

Mike Dunne's Wine of the Week: 2009 Amador County Fox Creek Vineyard Sea of Grapes Zinfandel

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Helwig Vineyards & Winery 2009 Amador County Fox Creek Vineyard Sea of Grapes Zinfandel (\$35)

You can almost miss seeing the vines at Helwig Vineyards & Winery in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley. There's just 17 acres of them. And they're only a few years old, without the bulk and gnarl of the dark stumps for which the valley is celebrated.

But mostly, the eye sweeps right across the vines to the top of the knoll from which they spill. There, four shiny new buildings are clustered like a tiara of wrinkled metal, sparkling glass and sharp jutting edges.

They look like they could be four modern houses with exceptionally large sloping roofs hanging over board-and-batten porches. Instead, they are entirely commercial buildings, which together form the most ambitious family wine estate in the valley's history. One is a tasting room, another an events center, the third a picnic pavilion, and the fourth, finally, the winery itself. The winery is hardly any bigger than the other structures, but it doesn't have to be. Alongside is an open-air crush pad large enough to accommodate an entire fleet of forklifts. And bored into the hill under the structures is a warren of caves spacious enough to hold 350 barrels of wine.

Besides, David and Nancy Helwig, the Thousand Oaks couple who just built the place, own two other wineries in the vicinity, the former Rabbit Hill over by Fiddletown and the former Serenidad just to the west. The Fiddletown property is where their son, Scott, and their general manager, seasoned Amador County winemaker Joe Shebl, made the first Helwig wines, just now starting to be distributed.

As Scott Helwig escorts me about the grounds he pauses to describe briefly the kinds of wines he intends to make: "Our goal is opulent, succulent, mouth-watering wines."

OK, let's go taste them, which we do on the deck of the manor that is part of the old Serenidad grounds. There are 14 of the wines. That number speaks to the industry and daring of the Helwigs. They weren't going to wait for their own 17 acres of vines to mature before they started to make wine. They got 21 acres of vines with the Serenidad property, and they bought a 35-acre vineyard in Suisun Valley just outside of Fairfield. What's more, they've been buying grapes from growers in Sacramento and Amador counties.

While Helwig's ambition is to make substantial statement wines he isn't relying solely on the fresh intensity of the fruit he's given. He's got a palate and a pocketbook eager to exploit freely American and French oak barrels. For example, he makes not one but two Shenandoah Valley sauvignon blancs from the same vintage. One is all zesty grapefruit and lime. The other was

fermented in wood to give it more breadth and weight as well as a trailing smokiness.

Similarly, he made four zinfandels, including two from the same block of grapes, but he used different regimens of barrels with each. Of his four zinfandels, the standout for its stunning color, jammy berry fruit, carefully nuanced oak and astonishing twists of black pepper is the Helwig Vineyards & Winery Amador County Fox Creek Vineyard Sea of Grapes Zinfandel, a long and twisting name for a long and twisting wine.

A syrah from the Suisun Valley vineyard was remarkable for the juiciness of its blueberry and Bing-cherry fruit and its notes of eucalyptus and bacon, while the petite sirah from Shenandoah Valley was all concentrated dark fruit, sweet oak and flowers, but the Sea of Grapes zinfandel kept drawing me back for how it spoke to the flamboyant but nevertheless congenial side of Amador County zinfandel.

Helwig's wines may be a bit uneven early on - the viognier was too astringent in the finish for my taste, the syrah rose was too sticky and warm, and a proprietary blend of malbec and cabernet sauvignon called "Line 38" was wobbly and stemmy - but the family looks to be on a mission to raise the county's profile for wine tourism as much as it wants to tout its own wines.

To that end, the estate is as much entertainment complex as winery. The events center is to be equipped with high-tech audio/visual equipment for corporate meetings, and off to one side is a room built specifically for brides preparing for their weddings. The picnic pavilion is equipped with built-in grill and fireplace. A dining room with a table large enough to seat some 30 guests is in the cave. And sculpted into the far side of the hill is an amphitheater that can accommodate 400 guests; its tiered and curving seating brackets the north portal into the caves. Paul Martin's American Bistro of Roseville is the winery's caterer. The first person to say that the site reminded them of Napa Valley was probably the first person to stop by.

By the numbers: 14.5 percent alcohol, 250 cases, \$35.

Context: An Amador County zinfandel this fruity, spicy and balanced cries out for a slab of similarly juicy beef, and if the crust carries a thin layer of char from the grill, all the better.

Availability: Helwig wines are just starting to be distributed, but they will be sold in the winery's tasting room, 11555 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth. At this writing, the days and hours for the tasting room hadn't been set; call (209) 245-5200.

More information: Visit the winery's website, www.helwigwinery.com

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Long-time wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne continues his relationship with The Bee as a contributing columnist to the Food & Wine section. His wine selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. Check out his blog at www.ayearinwine.com, and reach him at mikedunne@winegigs.com.

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