

# The Bluffs Food & Wine *gazette*



## Event Report:

Amador County Wines & Valentine's Day Dance

Amador County Wines: The Big Crush Part 3

Syrah—The Grape of the Northern Rhône Valley

Blind Tasting Bottle Covers



P. FERRARI  
© 2008



Photo courtesy of bagel.com

## President's Comments

**C**REETINGS ALL! IT'S GETTING warmer, Daylight Savings had us spring forward, and Spring is officially here! Time for warmer fun. But we also know how to have fun in the winter: to wit, our Valentine's Day dinner and dance. Omaha Field Club was our venue like last year, but our wine theme this time was **Amador County**. Most people are only vaguely aware that Amador is in the Sierra Foothills, an hour east of Sacramento, CA. Zinfandels and Rhône varietals are the area's strengths, but they grow numerous grape varietals as well. During quaffing and dinner, we listened to the music of DA the DJ, **Dennis Aliano**, who had the volume just right so we could talk, but cranked it up a bit when it came time to dance. It was a very nice event if I do say so myself.

We finish our three part series on Amador County wineries by visiting **Renwood Winery, Helwig Vineyards and Winery** and **Villa Toscano Winery**. Mary and I visited all the wineries in the series when we attended the Big Crush on the first two days of October, 2016. Considering there were a possible 45 wineries to visit during the event sponsored by the **Amador County Vintners Association**, we didn't even see half of them. If you ever have the chance, stop by and check them out. It is very rustic and rural, and not over crowded like Napa or Sonoma.

**John Fischer** provides our wine education for this month by focusing our attention on **Syrah**. How appropriate, since this is one of the Rhône varietals that grow so well in Amador County. Some of the biggest wines in the world are Syrah. John speaks of French Syrah, of course, but the grape is planted worldwide, and is a mainstay of the Australian wine industry, bottled under the name Shiraz. Definitely give this a read.

Finally, the international arm of the International Wine and Food Society has a pretty neat product that you can order from the international web site. If you enjoy blind tastings, check out their **bottle covers**, or sleeves, that are reusable indefinitely. Much more elegant than brown paper bottle bags, and very affordable.

*Tom Murnan*

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**"Great wine requires a mad man to grow the vine,  
a wise man to watch over it, a lucid poet to make it,  
and a lover to drink it."**

**-Salvador Dali**

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**Cover Photo: Decorative tile by Italian artist Philippe Ferrari as discovered  
at the Domaine de la Terre Rouge gift shop, Amador County.**





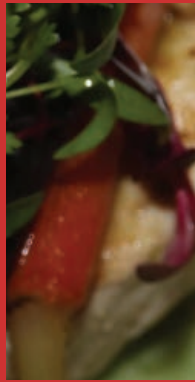
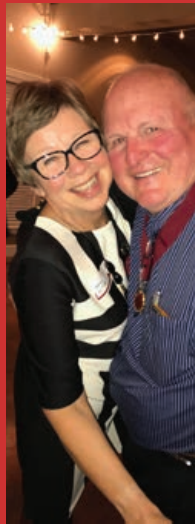
**I** ALWAYS THINK IT IS a special treat when we can drill down a bit and learn about a wine growing area that we are unfamiliar with. Amador County wines fits that description well. Most people, including me, are only vaguely familiar with anything coming from the Sierra Foothills, which includes but is not restricted to Amador County wines. I know I fell in love with the area when Mary and I went to the **Amador Vintners Harvest Wine Festival**, otherwise known as **The Big Crush**, October 1st and 2nd last year. I thought it would be fun and educational to try the wines I was talking about in my three part series on Amador County in the Gazette. **Chef Fortino Gallardo** was up for the task of pairing food with wine, and he and his crew did a great job. Twenty eight people attended, including four guests: Gary and Jane Hagebush and Shelli and John Klemke. Todd Lemke brought his mother Gwen since wife Sandy was indisposed.

