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April 26, 2007 7:25 PM ET

Kings Hill Cellars opens winery for fine-wine hobbyists

Joining San Francisco's Crushpad and Napa's Judd's Hill MicroCrush, startup Kings Hill Cellars this week announced the opening of a Santa Rosa winery where wine aficionados can "craft" their own fine wines for non-commercial use with help from wine professionals.



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The Santa Rosa winery will primarily cater to consumers who want "hands-on experience" in most phases of wine production, including everything from sorting, destemming, crushing and pressing the fruit, to blending and bottling the wine, the company said April 25. An in-house graphic artist can help design logos and private labels.

The facility is located along the Mayacamas Range between Santa Rosa and Calistoga. It has an overall storage capacity of 40 barrels, and also can accommodate small vineyard owners interested in making wine from their own grapes. "Many growers have good fruit, but don't have the expertise or equipment to make great wine," said Kings Hill founder and owner Lindsay Austin, a longtime Bay Area optical-equipment executive.

Kings Hill crushed its first fruit last year for friends and family, and now is making paid club memberships available to others. Trade publication Winesandvines.com reported Wednesday that it already has 17 members, and produced nine barrels of red wines last year.

Austin is chairman and co-founder of San Jose-based Pavilion Integration Corp., and spent more than 30 years in senior management positions with companies that develop, manufacture and market lasers, optics and instrumentation, including SpectraSwitch, JDS Uniphase, Coherent, Lambda Physik and Spectra Physics.

Members can make a 30-gallon or 60-gallon barrel of wine that yields 12 or 24 cases, respectively. Pricing varies by varietal, which include cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot noir, syrah, zinfandel and sauvignon blanc. For example, making a 60-gallon of pinot noir costs \$5,950; the same amount of sauvignon blanc is priced at \$4,450. Prices include grapes, a winemaking tutorial and consultation, use of equipment, staff-provided cellar practices (such as racking, topping and monitoring), and standard packaging (750 ml bottles, cases, corks and labels).

Consulting winemaker Richard Mansfield, who has worked for wineries such as Napa's Stags' Leap Winery, Healdsburg's Bradford Mountain Winery and Napa's Palmaz Vineyards, helps members do their thing.

Kings Hill sources most of its fruit from well-known North Coast vineyards such as Mountain View Ranch, Herbert's Vineyard, Fowler Vineyards, Le Vois Vineyard, Trew Vineyard and Volckhardt Vineyard.

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