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Winery of the Month



A Marriage of Science & Art

C.G. Di Arie Vineyard & Winery



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September 2011

In his early adulthood, Chaim Gur-Arieh pursued scientific studies that culminated in a Ph.D. in Food Science with minors in Biochemistry and Chemical Engineering, followed by employment with Quaker Oats and Del Monte Corporation where he designed new food products. But he began to further explore a creative side when he met his wife Elisheva, a ballet dancer with a wine collection, who also attended the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California and later exhibited her paintings in galleries across the U.S. We can assume that she must have been simultaneously cultivating an interest in science. He credits Elisheva with focusing his attention on wine and inspiring the goal that they would someday own their own winery.

Their first creative leap together was establishing Food Development Corporation, where Chaim launched *Hidden Valley Ranch Salad Dressing, Power Bars, and Wine Coolers*, names that need no introduction. The company then morphed into a flavor enterprise, and over the next 18 years, Chaim created a database of 5000 flavors for the food industry, an almost invisible business that nevertheless contributes its products to the list of ingredients on almost every packaged food.

A favorite adage in the wine business is

that it takes a fortune to make a fortune. After selling Food Development Corporation in 1998, they had the fortune that allowed them to enter the wine business, which more than most others is a marriage of both science and art. They purchased a 209-acre estate between the south and middle forks of the Cosumnes River in the five percent of Shenandoah Valley that is located in El Dorado County, the other 95 percent of the appellation situated in Amador County. The two counties are the most prestigious and prolific wine growing areas in the Sierra Foothills.

Chaim and Elisheva built a 12,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art winery, perched on a hillside with spectacular views of their vineyards and a panorama of the Sierra Foothills in the distance. The facility, which features two art galleries, has the capacity to produce 15,000 cases of wine annually. Their vineyards are populated mainly with Zinfandel, Primitivo, which is the parent clone of Zinfandel, three clones of Syrah, Petite Sirah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Barbera, Tempranillo, and Grenache. Needless to say, Chaim is the winemaker, while Elisheva oversees the brand image, winery events, marketing, and web design. She also manages the orchard, olive grove, and vegetable production at

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WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY *from cover*

the estate.

The winery's first vintage was 2002, and Chaim says that since then he has become a better winemaker and understands grapes more profoundly. His winemaking style produces what he calls "new world wines with an old world feel." Although fruit-forward and bold, they are lower in alcohol like European wines. Nor does he want oak barrel elements to overshadow the varietal taste, often a problem with California wines. "Wood should take a backseat." He ages his wines in French oak barrels because they intrude less on the grape flavors than American barrels. And he wants the flavor to be "open," to show layers, instead of being one dimensional. Finally, he wants the wine to impart its essence even after it is swallowed, that illusive *long finish* that challenges winemakers. "Sometimes, the finish is what you taste in the beginning, but sometimes it's different. Sometimes it's smoky, savory, and earthy, more like old world wines."

Along with creating the C.G. Di Arie wine style, planting vineyards, and even inventing equipment, Chaim has been concerned that the traditional cork is the worst closure that any winemaker can use for a wine bottle. The Australian wine industry has done all of the basic research on oxidation and micro oxidation, how wine oxidizes as it ages, he explains. The Australians compiled statistics on cork design and the failure rate of cork stoppers, and their research indicates overwhelmingly that screw caps are preferable. "In 2007, I finally bit the bullet and decided that I wouldn't use cork anymore."

Regardless how anyone may feel about the virtue of natural cork, Chaim makes a formidable argument against it. First, cork

is not uniform, he explains. "The density varies from one cork to the next, and the variation in that density causes a variable amount of air to penetrate into the bottle." Softer corks allow more air to penetrate through the cork and into the wine, and harder ones allow less. Softer corks also absorb wine, which is the reason that we sometimes see corks soaked with wine. If wine penetrates the entire cork, air will enter the bottle. And the more oxygen that enters the bottle, the sooner the wine will oxidize. Chaim points out that if you were to open each bottle in a case of wine with cork stoppers, each bottle of wine would taste differently because of various amounts of air penetration. "The cork is fully responsible for this phenomenon," Chaim explains. If those bottles were topped with screw caps, all the wine would exhibit exactly the same flavors and would age the same way. Made from aluminum, the inside of the screw cap has a coating of Saranex, a food-grade plastic that prevents contact between wine and aluminum.

The second reason that Chaim is opposed to natural cork is that according to Australian research, three percent of wine becomes contaminated with TCA (trichloroanisole) or TBA (tribromoanisole), harmless molds that nevertheless taint the cork and impart a moldy, wet-cardboard flavor to wine. "So you tell me which industry will accept a failure rate of three percent. It doesn't make any sense at all."

Chaim now uses two closures, the screw cap and a composite cork. The cork has been ground and the TCA/TBA extracted. Then the material is reconstituted and pressed into the shape of a cork. He says

that the treated cork particles are held together with a starch-based glue and that the density of each cork is exactly the same. A barrier is incorporated at the bottom of the cork so that wine is unable to pass through it. "To tell you the truth, I like the screw cap better than the composite cork, but I have to consider what my customers like. They like the idea of taking the cork screw, screwing it into the cork, and popping it out of the bottle of wine. This is what makes them happy."

Since such closures are relatively new, no one yet knows how wine will age with these stoppers. As wines ages, fruit flavors oxidize first and diminish so that secondary earthy, savory flavors emerge. But Chaim feels that the issue is not problematic. Wine has a small amount of dissolved oxygen in it just as water does. So wine will eventually oxidize even without the additional oxygen that would penetrate a natural cork over time. "Cork allows more oxygen to enter the bottle but in an unpredictable way. If you use a screw cap that prevents additional oxygen penetration, the process will be very predictable."

Chaim adds that the difference in price between a screw cap and natural cork is negligible. He pays two and a half cents per aluminum cap and three cents per cork, a miniscule difference, he says. "Very few people in the tasting room have complained that the wines with screw caps look cheap. I think people understand now and are getting used to it." While Chaim Gur-Arieh may cherish his creative abilities, coaxing complex flavors from the fruit and making distinctive blended wines with original flavors, he never ignores science.

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