

The logo for St. Helena Star features the text "ST. HELENA STAR" in a blue, serif font. The text is set against a background image of a landscape with rolling hills and a sunset or sunrise sky. The entire logo is enclosed in a dark red rectangular border.

Head of Frazier Winery keeps moving three years after the death of his son

By Alan Goldfarb - Wine Editor

Thursday, March 9, 2006 8:25 AM PST

Bill Frazier rolls his big blue SUV to about 10 yards in front of the slated wooden doors leading to his new caves. He stops the car but before we get out of the vehicle, he halts to reflect on his 4-year-old winery; and most especially on his children, who are helping him with his venture.

He talks about his daughter Kim, 26, who is the marketing director of Frazier Vineyards. About 34-year-old Jon, who manages the property's 21 cultivated acres. And about Kevin, 17, a senior at Justin Siena High, who works in the Coombsville vineyard when he's not in school.

Suddenly, Frazier, who is short of stature, and who will be 66 years old next October stops, looks off into the distance, and then turns back to the reporter. His eyes are moist, and they are pink.

He then tells of Shawn, who passed away in January of 2002 at age 21. Shawn died, his father says now in a low, cracked voice, "from a drug infection, from a dirty needle." He says Shawn was a heroin user.

"He could do everything'

He also says, with his voice now barely audible, "He was my big winery guy. He was the guy who could do everything around here."

Indeed, an inspection of Frazier Winery's Web site reveals a photo of the blond-haired Shawn standing in front of the open-air tank pad that was being constructed before he died.

Since then Bill Frazier, a boy from the Bronx and a retired 32-year pilot with United Airlines, has forged ahead, building his winery, constructing the 8,500 square feet of caves, planting another 20 acres, and hoping to build a tasting room when and if he can raise the capital.

'Pretty cave bathrooms'

He mentions several times that he doesn't have the money to complete all of his desired projects. For instance, the caves don't have interior doors "because we can't afford the doors." But there are two beautifully finished washrooms that he calls "the prettiest cave bathrooms in the Napa Valley."

Frazier, who retired from UAL four years ago, is still involved in commercial real estate, he has a painting business, and he used to own parts of a couple of restaurants.

"But I've borrowed for the caves and the winery has two mortgages. I'm still trying to recover from 9/11, we have new distributors. ... Maybe we'll get a few more mortgages and hopefully, we'll start making money from some of these things."

The 5,000 cases of wine, which also includes a second label -- Lupine Hill -- consists of a couple of Cabernet Sauvignons and a Merlot; and a reserve Cab called Memento, named in memory of Shawn. The latter wine, which costs \$85, is sold only at the winery or through Frazier's wine club.

Not far from thoughts

Despite the focus on building the estate, Shawn isn't far from his dad's thoughts. As everyone who outlives a child knows, those thoughts might diminish some -- but they never, ever go away.

"Yeah, a lot of the enthusiasm is gone," Frazier admits about the days after Shawn's passing. "(But) the four of us are working here. We've settled down, got to work and things have been getting better each year."

Frazier's winemaker is John Gibson, who also makes wines for Snowden, Rockledge, Andrew Geoffrey and for his own label, Salexis. The top end wines for Frazier -- the first of which was released in 1998 from the '95 vintage -- are strictly produced from free run juice, and sell for \$55. Frazier calls them "Big Boy Wines," because of their structure and tannins which result in a "big mouthful."

Hopes to double production

He hopes to double his production when the additional vineyard - which backs up onto the Napa Valley Country Club and is near the Rafter Ranch horse breeding school -- takes hold.

By that time, the Napa Valley should have another sub-appellation. Folks in the Coombsville area such as Caldwell, Tulocay, Palmaz, Star Hill, Bighorn, Farella, and Elke have applied for AVA status under the Tulocay name.

For a boy who lived in a one bedroom apartment in the Parkchester neighborhood of the Bronx, which housed five people including his grandfather, Bill Frazier could never have been so prescient as to know where his life would have taken him.

"I never envisioned living out in the country and doing this," he says.

As he looks out over the rolling hills covered with purple lupines and grapevines, his eyes water again. Not presumably from the wind coming off San Pablo Bay, but one suspects, from thoughts of Shawn.

Alan Goldfarb can be reached at wines@sthelenastar.com