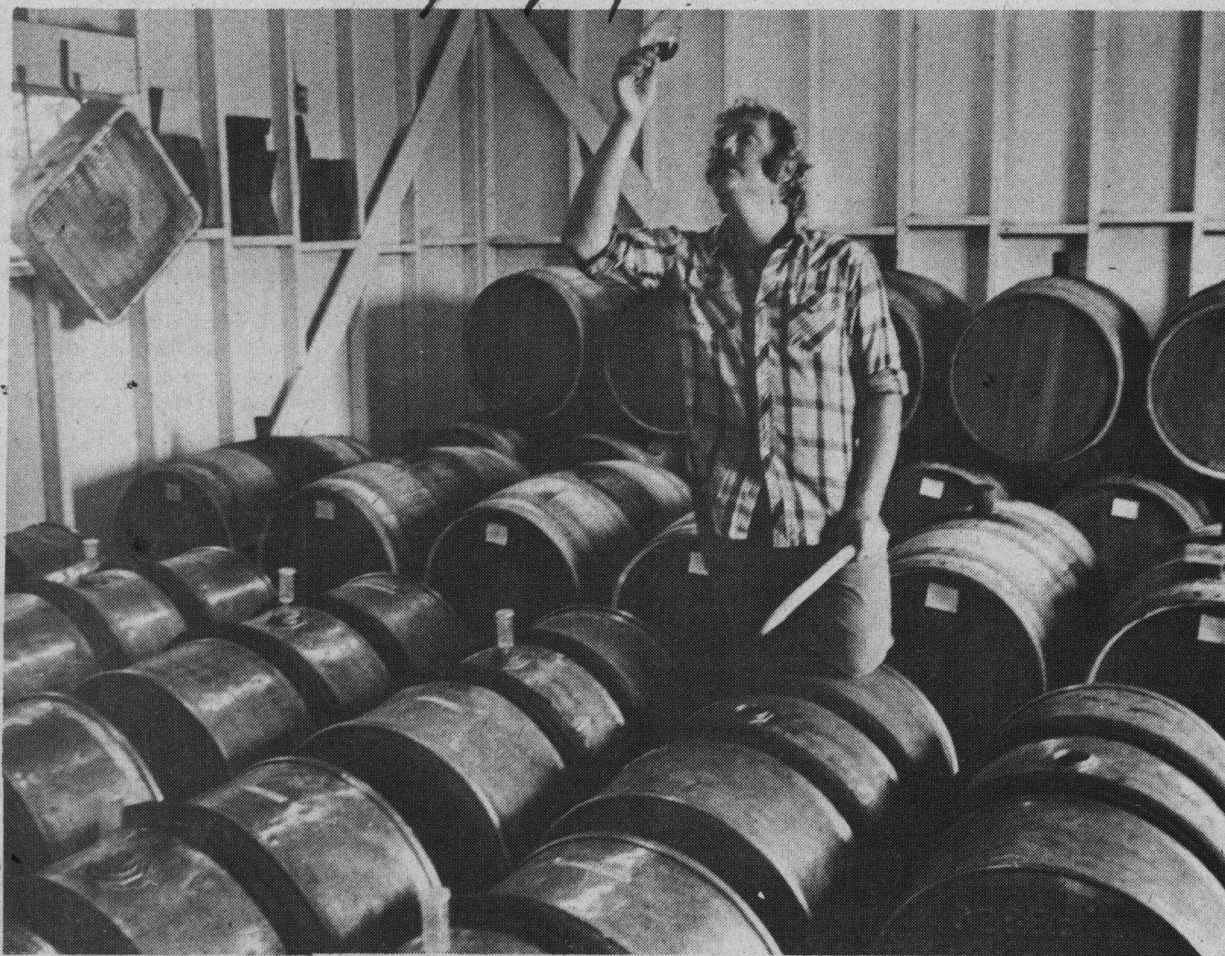


Wine

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Will Hangen checks out the '80 Zinfandel

'Mom-pop' winery in Aromas shuns the limelight

By JEFF HUDSON

Will Hangen, of River Run Vintners, started making wine mostly for himself, at home. "I used to take it to a wine tasting group in Santa Cruz," he says. "I noticed that the wines I was making were just about as good as anything you could buy. That more or less prompted me to do it full-time."

So Hangen bought some acreage near Aromas, and in the spring of 1978, River Run was born. "The name comes from the first words in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*," which is one of Hangen's favorite books. "And the Pajaro River runs out in back. It was a nice coincidence."

Hangen describes River Run as a "very small operation — a Mom and Pop winery," run by himself and his wife Terra. At present he makes two wines annually, with a total output of between three and four thousand gallons. "The wines are hand produced from start to finish," including bottling and labeling.

"We try to handle the wine as naturally as possible. There's a minimum of processing, and no additives to preserve the wine." Hangen took classes in fermentation science through UC Davis, and uses straightforward, "European methods" of wine making he studied there. His wines average between 13-14% alcohol content — River Run does not make the lower-alcohol "light wines" or the more potent "late harvest" vintages.

The wines are produced in a small building in an apple orchard, behind Hangen's house. Hangen put up the winery himself. He was a house-builder before he opened River Run, and wrote *Will's Guide to Building the \$9,000 House*, which sold some 35,000 copies through Unity Press of Santa Cruz.

River Run, like its owner, is low-key and unpretentious. Hangen seeks little publicity, seldom enters county fair wine competitions and does no advertising whatsoever.

But his wines have not gone unnoticed: *Wine Discoveries* magazine tasted his '78 Pinot Noir and found it "distinctive and first rate... River Run has hit the jackpot with the best inexpensive Pinot Noir we've tried."

River Run's Zinfandels are also "enormously popular" according to Hangen, and often quite hard to find.

"If you find something from a small winery that you like, you shouldn't hesitate to buy one or two cases," Hangen advises. "Production is limited and small wineries are notorious for short supply. People come around and ask me if I have any of my '78 Zinfandel left. I understand it's selling some places for around \$15 a bottle. All I can say is that people should have bought it from me when I was selling it for \$5."

Pricing is a sensitive issue with wine-makers, and Hangen thinks that some wineries charge too much. "The wineries that are bankrolled by oilmen or business barons tend to be the ones that overprice. Sometimes the quality (of

the wine) is there, sometimes not."

Hangen has found that the wine-making profession is not free of headaches: "Wine making equipment seems to triple in price every five years, and there are sometimes problems with availability of bottles. Then there's the medfly... Your return comes slowly, especially with red wines" (which are aged longer than whites).

Hangen hopes to increase production within the next two years, to between 10,000 and 15,000 gallons annually. But he will still produce only two or three wines per year. "I'd like to experiment with some Chardonnay. Of all the white wines, that's the one that holds my interest the best." He may try a Grenache as well. But the main part of River Run's production will be Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, because "I like the reds," Hangen says.

Right now River Run, like most wineries in Santa Cruz County, is small, with a pleasant feeling of being off the beaten track. But Hangen thinks this comfortable ambiance will change. "People should visit the wineries here while they're still informal — while you can taste wine out of the barrels and talk with the wine makers. It won't be long before these wineries become very busy and glossy, like the wineries in Napa."

River Run does not give tours, but visitors can arrange for "informal tastings" on weekends by calling 722-7520. The wines are for sale through the winery, and are available through stores in Watsonville and Rio del Mar.

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