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Photograph by George Sakkestad

Cinnabar Winery employees (from left) Mary Jane Reiter, Dick Ouellette, George Troquato, Aaron Hughes, Angela Cesari and Ken Omniabohs took part in an employee contest to create a new blend for the winery.

Blending in is easy for Cinnabar employees

Winery lets workers create new vintages

By MARIANNE L. HAMILTON

In Silicon Valley, most corporate teambuilding exercises fall somewhere between a pizza-and-beer-bash in an empty conference room and an offsite excursion to do a ropes course. The management at Cinnabar Winery recently came up with a "vintage" approach to creating good will among their staffers: 10 employees from their Saratoga tasting room—including two credentialed sommeliers—mixed and matched

varietals to create their own wines. The award-winning blends are now being sold online, and at the Big Basin Way facility.

It was the vision of George Troquato, winemaker at the family-owned winery since 1990, which led to the employee competition.

"We decided to come up with three proprietary blends and get the staff involved, so they felt vested in the wines and had some input," Troquato said. "We thought it would be empowering for them. Since two of our employees are second-level sommeliers, we knew they'd have some experience that we could tap into."

Troquato and tasting room manager Ken Omniabohs, a resident

of Los Gatos, first divided their staff into three teams. Each group then used three types of grapes to come up with its own formula; the process was repeated three times, with all employees (along with Cinnabar president Suzanne Frontz) judging each other's efforts throughout the evening.

"Everyone got to vote," Troquato confirmed. "The three blends that won were the ones that we ended up bottling, and the initials of the people who came up with the blend went on the labels. I adhered as much as possible to the percentages determined by the winning teams."

The three new blends are "Cruvee," a mix of Merlot, cabernet

franc and petit verdot, and "Tripartite" and "Philosopher's Stone," both of which combine zinfandel and lesser-known, full-bodied reds. In all, Cinnabar bottled 75 cases of each blend, mostly for sales through the label's online wine club.

"We've already sold out Philosopher's Stone," Troquato noted.

Included in the competition were wine club manager Angela Cesari and grower relations manager Alejandro Aldama, as well as tasting room employees Elizabeth Gray, Mary Jane Reiter, Aaron Hughes, Ina Henegan, Dick Ouel-

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lette, Kristen Jessie and Malcolm Brown. Hughes and Reiter both have received their sommelier certification through Campbell's Professional Culinary Institute.

Reiter, a PR consultant who has poured at Cinnabar for the past two years, said the competition was much more elaborate and challenging than she had anticipated.

"I thought we'd just be pouring a couple of things into a Dixie cup and seeing how they tasted, but it was much more scientific than that," said Reiter. "We had to be extremely precise and remember what exactly went into our blend. It was very educational; there's a lot more to it than you'd think. And the response from our wine club members, and people who've tasted the blends in our tasting room, has been really positive."

"The customers really love these wines; they're more European in style, and not heavy. But the best thing is that this activity has given our employees a sense of

ownership of their work. Now when someone walks up and says, 'This wine's really nice,' it puts a smile on their faces; like they've contributed to our guests' experiences," OmIniabohs adds.

Deeming the experiment a positive one, Troquato says wine lovers can expect more employee-devised blends in the future.

"We'll probably do another one in the next month or two. It's a great teambuilding activity; you learn different things about yourself, and the people you work with."

Note to corporate HR managers: Troquato is considering extending the winemaking activity to Silicon Valley firms looking for a unique way to motivate their employees.

"If companies want to come out here and make a blend and put on their label, we'd love it," Troquato said.

Which sounds like a whole lot more fun than climbing a rope.

Cinnabar Winery is located at 14612 Big Basin Way, Saratoga. More information on wines and tasting room hours can be found at www.cinnabarwine.com, or by calling 408.867.1012.