

Stacey Vreeken, Wine Press: Cinnabar rising

By Stacey Vreeken

Special to the Sentinel

POSTED: 07/23/2013 01:16:13 PM PDT



Mercury Rising from Cinnabar Winery is one of the most popular wines widely available from a Santa Cruz Mountains winery. It's edgy enough for the adventurous, yet its soft, silky tannins make it approachable for those who seldom drink wine. You'll see it in the hands of guests and on the menus of many restaurants.

"Mercury Rising takes on a life of its own. The wine allows us to cover a lot of fixed costs and helps us dabble in smaller lots of wines," says winemaker George Troquato of the rich, Bordeaux-style blend.

Troquato has been making wine for Cinnabar since 1990, creating a steady taste profile for the winery, despite changes, including the outsourcing of fruit, the death of its founder Tom Mudd in 2007 and the selling of the original Saratoga estate.

The winery is now owned by Mudd's children, Karina and Jack Mudd, and run by President Suzanne Frontz, with production occurring close to vineyards where fruit is purchased, much of it in the Paso Robles area. The winemaker, tasting room and winery headquarters remain in Saratoga.

"We outgrew the facility in the hills," says Troquato, of producing wine from grapes grown in Clear Lake, Sonoma County, Lodi, Contra Costa, Monterey, Paso Robles and, of course, chardonnay and pinot noir from Santa Cruz County.

"I'm enjoying the new wines," says Troquato, whose Italian heritage and vintner father cemented his love of farming and gave him a rich background in winemaking in the Santa Clara Valley. "I'm on a quest these days for nontraditional varieties, focusing on Rhones in Paso Robles. I really love petite sirah, Grenache, mourvedre."

The Mercury Rising tide lifts all vintages, allowing the winemaker to play around with some new blends and styles such as Incantation and Incantation Blanc, lightly sweet summer blends that Troquato says puts the fire out on Indian food.

Other wines reflect more traditional tastes such as the deeply rich Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon or the new Rhone varietals such as the Tempranillo or the Tripartite blend of grenache noir, mourvedre and syrah.

The winemaker's not afraid to make "consumer wines that have good color, mouth-feel, are supple, but that critics don't like. Critics like nervy, edgy tannins with a dusty quality in the background. There's a difference between what critics and consumers like."



Troquato, who spent much of life and career in the Saratoga/Los Gatos area, enjoys close contact with his tasting room and tries to make an appearance at least once a month, saying, "direct response from the consumer is effective."

His down-to-earth nature is reflected in his humble approach to winemaking.

"Nuance is the difficult next step," he says, describing lower alcohol wines. "California winemakers need to move away from power and move to grace"... nuance is a difficult thing."

Nuance is exactly what's needed when bottling Santa Cruz Mountains pinot noir.

"Pinot noir makes you a better winemaker," says Troquato of the notoriously difficult varietal that he obtains from the Corralitos area, "because you have to pay attention to nuance."

The Chardonnay gets the same attention. The grapes come from cool, dry-farmed Summit area vineyards, which give the wine a lean, elegant minerality.

But the biggest challenge for Troquato is responding to Mother Nature's curves.

"A lot of people learned a lot about themselves in 2011. You had to see if you were worth your salt as a winemaker," he says of the erratic growing seasons of the past few years.

He learned patience and that you have "to let the vintage be the vintage" it wants.

"You get what you get, so don't throw a fit. You think you know, then Mother Nature throws you a curve, and you say, 'wow.'"

Still, Troquato's many years tending vineyards, making wine, growing his garden gives him a philosophical bent.

"If every vintage were the same, wine wouldn't be as complex or diverse," he says.

Wine Press appears monthly. Contact Stacey Vreeken, the Sentinel's former Food & Wine editor, at staceyvreeken@gmail.com (<mailto:staceyvreeken@gmail.com>).

At A Glance

Cinnabar Winery

What: Saratoga-based winery popularized by Mercury Rising vintage. The original Santa Cruz Mountains estate was sold in 2007 after the death of founder Tom Mudd; many operations take place in Paso Robles, though the tasting room and winemaker remain in Saratoga.

Name: Founder Mudd thought the Medieval practice of alchemy, turning base metals into gold, was comparable to modern winemaking, so he named his winery Cinnabar, after the rich, red mineral ore of Mercury which was thought to help the process.

Tasting room: 14612 Big Basin Way, Saratoga

Hours: Noon to 6 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; noon to 5 p.m. Friday-Saturday; wine bar 5-8 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

I make wines that are: 'user-friendly. Like comfort foods, I make comfort wines," winemaker George Troquato says.

Wines: Fruit from Santa Cruz Mountains, Paso Robles, Sonoma, Lake County and Lodi are made into wines showcasing region's attributes.

Family: Wife Kristi is a nurse; children Camilla, 18, Dominic 7, and Xavier, 4.

Outside the winery: Troquato rides a bike for exercise, enjoys cooking but loves to garden and manicure his plants. 'I love the beauty that comes from it. It fills my soul.'

Inspired by: 'I try to do better every year and learn from each vintage,' says Troquato, who's been making wine more than 25 years. 'I try to capture more, be true to the nature of the varietal, to make it better. You strive to beat what you did the year before and enjoy the journey.'

Winemaker selection: 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley. Tasting notes: 'A brooding nose of dark fruit, mocha, black olive and leather, this wine displays flavorful layers of raspberry, black currant, vanilla-creme and pepper. Smooth, structured tannins lead to a dusty finish of sweet toasted oak.' \$42.

Recommends: Big Basin Winery; tasting room is down the street.

Events: Live music 5:30-7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2-4 p.m. Sunday.

Contact: 408-867-1012 and www.cinnabarwinery.com (<http://www.cinnabarwinery.com>).

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