

Is Orange County a good market for fine wine?

Thursday, May 25, 2006

Commuter vintners focus on quality

Orange County's commuter vintners try to make their winemaking work.

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Orange County Register

Orange County: the beaches, the postcard-perfect weather, the "California Riviera" lifestyle. But your heart lies in wine country. What to do?

This is the dilemma Charles Coniglio faces each day. He lives in Santa Ana but has such a passion for wine that he's become a vintner. And he refuses to move north.

"There's a lot of action here in Southern California as far as wine consumption, plus I live here, so why not continue to live here?" Coniglio says.

Coniglio is the latest in a handful of vintners who get their grapes elsewhere but steadfastly remain in Orange County: ...

Coniglio has hired a consulting winemaker who lives in Napa and produces the wines there, working with growers to make sure they get exactly the fruit they want. It's a brutal commute, but t's worth it.

"There's really not a lot going on before harvest, so I'm in Napa once a month for a week," Coniglio says.

Coniglio agrees that small, controlled production is the key. "We don't want to be in Cost Plus or Wine Club," he said. "I don't like playing down in the budget area. Not that there's anything wrong with it – that's just never been my forte." His vision for Coniglio Wines is also boutique.

Current Coniglio releases include 2001 Spring Mountain Cabernet (\$45); 2002 Napa Valley Cabernet Franc (\$35); 2002 Spring Mountain Cabernet (\$45); and a 2002 Atlas Peak Cabernet (\$45).

"We're going to grow at a comfortable rate to maintain the integrity of the business," Coniglio said. "We'll never release a wine I'm not happy with. If we grew to 15,000 cases, that would be a pretty big jump." Their 2002 production was about 1,900 cases; 2003 was about 2,500; 2004 will be less (1,400) because of lower yields, and 2005 will be 4,500. "The key is finding the right fruit and picking it at the right time. If you don't, you're really in trouble," Coniglio says.

So how does he keep an eye out for the perfect grapes when he's in Orange County most of the time? That's Craig Becker's job. Becker is an experienced winemaker who began his career at Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville. He went on to Spring Mountain Winery in St. Helena as assistant winemaker in 1997. In 1999 he began a consulting career and since then has worked with Peacock Family Vineyard, Armstrong Ranch, Borra Vineyards, Kelleher Family Vineyards and on his own brand, Michael Austin. He specializes in mountain wines using meticulous processes: cold soaks (to stabilize color and begin a healthy fermentation), wild yeasts, careful sorting and precise knowledge of when to harvest. "I want very soft, smooth tannins and a rich, rich body," Becker said. "I do that on the vine. I let them ripen so that I get everything possible out of the grape and I don't have to tiptoe around after." Becker makes single-vineyard wines for Coniglio with Cabernets sourced from Diamond Mountain, Spring Mountain, Oakville, Atlas Peak and Howell Mountain. The Cabernet Franc is from a vineyard in the valley north of St. Helena. The soon-to-be-released Sauvignon Blanc, named Leola for Coniglio's mother, is from the Pope Valley. Coniglio Wines are beginning to garner attention. The 2002 Atlas Peak Cabernet Sauvignon and the 2002 Napa Valley Cabernet Franc both rated 91 points in the June 2006 Wine Enthusiast Buying Guide.

The wines also found their way into Oscar goodie bags at this year's Academy Awards ceremony, and they fill bins at several top dining rooms in Southern California and Las Vegas as well as in boutique retailers in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Coniglio, who also runs an import business – he makes Christmas ornaments for Lenox, Waterford and Nieman-Marcus – has an array of interests that keep him busy in Southern California: the dance series at the Orange County Performing Arts Center, world history, ice hockey, golf, theater, genealogy, fine dining and film.

But his love of the vine guarantees he'll always have a connection to wine country, although he much prefers to live in Santa Ana. "We did the blending for the 2003 on my kitchen island one Christmas," Coniglio said. "Craig (Becker) brought down all the barrel samples and we did it in one afternoon. It was fun. You don't have to do everything in Napa."