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Cinnabar Vineyards passionate about cab in the Santa Cruz mountains

By Laura Ness
For the Los Gatos Weekender
Article Launched: 01/02/2008 06:12:07 PM PST

You've probably seen the Mercury Rising cabernet blend from Cinnabar Vineyards & Winery on many wine lists across the country. Its approachable yet complex flavors and rich texture have made it a huge hit with people looking for a cabernet that has some style at a good price point. The fruit for this wine comes from vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Paso Robles and San Benito counties. Winemaker George Troquato vinifies everything separately and then cherry-picks the best of the bunch to make his collection of Santa Cruz Mountains wines. He literally rates the barrels A, B or C, and only the A's make it into the special collection of pure appellation fruit.

When I visited the winery on a recent crisp winter afternoon, it was warmer in the cellar than it was outside—a rarity. Perched at about 1,650 feet on the eastern edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains range, overlooking the Silicon Valley below, the vineyards are little islands poking up above the fog. The operation is impressive: Clean, organized and immaculate. The winery, which has been operating for more than 20 years now, makes 15,000 cases of wine a year.

The name Cinnabar comes from the ore of mercury which alchemists believed could enable ordinary metals to be turned into silver or gold. Owner Tom Mudd (who died earlier this year) was a Stanford Ph.D. and a research scientist at SRI. Smitten by the wine bug, he attempted to buy the Mount Eden Winery in 1982. When that failed, he flew over the neighboring



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slopes of the Saratoga hills in a helicopter, glimpsing for the first time what was to become Cinnabar. He purchased 25 acres and planted half to cabernet and half to chardonnay, using the Mount Eden clones of both.

In 1999, he replanted 12 acres of the estate vineyards with 2 acres of pinot noir, 3 acres of chardonnay and the remainder, cabernet sauvignon, using certified clones and rootstock better suited to the soil and climate conditions. These vineyards feed the estate chardonnay and the appellation pinot and cabernet programs. Presently, Troquato buys 80 percent of the fruit he needs, with about 20 percent to 30 percent of that coming from the Santa Cruz Mountains. "Historically, there has been very low availability of Santa Cruz Mountains fruit," he explains. That, too, is changing. The bulk of the purchased fruit goes into the Mercury Rising, Paso Merlot and Monterey Chardonnay creations.

Troquato is intensely passionate about the Santa Cruz Mountains. He'd like to make more appellation-designate wine to really give people that sense of place. He's also passionate about cabernet. He told me point blank, "Cabernet is far harder to make than pinot noir. If you have the right site, the right clones and you handle it right, you

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can make good pinot. Cabernet, on the other hand, is so weather-dependent that it is a real struggle to get it ripe in this climate. One year you'll have an austere cab, and the next, a wine that is nice, rich and dark."

He knows what consumers prefer. "Nobody wants to go back to the days of 12 and 13 percent alcohol with those green flavors. I don't like cedar and cigar box in cab. Personally, I look for coffee, licorice and rich red and blackberry fruits." So, I asked, how do you get it the way you like it?

Simple. Well, not quite simple - it took years to get this right - but Troquato now buys by the acre and not the ton. And those acres are meticulously trimmed back to the exact tonnage he thinks will fully ripen, and he will keep cutting fruit until what's left is sure to be good. And if it isn't, he simply won't make a cab for that vintage. This happened in 1998 and 2000.

"Cabernet is the most cerebral wine. It is the biggest challenge to my intellect. I want to make great Cabernet from these mountains," Troquato says. "I believe there is just so much flavor per acre, and if you let the vines have their way, that flavor is diluted. I want to concentrate the flavors. I appreciate the slightly higher acidity we get here, and I don't want to lose the Santa Cruz Mountains style."

In search of the perfect cabernet fruit, he is buying from fairly new vineyards, including Black Ridge off of Bear Creek Road, where he also purchases cabernet franc and merlot. Down in the southern edge of the appellation, he buys from Kilmartin

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Vineyard in the Redwood Retreat area.

"I'm trying to select the best elements of the mountain fruit. If I can achieve supple tannins and a big mouth feel, that is what I'm after. I do not like dry tannins; they simply turn powdery with age. I want to make wines that people can enjoy when they're released. I like to say, 'Wine: What are you waiting for?'"

EVENTS

Jan. 5 and 6: Byington Winery invites you to Carols In The Caves from 2 to 4 p.m. Enjoy "Cave Of The Spirits For Twelfth Night" performed by The Improvisator. Using rare and exotic instruments, he will transport you back to ancient times in the amazing underground acoustics of Byington's wine cave. Byington wines will be available at intermission. Admission is \$40 per person (no children under 10). For tickets and more information, call (707) 224-4222.

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