

# Mutual love of wine fuels friendship of Cottonwood firm

Tom Burnham and Jim Tomasini have been buddies for years, and a mutual love of wine has fueled the friendship. For proof, look no further than the fact that they blended their last names for the title of their rural Cottonwood winery.

"We started making wine together 17 years ago and it kept evolving as a hobby," Burnham recalled. By 2000, the hobby had become a full-fledged business and Burnsini Vineyards became the first bonded winery in Tehama County.

The partnership includes both men's wives: Joy Burnham and Deanna Tomasini. Kids and grandkids have also been known to pitch in and help at various times during the year.

Currently there are seven acres planted in grapes, with five acres in production. An acre of Merlot vines are two years away from production and an acre of Sangiovese vines need another four years before they are ready, Burnham said.

Burnsini Vineyards is bottling five varietals and one blend, selecting fruit from 1,200 Zinfandel vines; 928 Merlot vines; 900 Cabernet Sauvignon vines; and 1,000 Petite Syrah vines.

In their first year, they bottled 350 cases and had sold out by March. Since then, Burnham said their production has been increasing by 200 to 300 cases a year. They are currently selling the 550 cases that represent their 2003 vintage.

Burnham ages his wine for two years in barrels made of French and American oak and takes the barrels out of service after four years when they've lost most of their flavor. To help extend their inventory, Burnham and Tomasini came up with Tehama Red, a blend of Zinfandel and Cabernet that does not need to be aged for the full two years.

"It keeps us in wine most of the time. Eventually we hope to age that for two years, too," Burnham said.

A retired millwright who worked for Simpson Paper, Kimberly Clark and McColl Dairy Products, the good-natured Burnham said he takes pleasure from all aspects of the wine business. "I find it very enjoyable, from growing the grapes to selling it. Our sales have been really easy. I've never had to go out and really hustle it. I've done a lot of wine tastings for different groups, and no matter how many you do, you always find somebody who says 'I didn't know there was a winery out here.'"

Burnsini Vineyards' Tehama Red retails for \$10.95 a bottle; Zinfandel is \$12.95; Merlot and Chardonnay are both priced at \$14.95; and their Cabernet Sauvignon sells for \$16.95 a bottle. "I have some people from the Bay Area, who live in Napa County, and they buy it. They just like our wine," Burnham said. "I ship four cases of Petite Syrah to New York every year. It's a standing order. It's all pretty well received. It's pretty easy to sell the first bottle, when it counts



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**Varieties: 1,200 Zinfandel, 928 Merlot, 900 Cabernet Sauvignon,**

**1,000 Petite Sirah, 920 Sangiovese**

**Total vines: 5,000**

is when you sell the second."

Burnham said he also enjoys the friendships and socialization that seems to revolve around the wine business. When it comes to wine, there is never a shortage of helping hands. "We were picking the Caber-

net last year and we called 35 people and we had 60 people show up. We have a breakfast, drink some wine and have a good time. It's like locusts – bam, bam and they're all picked."

Burnsini Vineyards is a civic-minded affair and proud of its Tehama

County roots. As one of the sponsors of the recent Cottonwood Wild West Art & Wine Festival, they produced a specially labeled Trail Boss Tom Petite Syrah and donated part of the proceeds to local charities.

*-Jon Lewis*