We had **DA the DJ** playing soft music when quaffing began at 5:30 pm. We started with pink "Champagne". Really, it shouldn't be called Champagne because it doesn't come from that region. The French, who zealously guard this name (especially since it is the house of Roederer, a French Champagne grand Marque that has an outpost above Sonoma, in the wilds of North America) call it sparkling wine. The Non Vintage **Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut Rosé** was just the thing to get us going. We also got to try a **2014 Joel Gott California Zinfandel**. These were the only non-Amador County wine served during the dinner. We also quaffed with a **2014 Sobon Estate Amador County Red Blend**. The staff passed around bite sized **Beef Wellington** and **Vegetable Egg Rolls**. Just the right size, they were à la bouche. I could have filled up on the Wellington alone.

Once at table, your host explained how Amador County had a history of both the 1849 gold rush and wine intertwined. Many Italians, among other immigrants, planted vineyards, and by the turn of the century there were over 100 wineries in the area. But when **Prohibition** hit in 1920, and the government began controlling the gold supply, both mines and wineries closed down. It took until the 1970's before the wine industry began to return. Zinfandel and Rhone varietals flourish in the dry foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Two wines we would try, **Domaine de la Terre Rouge** and **Easton** are divisions in the same company. There is much French influence in their wines. Eason is named after founder Bill Easton. **Terra d'Oro** started out as **Montevina**, but added a high end line named Terra d'Oro after the gold fields.

Our **First Course** was **Chicken Sate with a Roasted Garlic Aioli**. Three strips of chicken were grilled and ran through lengthwise on a bamboo skewer. It sat in a tumbler with the aioli. If you are like me, you usually think of peanut sauce with sate, but the garlic aioli





was quite harmonious with the **2014 Domaine de la Terre Rouge Viognier Fiddletown**. The Viognier was a low acid, smooth wine with minerality and a soupçon of honey. Even though soft, it still had stuffing of apricot, peach and almond flavors, enough to match the mild garlic flavors.

The **Second Course** was **Grilled Mahi Mahi with Herbed Micro Green Salad and Cilantro Butter Cream Sauce**. A square of fish was sitting on a pool of Cilantro Butter and Cilantro Cream Sauce. Purple and orange baby carrots were prepared al dente and provided color and flavor, and these were accompanied by micro greens. The dense flesh of the Mahi Mahi, cooked just a tad dry, was moistened by the slightly sweet sauce. A bit of sweet, red colored, chili sauce provided a bit of spice. The cilantro provided a lively and exotic touch. The **Easton Monarch Mine Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc 2013** was a good match to this dish. Not grassy, as so many SB's are, this lightly oaked wine had flavors of honeydew melon and Meyer lemon. The wine was not acid forward as so many SB's from New Zealand or California are, but more of a background presence. It paired well with the dish.

We cleansed our palates with the **Third Course**, a **Peach Sorbet**. Nicely presented on a porcelain Chinese style spoon, a small scoop of sorbet was accented by a single raspberry and a mint leaf.

For our **Fourth Course** we were treated to **Pork Belly and Corn Bread, Huckleberry Marmalade with a Sweet Corn Relish and Bacon Powder**. Beautifully presented, a wide swatch of huckleberry was seemingly painted with a two inch brush across the plate. The corn bread sat atop this, then the pork on the bread. A spoonful of corn relish sat to the side as well as a vegetable garnish of orange and purple baby carrots. A bit of cheese and bacon powder were sprinkled over all. The corn bread was crispy and a touch sweet. The pork was smoky and rich, like a thick piece of bacon. It was quite salty. The corn, both the bread and relish, were more neutral and toned the saltiness and smokiness down.

