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Helwig to open Amador's first wine cave

Friday, August 27, 2010

- Gwen Johnson

Amador County will be getting its first wine cave in late spring of 2011.

"Cave systems are great for barrel storage," said future cave owner David Helwig. "Their constant cool temperatures mean we don't have to pay to air condition the place. They're the right level of humidity, perfect conditions." The cave system will be part of Helwig Winery, on Shenandoah Road, between Bell and Steiner, in Plymouth. Helwig and his wife, Nancy, currently reside in Thousand Oaks, but plan to open their Amador County business next May or June. The man-made cave will be cut into a hill on the property, and will have two entrances - a staircase leading to the winery building, and a north portal overlooking a grassy amphitheater designed to hold music concerts and other outdoor events.

Doing the actual blasting will be Graham Wozencroft of Glen Ragsdale Underground Associates, Inc., based in Napa County. Wozencroft has built several wine caves in California, but Helwig's project stands out from the others.

"The geology is different in Amador County," said Wozencroft. "The project is pretty unique in that it will have multiple entrances. It's going to have a nice feel and combination of barrels. It's going to look really nice when we're finished with it."

Set above the wine cave will be four structures - the winery itself, the tasting room, a special events building and a covered picnic pavilion. When seen from an aerial view, the four structures will appear as the letter H used in the winery's logo, and the courtyard where the four buildings converge will look like a wine barrel turned on its side.

The entire concept has been a vine-covered dream of Helwig's for many years.

"When I was still working in my day job, I knew that, once I retired, I wanted to get into the wine business," he said. Shortly before retiring from Anthem Health Insurance in early 2007, Helwig started the process of selecting a location to make his dream come true. He and Nancy chose Amador County to be the site of their business, due to the region's wine quality, land values and community spirit.

"I started researching Napa, Sonoma, Santa Barbara, Suisun Valley, and Temecula," Helwig said. "We came to the conclusion that Napa/Sonoma has gotten too expensive and regulatory. In terms of where we wanted to settle down, Amador County had the best value of lands by far."

They now own three vineyards in the Shenandoah Valley AVA (American Viticultural Area). The Helwigs bought their first vineyard in El Dorado County in February, 2006. In 2007, they purchased the Shenandoah Road property, and, in 2009, they added the former Serenidad property and a custom crush facility on Ostrom Road in Fiddletown. Their son Scott currently resides on the Fiddletown site and will be the winemaker for his parents.

It was important to the Helwigs that the winery design capture the spirit of the local culture. After interviewing several architects, they decided to go with Sacramento-based Sage Architecture, Inc. upon the recommendation of Andy Friedlander, who will be opening Andis Winery - another Sage



An architect's rendering shows the planned construction of the new Helwig Winery's tasting room.

Photo by: Courtesy to the Ledger Dispatch

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project in the Shenandoah Valley - later this year. "We felt the most comfortable with them," Helwig said.

According to the website for Sage Architecture, Inc., the Helwig buildings will be constructed of heavy timber and rustic materials. The oak and pine that was harvested during the clearing of the site is going to be repurposed into decorative barn door sliders, the main tasting bar surface, interior siding and other decorative touches. Standing- seam metal roofs and exterior walls combine with board-and-batten wood siding that will turn to a soft silver gray as it weathers over time. Each building will feature deep overhangs that create sheltered porches - a concept that will make the buildings more energy efficient.

"We wanted to make it as environmentally responsible as we can within the parameters we had to work with," said Paul Almond, who owns Sage Architecture, Inc. with his wife, Pam Whitehead. Both partners are architects working on the Helwig project. "We oriented the buildings to let the sun in during the winter and out in the summer. The nice, deep overhangs make it comfortable."

He adds that the covered pavilion will allow people to bring their picnic baskets and eat in the shade. The winery building is a two-story space carved into the hillside. The lower level will store the fermentation tanks while the upper level features an observation deck.

"I think it will be a very enjoyable place for people to hang out," Almond said. "One of the nice things is that you'll have a series of four small buildings centered around a courtyard. You get a great feel of Amador County with 360-degree views, a beautiful perspective and a great indoor/outdoor experience. It provides for a lot of interaction."

In addition to stunning vineyard views from any spot on the site, the hilltop location allows for views of the High Sierra to the east and Mt. Diablo to the west. The Helwig wine portfolio will feature popular red wines, including Zinfandel, Primitivo, Tempranillo, Barbera, Syrah, Petite Syrah and Grenache, as well as newcomer Gradano from Italy. For whites, they'll have Sauvignon Blanc and a blend of Vioigner, Roussanne and Marsanne made from grapes in Helwig's "Three Sisters" vineyard, named after Nancy's mother and two aunts.

Both Helwig and Almond have found the people in Amador County a pleasure to work with.

"Everyone we've gotten to know has just been real friendly," Almond commented. "People at the restaurants and the subcontractors were wonderful. The staff in the county building and planning departments have been fantastic to work with. They genuinely care about the environment and the people. Everything's more personal in Amador."

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