

North Bay

September 20-26, 2006



Made to order: Judd (left) and Art Finkelstein help to crush great ideas.

Personal Best

Custom wine programs allow regular wine lovers to join the crush

By Alastair Bland

Crush time is here, and the grapes hang heavy in the Indian summer sun. Such a sight makes wannabe vintners of many dreamers. How nice it would be, they sigh, to have a winery of one's own, tucked somewhere far back in the quiet oak-studded hills of Napa or Sonoma.

But such idyllic dreams can quickly turn to vinegar when reality and logistics collide. One must, of course, harvest the fruit, crush the grapes, fill the vats, clear the hoses of muck, understand nuances in temperature and generally have a grasp of chemistry, the science of taste and old-fashioned farm methods.

Perhaps grapes are best left to the growers and wine to the makers, but the lazy layperson can still craft his or her very own vintage, as several wineries in the North Bay produce custom wines.

In this process, clients choose varying degrees of physical involvement, from little more than a few telephone calls to actually joining in the fall harvest, the crush and all the dirty, sticky work that follows. Most significantly, however, the client may precisely

direct the winemakers in what grapes will be used and by what proportions the different blends will be mixed before bottling.

Judd's Hill MicroCrush, located just north of Napa, has produced custom wines since 1992. It's a two-generation family business with Judd, owner Art Finkelstein's son, acting as winemaker. In addition to their own 3,000 annual case winery, Judd's Hill, the family has added the last element of the name, "MicroCrush," indicating their specialization in very small and personal batches of wine made exactly to the specifications of others.

"Other wineries custom crush," says Art Finkelstein, "but many have a minimum requirement of several tons. We don't like to do more than eight tons. We save that for the big guys and they send the small guys to us. It's a very nice arrangement."

Judd's Hill will process as little as a half ton of grapes, which is one barrel's worth, or 24 cases of wine totaling 288 bottles. By a winemaker's standards, a half ton of grapes is a paltry bundle. Yet even for the dinkiest batches, the Finkelsteins don't let their guard down.

"When you make it with us, you're guaranteed success. We don't mess up. We've got three winemakers here with 40 years of experience," Finkelstein assures.

Judd's Hill MicroCrush grows 12 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon on the hillside that ascends eastward from St. Helena, and the winery maintains a priority in producing its own various wines each year. Its mainstay, however, is custom wines, of which the family annually generates 7,000 to 9,000 cases--enough to prompt the opening of a new winery last year. The grapes for these custom vintages vary in origin. Some clients have their own vineyards, just no winery, so they truck their fruit over to Judd's Hill and leave the winemaking to the experts. Others--city slickers, perhaps--have no grapes at all, and for these Judd's Hill MicroCrush provides the grapes, as the winery works with many local growers and has access to several varieties of Napa's finest clusters.

"We've also got an inventory of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc stored in barrels, and we can complement someone's blend with these wines if they like," Finkelstein says.

Finkelstein stresses that he does not rent his facility out to grape-holders who want to make their own wine, but clients are welcome to participate in the process. Enthusiastic individuals sometimes help with the picking, the crushing, stirring the vats and cleaning the equipment.

"But mainly people just come in and taste their wine's progress, see that it's a living thing that mellows out over time."

Certainly, many wines are cheaper than a custom blend from Judd's Hill MicroCrush. However, here you're paying not only for grapes and labor, but also for a very personal attention to exactly what you want in several hundred bottles of wine. The price, says

Finkelstein--after crushing, fermenting, bottling and labeling--arrives at about \$275 per case.

Judd's Hill MicroCrush works seasonally, and now is the time. If you want to get purple and sticky, go for it--and forget about that vineyard. It's a lot of trouble, and it's probably just a pipe dream anyway.

Judd's Hill MicroCrush, 2332 Silverado Trail, Napa. For details, call 866.438.5833 or go to www.nvcmc.com.