

Schaefer on Wine

By Dennis Schaefer

You, too, can be a Santa Barbara County winemaker

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Ever had the notion you could be a winemaker? Many folks, fascinated by the process and the resultant product, would like to dip their toe in the wine barrel, so to speak. But the cost can be quite prohibitive. However, a few years back, an outfit called Crushpad opened a small custom grape crush and winemaking facility in San Francisco, focusing on helping regular people who have day jobs indulge in their fantasy of winemaking.

Crushpad founder and CEO Michael Brill, after planting pinot noir in his San Francisco backyard and making wine himself, noticed that neighbors and acquaintances were captivated by it all. So he went legit and founded Crushpad to help out other wine geeks like himself. "We started Crushpad in order to enable anyone across the country to make their own high-end wine in barrel-size lots," he explains. "We always thought that there was a huge opportunity in the millions of wine enthusiasts who would want to take their hobby to the next level. What we didn't initially consider is that people would want to create wine businesses with us."

Here's how Crushpad (877-946-3404 or www.crushpadwine.com) works: It provides a state-of-the-art winemaking facility and a winemaking team who source grapes from top California vineyards, just like big wineries do. You participate as much or as little as you want in the winemaking activities and decisions. The minimum is a barrel-sized lot, roughly 25 cases or 300 bottles; the cost is between \$5,000 to \$10,000 a barrel, depending on your grape source, which puts the cost per bottle between \$16 to \$33.

Crushpad has access to vineyards in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and, yes, Santa Barbara County, including such well-known local vineyards as La Encantada, McGinley, Thompson and White Hawk. To give you an idea of the quality of these wines, let's focus on a few of the commercially available ones, made from Santa Barbara County grapes, and the individuals behind them.

David Dain Smith, a 51-year-old microbiologist working in pharmaceutical sales from Springfield, Mo., didn't wait for retirement to realize his winemaking dream. He jumped on the Crushpad bandwagon early and has become the poster boy for its success. "Dain was the very first commercial customer we had," recalls Mr. Brill. "At the time, we had very basic equipment with mostly volunteers as employees. We all worked 18-plus-hour days, especially when we had to do all-day trucking trips down to Santa Barbara (to pick up the grapes)." Mr. Smith now makes about 500 cases a year and his Dain wines have received high praise from all major wine publications. A few tasting notes:

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- Dain Syrah, The Smart Set, White Hawk Vineyard 2007 (\$55): Plenty of plum, cherry, pomegranate and graphite on the nose. Almost black in color, the intense pinpoint flavors on mid-palate include blackberry and plum as well as smoked meat and white pepper hovering in the background. It gets a floral lift on the finish from the tiny dash of viognier in the mix and the sweeping acidity. Subtle and restrained in its demeanor, as few syrahs are, it only now is starting to hint at its complexity, needing more time in the bottle to show all its colors.

- Dain Pinot Noir, Anticipation, La Encantada Vineyard 2007 (\$55): Typical Santa Rita Hills pinot nose of red fruit, cherry and raspberry while on the palate it turns toward the dark side with flavors of black cherry and plum along with elements of baking spice, tree bark and freshly turned earth. Medium-bodied and quite elegant in nature, it's supple, forward and generous with its flavors and quite delicious and easy to drink right now.

Michael A. Giarraputo, a marketing executive in Basking Ridge, N.J., got the home winemaking bug, winning medals in amateur competitions, and wanted to move up the professional level. The Italian name Giarraputo translates into English as "jar of knowledge," thus his label is Think Tank.

- Think Tank Syrah, White Hawk Vineyard 2007 (\$45): Dark, extracted and deep purple in color, this syrah gives off aromatics of damson plum, prunes, bacon fat and freshly turned soil. On the palate, plum, dark berry, lavender, bacon fat, burnt creme brulee crust, graphite and printer's ink flavors are woven together to knit an entire fabric of flavors. This is a true dark star of syrah, perhaps the best young White Hawk Vineyard syrah I have ever tasted. The fruit and spice flavors meld together seamlessly on mid-palate and the finish is generous and long-lived.

- Think Tank Pinot Noir, La Encantada Vineyard 2007 (\$60): The immediate aromatics tend toward beet root, cola, root beer and tree bark, but with a little swirling in the glass, the fruit comes to the fore. Surprisingly (at least given the nose), on the palate, it is bright, fresh, racy and almost giddy with bright cherry and strawberry flavors, which is an anomaly for this particular vineyard. But quite sneakily, an undercurrent of deeper, darker plum and black cherry flavors make themselves known. Tasted a day after opening, the flavors do stretch out with both bright and dark flavors prominent. With such great fruit concentration, decanting is recommended.

Birmingham, Ala., natives Charles Atkins and Julie Youles first met at a restaurant in the Five Points neighborhood of that city. In 2005, they headed west to pursue their dream of starting a boutique winery in California.

- Five Points Syrah, White Hawk Vineyard 2005 (\$45): A potent nose of shoe polish, lavender, nutmeg, black plum and dark berry fruits just jumps out of the glass. Aged for 18 months in new French oak, this is a strong and big-boned syrah with flavors that are multiple and complex. Black raspberry, damson plum and boysenberry flavors are in the forefront along with subtle influences of chalk, pepper and barrel spice. Warm and well-rounded in the mouth, it melts on mid-palate like a piece of warm, oozing chocolate. All flavor components are synced up and everything is in balance, as this smooth operator fades away for the long goodbye on the finish.