This dish was going to need stronger wines to stand up to the assertive flavors. We had a pair of reds this time. The **2010 Andis Mouvedre Amador County I** found a bit on the soft side, despite the 22% Syrah in the blend. It had nice berry fruit and a touch of leather and some smokiness to match the pork's smokiness. Contributing to my soft impression was velvety tannins and light acidity. The other red was a **2012 Domaine de la Terre Rouge Syrah Cotes de l'Ouest**. This wine had a sharper acidity and was bigger and more forceful than the Mouvedre. It was better able to cut through the richness and smokiness of the pork. Deep blackberry and black plum flavors, it had ripe tannins. I thought the Syrah won on this pairing. Interestingly, it contains 4% Viognier, a white wine, and is added for bouquet. They do the same thing at Côte Rôtie, one of the premier terroirs for Syrah in France.



The **Fifth Course** found us with **London Broil Medallions with Grilled Polenta and Spicy Black Berry BBQ Sauce**. On a long, rectangular white plate, three medallions of beef lay on a bed of sauce, two triangles of polenta occupied the center, and the same orange and purple carrots that we saw on two other courses occupied the far corner. Just a quibble, but after seeing the same carrot medley two times before, I would expect that another arrangement would be picked, tasty as it was. The meat was a bit chewy, but very beefy in flavor. The spicy barbeque sauce added liveliness as it definitely had a kick to it.

The sauce dictated a wine that would not wimp out, and Zinfandel was just the thing. Zin is probably the top wine Amador County produces. The **2013 Michael David Gluttony Old Vine Amador County Zinfandel** and the **2010 Terra d'Oro Deaver Old Vine Zinfandel Amador County** wines were just what the sommelier ordered. Michael David's facility is in Lodi, but the fruit was sourced in our themed Amador County. The winery does a takeoff on the seven deadly sins (Lust, Gluttony, Rage, 7 Deadly Zins) and has interesting bottle labels. The **Gluttony** is in a big, fat, heavy bottle, as befits a glutton. The wine is raised in a combination of new and old American oak. I found it to be jammy, hedonistic, big, fat, lazy and indolent. I noticed baking spices, and a bit of tar. It was very berry like. The alcohol level gives you another clue to how massive the wine will be. Ours came in at 15.5%. The **Deaver** hails from a 132 year old vineyard planted in 1881. It sports deep red fruits, and is well balanced, and supple, with fine ripe tannins. It's alcohol level was 14.5%.

During a break, your President presented **Dave and Tabitha Thrasher** with their framed IWFS membership certificates from international. Welcome aboard Thrashers!

We finished with the **6th Course**. A **California Orange Pannacotta** was served. It was presented in a three ounce wine glass (the same as our dessert wine glass). A nice custard sat atop a caramelized sugar sauce and was garnished with a red maraschino cherry with a twist of candied orange peel. The dessert was, in this case, sweeter than the wine. Usually you want the wine to be sweeter than the dessert. This fact lessened the effectiveness of the wine. Our wine was the **2013 Domaine de la Terre Rouge Muscat à Petit Grains**. It was inspired by Muscat Beaumes-de-Venise in France's Rhône Valley appellation, where the fermentation is stopped by the addition of high alcohol lest the yeast ferment the wine to dryness. Terre Rouge has a distillery make a Muscat brandy for them which they used to stop fermentation and keep the wine sweet. As a result, it has 16% alcohol and 10% residual sugar. It had apricot and honey flavors, with a flowery Muscat / honey nose. But you can detect the steely core of alcoholic brandy in the center, once on the palate. Unfortunately, I didn't have the chance to try the dessert to see how sweet it was.

A Sauternes would have been better, but that would not fit our Amador theme.

The rest of the evening was spent dancing to the tunes of **DA the DJ**, aka Dennis Aliano, who cranked the volume up a bit more for the dance. A few bottles of 2014 Tesslae **Grenache, Syrah, Mouvèdre** were available to keep the wine flowing.

