

The grapes of Mt. Diablo

Local landmark provides terroir for premium fruit

By Jessica Yadegaran ~ Contra Costa Times

The term terroir was coined by the French to denote the special characteristics that geography bestows upon grapes, and, ultimately, on wine.

Surely, then, every place that has soil has terroir. Every place where wind, sun, rain and a smooch from God — if you believe in that — brush the soil is capable of producing wines that reflect its terroir. Even Walnut Creek.

Two Contra Costa County wineries proved that when they took home a total of 12 medals at this month's San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. This is buzzworthy, as it's the largest blind tasting competition of American wines and the judges are among the best palates in America. Even more intriguing is that the grapes that produced the award-winning wines were grown on or at the base of Mt. Diablo, where harsh conditions and nutrient-deficient soils make for elegant, complex wines.

It's no surprise. The Mt. Diablo area was a popular spot for growing grapes in the 1800s. By the turn of the century, one third of the area's agriculture was planted to vineyards. But in 1911, the grape mite phylloxera invaded and killed most of the vines. The fate of the mountain's grapes was sealed in 1920 with Prohibition, when nearly all the vineyards were replanted to walnut and almond orchards.

Nearly a century later, Walnut Creek's Shadowbrook Winery, the first in the city to obtain a winery permit since Prohibition, took home a double gold —

a first for Contra Costa County — for its 2006 Rose, a gold for its 2006 Syrah, a bronze for its 2006 JonRae, a Bordeaux blend, and a silver for its 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon. The latter is particularly noteworthy, as the wine came from four-year-old vines, yet shared the spotlight with older Napa stalwarts Cakebread and Grgich Hills.

Ever determined to showcase his wine's potential, Shadowbrook proprietor and wine master Tim Jochner insisted on entering it in the \$45 and over category of cabernet sauvignons, even though it retails for less. This is the winery's first commercial wine competition and every wine Jochner entered won a medal. Naturally, he is a bit elated.

"We are just trying to produce a world class cabernet sauvignon from Walnut Creek because we grew up here and love it here," he says. "We want the people and the restaurants here to drink and serve our wine and be proud that it comes from their backyard."

That part, unfortunately, has been challenging. Jochner and his wife, Courtney, have trouble getting appointments with local restaurants and wine buyers. Their wines are

available at a local liquor store and a restaurant, but that's about it. At a recent upscale walk-around tasting, one consumer dumped Jochner's wine when he heard it was made from grapes grown in Walnut Creek. Never mind that he had tried it and loved it.

The Jochners opened the micro-premium winery (their permit limits them to 1,000 cases) in 2005 in a quiet residential area at the entrance of Mt. Diablo State Park. As such, their ornate tasting room and property, once graced by the late Robert Mondavi, is not open to the public, and even organizing private events for their 100 or so wine club members can be challenging, because of city ordinances.

Still, Lochner and his winemaking partner, Mike Lavezzoli, nurse with pride their six acres at the base of the mountain. At harvest, they hand pick the grapes — all six varietals: Chardonnay, syrah, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, Zinfandel and Petit Sirah — and run them through a destemmer-crusher. Next, an army of friends help with must sorting, taking care to remove remaining stems or subpar fruit from the sorting table before the grapes ferment in individual 1.3 ton tanks. Jochner favors cooper selection over oak barrels, and filters his red wines very little.

A self-taught winemaker, Jochner has consultants on hand to help with decisions on picking and blending, but he and Lavezzoli do all the labor and cellar work, and Jochner makes the final calls. When Randle Johnson, winemaker for Hess Collection and Arzein, heard Jochner was looking for a consulting winemaker, he jumped at the chance.

"I was intrigued with the idea and the slopes of Mt. Diablo," he says. "And I could tell from the vineyard operation that it was first class."

Johnson said the news hasn't circulated around Napa yet, but those who have heard are surprised, to say the least.

"People are jaded and chauvinistic about terroir," he says. "But you should never dismiss anything. Every wine in the world deserves a fair shake."

Sterling Albert Winery in Concord certainly has gotten its fair shake. Winemaker and grape grower Sterling Albert took home seven medals at the Chronicle's competition, two of which have his Mt. Diablo trademark. "It received a silver as the group award, but I thought it deserved a gold," says judge and Wine Press Northwest Magazine editor Eric Degerman of the 2006 Mount Diablo Syrah. "I voted it as gold because I really enjoyed its plummy overtones and found its structure juicy and balanced. It's just what I look for in a New World Syrah. In fact, I thought that it might have been from Washington state."

Albert studied viticulture and winemaking at UC Davis and ran a landscaping company until 2008, when he decided to grow and sell grapes from his vineyards in Sonoma and Alexander Valley full-time.

In 1998, he met Father Richard Mangini, who owned 3,700 acres on the northern corner of Mt. Diablo known as Mt. Zion. Albert was drawn to the area's harsh conditions and

thin, nutrient-deficient soils. In 2000, he found a plot next to Mangini's house and planted 9,000 vines of cabernet sauvignon, Syrah, Zinfandel and Sangiovese. Not surprisingly, the same northeastern facing spot was a vineyard before Prohibition.

"The sun exposure is from sunup to when it rolls behind the hill around 7 p.m. in the summer and 3 p.m. in winter," Albert says. "It's almost perfect."

The soils are to Albert's liking as well. An offshoot of volcanic rock, the red loam clay soils have a top layer of granite and sandstone, which Albert says is reminiscent of Napa's Howell Mountain. To prove Mt. Diablo's unique terroir, Albert planted the same syrah clones at the same elevation (about 800 feet) on his vineyards in Sonoma, and the wines turned out completely differently.

"What I get from Mt Diablo are earthy, herbal notes such as rosemary and lavender," he says. "Those flavors are not in my Sonoma syrahs."

Today, Albert's business is thriving and it's largely because of the size of his production. He makes a sweet-spot 5,000 cases a year — Mt. Diablo wines account for 20 percent of his total production — with most distributed to Canada and a dozen states outside California. The Mt. Diablo wines are sold at more than 20 local retailers and restaurants, and the Whole Foods in Walnut Creek will begin carrying them in February.

"I'm not medal shopping," Albert explains. "I'm trying to make history. I've done blind tastings against Silver Oak and Jordan and eight out of 10 people pick the Mt Diablo. They're just amazed."

What does all this point to? A future Mt. Diablo Appellation? Albert doesn't think so. Growing on the boundaries of a state park is unrealistic, and the mountain is landlocked, so it's not an easy or cheap place to farm. And, when it comes to value, land developers always will choose houses over vineyards, he says.

"But I think the area can have a good name as people keep growing quality grapes in the next few years," he says.

By then, perhaps we'll be sipping Jochner's award-winning cabernet sauvignon with a steak in downtown Walnut Creek.