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California
Winery of the Month



Hannah Nicole Vineyards

You Work, You Work, Then You Work More *Hannah Nicole Vineyards*



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December 2011

Neil Cohn is yet another accidental winemaker, who says that he had been looking for a second occupation that would augment his main activity as an insurance broker. He describes himself as a “producer” without a team to implement his decisions. Everything that he accomplishes is the direct result of something that he does personally. “You work, you work, and you work. That’s great, but at some point in your life you can’t or don’t want to work that hard.” So he bought a pear orchard. If he had asked, any farmer would have told him that he was headed for ever more work. But it was exactly this failed plan that led him to the one that succeeded.

In 1999, his idea was to convert his pear orchard to apples, which was a fairly remunerative crop, at least before the price plummeted. His next idea was to plant grapes. But instead of the two years that he expected for the first crop to appear, it was ready to harvest in 15 months, and he had no buyer for the fruit and no time to find one. The choice was simple. Make raisins or make wine if he wanted to avoid the heartbreak of watching birds and microbes devour his investment. Neil Cohn made wine. He entered a bottle in the California State Fair and won a silver medal, which was all the validation he needed. “I’d never grown anything in my life, never been in the farming business. I just decided to try it, and gosh, I just really loved it,” he says with all the innocence of a child. But he followed up with a lot of energy, intelligence, and perseverance and created Hannah Nicole Vine-

yards. In just ten years, Neil and wife Glenda have developed 55 acres of vineyards, a state of the art winery, and a gorgeous tasting room and event center, located in eastern Contra Costa County, one of the nine counties that make up the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area. Neil is also the engine in back of the Diablo Foothills Winegrowers Association, which is working with the Contra Costa Winegrowers Association to formally establish a unique American Viticultural Area (AVA) for Contra Costa County. I repeat our conversation with minor editing for clarity.

What is it that you love about the wine business?

I love the outdoor aspect of it. It’s a great way to reduce stress. Having a vineyard is like having a large garden. I love the vineyards, being outside, growing the grapes, and the fact that you’re building all the pieces of your product. Wine has its own life, its own personality, yet it’s a direct reflection of what you do to it. You get to mold it and turn it into what you want and have ways of doing that. So over time, you learn all the tricks of the trade, how you can make a better grape. People say you don’t have any control over the grape, but it’s the one thing that you have the most control over. It just depends on how much effort you want to put into it. But it’s always a struggle, too. It’s a tough business. I think that what we’re really doing is providing something for our community to enjoy. They say it’s good to be a big fish in a small pond.

See **WINERY** back page

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

But my hope is that with the formation of the Diablo Foothills Winegrowers Association, we'll find a way to bring out more wineries here, especially as the economy improves. A handful of winemakers were interested, but I think as the economy improves, there will be more. There are 2000 planted acres of vines in Contra Costa County, so it's not like there are not enough grapes here. Most of those 2000 acres get sold to giant wineries like Kendall Jackson and Canandaigua. But a lot of Contra Costa County grapes get sold to Rosenblum Cellars because they've always liked Contra Costa Zinfandel. Cline Cellars has also owned vineyards here forever. So there's a real history here. There were grapes grown in Contra Costa County before Prohibition. As a matter of fact, I think there were 17 or 18 wineries before Prohibition, but then post Prohibition, most of those wineries went away.

Stylistically, your wines are very consistent, very elegant.

Yes, we try to do that. You don't want the palate to change year after year and disappoint people who have bought wines before. If you have huge style changes, you have to create a whole new audience every year. Our winemaker John Sotelo is responsible for producing our wines. He likes food friendly wines, not overly tannic, too high in alcohol, too overbearing. I don't think he likes people that way either. His style is to make a food friendly wine that is enjoyable to drink, not so big and bold that you would say, 'Oh, I can't drink this. It's too strong for me.' He wouldn't make something like that. But I think we're starting to see a lot of wineries going back to reasonable alcohol levels. I had a Turley Zinfandel that was 17.5% alcohol. Holy Smokes! That's almost distilled. I think that the buzz factor was overdone a bit. How fast can you get inebriated on a glass

of wine? I think that now that we're through that, we're starting to see winemakers focus on flavor and character and structure as opposed to how much alcohol they can get into a wine. We have such efficient yeast today, so if you pick fruit at 28 percent sugar, you can get 16 plus percent alcohol out of it, no problem. We try to pick our grapes between 24 and 26 brix (the measure of sugar in the fruit). Every once in a while.... Viognier for example is finicky, and you have to go out in the vineyard everyday as it gets toward maturity, and you taste. Yeah, it's looking good. It's 23.5; now it's 24, 24.5. Yeah, we should pick this pretty soon. Then it'll get warm and jump three points in a day. Ahhh, and you pull your hair out. You have to know Viognier can do that, and you have to be ready before it happens.

You live on the property, so you're probably careful about what you put on those vineyards.

Well, we don't put much on them, just the normal fertilizers like nitrogen and potassium. You have to keep mildew away, and we use pretty typical substances for that. But we're not organic. We've talked about it. It would be nice to be organic, but I'd say we are more sustainable than we are organic. We want to preserve our vineyards and preserve our ground. We do use solar energy. We have a solar field. That's a nice feature. It's good for the environment. So we're pretty careful. And we've preserved the property in a conservation easement, so that means that the property will always be used for growing crops forever in perpetuity. When you conserve a piece of land, you use a land trust and record an easement that the land trust controls the use of the land, and you have designated uses that you have to be consistent with. So we used the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust because we thought it was

good for us and good for the community. So it's always going to be farmland. A couple of other farmers in the area have done that, but not vintners. They do this a lot in Livermore, which is 30 minutes south of us. It's pretty common there. Actually, they're more aggressive about it. If you have a hundred-acre parcel, for example, and you conserve it, then you're allowed to subdivide it into 20 acre parcels. Otherwise you're not able to subdivide.

Your label is beautiful and has an equally beautiful back story.

Dennis Francesconi, a neighbor of our winemaker, is the artist. He's a member of the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists, Worldwide. When he was 17 years old, he was involved in an accident and broke his neck. He's confined to a wheelchair. He's my age, 50ish. He developed a passion for painting, which is interesting, because he wasn't a painter before he was paralyzed. So we had a little clip-art rose as our logo, and one day, I wanted to improve it and was looking for something different. We looked at all these different roses and couldn't find anything. I finally realized that what I really wanted was a perfect rose. Dennis said he could do that. He made me a couple of sketches, and actually the sketches are available on our website. He came up with this gorgeous rose. So we used it on our bottle. He's a great guy. He's an incredible painter and has done tons of work for different non-profits. I've never watched him work, but my winemaker's daughter helps him sometime because they live next door. He calls her "squirt" because she squirts paint on his easel. Then he uses the brush. He draws exactly the same way that he paints. He's got a long pencil or brush, and he puts it in his mouth. It's amazing how he can do that. I can't paint with my hands. He posts his work on his website at www.sconi.com.

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