

Vineyard owner has no intention of slowing down

BY MELLISA HANNUM
SPECIAL TO THE UNION,

"I think everyone should be repotted," said Michel "Mike" Naggiar.

Though his body reminds him that he's not quite as young as when he started Naggiar Vineyards about ten years ago, he stated, "I am partial to not retiring."

At 56, Naggiar decided to take an early retirement from Hewlett Packard. He had what he called a "hobby vineyard" by his home in the Bay Area, and Naggiar found that he enjoyed the outside work. "Why don't we try grape growing commercially?" he asked his wife, and the search for a new home began.

In 1996 they came up to this area to stay with friends and fell in love with Grass Valley and Nevada City.

Naggiar hired a consultant, Larry Bradley who still works with the family, to look for land.

When they purchased their Grass Valley property, there was nothing but rolling hills, trees, and a neighboring bison ranch.

Naggiar took some courses at the University of California, Davis "just to be dangerous enough to ask the right questions," and set out on his second career.

Originally going into business to sell his grapes to other wineries, Naggiar Vineyards began making wine four years ago. Though they still sell 80 percent of their grapes to other wineries, Naggiar produces 1,500-2,000 cases a year - depending on the harvest.

Their 60 acres of vines contain 16 varietals, a diversity that is rather rare in a vineyard of its size. The winery, led by winemaker Derek Irwin, a UC Davis graduate, creates 14 different wines including a rosé; made from Grenache, a gold medal Sangiovese, and a Mourvedre. "Thanks to him, we've become successful," said Naggiar of Irwin's skill in winemaking. "He's done a great job for us. We've been very lucky."

At 1300 feet, choosing which grapes to grow can be tricky. Bradley helped them choose varieties that do well at that elevation. In this case, all were Southern European and Southern Italian varietals, including three whites, including Viognier. It won silver in 2006 at the California State Fair, the Orange County Fair, and the San Francisco International Competition and in 2007 with the San Francisco Chronicle.

Naggiar feels that having the double model of making wine and growing grapes for other wineries has been a good business decision. "It's a very easy business to get into. Staying in it and making money's another story," he said. 35 restaurants buy their wine, and customers locally, in Napa Valley, and even one in Boston purchase their grapes. "It's a lot of work," Naggiar said. "Like anything else, if you want to do it right, it's a lot of work."

Selling wine is tough, but over the years, his family has moved closer and helps with the business. His son lives next door, his nephew down the road. His wife, who handles the majority of sales, now has help from their niece and daughter-in-law. While the family may want to do something bigger someday, Naggiar has no plans to expand the vineyard. "I want to keep it fun," he said.

That motivation, as well as always considering his customers, has proven to be very successful. Naggiar Vineyards and Winery is planning on opening a new tasting room in early spring. Currently, they do private tastings within



their home, typically with a group of six or more. "We try to cater on a more personal basis," Naggiar explained. He feels that the average wine taster wants that type of experience when trying out new wines. Even though the new tasting room is much larger than the Naggiar's dining room, it will have the same Tuscan theme as the main house as well as offering amazing views of the vineyard. "I'm determined to keep it personal," he stated.

As he looked out at his oak dotted landscape from a future window of the tasting room Naggiar said, "I have no intentions of slowing down."

Mellisa Hannum has a Bachelor's in Journalism from Humboldt State University. She lives in a converted barn in Nevada City.

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