

# A Year in Wine

*Seeking Wines With Stories To Tell*



## About Me

MIKE DUNNE

My goal here is to share with other wine enthusiasts my discoveries as I judge at wine competitions and visit wine regions, with occasional commentary about issues touching the wine scene, especially in California.

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Joh Shebl (left), Scott

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MONDAY, MAY 16, 2011

## Raising The Bar In Amador County

Scott Helwig is showing me around his family's nascent wine estate, Helwig Vineyards & Winery.

We're ambling about a knoll 1,640 feet up the Sierra foothills east of Sacramento, in the heart of Amador County's

Shenandoah Valley. In virtually every direction vines ripple across the rolling terrain.



Joh Shebl (left), Scott Helwig alongside picnic pavilion

We walk gingerly, for the site is still a construction zone. A jackhammer pounds into a new concrete walk, tearing up an apparent mistake. A breeze lifts red dust, which settles on granite boulders in the middle of what eventually will be the estate's central courtyard. It's flanked by four buildings whose soaring and sloping shed roofs say today, while sidings of corrugated metal and board-and-batten suggest the barns, mines and farmhouses of yesterday Amador. If we were in a hot-air balloon overhead, looking down at the cluster of buildings, the layout would suggest an "H," as in Helwig, Scott notes.

One building will be the tasting room, its oval counter milled from two oak trees fallen on the site. Another is an events center; here, Scott pauses to gesture across the expanse toward a room designed specifically for brides preparing for their wedding. A third is the open-air picnic pavilion, with built-in fireplace and grill. Oddly, there's no commercial kitchen on the premises, but the Helwigs have retained the restaurant Paul Martin's American Bistro of Roseville as their

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Nearly 50 wines won high honors in last week's California State Fair commercial wine competition in Sacramento. That's because the State Fai...

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caterer.

The fourth building is the winery itself. It's no larger than the others, though alongside is a crushing pad that easily could accommodate an entire fleet of forklifts.

And underfoot is a warren of caves capable of holding 350 barrels of wine. One wing will be a private dining room with a table that will seat some 30 guests. The caves represent what well could be the largest excavation in the county since the last gold mine was dug. "We did run into some quartz veins, but we didn't find any gold, at least none that the construction guys told us about," says Scott.

Some 60 of those workers remain on the site, scurrying about as if continuing a frantic search for nuggets. Actually, they're up against a tight deadline. The Helwigs aim to open the grounds to the public around Memorial Day weekend.



The Helwig amphitheater takes shape

Many of the workers are on the north side of the hill, sculpting rows of curved seating for the estate's amphitheater. It will hold 400 guests on tiers that bracket the north portal into the caves. They have to finish it by July 8, the date of the winery's first concert, headlined by the Celtic rock group Tempest, for which tickets already are on sale. That should be enough of a seismic test for the caves.

Given its striking design - by Sage Architecture of Sacramento - and its industrious hospitality and entertainment programs, Helwig clearly is the most ambitious and costly investment in Amador County's wine trade. As soon as the first visitor winds up the drive and is greeted by the south portal into the caves, comparisons with the affluence and aesthetics of Napa Valley will be drawn.

Scott sidesteps questions about the expense, but it's obviously substantial. The facilities sit on 42 prime acres, 17 of which the Helwigs have planted to vines; another three acres are devoted to olive trees. Eager to be active members of the local wine culture as soon as their winery was built, the Helwigs bought two former nearby wineries, Rabbit Hill near Fiddletown and Serenidad just to the west.

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They made their first wines at Rabbit Hill and use Serenidad for stockpiling their releases. They also bought a fully mature 35-acre vineyard in Suisun Valley just outside of Fairfield.

The first 3800 cases of Helwig wine are being released today, though it may be several days before they start to arrive in Sacramento outlets. The initial rollout involves 14 wines. Scott Helwig made them with guidance from seasoned Amador County winemaker Joe Shebl, the winery's general manager. "Our goal is opulent, succulent, mouthwatering wines," Scott says. And true to that model, the lineup includes a luscious rose of syrah, a smoky barrel-fermented sauvignon blanc, an unusually muscular barbera, a syrah with more power and complexity than usually found in the varietal, and four interpretations of Amador County's signature wine, zinfandel, from the swaggering to the lumbering.



Scott's parents, David and Nancy Helwig, live in Thousand Oaks. He's an executive with Blue Cross; she's a homemaker who tends some 30 head of alpaca - breeding, showing and shearing them, then spinning their wool and knitting it into purses, socks, hats and the like. Eventually, they'll settle in Amador County, bringing the alpacas with them.

Scott says his father, a Chicago native, long has been interested in wine, to the extent that he's tended vines in a small plot behind their home. Scott, a graduate in psychology at North Park University in Chicago, was following his father into the insurance business when his parents acquired the Shenandoah Valley property in 2007. Scott, figuring he'd rather work outside than in an office cubicle, returned west from Chicago and began his formal introduction to the wine trade, starting under the tutelage of Chaim Gur-Arieh, proprietor and winemaker of the Shenandoah Valley's C.G. Di Aire Vineyard & Winery.

When his parents began to toy with the notion of becoming vintners they first looked at Santa Ynez Valley in Santa Barbara County, but land prices were high and going higher, and they weren't crazy about the attitude, says Scott. They turned to Napa Valley and Sonoma County, but had the same reservations. In Amador County, they found what they were looking for, not only in land values and availability but in the county's familial atmosphere. Besides, Scott's mother grew up in Sacramento and was familiar with the foothills, where she still has family.

"We're a humble and quiet family. We're hometown people. We like community, and that's what Amador is," says Scott. "The (winemaking) bar has been rising in Amador County, and we would like to raise it a little more. My dad knows the potential of Amador, and he wants to help it keep growing."

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