

Duane Hoff, Proprietor

Fantesca Estate and Winery

2920 Spring Mountain Road, St. Helena

Cellar rats were barreling Cabernet Sauvignon on the crush pad of Fantesca at the time of this interview. New wine was being moved from stainless steel fermenters to old and new French oak barrels, while strains of Herbie Mann and Phil Woods' "Bohemia After Dark" filled the air. The

Cabernet fruit had taken about ten days in large tanks to achieve primary fermentation after destemming and the addition of yeast. The wine was being run into barrels where, after some initial bâtonnage, it will age for 18 to 24 months in an adjacent cave. The rented fermenters were to be picked up that afternoon and a mobile bottling truck will come at bottling time.

Although Fantesca Estate produces no more than 800 cases of Spring Mountain estate Cabernet Sauvignon and about 670 cases Chardonnay from vineyards in Los Carneros, its facility is permitted for 13,000 cases or 30,000 gallons of wine. Proprietor Duane Hoff says Fantesca doesn't advertise; its custom crush clients find it strictly by word-of-mouth. Currently, there are four consulting winemakers. Nils and Kurt Venge originally guided Fantesca's winemaking. With the 2008 vintage, Heidi Barrett is chief winemaker and John Leahy continues as Fantesca's assistant winemaker. The consulting winemakers for custom crush clients include Sarah Gott, Philippe Melka and Diana Snowden Seysses.

Duane and his wife Susan had been looking for two years for property in Napa Valley on which to grow mountain or hillside Cabernet when they found Fantesca. They

had begun to enjoy wine years before when they were both executives with Best Buy and lived in the Minneapolis-St. Paul suburb of Chanhassen. The Hoffs would relax with a ritual glass of Pinot Grigio after their two kids were in bed. They soon became fans of good wine; Duane's favorite was Napa Valley hillside Cabernet. The estate on Spring Mountain Road came with two unreleased vintages on the premises, one in bottle and the other in barrel. When the sale closed in February of 2004, the Hoffs had to scramble to create the brand of Fantesca in time for harvest. They succeeded and released the 2002 bottled wine as Fantesca's first vintage of Cabernet in 2005, and the barreled vintage as its second. The first Chardonnay vintage was 2004.

Developer Robert Yeakey had planned the property as a custom crush facility when he planted ten of its 53 acres to vineyard in 1997. Permits, clients, a stone winery, 300' cave and fermentation tanks with hot and cold glycol were all in place when the Hoffs acquired the facility. However, Duane says the building isn't optimal and the tanks were all the same size and all open-top. Tanks were traded out for different sizes and styles, and there have been some vineyard changes. A half-acre of Cabernet Franc that didn't make the blend was pulled

and planted to Petite Verdot, a second line of irrigation added and vine canopies widened. Duane says Fantesca is not farmed organically, *per se*, but is definitely sustainable. He is proud to point out that the land was part of Caroline Bale's dowry of vineyards when she married Charles Krug in 1860. Segments of old rock walls dot the



property. The cave pierces a spine of rock separating the main house from the winery and provided a thoroughfare for the Hoffs' commute between house and office.

Fantesca's ten acres of vines yield twenty to thirty tons of fruit a year from seven vineyard blocks. Were Fantesca to make just 800 cases, only modest development of the enterprise would be possible. However, by Duane's estimate, with custom crush clients,

what would take ten years to pay is paid in three; the financial spectrum of custom crush is cost effective. Duane also likes that there are multiple winemakers' approaches to problems. He says winemaking is not a copycat industry; no one is looking over anyone's shoulder. It is all about interpreting. Unlike the VCR to DVD, or DVD to Blu-ray, Duane says, "Winemaking isn't about what's the next hot varietal. Nope. You pick a wine you really love, like French white Burgundy. Its bright acid pairs well with food; a little oak adds a bit of complexity." Fantesca may have moved from winemakers Venge to Barrett, but bright acid, tropical fruit and its commitment to Chardonnay remain aligned.

Change has been incremental in its recipe for winemaking. In Duane's analogy of master chefs such as Charlie Trotter or Thomas Keller, a dish is created and then taught. So it is with winemaker Heidi Barrett and "our guys" at Fantesca. Directions from all the consulting winemakers come by e-mail; everything is documented and initialed for a paper trail. Everything has always been in writing at Fantesca, to eliminate any "he said, she said" variables, so there is a track record to beautiful wine or for problem solving. Duane feels there are good communication thresholds at the

winery. Fantasca knows what works, what runs for its team. Duane calls his own way of managing “ears-on.” He looks and listens; all his people, equipment, and their time must be accountable. Assistant Winemaker John Leahy has a background in an old school winery where everything was pretty casual and then with Danny Fetzer, where John had to keep careful track of multiple individual lots. Duane calls John the go-to guy for challenges. He can identify hallmarks of problems early in the process as he follows the menu for each step, and recommend either traditional corrective measures or something else. New equipment is acquired when a number of clients agree. Its cost is spread among the clients and an additional fee charged for its use. Clients provide their own racks and barrels, topping wine and containers. Each client’s barreled wine is stored in a separate branch of the cave as part of the standard fee.

Duane came to wine from Best Buy when it was a fast-growing, entrepreneurial company. He had been an assistant manager for a department with \$28 million in annual sales. He no sooner became manager then he was asked to run the \$200 million car stereo department. He confessed his surprise at this challenge to the boss, who said, “So? I’m responsible for \$2 billion! Grab

the reins and do your best,” and Duane did. Eventually the demanding pace of the job got to him. He and Sarah wanted to travel less and spend more time with their family. Now Duane only needs to travel six weeks a year in ten states, a 200 percent change from Best Buy to a fully planted, realized property, he says smilingly. And his two kids, 17 and 15, are in the viticulture program at St. Helena High School. ■



PHOTOGRAPHY: PRISCILLA UPTON