



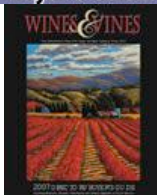
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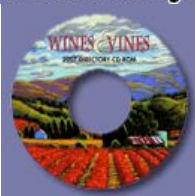


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Customers Make Their Own at Kings Hill

Sonoma County winery encourages hands-on participation

Santa Rosa, Calif.—Kings Hill Cellars is a "members only" winery in the Mayacamas Range between Sonoma and Napa counties that sells no wine. Instead, it provides premium winegrapes, a state-of-the-art winemaking and storage facility, and guidance from an expert winemaker to individual or group members, who invest in half or full barrels of Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Zinfandel or Sauvignon Blanc.

Grapes are sourced from established North Coast Vineyards, including Mountain View Ranch, Herbert's, Le Vois and Trew in Dry Creek Valley; Fowler in Knights Valley and Volckhardt in Green Valley. After selecting their preferred varietal, and its source, members are encouraged to participate in all the decisions and processes involved to create, age and bottle their wines, which can then be stored for up to two years in the Kings Hill cut-and-bermed, climate-controlled cave.

Owner Lindsay Austin is a former business executive who moved to wine country in 2001. He joined a winemaking club and participated in Germany's 2003 crush, an experience that inspired the Kings Hill model. His desire to make cult wines of his own prompted him to hire consulting winemaker Richard Mansfield, owner of Vincon Enology Services who formerly worked at Stags' Leap, Bradford Mountain and Palmaz, and now has his own label, Mansfield Winery.

The winery, which was completed in September 2006, is also available to vineyard owners who want to produce wine from their own grapes. "Many growers have good fruit, but don't have the expertise or equipment to make great wine," Austin commented. The Kings Hill facility was specifically engineered to be safe, clean and easy to use; gentle on the wine with minimum exposure to air. It's equipped with inert-gas racking and filtration systems, as well as a fully stocked lab. A mobile bottling service comes in when needed, and an in-house graphic designer will assist in designing private labels.

"Unlike firms that produce wine or operate virtual wineries for customers in absentia," Austin said, "Kings Hill provides members with hands-on experience...from sorting and de-stemming to crushing and pressing, to blending and bottling." Austin told *Wines & Vines* that Kings Hill currently has 17 members; last year, a total of nine barrels of red wines were produced. As many as six members are teaming up to produce a single barrel.

"Virtually all the members were here for crush/initiating fermentation, then again at press. They are all coming to barrel tasting and weighing in on blending options, picking their bottle, cork, capsule and creating their labels," Austin said. "A few were here for some of the punch-downs, and a few helped with racking."

According to the Kings Hill website, "By pooling members' efforts and sharing resources, a co-op structured wine club benefits everyone...Winemaking is not a mystery."

Although Kings Hill styles itself as "a new class of California winery," committed consumers can find similar experiences at operations like Judd's Hill MicroCrush in Napa and San Francisco's Crushpad.

Still, Austin makes a valid point for those who'd like to share the winemaking experience. "Next time you come up to the wine country, wouldn't you rather be checking in on your own barrels?" Membership prices range from \$2,450 for a half barrel of Sauvignon Blanc to \$5,950 for a full barrel of Pinot Noir. Limited quantities of each variety are being negotiated for the 2007 harvest, and membership is on a first-come, first-served basis. For details, visit kingshillcellars.com.

—Jane Firstenfeld



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