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## Wine principals growing grapes near Napa Valley

By SCOTT CHERRY  
December 28, 2008



**Winemaker Matt Smith (left) and proprietor Don Johnson show off some of their Winterhawk wines during a recent visit to Tulsa. CORY YOUNG/Tulsa World**

Don Johnson purchased land in California's Suisun Valley in 1977 with the intent of growing world-class grapes.

The Suisun (pronounced sue-soon) Valley sits off the San Francisco Bay and bumps up against the state's revered Napa Valley.

"I'm a certified public accountant in my other life, but I grew up on a farm in Michigan," Johnson said. "I figured if you could grow apples, you could grow grapes. I was wrong about that, but I learned."

Johnson and his crew learned well and soon were supplying grapes to some of California's best-known winemakers, including Sebastiani, which still is a customer. After almost three decades as a grower, Johnson decided to start making small batches of his own wines under the Winterhawk Winery label.

Johnson and winemaker Matt Smith were in Tulsa recently to provide wine for a local fundraiser and to introduce Winterhawk wines to Oklahoma, the first state outside California to receive the wines. That's largely because of Johnson's friendship with Carol and Joe McGraw of Tulsa.

"Because we know every inch of our property, we can cherry-pick the vineyards for our wines," Johnson said. "Because we are right there, we also can drive the tractor from the vineyards to the winery and crush the grapes immediately, which is a big advantage. Grapes are a perishable product."

Winterhawk's estate-grown varietals include chardonnay, merlot, pinot noir, tempranillo, albarino, petit sirah and zinfandel. Smith had an explanation for the tempranillo and albarino, two grapes not often associated with California.

"Don imported a pizza oven and wanted to have a tapas restaurant and to serve Spanish varietal wines," Smith said. "So we ripped out some vines and planted tempranillo and albarino."

Johnson said Winterhawk produces 350 to 400 cases each of chardonnay and merlot and about 200 cases of each of the other varietals. Most will retail at about \$15, except the pinot noir, which is just less than \$20, and the zinfandel dessert wine, which is just over \$20.

The Winterhawk reds we tasted generally exhibited true varietal flavors, subtle oak and soft tannins. The chardonnay had bright fruit and was well balanced.

The only Winterhawk wine not made from estate-grown grapes is the orange muscat, an off-dry wine with a big floral nose and a good partner with sushi and spicy foods.

"It's really important to make the wine taste like the grapes," Johnson said. "I wish everyone had the opportunity to taste grapes straight off the vine."

The labels on the wine bottles all have pictures of hawks because Suisun Valley is home to many species of hawks. Some Tulsa stores already are carrying Winterhawk wines. Check your wine merchant for availability.

For the remainder of December, \$2 from the sale of Winterhawk wines in retail stores and restaurants will benefit Cascia Hall School and Clear Creek Monastery.