

Through the grapevine

More Ventura County winemakers, especially those in Ojai Valley's grape-friendly climate, are choosing to grow their own

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On the first day of harvest, Mark Dufau needed 10 workers at the crack of dawn. Five people arrived. At 8 a.m. Dufau needed their help to pick enough of the sticky cabernet sauvignon grape clusters growing in his family's Sulphur Mountain vineyard near Ojai to fill 16 plastic bins stacked on his rented flatbed truck. But by 3:30 p.m., only nine of the 4-by-4-foot bins were full.

No matter. Dufau and his 4 1/2 tons of plummy-black grapes had a date with a machine that would remove their stems and crush their skins, the first step in turning them into wine. With a little luck and determination, he figured, they could make it. "You have to have a passion for this, because the economics of it are very difficult to justify," Dufau said with a laugh.

No one said that making wine from the ground up would be easy. There is the waiting for grapes to ripen before the weather turns, for one thing. There is the need for new French-oak barrels at \$700 a pop, for another. But more Ventura County winemakers like the Dufaus are giving it a try. In most cases, they planted vines for public consumption several years before the Oscar-winning movie "Sideways" helped broaden the term "California wine country" to include places outside the Napa Valley. Now these homegrown vintners stand to reap the rewards as their vines start to produce: Wine consumption is up 4 percent from 2004, marking the 11th straight year of growth.



Rob Varela / Star staff

Don Dufau, who once farmed celery and other crops in Oxnard, picks cabernet sauvignon grapes from a vineyard planted just a few steps from his front door on Sulphur Mountain near Ojai. The vineyard is part of the Dufau family's 40-acre avocado ranch.



Rob Varela / Star staff

Juaquim Hernandez of Santa Paula clips a cluster of grapes during the first day of the cabernet sauvignon harvest in the Dufau family's vineyard.

The numbers aren't likely to decline anytime soon, thanks to a "baby boomlet" of Americans who reached legal drinking age in the mid 1990s. By the end of this decade, they'll be in their 30s -- prime targets for wine marketers. At 33, Mark Dufau is very nearly part of the demographic. But standing in his family's vineyard nestled in a 40-acre avocado ranch, he was thinking more about making wine than drinking it.

Some 90 miles away, in an industrial park tucked behind a Home Depot in the northern Santa Barbara County town of Lompoc, the shiny, stainless-steel stemmer/crusher was waiting. Waiting, too, were the people who knew how to run it. With his father, Ventura County farmer Don Dufau, 68, riding shotgun, the younger Dufau climbed into the truck and started the engine. By the time the Dufaus pulled up outside the Lompoc wine ghetto -- so called by locals because the gray and blue metal buildings house no fewer than six wineries -- the town's famously chilly late-afternoon fog had blown in off the ocean. The crush crew had gone home.

"Bad news," said Mark Dufau. "If we'd gotten here just 15 minutes earlier, we could have done the crush. Now it looks like they might wait till tomorrow, when we bring in more grapes." But the trip wasn't a total loss. Three weeks earlier, the Dufaus had picked, crushed and pressed their syrah, resting now in a stainless-steel tank in the corner. Wouldn't this be as good a time as any to taste it, just to see how things were going? Passing a glass of the deep purple juice between them, Mark and Don Dufau sniffed, swirled and sipped.

"Wow," said Mark. "That's pretty smooth for just sitting in a fermentation tank."

For public consumption

Small, family-run wineries like the Dufaus' Ojai Ridge face a variety of challenges that are virtually unknown by the likes of Beringer and Kendall-Jackson. First, they must fend off the occasional visiting bear intent on eating more than its share of the already comparatively tiny harvest. Then they must jostle with the big guys for shelf space in wine shops and restaurants. Creating a limited-production wine in an as-yet-unheralded region may be one way to cut through the noise.

