

Local News

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Valley red wine voted best at rodeo

By John Holland
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You might be surprised to learn that Texas, home to plenty of beer-swilling cowboys, has a well-regarded wine competition. You also might be surprised to know the top red was made from grapes grown in Stanislaus County, better known for lower-end wines. Silkwood owner John Monnich said this and other awards show that the San Joaquin Valley can hold its own against more famous regions.

"We can produce quite as good a quality grape," he said. "We just don't have the ambience that the Napa Valley has or Paso Robles has."

The Houston award provided a chance for The Bee to catch up with Monnich, 79, who has had a long career in wine and the farm chemical business.

He grows the grapes on 91 acres on Dusty Lane, near Dry Creek east of Modesto. They include the alicante bouschet, syrah, petit sirah, cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay.

The wines are made under contract at Weibel Family Vineyards and Winery in Lodi. They range from a \$17 red blend and \$19 chardonnay to a \$120 petite sirah from 2007. (Those are

the online prices; the wines also are at many stores and restaurants in the Modesto area.) Monnich said making premium wines in the valley requires grape varieties that can tolerate high temperatures. He fertilizes with a seaweed product from South Africa that develops the grape clusters in a way that increases air space between the berries. This reduces the chance of moisture getting in and rotting the fruit. Monnich recalled that in 2007, Napa Valley growers harvested petit sirah in late August, out of fear of rain damage, but he picked his in early November.

"You just get a lot of hang time, and you can get the fruit to ripen properly," he said.

The company produces about 10,000 cases a year and has the potential to double in size, Monnich said. The wines are sold in 21 states, Japan and Hong Kong.

Monnich is active in the San Joaquin Valley Winegrowers Association, which promotes wines from the region.

"He's unashamed of where it's from," said Peterangelo



John Monnich, owner of Silkwood Wines, says the San Joaquin Valley can hold its own against more famous winemaking regions.

Vallis, the group's executive director. "In fact, he has pride that he's putting out world-class wine from the valley."

Monnich also owns Caltech Agri Marketing Services, a fertilizer company in the same F Street building as Silkwood. Caltech has nine employees; the wine company has four, plus seasonal workers.

Monnich, a native of Woodland, is the grandson of a farmer who planted alicante bouschet in the Sacramento Valley in the 1920s.

Monnich and two partners launched Silkwood in St. Helena in 1978. It made a chardonnay that caught the attention of the Reagan White House, which served it there and at a few foreign summits.

The partners lost their winemaker and decided in 1984 to discontinue the brand. Monnich relaunched it in 1988 by himself and

shifted the production to Rombauer Vineyards in St. Helena.

A warehouse fire at Rombauer in 2000 wiped out Monnich's inventory. He started over yet again by joining with then-partner Rodney Beard to grow grapes in the Modesto area. The wines are known for their fuzzy-textured labels, made at Willey Printing in downtown Modesto.

The Silkwood name grew out of those early products from the Napa Valley.

"We had such a silky wine coming out of these new chardonnay barrels, and it had such great wood," Monnich said.

On the Net:

www.silkwoodwines.com
Got an idea for the Farm Beat? Contact Bee staff writer John Holland at jholland@modbee.com or (209) 578-2385.

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John,

This is an outline of how our competition works, and how Silkwood Alicante Bouchet NV wound up winning this award:

- Silkwood Wines Alicante Bouchet NV was entered into the Other Rhone Style - Varietals and Blends Category, along with 38 other wines in that class. It was judged blind in the second of four flights.
- All five judges on Panel #4 all gave it a Gold Medal, making it a "Double Gold" in our scoring system. It tied with another wine that also received a Double Gold that was judged in the third flight, making these 2 wines the top 2 in the class.
- The panel had to break the tie, and chose The Silkwood as Class Champion, and the other as Reserve Class Champion (2nd place in Rodeo culture). This meant that the Silkwood was automatically advanced to The Sweepstakes Round, with all other Class Champions.
- The Sweepstakes Round is another blind tasting of all Class Champions against each other, blind. So for example, The Silkwood went up against The Class Champion Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Champagne, Riesling, Shiraz etc. In all, there were (78) wines presented during The Sweepstakes Round last Sunday afternoon. 23 Judges were seated this year in The Sweepstakes Round.
- Final Results:
 1. Alexander Valley Cyrus 2008 - Grand Champion, Best of Show
 2. Williams Selyem Westside Road Neighbors Pinot Noir 2008 - Reserve Grand Champion, Best of Show (2nd Place)
 3. Silkwood Wines Alicante Bouchet NV, Top Red Wine
- As our rules stipulate, the Grand Champion Best of Show and Reserve Grand Champion Best of Show can be any of The Class Champions presented; but are eliminated from The Best White Wine Award, or Best Red Wine Award, Best Sparkling Award, etc. automatically
- Silkwood Wines Alicante Bouchet became the highest scoring red wine in The Sweepstakes Round after the Grand Champion and Reserve Grand Champion winners! And therefore the winner of our Top Red Wine Award this year
- That is how it transpired! Congratulations John!
- This is as exciting for us as I know it is for you John! Congratulations again sir on creating a fabulous wine! I was able to taste it yesterday with the other Rodeo Officials, and I can speak for all of them when I say The Silkwood Alicante Bouchet NV is well deserving of this award!

Robert A. Gilroy
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