

WINE COUNTRY *This Week*



The Finkelsteins make fine music to go along with their fine wines. The family band is comprised of Bunnie on tuba, Judd on ukulele, Art on piano and Holly on tambourine. Photo by Tia Gavin

JUDD'S HILL WINERY

Fun First (After Eating)

by Richard Paul Hinkle

It is only the slightest of inconsistencies when the folks at Judd's Hill tell you that "fun comes first" and that their family motto is "... but first we eat!" It is an infectious attitude, and one that works well at disassembling the arrogance and pretentiousness that previously infected the wine business. I mean, after all, who can retain the slightest hint of pretense when the young man for whom the winery is named plays ukulele for the Maikai Gents, Featuring the Mysterious Miss Mauna Loa? (Mauna Loa is hula dancer Holly Finkelstein, Judd's wife and winery CFO. It gets better. Judd's mother, Bunnie, plays the tuba!)

Judd's dad is proprietor-winemaker Art Finkelstein, a piano player who, with his

physician-brother Alan Steen, founded Whitehall Lane Winery in 1979. When it got too big a decade later (“We were spending too much time on the road”), they sold it and started over on an 11-acre vineyard in Conn Valley named for Art’s son, then a broadcast journalism student at Arizona State. Last year, they moved the operation down from the hill to a site on the Silverado Trail a few miles north of Napa.

A big part of their business today is called Judd’s Hill MicroCrush. “We have over a hundred clients, many of whom are grape growers who want to market their grapes in the best possible manner: by showing just how good the wines from their vineyards can be,” says Art, who grew up in Rock Island, Illinois, then followed his older brother west to study architecture at USC. (The fact that Bunnie attended UCLA only causes family friction during football season.) The Judd’s Hill crush accounts for about 3,000 cases each year, while their custom crush project handles about 8,000 cases a year.

As at Whitehall Lane, Cabernet Sauvignon is the *raison d’être* at Judd’s Hill, where Judd shares the winemaking duties with his father and enologist Greg Opitz. “You need all three of us to keep track of all the custom crush lots, not to mention making our own wine,” laughs Art. But all you need to do is taste the 2002 Judd’s Hill Napa Valley Cabernet (\$42) to know just how serious these guys are when it counts. The wine is wonderfully juicy despite the chewy, chalky tannin that holds in the expansive iodine and violet fruit that spreads out over your palate like a down comforter. Think grilled tri-tip and you’ll be on the right track.

There are other wines at Judd’s Hill, two of which really stand out right now. One is the Petite Sirah 2002 from Lodi (\$28), wet and juicy with peppercorn, violets and blackberry fruit. This wine is unusually soft and supple, perhaps more so than any other Petite Sirah I can recall. “We had made this wine for the grower as a custom crush wine,” says Art, “and it was so good that we asked him if we could buy some of his fruit for ourselves. He agreed, and there you are. It is unusually soft, as you suggest. Which is good, because that makes it better for food and, as you know, we do like to eat!”

With eating in mind, pay close attention then to the Judd’s Hill Pinot Noir 2004 Napa Valley (\$28), a delightfully succulent rendering of the variety, with black cherry and raspberry fruit that virtually begs for the filet mignon, and don’t hold back on the mushrooms. The fruit comes from the vineyard adjacent to their new facility. “We’re in a micro-micro climate here, between the creek and the river, so it is just cool enough for Pinot Noir,” says Art. “The owners planted the Pommard clones we requested and we’re more than happy with the wines that fruit has produced.” Taste the wine. You’ll see. That’s all you really need to know.

Bunnie says I have to share with you the poem I wrote a few years ago for the winery's poetry contest (I won a T-shirt), entitled It's a Dog's Wine: "Here we have our sanitation/
To keep the germs at bay/ But across the wide Atlantic/ They live a better way. There's
Frenchy at his bistro/ On the hearth a burning log/ "Some Gevrey avec mon rôti," he
sang/ And a little Beaune for my dog."

Open to visitors by appointment only, Judd's Hill is now located at 2332 Silverado Trail, Napa (3/4 miles north of Trancas, and 2.5 miles south of Oak Knoll). Phone is toll-free 1-866-GET-JUDD [438-5833]. Or check 'em out on the web at www.JuddsHill.com.

[The author of eight wine books, Hinkle is adept at business writing, from brochures to portfolios, from press kits to back labels. He even writes books about wineries, his latest being Alligator Dreams: The Story of Greenwood Ridge Vineyards. See his website at www.RichardPaulHinkle.com.]