Witness Screaming Eagle, one of Napa Valley's smallest wineries. Its cult cabernets have sold for as much as \$250 a bottle to loyal mailing-list customers. "Sometimes that whole hand-crafted thing catches on. You have some fun and maybe make a little money," said John Cuthbert, 62, a retired engineer whose family grows and bottles a red wine called malbec on a historic Ojai estate once owned by movie director Tim Burton. It's a start. Made by daughter Anne Cuthbert, 35, Noble Oaks Vineyard & Winery's 2002 malbec is, at \$75 a bottle, the only example of that particular varietal selected for the 60-page wine list at the revered Meiners Oaks restaurant The Ranch House.

Wines of the times

It's no Napa or Santa Ynez Valley -- yet -- but Ventura County is home to at least a dozen wineries. Most haul in fruit from regions with proven grape-growing track records. John Daume of Daume Winery in Camarillo makes his chardonnays from grapes he brings in from Monterey County. Leeward Winery in Ventura this weekend will unveil its 2001 pinot noir made with grapes grown in the Santa Maria Valley vineyard Bien Nacido. Even Old Creek Ranch Winery near Oak View, which dates to the late 1800s and was rumored to have supplied locals with wine during the Prohibition, has taken to "sourcing" its grapes from outside of the area. It has to: Most of its vines were wiped out by an insect-borne scourge called Pierce's disease in the 1990s and have yet to be replaced. Owners Carmel and John Whitman plan to plant cherry trees on the premises in February, although they are reserving some hilltop space for eventual use as a vineyard. Until then, the winery's public tasting room will feature a Los Alamos sangiovese and a newly released petite sirah made with grapes grown in Clarksburg near Sacramento.

Pierce's disease also is a concern for Manfred and Elaine Krankl of Sine Qua Non, a Ventura winery whose production of wines with names like The Hussy and Hollerin' M is so limited, and in such demand, that oenophiles like to joke that there is a waiting list just to get on the mailing list. This spring, the Krankls finished planting what Elaine called a 6 1/2-acre "trial" vineyard of syrah, grenache and roussanne on their property near Lake Casitas. "We wanted to see how things went before we planted more than that," she said. "We've had traps out, and people monitoring the vineyard. ... With the growth we've had so far, it's looking good." If all goes as planned, she added, the vineyard will be ready for production in 2006.

A sense of place

The business office of Opolo Vineyards is in Westlake Village because that's where co-owner Rick Quinn runs his brokerage, Century 21 America Realty. But Opolo grows, ferments and bottles its zinfandels, merlots and pinot noirs in Paso Robles for an equally matter-of-fact reason. "That's where I chose to make my investment," said Quinn, who described winemaking as "a hobby that got out of control." In the past five years, he added, Opolo's production has grown from 1,000 to 30,000 cases a year. Quinn questions the winemaking possibilities of grapes grown in Ventura County's relatively -- and consistently -- mild climate. But if any region in the county is up to the task, he added, it's Ojai, where dry soils and pockets of alternating hot and cool weather contribute to the flavors and sugars prized by vintners.

Led by Mark Dufau of Ojai Ridge and John Cuthbert of Noble Oaks, some winemakers toiling in the region's Mediterranean climate are pursuing the idea of creating an Ojai Valley AVA, or American Viticultural Area. If approved by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, such a designation could prove a valuable marketing tool. An official designation has certainly worked wonders for the Santa Rita Hills appellation, which encompasses vineyards between Lompoc and Buellton. Approved in 2001, the region's name has become synonymous with pinot noir and, to a lesser extent, chardonnay. The words "Santa Rita Hills" on a bottle of pinot are worth "at least an extra 10 bucks," joked Nick Fisher, owner of the wine shops Ventura Wine Co. and Carpinteria Wine Co.

Varietals are spice of life

After graduating from Villanova Preparatory School in Ojai, Mark Dufau earned a degree in agricultural and managerial economics at the University of California at Davis, a magnet school for viticulturalists if ever there was one. Today he is co-owner of Channel Islands Trading Corp., a Delano, Ca.-based company that imports spices and exports nuts. He also likes to drink wine -- cabernet sauvignon in particular. So it is that his family's Ojai Valley vineyard is planted with 3 acres of cabernet. The Dufaus were inspired to also plant an acre of syrah after seeing the example set by Adam Tolmach and his Oak View winery, The Ojai Vineyard.