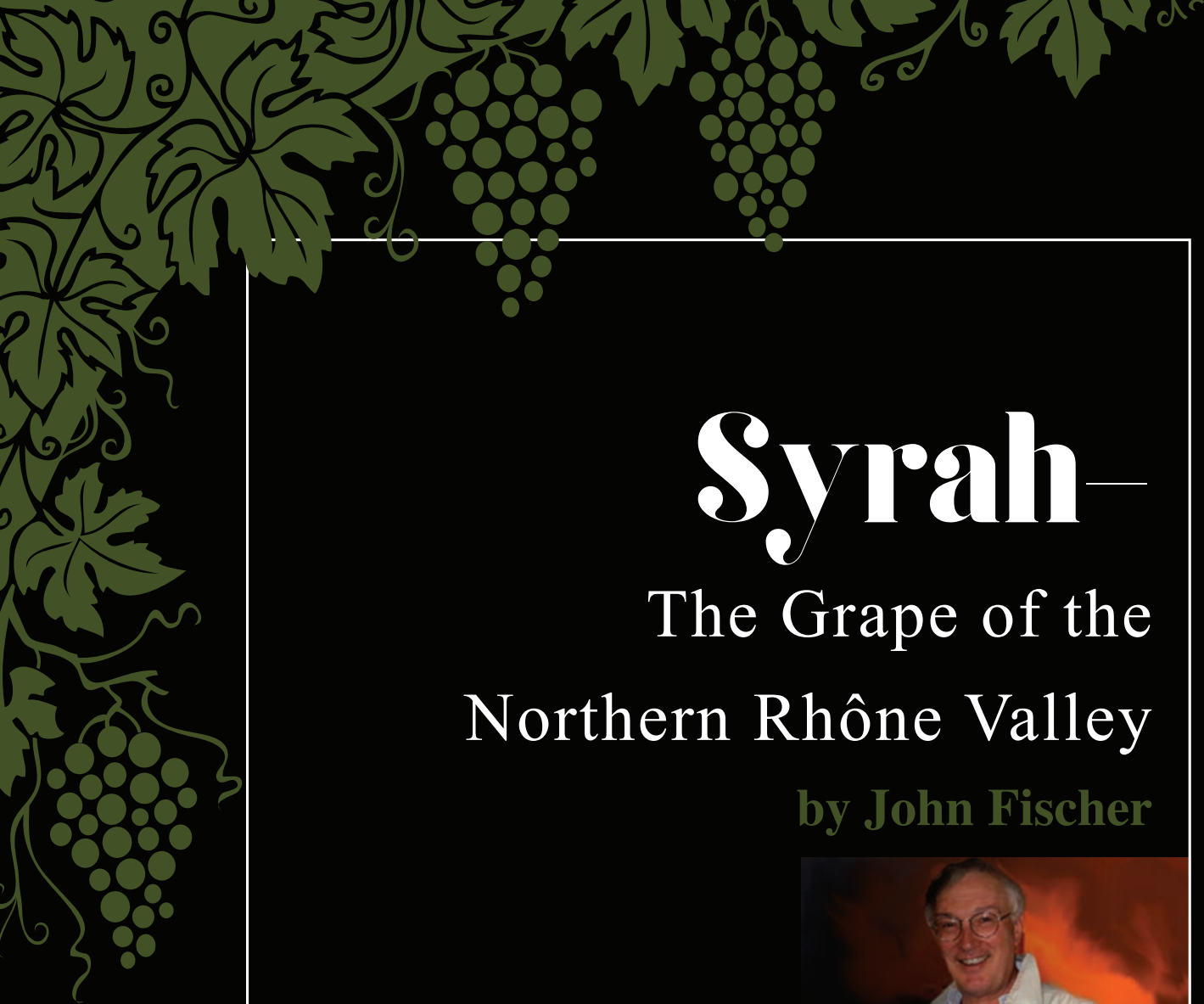
Many thanks to **Caitlin Jones Mell**, Event Coordinator (who got married since we were here last February) who organized everything, to **Chef Fortino Gallardo** for a great dining experience, **Connor McNeely** the Banquet Captain, **Phil Aines** our bar tender, and **Mary Murnan** who helped with the decorating.











