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A Perfect Pairing with the Community

By Andrea A. Firth



Photos Andy Scheck

friend, Kesnija Olmer, became so committed to the vineyard that she

adopted three rows of grapevines that she cares for as her own. Four years into the process, the now leafy-green vines are reaching maturity. Captain Vineyards became a bonded winery in May, the second in Lamorinda, which enables them to make and sell wine under their own label.

The Captain's 3,500 grapevines horizontally traverse the hillside that falls away from the back of their home. The 350-step terraced vineyard has 120 lanes that are oriented to take the best advantage of the sun while minimizing erosion and providing easy access to the grapes. A panorama of golden-yellow, undulating hills serves as the backdrop for the vineyard—a picturesque landscape, which could easily be mistaken for the Napa Valley, that faces northwest toward Lafayette.

"The most important part of wine is a good grape," states Susan, who makes sharing her knowledge and love of viticulture a priority.

She has taught organic winegrowing practices to young people through the Lamorinda 4-H Club and a Miramonte High School internship program. This winter, Susan plans to begin offering classes in wine grape management to the community.

In contrast to Susan's affinity to the vine, according to Sal, "Everything starts in the garage." He has emerged as the enologist of the pair. After contracting with other wineries to produce their wine for the past three years, the Captains plan to gradually move the production of their vineyard's eight tons of grapes in-house. Sal has outfitted the garage with a crusher/destemmer, press, and filter in preparation for processing 1.5 tons of grapes, which will produce about 900 bottles of their petite sirah/cabernet sauvignon blend this year. Sal has also reclaimed the naturally cool basement space below the house for bottling, storage and wine tasting. Together Susan and Sal look forward to tasting the product of this vintage, which will be released sometime in 2012.

As the Captains have watched their grapes grow, they have also observed the propagation of vineyards in Lamorinda and had the opportunity to meet and work with other local vineyard owners through their involvement in the Lamorinda Winegrowers Association. "People who enjoy wine have a good disposition," states Sal. "We have met some really interesting people through this adventure," says Susan, adding, "You really have to be passionate about wine making. You have to love the land and love doing it."

Lamorinda Winegrowing on the Rise

The number of backyard vineyards dotting the hills of Lamorinda is on the rise. The Lamorinda Winegrowers Association has grown exponentially since its inception in 2005 according to Dave Parker, who, with his wife Shari Simon, owns Parkmon Vineyards in Moraga. "When we first started [the Association], there were about 23 vineyards. Now we have a directory of 85 vineyards in Lamorinda," says Parker. "About half of the vineyards are trying to produce wine from their grapes—some are home winemakers, some pay to have their wine made, and others sell or exchange their grapes for wine production," he adds. Parkmon Vineyards, the first commercial winery established in Lamorinda, expects to produce 900 cases of wine this year with 2/3 of the grapes sourced from 11 different Lamorinda vineyards. Parkmon's wine production has more than doubled in the past three years and the percentage of grapes sourced locally has increased two-fold.

The Captain's backyard was buzzing with activity on a warm Friday morning in September as a crew of 15 people picked pinot noir grapes and hauled overflowing bins of the ripened fruit up the steps of the hillside vineyard. The grape pickers included vineyard owners Susan and Sal Captain and a collection of family, friends, and recent acquaintances who came together for the harvest. "It went so fast. We were done in about an hour," states Susan, pleasantly surprised by the speedy work of her volunteers. "Friends were still arriving to help, and there were no more grapes left to pick."

Community involvement in the Captain's vineyard was always part of the plan according to Susan, a warm and intellectually curious woman, who has cultivated an extended and diverse network after living in Moraga for 20 years. "The idea was always to share [the vineyard] with the community," says Susan. "I can only drink so much wine by myself," she adds with a laugh.

Captain Vineyards, the largest vineyard in Lamorinda's rapidly-growing winegrowing community, was Susan's brainchild. She wanted to find something that would keep her and her husband Sal physically, intellectually, and socially active in their "retirement."

The Captain's remaining children were recruited to train, prune, thin, and pick the vines and friends were enlisted as needed. Susan's



The Captain's terraced vineyard became bonded in May Photo Andy Scheck

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