

French emigre's love affair with wine

By DAVID STONEBERG
For the Register

Bill Tristant tells his visitor to take a good healthy dose of wine, let it sit in his mouth for a while and, after spitting it out into a decanter, continue to enjoy it. “If we don’t say anything, we would taste it for a long time,” he said.

Tristant should know something about wine, since he was born in the southwest of France and grew up on a small winery in the Basque country, the same winery his brother now owns. Tristant recalls when he was a child, a time 60 or more years ago, watching the crush and workers stomping the grapes. After they were done, he and his brother would finish the work.

His life has gone full circle — today, he is releasing a merlot-based wine made from grapes grown in his vineyard. Mirifice, a blend of 80 percent merlot, 15 percent cabernet sauvignon and 5 percent petit verdot, is from grapes harvested in 2006. The merlot and petite verdot grapes were grown in Tristant’s Bale Lane vineyard, the cabernet sauvignon are from hillside vineyards on White Cottage Road in Angwin.

Tristant said “Mirifice” is a Latin word meaning “extraordinary” and “wonderful.” To achieve that end with the wine, which Tristant believes he has done and which a taste or two proves, isn’t easy, but it is an effort that Tristant clearly loves. His 11 acres of vines — three of petit verdot the rest planted in merlot — are 10 years old.

For each season, his vines go through five harvests, that is, he’s dropping fruit four times and then harvesting the best grapes at the end. He drops fruit when the grapes are green and again at veraison. The third time is when he drops the shoulders of each cluster and finally, he drops more fruit two days before the grapes are ready for harvest. Finally, what’s left is harvested. It’s a lot of work, he said, but it is worth it.

“You’ve got to watch the vines and walk through them every day. It’s like cooking, you have to take care to make it right,” he said.

After the grapes were harvested, they were crushed at Benessere Vineyard, which is right across the road. They were cold soaked for five or six days, to extract the maximum flavor and then fermented. The wine was put into barrels and Tristant hauled the French oak barrels back to his warehouse for 18 months of aging. He uses several different coopers for his French oak barrels and racks the wine between them.

Wine blended twice

“I like to do that so all the wine gets the special flavors from all the barrels,” Tristant said. After 18 months in the barrels, he said he and four other winemakers, Remy Martin, Bob Foley, Michelle Roland and his winemaker, Girard Zanzonico, determined the final Mirifice blend. The wine was blended twice, in late February and a month later. The barrels were taken back to Benessere and the wine was bottled there.

The grape grower and now wine seller said the finished wine has a long finish, because the fruit is good, in great part because of the terroir of the vineyard’s site.

“The fruit was perfect when it was picked and the secret is to watch the grapes every day, to taste them and make sure they are ready,” he said.

After harvest, he and Zanzonico ensured the uniqueness of the fruit was preserved in the final bottle of wine. A total of 390 cases of wine were produced and now Tristant will hit the road, taking his wine to high-end restaurants and specialty wine shops. He also is seeking a distributor, but he wants to make sure everyone who wants to sell his wine will be able to do so. He also has hired a person to help him with the Web site and plans to market the wine, at \$48 a bottle, through his site, www.tristantvineyards.com. Like in most things, Tristant has an opinion and a definite plan.

He sums up one of the driving forces of his life. “I have a love of wine; I was born in a winery. As a youth, I was seeing, working and growing grapes. I drink wine every single day, mostly pinot noir, and I’ve become knowledgeable by trying, making errors and then having success. I have always had a love of wine; I’ve drunk it all my life and drink it with pleasure.”

Studied architecture

Tristant immigrated to the United States when he was 16, studied architecture at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and ended up in San Francisco, where he worked as an architect. Years later, in 1975, he was driving around, looking for property to buy in the Napa Valley. He drove down Bale Lane, saw a little old house with a sign that said for sale by owner. He stopped and found out the owner was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “I went in to see him and within a half hour my offer was accepted and he was happy,” Tristant said. The land was adjacent to the Napa River and had oak trees on it. It was covered in hay that was between two and three feet high.

Tristant hired a dozer to clear the property and dug a few pits. What he found is why his grapes make such good wine. Dig down in his land and you’ll find 25 to 36 inches of gray, sandy loam topsoil and after that,

you'll find 150 feet of white, gray gravel, which provides excellent drainage. It's perfect land for his Bordeaux variety grapes and today, he calls his land a true blessing.

After planting vines, he sold the grapes to Cain and Beringer for several years and then, for 19 years, to Markham Winery. Today, he sells a portion of his grapes to Del Dotto Winery. But, he said, he always wanted to have his own label and began working on the plan for Mirifice in 2005.

Walking through the vineyard, tending the vines and taking care of them — killing the weeds with a shovel, rather than chemicals — is the French émigré's first love. For Tristant, the issue always comes back to the land. "It's very important to know your property. You have to treat it and know it like you know your hands. All good wines are made in the vineyard and not in the cellar," he declares.