

Pursuing the ‘perfect’ wine

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By Ramona Frances

A small vineyard tucked between the San Joaquin River and Avenue 7 is tended with the precision of a perfectionist housekeeper standing guard over a family treasure. But the visually attractive Fäsi Estate Vineyard with its Napa-Sonoma like view is more than it seems.

Every action performed on the vineyard is by design - thanks, in part, to 20 weather sensors on 42 acres of Class I sandy soil on slight slopes. Maintenance performed by ranch manager Santos Mendoza is part of a revolving plan to intensify flavors of wine made from the Syrah grapes grown there.

“Ninety-two points is our best (wine rating); it’s beyond our wildest dreams. We farm organically using deficit irrigation. We wait a long time before the first irrigation. With a longer wait, there is more character in the wine. We cut about 50 percent of the bunches for more intense flavors,” co-owner Ralph Fäsi said.

Removing canes by Mendoza and a team of pruners, for example, is not expected to be completed before Feb. 27 or 28, a practice performed very late for most vineyards when the swollen buds of nearby varieties are nearing spring bloom.

“We leave only two fruit canes and in April we thin. We take many bunches off,” said Mendoza, who have tended the vineyard for 25 years.

The timing of pruning on the Fäsi Vineyard Estate is allegedly ideal for syrah grapes, whose choice was initiated by California State University Fresno viticulture experts, including Robert Wample. The distinct micro-climate along the San Joaquin River, which keeps its surrounding 10 degrees cooler at night even during the hottest summer months, helps create conditions for a “perfect” wine.

“In 2000, we started using solar energy to run the weather station – all because of Fresno State. They found out we had the perfect conditions for Syrah and we spent three times as much for it. Dr. Wample decided what trellis system and spacing. He believed we could do well here,” Fäsi said.

Owned by Swiss-born Ralph & Yvonne Fäsi, the vineyard is described by Ralph Fäsi as an expensive but enjoyable hobby.



Santos Mendoza (Ranch Manager) & Ralph Fäsi

“We produce four or five tons to the acre as opposed to its potential – 14 tons per acre,” Fäsi said.

His effort has already achieved some recognition. Fäsi Crest 2005 Syrah Private Reserve, made from grapes grown on the property, garnered a gold medal in the 2009 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. It competed against 4,736 wines entered from wineries across the country. Over 60 professional wine judges representing trade, education, media, retail, and restaurants throughout the United States evaluated the wine over a four-day period.

Fäsi said he does not regret living in Madera. “It’s a great place to live. It’s very quiet with lots of coyotes to keep us entertained and the dogs howling at night,” he said.

Fäsi said Fäsi Crest, a mix of 2005 – 2007 vintages, earned a 90 point rating and Sweet Syrah 2007, a fortified port-style private reserve dessert wine has not been rated. Fäsi Estate wine is carried at the Vineyard Restaurant.

Fäsi Estate Vineyard is a CCOF organically-certified vineyard in Madera County, founded in 2000 with its office in Fresno and sales operations in the U.S. and Switzerland.