

SPOTLIGHT

## Rianda House celebrates Meily Park vineyard's first harvest



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The vineyard crew could have been any set of proud grandparents marveling over the accomplishments of a precocious 3-year-old.

“Look at these vines! Look at these grapes! And this is only the third year,” was the general thread of conversation last week as the morning sun cast long shadows across the quarter-acre vineyard at Jacob Meily Park, where members of the Rianda House Wine and Vine group were harvesting primitivo/zinfandel.

“If I were a commercial farmer with this kind of yield, I would be jumping up and down, provided I had a contract that would cover it,” said the group’s winemaker and cheerleader, Mike Hardy, as the vineyard’s first harvest was getting underway.

Since the project’s early days, “it’s been beg, borrow or steal right along, but the community’s been receptive,” Hardy added. “We got a couple of barrels for aging from a winery in the Stags Leap area. It’s been that kind of thing all along.”

The community has played an active role in the creation of the vineyard from the start, Hardy said.

Initially, the city’s former parks and recreation head Kathy Carrick alerted the Rianda House Senior Activity Center to a remnant of a historic vineyard in a weed-filled corner of Meily Park. Hardy, a veteran winemaker now retired, gathered a group of seniors interested in learning about grape growing and winemaking.

Viticulturist Linda Neal stepped in and added her considerable energy and expertise, as did Jim Haller and his city parks crew, Hardy said.

Hardy then ticked off an impressive list of benefactors as he reviewed the small vineyard’s history: Grafted vines came from California Grapevine Nursery; A&J Vineyard Supply of St. Helena provided posts, wire and irrigation materials; C&R Forest Products of Santa Rosa provided material for fence posts; North Coast Irrigation designed the watering system; Jim’s Supply Co. in Calistoga delivered fence posts; and Steves Hardware offered credit on small items.

“Several vineyard consultants helped us pro bono,” Hardy said. “Danyal Kasapligil of Dellavalle Laboratories, an outfit that does soil analysis, and Richard Nagaoka of St. Helena. Davie Pina did backhoe work for us for nothing. Central Valley Builders Supply gave us some free time with

rental equipment to dig post holes and trenches.”

The group decided to use the traditional vertical cordon method, which encourages grapevine spurs “every 6 inches all the way up the vine, like a Christmas tree,” Hardy said. “There’s a better yield than with head-trained vines, and it is very easy to pick with most grapes waist-high or higher.”

The project took longer than expected as the group worked out a memorandum of understanding with the city of St. Helena and signed a 10-year agreement. But Neal was there, encouraging the group at every turn.

“Linda has donated huge amounts of her time,” the Rianda House winemaker said.

“Without her, none of this would be possible,” David Kernberger, another harvester, chimed in.

As it waited for the vines to mature, the group developed its winemaking knowledge and skills by harvesting and bottling grapes from other vineyards. Its 2009 and 2010 Geezer Picnic Red was made from a primitivo blend with a little sirah, both donated by Linda Neal and harvested by the group. The grapes were crushed and the juice aged and bottled at Kernberger’s compact stone winery.

Last week, the hard work, exasperation with slow-moving bureaucracy and the difficult, knuckle-biting wait as the Meily Park vines grew and matured were forgotten.

A crew of enthusiastic pickers, sliding plastic dishpans or 5-gallon white or orange paint buckets along the rows, worked their way through the 175 vines, marveling as they went at the size and number of the primitivo grapes.

“Look at these grapes,” urged Klaus Gruetzner. “Just unbelievable.”

As she picked, Donna Hardy talked about the quail she sees enjoying the grapes and despaired over the humans who pick the clusters and toss them on the ground.

The synchronized team of Bob and Kate Skupny tried out two types of tools — Kate Skupny preferred sharp, narrow-bladed clippers, her husband, the traditional curved grape harvest knife.

There was an element of the sartorial in what pickers chose to wear. Don Green sported an unusually floppy straw hat, Cliff Hansen paired a blue Jackson Hole T-shirt with a faded green Victoria, Canada, cap. Bob Fitzgerald had on a wine-red souvenir T-shirt from August’s 2013 Main Street Reunion car show, and Russ Baker wore a classic Notre Dame sweatshirt.

“This is a lot of fun,” said Baker, a veteran of an estimated four or five vineyard harvests. “It gets you out in the fresh air.”

When the harvest bins in the waiting Toyota Tacoma were full, they were taken to the bonded William Cole Winery to be crushed.

By late afternoon, Hardy was at his computer emailing the pertinent numbers to the group.

“Despite knocking 25-30 percent of the crop off a dozen dead or dying vines, and some pilferage, we harvested about 1,100 pounds in about an hour and 15 minutes,” he wrote to Wine

and Vine members.

“The 1,100 pounds will only give us about 80-85 gallons of juice, or 34 cases.”

Refractometer readings showed sugar levels at 25.8 Brix — on the high side of where he wanted the grapes to be — and Hardy is hoping to later blend the primitivo with some of Neal's sirah.

The two varieties would be fermented separately, however, “to keep our blending options open and give us a chance to evaluate our own grapes by themselves,” he said.

“This is the first time we've used it with our own grapes, and we won't know what we need,” Hardy had explained earlier in the day. “It's a game winemakers play. We'll have to decide how much press wine we'll use. Most home winemakers use all of it together, but I don't believe in that.”

It may be the first vintage for the Rianda House Meily Park vineyard, but already the group, influenced by its own preferences and Hardy's winemaking philosophy, is aiming at creating a lighter, fruitier varietal rather than “one of these alcohol-laded fruit bombs.”

“Our group all basically likes the lighter wine style,” Hardy said, “and it's been successful at the county fair. We've entered three wines (using grapes harvested from other vineyards) and won three medals.”

The lighter style “also allows us to bottle the wine after only a year,” he added. “We don't have to age it two years and buy all those barrels. I don't want all that wood flavor anyway; the wine is fairly soft to start with.”

Hardy considers this aspect of winemaking “the fun part for me, playing with the wine. In my case I like the vineyard to come through and not the manipulation of the winery.”

Those interested in sampling a little of the Rianda House vineyard “flavor” will have to wait, however. The group is still working on getting the licensing needed to use the wine for fundraising.

Until then, the only other option is to be invited to share a bottle with a member of the Wine and Vine group.