



Winegrower's Jim and Leslie Ward, Lafayette

Photo by Andy Scheck



Grapes are Growing on the Hills of Lamorinda

By Andrea A. Firth

When Dave Parker planted 1,500 grapevines on the hill behind his Moraga home four years ago hoping to fulfill a dream to make his own wine from a future harvest, he had no plans to turn his experiment into a commercial venture. However, the combination of Dave's passion for wine and entrepreneurial spirit along with the help of his wife and business partner, Shari Simon, soon led to the creation of Parkmon Vineyards—the only commercial vineyard in Lamorinda. “I originally pursued winemaking as a business, because I thought it would be something that wouldn't take over our lives,” notes Dave with a laugh. Yet in 2006, Dave found himself working 100-hour weeks during the “crush” season after harvesting eight tons of grapes from his own vines and other area vineyards and producing about 400 cases of wine. And, as the grapes have grown so has the business. Dave and Shari anticipate a 20% increase in production this year.

Once he had planted his vines, Dave began to notice other vineyards throughout Lamorinda, and other homeowners with empty hillsides started to stop by Dave's property to take a closer look and ask for help to get their own vineyards started. This shared enthusiasm and interest in winegrowing led to the formation of the Lamorinda Winegrowers Association—a group committed to supporting Lamorinda as a winegrowing region. “We started the association in July of 2005 with a meeting of 15 families that owned vineyards in the area, and we now have over 50 members that are winegrowers,” states Dave.

“I think the vision for Lamorinda as a winegrowing region is great,” adds Jim Ward, a member of the Lamorinda Winegrowers Association.

Jim became interested in winegrowing through a friend who owns a winery, but he was also challenged with the maintenance of a 3-acre hillside where grass and weeds presented a fire hazard in the dry summer months. To solve the problem and fuel his interest in wine, Jim and his wife Leslie planted 1,500 pinot noir vines in 1999 and had their first wine produced in 2002. Jim chose pinot noir grapes, because he feels that Lafayette's climate with its cool evenings and hot, but not sweltering, days provides a good environment for this variety. Jim finds himself out working in his vineyard many evenings. “I work in the construction industry, and it can be stressful. I find the 15 to 20 hours a week that I spend pruning and training my vines calming, pacifying.”

One of the goals of the Lamorinda Winegrower's Association is to obtain a specific Lamorinda appellation. The appellation would officially designate Lamorinda as a winegrowing region and provide a significant marketing advantage for the sale of grapes and wines from the area. “I think the growing conditions in the area actually are quite good for

growing top-notch wine grapes. The quality of the fruit that I've found so far has been exceptional,” notes Dave Parker.

The group is also committed to sustainability. “Although we have to use practices to make winegrowing economically feasible, we try to treat the vines and grapes as naturally as we can and avoid introducing unnatural elements into the environment,” states Dave. And of course, the group's meetings always start and end with a wine tasting to provide members with an opportunity to further their wine education and to socialize.

As he looks out the window at the vines growing down the hillside that stretches below his home in Moraga, Joao Magalhaes has a fabulous view and an interesting vision. Upon completing the construction of his Spanish-styled home about five years ago, Joao planted 430 vines with the intention of growing enough grapes to make wine to enjoy with his friends and family. Although he finds that he often has “to share” his grapes with the birds in the area, Joao's vineyard yielded 40 bottles of pinot noir in 2006.

But Joao's plans for winegrowing have blossomed. An early member of the Winegrower's Association, Joao is working on the concept of developing a wine tasting room and small-scale wine production facility in Moraga, possibly located near the Moraga Shopping Center. He envisions a pedestrian-friendly complex with a small inn or bed and breakfast and other hospitality businesses to compliment the production facility and benefit the entire community. According to Joao, the proposal has received positive feedback from several members of the community, and as Lamorinda develops as a boutique winegrowing region, Joao sees the proposal as a perfect fit. “We are adding value to a treasure.”



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