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'Retirement' means opening a winery for Naggiar family

By: Gary Moffat, Sierra Foothills AVA

Throughout the foothills, wine making and grape growing is more often than not a family affair. At Naggiar Vineyards in Nevada County, though, it's more like a clan affair, with three limbs of the family tree all located near the end of Garden Bar Road on 160 rolling acres.

The Naggiar's are French Canadians with an Italian heritage, so the allure of the vineyard and crushing grapes is not in the least surprising. But how the extended family ultimately settled in the shadow of the Sierra is a long story.

It starts with the fire in the belly of Mike Naggiar, a former HP executive with North American responsibility for PC sales who retired early in 1997. He and his wife, Diane, spent many years in the Bay Area, with a last stop in Saratoga, where Mike tended a one-acre vineyard.

"I wanted him to retire, but I wanted him to stay busy," said Diane. "The one acre was more of a hobby, but we thought we could grow grapes on a larger scale."

Indeed. Today the Naggiars tend 50 acres of 13 varieties of grapes and their nascent winery operation was bonded early in 2004. Naggiar Vineyards is now releasing its first five wines.

Like many would-be vintners answering the siren call of Bacchus, the Naggiars first combed Napa and Sonoma in the search for land, but staggering prices forced them to look elsewhere.

The Naggiar ranch is more like a well-manicured estate. Just past the entry gate are the winery building, a nondescript steel structure on one side, and the vineyard foreman's cottage on the other. Follow a windy road up to the 1,300-foot peak of the property to the main residence, a rambling ranch studded with giant rose bushes, the cultivation of which is another Mike Naggiar



The Naggiar family has relocated from several points on the North American map to operate a vineyard in Nevada County. Courtesy Photo

passion.

"The idea in the beginning was to be growers," Mike said, "And we decided to target the Rhones to be our flagship over time." You'll find the principal Rhone varieties - syrah, grenache, mourvedre, viognier, marsanne and roussanne.

"We don't bank on one variety or one customer," said Mike, who counts Elyse, Clos du Val, Viansa, V. Sattui and Terre Rouge, plus a number of foothill wineries, including Burch Hall and Nevada City.

Last year, the vineyards produced 180 tons of fruit, making Naggiar the second-largest producer in the county, behind Indian Springs. Cabernet sauvignon, sangiovese and petite sirah are also mainstays, with tempranillo and more Rhones to come.

After becoming firmly entrenched on the growing side, Mike and Diane decided they want to go all the way and make wine from what they believe is outstanding fruit. To do that, though, they needed reinforcements. Perhaps it was his long experience in sales, but it didn't take much for Mike to convince his nephew and his wife to leave Montreal for the sunny skies of Norcal.

Tony and Linda Tibshirani built a home on 40 acres carved out of the original property, and moved in with their two daughters. Tony is in software sales for high-tech giant SAP. Mike's brother, Pierre, moved to another 40-acre home site with his wife, Kathy. The couple relocated from Atlanta, and Pierre telecommutes for HP.

Rounding out the clan operation are Mike and Diane's son, Shawn and his family, wife Mary, and their son (and future winemaker) Freddy. The young Naggiars live in Rocklin and help out when they can. Everyone is totally engaged, though, especially during crush.

Wines are targeted for the under-\$25 niche and will be sold through high-end restaurants, fine wine stores and on the Naggiar Web site, **www.naggiarvineyards.com**.

"These are going to be high tannic wines that can be put away for five years," said Mike. "Our wines are softer, in character with the variety; fruity, but not too fruity.

For the future, the Naggiars are working on a strategy to open a tasting room, though they are wary of being shackled to another time sink. After all, the Naggiars are supposed to be retired.

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