



Napa winery gets help from an 'insider'

Former Star critic and PC product innovator lends expertise to small but special vineyard venture

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

St. Helena, Calif.—On a side street in the small town of St. Helena sits the tiniest winery in Napa. In stark contrast to the spiffy design or historic mansions of many neighbouring Napa wineries, Charter Oak Wines are made in a former chicken coop out back of an ordinary 1950s-style house.



MARGARET SWAINE PHOTO

After a career as a restaurant critic and product developer, Jim White moved to Napa and teamed with a friend in the wine business.

Torontonians, however, have a special reason beyond good taste to find "COW" of particular interest. One of its owners is Canadian Jim White. White was a *Toronto Star* food editor and restaurant critic in the early '80s who went on to be the voice of Dave Nichol's *Insider Report* and the brains behind thousands of President's Choice products.

"You probably lost track of me when I pulled up stakes in Toronto," said White, who moved to Napa after making a bundle on an investment with Cott soft drinks in its early days.

"I moved to Napa in 1997, figuring that if I were to continue writing about food and wine, I wanted to live where the best in North America is produced and served."

His first venture in Napa was an Internet business but with his house in the middle of famous vineyards, wine seems a natural for this master of all things consumable.

"I teamed up with a good friend here and for the last five years, helped Rob Fanucci make his Charter Oak zinfandel," White says.

"We pick the fruit by hand, process it in small batches, inoculate with native yeast and the juice never sees stainless steel or large commercial

Just the facts

Air Canada offers three direct daily flights to San Francisco.

www.aircanada.com
From San Francisco airport it's about an hour and a half drive to Napa, depending upon traffic.

California Wine Tours and other such transportation companies offer chauffeur-driven winery visits. See www.californiawinetours.com

hoses. We even use a 100-year-old wooden basket to press out the fermented juice by hand. No bladder pumps nor highfalutin machinery."

There are about 500 wineries in Napa Valley, many of which offer tasting rooms open to the public. In summer, traffic can be bumper-to-bumper with visitors keen to sample the wines of famous labels.

Beringer, one of Napa's most historic, is in the landmark Rhine House Victorian home with its Old Stone Winery from the late 1800s.

Clos Pegase, designed by architect Michael Graves, is a postmodern temple to wine and art.

The Hess Collection Winery offers visitors free access to Donald Hess' extensive and impressive private Contemporary Art Museum.

Merryvale's historic building, the first winery built in the Napa Valley after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, has become a must-see attraction.

At Charter Oak Winery on Charter Oak Ave. visitors would be forgiven for thinking they've arrived at an artist's home. They have, in a way. Rob's wife, Layla Fanucci, is a talented artist who has exhibited works in New York and Toronto.

The house was once owned by Fanucci's grandfather, Guido Raghianti, an Italian immigrant who taught his grandchild the old winemaking techniques.

When Fanucci showed me the basement where the wine rests in oak barrels, his grandfather's spectacles lay on a shelf of old bottles. Fanucci has left the glasses and the wine made by his grandfather there as a memorial.

The 100-year-old wooden basket press is still housed in an old chicken coop. Handmade wooden tools lay ready for use at harvest.

"I have never before used the words 'elegant' and 'zinfandel' in the same sentence, let alone the former to modify the latter, but that is what we have produced with our 2006 zinfandel," says White.

"We have two cuvées, one from our winery property and the other from the oldest zinfandel vines in America which are 125-year-old vines, high up in the Mayacamas range, from the Monte Rosso Vineyard. We also make a petite sirah and a gorgeous cabernet."

Some of America's best restaurants are located in this tiny valley. The little town of Yountville (pop. 2,900) boasts some of the best eateries in the country, three by famed Chef Thomas Keller – the French Laundry, Bouchon and Ad Hoc.

However, true to the nature of Charter Oaks, when I had lunch with White we ate *al fresco* at the picnic table outside the house, the sun dabbling down through a nearby ancient fig tree. There was fresh produce from their garden, lemons plucked from the tree out back and oranges harvested from the front of the property. Sausages, naturally, also were locally purchased and artisanal.

The wines we tried, produced in tiny lots of 350 cases or less, were 2006 Charter Oak Zinfandel Napa Valley, 2006 Charter Oak Zinfandel Monte Rosso and 2006 Charter Oak Petite Sirah Napa Valley. I thought the Napa Valley Zin to be showing the best, but all had an intensity and depth of flavour that was impressive. Should you not make it to Napa the fruits of White's labour are available to taste at Nota Bene, near the opera house in Toronto.

Those who want to taste the wine where it's grown should click onto White's latest writing. His Napa recommendations are on his year-old website, www.napaman.com.

"Last week, we had visitors from 68 countries, including Nigeria and Togo," White says. "We speak to the four million tourists who come to Napa Valley annually, in search of great food and great wine."

Margaret Swaine is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

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