

Frazier Winery looks for new ways to set itself apart from the pack

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It's hardly news that in Napa Valley contains a lot of fine wineries, and it's becoming increasingly difficult for newcomers to differentiate themselves from the pack.

One way is to make great wine, but that's not always enough. Bill Frazier's Frazier Winery shares a number of distinctions that help produce exceptional wine -- and distinguish it from most of the rest -- but he's still struggling to get out of the red.

His winery is located in the little-known grape growing area east of Napa beyond the Montecito Hills. This area is starting to gain notice, and that's likely to multiply if the proposed Tulocay American Viticultural Area is approved.

This area, sometimes called Coombsville, has a distinct climate, cooler than upper Napa Valley, and it is an area that's becoming recognized for producing some of the valley's best merlot -- and increasingly, cabernet sauvignon. Frazier's original planting of cabernet sauvignon in 1990 was unusual, however, as the king of grapes was rarely planted this far south in the valley.

The cooler climate contributes to elegant wines with intense color and mellow tannins. The wines, while not 'fruity,' exhibit strong varietal characteristics. They're not overripe like some big cabs, and especially merlots, and in fact, the former Air Force and commercial pilot would probably have chewed down his nails waiting for the fruit to ripen in cool years except that pilots have nerves of steel.

The Lupine Hill Vineyard

Frazier's Lupine Hill Vineyard includes 21 planted acres out of his 61 in rolling hills off First Avenue.

He bought the first 15 acres in 1982, then started building a house there in 1983 and moved to the property the next year.

In 1990, he planted nearly 10 acres of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, plus a bit of cabernet franc, a grape that ripens well even in cooler climates.

Adopting modern techniques, he planted 2,100 vines per acre instead of the more traditional 450,

reducing yield per plant for higher quality.

The vineyards lie on two opposing hillsides. The northern hill faces due south with a 14 percent slope and shallow soils. The vines are trained in the unusual Scott-Henry trellis system, one vine up and the next vine down. This allows the grapes to be fully exposed to sunlight in both the morning and the afternoon for excellent ripening.

He sold the grapes in 1993 and 1994, and made a little home wine, but buoyed by their excellent reputation, he hired former Stags Leap Wine Cellars winemaker John Gibson in 1995 and Frazier released the first vintage under his own label in 1998.

Encouraged more by the response, that year he bought the adjoining 46 acres, planting 11.5 acres of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot, an intense purple grape with bewitching perfume that's the secret ingredient blended into many fine cabernets. Frazier's petite verdot blend, in fact, attracted notice at the recent Premiere Napa Valley Auction among all the cabs.

In 2001, after using custom crush facilities to make his wine, Frazier converted a hay barn on the property into a winery.

He started digging a cave in 2002. That cave is functional, but remains unfinished; unfortunately, Frazier's plans butted into the bear market of the last few years, and he's had to rein in his ambitions to focus on selling wine. "I was a little naïve in the beginning," he admits. "The first 1,300 cases flew out the door, and the same thing happened in 2000."

Then the dot-com bust, a recession and then 9/11 hit. Things started going down hill fast.

Now Bill, his daughter Kim and sales rep Harvey Posert, Jr., spend most of their time selling wine, though Bill admits, "I'd rather be driving a tractor in the vineyard."

Working with the family

Bill Frazier was born and raised in the Bronx. After graduating from Virginia Tech, he flew in the Air Force before becoming a commercial pilot for United Airlines. He spent more than 30 years with United while also developing real estate projects, including two restaurants.

Bill is fortunate to have three of his children working with him. His vineyard manager is Jon Frazier, 34, who graduated in viticulture from Napa Valley College.

Kim Frazier, 26, handles marketing and sales. Born and raised in Napa, she graduated from UC Davis in 2000 with a managerial economics degree, and an emphasis in marketing.

Kevin Frazier, 17, a senior at Justin-Siena High School in Napa, also helps out.

Another son, Jeff, 37, lives in Sacramento but helps out at harvest. Sadly, Bill's other son, Shawn, died in 2002 after working with his family in the winery. The winery's top wine, Memento, is dedicated to his memory.

Winemaking

John Gibson makes big wines with soft tannins, wines that can be appreciated now, but deserve aging. The merlots are massive, while the cabernets suggest classic Bordeaux.

The wines are treated much like those of Opus One. Because of the varying conditions in the vineyards, pickers make 12 to 15 passes over as much as a month to ensure optimum ripeness, and each lot goes into a different tank.

The grapes are handled gently and sorted repeatedly before being crushed, then undergo maceration for 25 to 35 days to encourage short harsh tannins to merge into longer chains with softer flavors.

The free-run juice is set aside to become Frazier wine, and the first press is made into less-expensive Lupine Hill. The rest is sold in bulk.

The wine is aged in all new oak for one and a half to two years and held in the bottle for a least a year before being released.

In all, Frazier makes about 5,000 cases. He has a permit for 50,000 gallons, but is limited to what he can grow on the property, and is prohibited from selling his own grapes as well.

The 2001 Frazier cabernet sauvignon is \$55, some older wines are still available at \$45. When the 2002 merlot is released, it will cost \$40.

The Lupine Hill merlot and cabernet cost \$30.

The Memento cabernet, of which only 240 cases were made, is available only at the winery for \$95.

Frazier also has a good selection of older wines and larger bottles for sale.

Frazier Winery is on a small road in an obscure place, though not far from downtown Napa, and Bill can't host many visitors. He can sometimes accommodate serious wine lovers, so it's worth a call at 255-3444. It's a lovely site, and Bill or Kim may be able to show you around the vineyards, winery and caves, too.