# Syrah—

The Grape of the  
Northern Rhône Valley

by John Fischer



**T**HERE ARE MANY LEGENDS surrounding the origin of Syrah; however, the prevailing belief is that it came from France as the offspring of two obscure grapes called *Dureza* and *Mondeuse Blanche*. Syrah is often confused with Petite Syrah, which is a totally different varietal called *Durif*. In recent times, the plantings of this grape have increased in numbers both in the United States and abroad.

Hermitage, a wine from the Northern Rhône Valley, is the locality that made Syrah famous. These were robust wines of excellent quality, and it is surprising that they were used for centuries as part of the blend to fortify Bordeaux wines, especially in lighter vintages, instead of a wine in its own right.

Today, Syrah is the main grape of the Northern Rhône used in the production of such notable wines as Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie, and Cornas. Nevertheless, even from this relatively small region there are distinctive stylistic differences: Côte-Rôtie is fleshy, rich, and fruity, and more perfumed, whereas Hermitage is tannic, firmer,

tighter, and more minerally. Both are extremely concentrated and complex.

Cornas is an inky-black colored wine, loaded with aggressive tannins that take a decade or more of cellaring to settle down. In their youth they are essentially undrinkable. This is a gargantuan wine—the most massive and thickest wine known to man. At maturity Cornas is extremely complex and concentrated and in good vintages can represent excellent values.

There are several estates of the Northern Rhône of lesser quality. Don't be hoodwinked by the noble sounding estate of Crozes Hermitage. The majority of their wines are undistinguished, light bodied, and of mediocre quality.

In the Southern Rhône, it is used as a blending wine for such estates as Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas where the main grape is Grenache. France has the largest number of plantings of this varietal.

In 1831, the grape (here called Shiraz) was introduced to Australia via European cuttings by a Scotsman named James Busby, the Father of Australian viticulture. Today it is Australia's most popular red grape. The most famous and finest Shiraz produced in this country is a big, rich, full-bodied, and long-lived wine called Penfolds

“Grange.” Although it is predominantly made from Shiraz, it is occasionally blended with small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon.

There is a plethora of good sound Shiraz from Australia that can be purchased at very affordable prices. The typical Australian style is more forward, less sophisticated, and fruitier than that found in the Rhône Valley, but still delivers a full, rich mouthful of complex and exotic flavors. Many of these wines are very drinkable on release, but for early-drinking wines, longevity is invariably short.

In the U.S., the varietal can legally be called either Syrah or Shiraz. Syrah is a newcomer to this country being first planted in the 1970's. The majority is grown in California, but increasing amounts are being planted in the state of Washington. The style of the wine varies depending on the soil, viticultural practices, and climate.

Characteristically, Syrah produces a deep colored, moderate to full-bodied wine, with solid levels of

acidity and tannins. Look for flavors of blackberries, raspberries, cassis, black cherry, hickory smoke, game, black pepper, spices, nuts, tobacco, chocolate, espresso, leather, truffle, and minerals. Of these savors, blackberries and black pepper are most dominant.

This wine can be paired to any full-bodied dish that matches the style of the wine. There are two main categories. The higher

quality Northern Rhône wines are a little more sophisticated and should be matched to similar styled foods: grilled steaks, crown rib roast of beef, beef Wellington, roast of duck, and game casseroles. Less sophisticated dishes go best with the fruity, rich, and easy-drinking Australian model. Try these wines with such dishes as grilled sausages, meat loaf, meat stews, barbecued meats, and game birds. Try to incorporate some of the flavors in the wine to those in the dish. For example, black pepper is a very common flavor found in Syrah wines and those that have this flavor would be natural partners with pepper steak.

