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Posted on Wed, Sep. 20, 2006

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Fisher: Open a bottle of vintage valley success

By Patty Fisher
Mercury News

From Thomas J. Fogarty's hilltop winery in Woodside, you can see the evolution of Silicon Valley laid out like an open book.

The vineyards stretching before you evoke the days after the Gold Rush, when this region was a major wine-producing area. The pristine hillsides beyond are a testament to the decades-long battles over open-space preservation. And the bustling high-tech capital below contains thousands of stories of innovations that shaped our 21st-century world.

The story of the region parallels the story of Dr. Fogarty. The honored inventor, physician, teacher, vintner and venture capitalist is a walking local history book. That's why Fogarty, 72, is receiving the 2006 San Mateo County History Maker award from the county historical association Thursday night.

I'd never visited the Fogarty Winery on Skyline Boulevard, so I figured that a chance to meet the county's reigning history maker was reason enough to make the trip. The good doctor was waiting for me, eager to begin the history lesson.

Like so many local luminaries, Fogarty is a transplant. Born in Ohio, he was a lackluster student who spent his time tinkering instead of studying. He once took a crack at a professional boxing career. At 19, while working as a scrub nurse in a hospital, he invented a balloon catheter that revolutionized vascular medicine by allowing doctors to remove blood clots without invasive surgery.

Fogarty found his way to Stanford University in 1968 after finishing medical school in the Midwest. While teaching and performing cardiovascular surgery, he helped launch the medical technology industry that has become such a hallmark of the valley. He holds more than 100 surgical patents, has won many prestigious awards and was inducted into the Inventors Hall of Fame in 2001.

His inventions paid off handsomely. With his growing wealth, he started a foundation and became a venture capitalist to help launch other medical devices.

"If you do good for mankind," he said, "it's not a bad thing to make money at it."

Meanwhile, Fogarty started tinkering again -- this time with winemaking. His first attempt produced a few bottles of drinkable red wine -- he says it's hard to make a bad zinfandel. In the mid-1970s he bought 220 rugged acres off Skyline Boulevard above Portola Valley for a mere \$118,000 and planned his winery.

That's when he took on the local preservationist movement for the first time. In those days Portola Valley did its best to discourage development, and the locals wanted no part of a commercial winery. Even though winemaking is considered an agricultural land use, it took him several years to get a permit.

"I finally had to threaten to sue the town," he said dryly.

Today the winery produces about 15,000 cases of chardonnay and pinot noir each year, and its panoramic views make it a popular site for weddings, which help keep the winery profitable.

Fogarty has continued to bump up against local preservationists. He's currently involved in a lawsuit with the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District over his plans to build a house on another parcel.

When I asked Fogarty what it felt like to be told "you're history," he smiled. At this point in his life, he seems comfortable with his accomplishments.

"I don't really care about the awards," he said. "But if we can set an example for our children and promote innovation, then I'm for that."

And if this award can remind us -- and our children -- how this remarkable community of ours came to be, then I'm all for that.

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