

Signorello's new winery breaks ground — in a housing development

By JACK HEEGER
Register Staff Writer

More and more people are making their own wine these days, but they aren't necessarily making it in their garages or basements nor are they doing it alone.

A number of wineries have sprung up that allow wine enthusiasts to make their own wine and be involved in the actual winemaking process as much or as little as they wish.

Several variations of these do-it-yourself wineries are available, but they all offer the same thing — the opportunity to make a barrel of wine, resulting in about 24 cases.

They're located all around California, even in the heart of San Francisco, and one such operation exists in Napa Valley — MicroCrush, operated by Judd's Hill Winery on Silverado Trail.

Ray Signorello Jr., of Signorello Vineyards, also is building a winery to offer a similar service, but his is quite different from the others — his is in the middle of a residential development in Tempe, Ariz.

Signorello has partnered with the developers of Centerpoint Condominiums in the Mill District

to create PurVine, which will be on the ground floor of the commercial portion of the mixed use complex, where eventually 800 condominium homes will be developed in four buildings.

'A pilot winery'

PurVine will be small — just 2,000 square feet — and although it will be a working winery, it is intended to be more of showplace, "a pilot winery," as Signorello called it. He is also building another larger facility in Phoenix to take care of most of the demand he hopes will be created by the do-it-yourselfers. Both will be completed in time for the 2008 harvest. He also plans another similar project in Arizona in the future.

PurVine is a membership organization, with an initial fee of \$500 to join and \$500 annual dues. To make a barrel of wine, members pay \$9,000, then choose the varietal they wish to make.

Signorello obtains the grapes from such well-known vineyards in Napa Valley as Stagecoach, hauls them to Tempe, and the "winemakers" then can choose to get involved or not in crushing, fermentation and racking, and they can even determine how long they want the wine to age in the barrel. They will be aided and advised by John Allen Burtner, PurVine's official winemaker who has had considerable experience in the wine industry, including at Cakebread Cellars and Signorello Vineyards.

The company is actually in operation now, working out of a temporary leased facility with a dozen 1,300-gallon tanks which will be moved into the new winery when it is completed.

"We're taking Napa Valley to the city," Signorello said. "We're letting them make wine from the

best grapes and using the best equipment, and we're teaching people how wine is made.

We're demystifying it."

PurVine has about 150 members, and with added capacity, can go up to 200, he said.

Frustrated with tax laws

The concept grew out of frustration with taxes on wine in British Columbia, said Signorello, who grew up in Vancouver and still spends considerable time there. Every province in Canada has different laws and British Columbia has a 119 percent tax on imported wine, he explained.

"You sell a bottle to the liquor board for \$10, and it can end up costing as much as \$109 in a restaurant," he said.

But the B.C. government allows people to make wine for others under what's called a U-Vin license. "It's the same thing (as PurVine), except that they make a 30-day kit wine" using concentrate, he said. "You pay a fee, they make the wine and in 30 days you get a crummy wine."

He came up with an idea to create a private club and make quality wine using the U-Vin license. This can be done, because there are no tariffs on shipping grapes — just on finished wine. "When you ship grapes, the 119 percent tax doesn't apply," he said. "So I could ship grapes that make wine that sells for \$100 here."

Signorello, who was born in San Francisco but was raised in Vancouver before moving back to the Napa Valley when his parents bought property on Silverado Trail, started his Vancouver project in 2005, and has since sold it. But its success led him to Avenue Communities,

developers of the Tempe development.

Signorello eventually plans to open PurVine wineries in other cities as well, including Los Angeles and Las Vegas. "The whole U.S. and Canada is a market," he said.

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