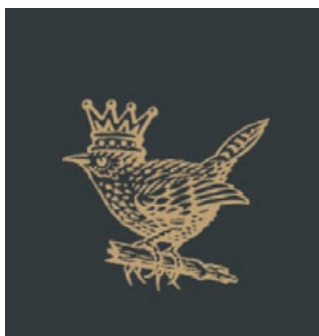
**"Look for flavors of blackberries, raspberries, cassis, black cherry, hickory smoke, game, black pepper, spices, nuts, tobacco, chocolate, espresso, leather, truffle, and minerals."**

**—John Fischer**

# AMADOR COUNTY WINES: THE BIG CRUSH PART III

by Tom Murnan





**T**HERE ARE A LOT of interesting wineries in Amador County, and at Mary an my attendance of the **Big Crush Harvest Festival** on October 1st and 2nd of 2016, we only managed to stop at 11 of the 45 different participating wineries. I was very impressed with the overall quality of the wines. The area, which reminds me of far western Nebraska only hillier, produces great Zinfandel and Rhône Varietals. We had a great deal of fun attending the Big Crush and would highly recommend it if you ever have a chance. It is laid back and relaxing experience, and you can go at your own pace.

**Renwood Winery** was established in 1993 and is sold in all 50 states, one of the few Amador County wineries to have such wine distribution. The winery is owned by billionaire oilman, Alejandro Pedro Bulgheroni. Renwood specializes in Zinfandel and has some of the oldest vineyards in the county, some over one hundred years old. Their logo is a crowned wren. The winery tells this story. "When the world was young, the birds held a contest to select their king. The one to fly highest would wear the crown. They climbed

until only the mighty eagle remained, except for the clever wren hidden in his plumage. When the eagle tired, the wren took flight, and upon his return was proclaimed king. To this day, the birds gather amongst the old vines to celebrate in the knowledge that ingenuity triumphs over strength."

Renwood has recently remodeled their facility and now has a stunning, state of the art winery, aging chai and tasting room that includes a gourmet deli and olive oil. Their wine portfolio includes basic and high end named vineyard Zinfandels. This includes the 91 year old **D'Agostini** vineyard. Blended wines include the **Kirkland Vineyards Zinfandel** which includes 5% Syrah; the **Zanini Vineyard Zinfandel** from the Fiddletown AVA, which includes 5% Petit Syrah; the **Jack Rabbit Flat Zinfandel**, made from 103 year old vines and which is blended with 25% Petite Sirah; the **Special Reserve Grandpère Zinfandel**, a mix of 75% Zinfandel, 20% Petite Sirah, and 5% Barbera; and top of the line **Grand Wren Zinfandel**, which consists of 90% Zinfandel, 5% Petite Sirah and

5% Barbera. The \$99.00 2013 Grand Wren was awarded 95 points by Connoisseurs' Guide. It comes from the Akulian (75 years old) and Jack Rabbit (102 years old) vineyards. Only 115 cases of the 2013 Grand Wren were bottled.

Other wines include the grape varieties bottled include Tempranillo, Barbera, and Syrah. A **Renwood Rosé** as well as a **Sparkling Rosé** are both made from 100% Zinfandel grapes. A **2006 Vintage Port** is available from classic Portuguese varietals grown at the estate: Alvarahao, Bastardo, Souzao, Tinta Cao, Tinta Roriz (Tempranillo) and Touriga.

All in all, Renwood is an impressive winery making top tier wines. If you see them on the shelves locally, they definitely are worth a try.



*Pictures from Helwig Vineyards and Winery*

**Helwig Vineyards and Winery** Dave Helwig was born and raised in the Midwest. After visiting a winery for the first time in 1975, he began thinking of starting his own winery. In 2006 he purchased his first winery in the Shenandoah Valley. Once he left the corporate world, he had the time to develop Helwig Winery. The winery boasts some of the most socially oriented events of any of the wineries we visited. It is located on the crest of a hill, with the tasting room at the top. Outside is a picnic area with its stunning view of the Sierra foothills and the Coastal Mountains. Directly below is the winemaking facilities and aging room. A door from the aging chai goes right out to the ground level of a terraced concert amphitheater. During the summer, there is a live concert every Friday evening, with BBQ catered in and, of course, all the wine you care to drink. They specialize in wedding ceremonies and parties.

