

Getty Heir, S.F. Mayor Test Waterless Urinals at Napa Winery



I arrived at Napa Valley's newest environmentally friendly winery in a two-ton SUV and parked in a space reserved for low-emission vehicles. The area was shrouded in fog, so hopefully nobody noticed.

California's Cade Winery, which opened in April, is part of the PlumpJack Group, a hospitality business co-founded by oil heir Gordon Getty and San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom. The first estate wine, a blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot priced at \$125, will be released in February.

"I want perfectionism," Getty, 75, said in an interview. "I'm more interested in making a great wine than money."

John Conover, Cade's general manager and partner, acknowledged that selling pricey wines in a slumping economy is a risky move.

"If you're looking for a quick return on investment, or to flip it, the wine industry is probably a poor area for you to dabble in," he said.

If the samples I tasted during my visit are any indication, however, oenophiles may be willing to pay the price.

The wine, aged 22 months in oak barrels, was presented in a scientific glass beaker and had a spicy aroma mixed with lush berries. It tasted like red and black fruit with strong, but not overpowering tannins. Even with two months left of barrel aging, this wine was impressive.

“Here on the hillside, you get more masculine, stronger flavors and higher tannin levels,” Conover said.

Howell Mountain

Quality winemaking in the Howell Mountain area dates back more than a century, said Jim Lapsley, who teaches viticulture and enology at the University of California, Davis. One of the local wineries, Liparita, won a gold medal at the 1900 Paris World Exhibition.

Prohibition put most of the high-end wineries out of business and they didn’t make a real comeback until the 1970s, Lapsley said.

In 1983, Howell Mountain became the first of 14 wine- growing areas in the Napa Valley to get a special federal designation signifying its geological uniqueness. Now the region is dotted with boutique wineries.

Plots must be above the 1,400-foot contour line, with the elevation typically producing warmer, drier days and cooler nights during the growing season than the valley below.

Electric Cars

Soil containing decomposed volcanic ash and red clay force vines to dig deep for nutrients and water, resulting in grapes that make powerful, tannic wines, according to Claudia Chittim, executive director of the Howell Mountain Vintners & Growers Association.

Cade’s 54-acre property boasts organically grown grapes, plus a tasting room and production facility made from mostly recycled materials. The property is almost completely powered by solar energy, the urinals operate without water and the parking lot offers special outlets for drivers of electric cars made by Tesla Motors Inc.

Barrels are stored underground in 14,500 square feet of arched caves built into the hillside. A dining room in the middle of the dim expanse has a goth look to it, with a spider web of filament bulbs dangling from black cords attached to the ceiling.

“The goal was to minimize the footprint on the site, but the caves provide year-round, 61-degree temperatures, so we don’t have to heat or cool it or humidify it,” Conover said.

Winery Survey

Cade’s approach is part of a trend among California vintners, said Allison Jordan, executive director of the Wine Institute in San Francisco. A study by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance showed 80 percent of the 101 winemakers surveyed reported using at least six environmentally friendly practices.

For now, Cade is selling just three types of wines, all made from grapes grown in the Napa Valley.

“You have to grow the wine the land wants to grow,” Getty said. “Outside that, I like to grow the best wine that can be made.”

The 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (\$26) tasted like peaches and finished with a kick of fennel, while the 2007 Napa Cuvee Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60) had flavors of blackberry preserves and chocolate-covered almonds.

The 2006 Cade Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$68), made from grapes purchased from seven growers in the area, presents dense plum, currant and blackberry-pie flavors.

Cade’s Napa Cuvee sells for \$38 a glass at Wolfgang Puck’s Cut steakhouse in Beverly Hills, California. Customers bought 70 glasses of the wine in August and 80 in September, said Dana Farner, the restaurant’s beverage director and sommelier.

“I was so impressed with the layers, the balance,” Farner said. “I thought it was just a beautiful bottle of wine.”