Made from grapes grown in the Upper Ojai, Tolmach's 2000 Roll Ranch syrah earned 93 out of a possible 100 points from the Wine Spectator. The buzz created by the positive review helped create an important association in wine-drinkers' minds between Ojai grapes and quality syrah, said Mark Dufau.

At Noble Oaks Vineyard & Winery, it was Anne Cuthbert -- who has studied winemaking at UC Davis and earned a master's degree in industrial administration at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh -- who suggested planting an acre of malbec on her family's Ojai property in 2000. "Malbec is something we like, something that is suited to this climate, and something that is different; not a lot of other wineries here grow it," Cuthbert said of the varietal, which is widely planted in Chile and Argentina. (She also makes a cabernet franc, with grapes purchased from Rancho Sisquoc Winery near Santa Maria.) When her parents, John and Mary Cuthbert, bought Noble Oaks in 1999, an "'Edward Scissorhands' topiary dating from Tim Burton's ownership of the 1928 estate still stood on a patch of grass encircled by the driveway. The deer-shaped shrub has since been replaced by the flagpole seen in Noble Oaks' wine label design painted by watercolorist Norman Kirk. The Cuthbert family also makes a single-vineyard syrah using grapes grown by Boyd Ford, 80, in what he calls the Topa Topa Vineyard. It's a big name for a small -- as in one-third of an acre -- space at Eucalyptus Street and Foothill Road in Ojai. Early one Saturday morning in mid-September, a volunteer workforce of friends gathered in the vineyard to pick, dropping grape clusters into 5-gallon buckets. The plastic buckets were then loaded into the back of a Toyota pickup and driven about a mile to Noble Oaks, where they were dumped into an Italian-made crusher in the Cuthberts' three-car garage, a space so pristine the floor is painted white. Six days later, Anne and her father were back in the garage, using the same buckets to pour the crushed syrah grapes into a bladder press. The machine is so named because its rubbery center is inflated with water, pressing grape skins against a piece of mesh at a rate of 45 pounds per square inch. Without a protective cover in place, juice comes spurting out of the mesh with equal force. Forgetting to put the cover on is "something you usually only do once," Anne said with a laugh. "Making wine is a learning experience, no doubt about it."

A long process

Bill Moses learned about making wine in the 1980s, when he was a student living in France. Then he started doing it for himself, at one point using the same communal winemaking space in Santa Maria that housed Herzog Wine Cellars before the kosher winery moved to its custom-built, 77,000-square-foot facility in Oxnard. Moses moved his winery to Ventura County, too, just on a much smaller scale. The process started about 11 years ago, when Moses, a former investment banker, bought the Pratt House, an Ojai landmark built by Charles and Henry Greene, the sibling stars of Craftsman-era architecture. Moses planted an organic, 2-acre vineyard of syrah, grenache and semillon just inside the estate's gate. He converted the century-old water cistern into a cellar and hired a local craftsman to make a custom oak hopper -- a giant funnel to transfer grapes from picking bins into a barrel shaped stemmer-crusher -- in classic Greene & Greene style. Thus was born Pratt Winery and its label, Casa Barranca, the name given to the estate by its original owners. "The attention to detail in our winery translates to the attention to detail in our wines," said Moses, smiling as he spoke the potential slogan aloud.

A believer in sustainable energy and farming practices, Moses has dotted the estate's rooftops with solar panels, counts on the services of an on-site apiary and recycles pressed grape skins as fertilizer. His quest to make organic wines has inspired some of the vineyards from which he purchases grapes to start changing their farming methods, or to at least think about it. For now, Moses is particularly proud of the organic wines he makes and bottles on site, without added sulfites, which have been known to cause allergic reactions in some people. All wines contain some sulfites, but many winemakers add more to improve the longevity of their vintages. Wines without added sulfites often don't fare well when shipped cross-country in trucks, Moses said. Rather, such wines are best when consumed as close to the vineyard as possible. "All the more reason," he added, "to support your local winemakers."

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