Helwig has 124 acres of vineyards scattered over several different areas. There are four vineyards in Amador County, El Dorado County and Solano County. They also buy fruit from other sources in Amador County, including Cooper Vineyards and Fox Creek Vineyard. Grape varieties include Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Primitivo, Mourvedre, Tempranillo, Barbera, Marsanne, Rousanne, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Malbec, Sirah and Grenache.

Dave is assisted by his wife Nancy and son Scott Helwig, who is the winemaker. Of all the wineries we visited, this was the best set up for relaxing, spending some time, enjoying either the scenery or the music, and, of course, some pretty good wine.



*Pictures from Villa Toscano Winery*

**Villa Toscano Winery** was created when Erika and Jerry Wright decided to bring the warmth and lifestyle of Tuscany to the Shenandoah Valley. Being European herself, Erika had always been impressed with this beautiful area of Italy. One would think he/she had landed in Italy with the stucco buildings with red tile roofs. The site contains a nice bistro, perfect for having a gourmet lunch while on the wine route. You can purchase pizza and sandwiches where the dough and bread are made onsite. They also have a large store selling Italian goods and food. There is a nice area outside, covered by a tent, where you can sit and eat your meal.

Wines are not restricted to just Italian varietals. Zinfandel of course is sold, but also Chardonnay, a rosé made from Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, Barbera and a white Barbera, Pinot Grigio, Tempranillo and Sangiovese. The Villa also makes a Port styled wine.



*Sources: [renwood.com](http://renwood.com);  
[helwigwinery.com](http://helwigwinery.com);  
[villatoscano.com](http://villatoscano.com)*

# *B*lind Tasting Bottle Covers

Many IWFS members are unaware that the Society has a neat product available for purchase. The Blind Tasting Bottle Covers are available in a kit that includes a carrying case and 10 different numbered bags. The kit bag as well as the individual bags have a velcro strip at the top to secure the bag tightly. So much tidier and classier than brown paper bags scotch taped at the top. Easy to use, they have the advantage of being usable for multiple blind tastings.

So, if you are one of those wine afficianatos with a sadistic streak, and love to make your guests think about what wine may be lurking within that bottle, this is just the thing. "The IWFS branded kit consists of 10 individually numbered woven cloth bottle covers (suitable for wine, not Champagne) and presented in a handy carry bag. Give that professional touch to your own wine tasting events or private parties."

To purchase, log into [www.iwfs.org](http://www.iwfs.org). Once in, click on Americas, then Resources, then Purchase Regalia. Scroll down and find the bottle sleeves. Purchase them from the web site for \$35.00.







## Upcoming Council Bluffs Branch Events

Mark Your Calendars!



**April 23, 2017**

V. Mertz

Theme: All Champagne Dinner

Producers: Patti & Steve Hipple



**May 21, 2017**

Happy Hollow Club, Chef Jason Hughes

Theme: A Day at the Races

Producers: Jill Goldstein & Jenny Ayoub



**June 3, 2017**

Place: The residence of Liz & Nate Farmer

Theme: Barbeque catered by a

State Champion BBQer

Producer: Farmers, Hipple &

Lowell Wilhite

### Hosting an event?

Let us know when, where and a little bit  
about what's going on!

We would love to include YOUR event on the calendar!

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*The mission of the Council Bluffs Branch of the International Wine and Food Society is to develop a profound understanding and appreciation of both wine and the culinary arts and to enjoy this experience in the camaraderie of friends. Our task is to educate our membership about wine and to develop the skill of matching wine with food. We strive to drink high quality wines and to experience an eclectic array of foods prepared by the area's top chefs.*

*The International Wine & Food Society of London, England  
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**Keep In Touch!**

**Please notify Club Membership Chairman Diane Forristall at Diane@Forristall.us to let her know if you are interested in hosting an IWFS event.**

**To access past Gazettes and other features about our Branch, go to the international website following this link: [www.iwfs.org/americas/council-bluffs](http://www.iwfs.org/americas/council-bluffs)**

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