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Grapes, Wine, and Friends-A Perfect Mix

By Andrea A. Firth



Paul Reising filling the crusher Bruce Dunn picking at Jon and Megan Leuteneker's vineyard Photos Andy Scheck

For Paul Reising, a longtime Moraga resident, growing grapes and making wine has always been about spending time with good friends. "It's fermented grape juice that you are meant to have with a meal," states Reising with his ever-pragmatic approach to all things related to grapes and wine.

As he sits in his sun-filled family room where the walls are covered in brightly-colored, framed posters from his visits to vineyards throughout California, the northwest, and Europe, Paul recounts the letter he and wife Jackie sent to ten Moraga couples back in 1977. The Reising's friends were invited to join the WCTU-the Wine Connoisseurs Tasting Union-an adaptation of the acronym for the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which spearheaded the Prohibition movement. The idea behind the WCTU was to provide Reising and friends the opportunity to try some new wines, eat a casual meal, and enjoy each other's company. The group, whose members' now range in age between 65 and 80 years, has met almost every six weeks and tasted countless wines for over 30 years. "We have fun at it," states Reising. "If the wine is good, it's a bonus."

Twenty years ago, Reising planted 50 vines-one variety, pinot noir-on a south-facing hillside in his backyard. He took classes in oenology at UC extension and UC Davis and tracked the temperatures in Moraga. "The folks at Davis recommended pinot noir grapes. I like red wine. So that is what I planted," states Reising.

The fact that pinot noir grapes are more difficult to grow and the wine is more difficult to make, seemed like just the right challenge for Reising who could wage this battle on his own land, in his own time, although not completely on his own terms. "Every eighth or ninth batch of wine, I make a real stinker. I really do," admits Reising, who has won best of show for his homegrown wine at tastings in more favorable years.

For two decades Reising has labored and cared for his vines with more than a little help from his friends. In the early days of the vineyard, friends were part of a coop where they exchanged their time on Reising's hillside for wine produced from the year's harvest. In recent years, Reising has enticed his friends and their wives to assist in the bottling, corking and labeling process with a morning spiked with Bloody Marys. "That's the carrot," states Reising.

Reising admits that it has gotten more difficult for many of his friends to climb up and down the steep hillside, and the wine-making process has become more arduous for him to manage. He has moved much of his wine-making equipment to the garage of a younger neighbor, fellow winemaker Jon Leuteneker, as he gradually and happily retires from a life of winemaking to one confined to wine tasting. Over the years, Reising has acquired a vast knowledge of oenology, but he what he likes best to share with his friends is the experience of tasting it together.



Left to right: Jon Leuteneker, Reg Whittington, Dick Reuther, and John Reed setting up the press
Photo Andy Scheck



Paul Reising measuring sugar for the 2008 Chardonnay

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