

Wooden Valley grows sideways

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By Matthew Bunk

SUISUN VALLEY - Between pouring glasses of wine in the Wooden Valley Winery tasting room, Ron Lanza points out the wine spots on the 100-year-old oak bar.

The bar itself isn't 100 years old, but the wood it's made from is. It used to be part of a huge barrel that cased Wooden Valley wine long before the Lanza family took over the winery.

"There's a lot of history in our tasting room," Lanza said while standing in front of a display case that held pictures of his grandparents Mario and Lena Lanza, next to bottles of wine adorned by state fair ribbons.

The future of Wooden Valley might be as rich as its past.

The winery slowly amped up production in the last couple of years as executives hope to reach more wine consumers through direct sales. A Supreme Court decision last month that lifted limits on interstate wine sales could make that easier, Lanza said.

In the meantime, Wooden Valley is trying to increase its customer base at home through the release of two new wines and by investing in a marketing campaign to promote Suisun Valley wineries.

"We're trying to bring more awareness of our appellation so people immediately recognize our labels," Lanza said, noting there's much more to it than that. "You can promote it all you want, but you have to prove it through the wine."

Branching out on the vine

Wooden Valley last week began shipping its newest products - a 2004 Pinot Grigio and a 2003 Primitivo - to wine club members. It was a move meant to tap into the growing popularity of the two Italian varietals.

“It’s been a while since we released something new, so it’s a big deal for us,” said Lanza, a third-generation owner whose family bought the winery in the 1950s. “These two new ones could potentially be a big deal for us.”

The Primitivo was somewhat of a mystery grape, as far as origin is concerned. Research at the University of California, Davis, has found Primitivo grapes and its genetic twin Zinfandel mutated from an ancient variety native to the Balkan region.

According to legend, the deeply colored Primitivo got its name after it had been transported to Italy, where Benedictine monks described it as precocious.

The white Pinot Grigio puts Wooden Valley at the forefront of the market for wines made from the temperamental Pinot grape. Wine tastes have shifted toward Pinot varietals in recent years, Lanza said, and the trend was fueled by the movie “Sideways,” which denigrated traditional favorite Merlot and praised Pinot Noir.

Despite the silver-screen setback, Merlot remains in high demand at Wooden Valley and beyond. It has been Lanza’s biggest seller, making up about 15 percent of the 12,000 cases sold last year.

Cabernets and Chardonnays are also popular among the 16 wines sold at Wooden Valley.

“For most people, Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot is what they know,” Lanza said. “But now more people are starting to pay attention to the other varieties.”

Suisun Valley: The little sister

Along with LedgeWood Creek Winery, Wooden Valley is one of the largest wineries in Solano County. There are a few other private labels made by grape growers in the region, but the Suisun Valley for the most part gets overshadowed by its world-renowned neighbors, the Napa and Sonoma valleys.

Although Suisun Valley farmers argue there’s not much difference between a grape grown in Napa and one grown in Solano, there’s a huge price difference. Napa grapes typically sell for 10 times the per-ton price of those from Suisun Valley.

Nonetheless, most grapes grown in Solano are shipped to wineries outside the county. Selling grapes, not wine, is the biggest money-maker for both Wooden Valley and LedgeWood Creek.

Only 10 percent of the grapes grown on Wooden Valley’s 600 acres go into its wines, Lanza said.

He hopes better marketing, a greater selection and fewer regulations will tip the scales in the coming years.

“More labels brings more attention,” Lanza said, leaning across the century-old bar to scratch a wine spot. “Which brings more success.”

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