

BUSINESS: Success • Views & Facts

CHRIS WILLS, WINEMAKER, LAKE SONOMA WINERY

By S.A. Jernigan

You could say Chris Wills' winemaking career got started with a bang. And he was only in the 6th grade at the time. When his dad's Santa Rosa plum tree produced a bumper crop -- Chris thought it would be dandy to make his own wine. He even knew a little about it. Let's see...crush up the plums (pits and all, mind you), grab a one qt. mason jar from the cupboard, add some sugar - about half a cup. And here's a package of mom's Fleischmann's yeast. H-m-m-m...how much? Oh, a whole pack ought to be about right.

Even at the age of 12, Chris knew that oxygen was "the enemy of wine." So he punched a hole in the mason jar lid, swiped a hose from his aquarium, stuck one end in the jar with the juice concoction and the other in a second jar filled with water, sealing the "wine" jar with wax.

"I knew it needed warmth to ferment so I set it inside the fireplace. Hey, I even knew to open the flue of the chimney - not bad for a kid!" Smugly pleased with initiating his new science experiment, Chris went off to bed. Later that night, his dad was awakened by the family's toy poodle barking incessantly...at the fireplace. Because the hose had sprung loose and was now spewing warm juice and pit bits everywhere with a vengeance, Mr. Wills was worried the thing - whatever it was -- was going to explode. Grabbing some potholders, he quickly snatched up Chris's makeshift contraption and went running out to the backyard with it, setting it down on the lawn to finish "detonating."

Chris managed to sleep through the whole episode. But a lecture accompanied his morning Cheerios.

"Hey, I knew the oxygen needed to dissipate into water -- you gas off the remaining CO2, I just didn't realize this step happened AFTER fermentation - now, that was a key piece of missing information. And, of course, I had about 1000 times too much yeast in there!" Chris rolls his eyes and laughs when looking back on the incident now. In his early 40's, he resembles Ron Howard with hair.

Not one to be discouraged, Chris tried his home fermentation experiment again in high school - this time...ahem...motivated more by an interest in free alcohol than "pure science," he admits. And so he began making "balloon wine" as a senior. The recipe? Grape juice, the Fleischmann's yeast again, sugar. And a balloon over the top of another glass jar. He later racked his "finished wine" off into Strawberry Crush bottles for camouflage purposes. "It looked perfect - just like pop!" A little yeasty...but drinkable. Nothing like literally savoring the fruits of one's labors - especially at 17.

Today, Chris Wills is a winemaker of distinction with Lake Sonoma Winery (9990 Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg) whose sublime varietals garner gold regularly -- including most recently at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair along with international accolades galore. He's not done experimenting, mind you. Instead, he gets paid for the pleasure of winemaking innovation these days. Talk about a childhood dream come true, 'eh?



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