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Tim Meinken and Anne Giere of Sapphire Hill
Leslie Sbrocco

Sapphire Hill - A gem in the making

Monday, August 31, 1998

By [Leslie Sbrocco](#)
WineToday.com

If Anne Giere and Tim Meinken have anything to do with it, over-oaked and overblown chardonnay would become passé. Their inaugural release of [Sapphire Hill](#) is focused on something many chardonnays have forgotten — fruit.



“We wanted to make our wine in a style we liked. One that would highlight the beautiful fruit of the Russian River, and one that would go better with food than heavier chardonnays,” said co-owner Meinken.

Nestled between the famous chardonnay vineyards of Dutton Ranch, [Sonoma-Cutrer](#) and Saralee Kunde’s vineyard, the grapes that go into Sapphire Hill come from hallowed land. At first, the husband-and-wife team of Meinken and Giere sold all their fruit to producers such as [Murphy-Goode](#), [Kendall-Jackson](#), [La Crema](#) and

Where to buy
Sapphire Hill
Chardonnay

Sapphire Hill Vineyards
www.SapphireHill.com
(707) 431-1888

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Sonoma-Cutrer. They still sell the majority of the grapes, but decided in 1996 to make their own wine.

“Our vision was to plant the grapes first and then think about becoming winemakers with our own fruit,” said Meinken. Their vision has become reality with the recent release of the [1997 Sapphire Hill Chardonnay](#).

Consulting winemaker Michael Scholz crafts the wine as Meinken put it, “in a unique 50/50 way.” That means one half of the wine gets the full treatment most high-end chardonnays are used to: whole-cluster pressing, barrel and malolactic fermentation, and barrel-aging in a combination of new French and American oak.

The difference between Sapphire Hill and other chardonnays, however, is in the remaining half. Scholz ferments it in stainless steel tanks, but it doesn't undergo malolactic fermentation or see oak. When the two halves are blended together, the 50 percent that receives the full treatment gives the wine richness and depth. The half from the tanks emphasizes the bold, tropical fruit flavors associated with Russian River Valley chardonnay.

“When we first tasted this wine we said, ‘wow, we’ve got a winner,’” an enthusiastic Bill Traverso, co-owner and wine buyer of Traverso’s Market in Santa Rosa, CA., said. “The customers love it because it doesn’t overpower food. It’s fresh, well-balanced and the tropical fruit flavors are so pretty...we’re just all enamored with it.”

The story behind Sapphire Hill is the stuff of wine lovers' dreams. A young couple meets in Chicago and discovers their love of wine while living in Denver. When transferred to the San Francisco Bay Area, they buy vineyard land in Sonoma County and eventually make their own wine. The inaugural release garners rave reviews and they become an overnight success.

The good-natured Giere laughs at the romantic concept. “From the time Tim and I moved to San Francisco in 1988 until our first wine...it’s been ten years. We’re certainly not an overnight success.” In fact, the couple is a

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study in the amount of hard work and dedication it takes to become small wine producers.

They, along with partners John Hall and Denice Engstrom, bought the historic property in the heart of the Russian River Valley in 1989. They planted the first 20 acres of chardonnay (of the total 33 comprising the property) the same year. "We knew chardonnay would grow well, but it was an economic decision. Chard was selling," Giere said.

Meinken, a management consultant for a large international firm, continued to live in Marin and work in San Francisco. He would commute one day a week to Sonoma to take viticulture courses at a junior college. Giere lived in Healdsburg for several years with her children while their home was being built. As of this July Meinken was able to leave consulting and be a full-time winegrower and small producer. "You have to be an all-around business person ... a designer, artist, marketer and salesman. It's more than just planting grapes," he said.

Sapphire Hill vineyards is named after the color of the night's sky from the couple's wrap-around porch and the knoll on which the estate is located. The sweeping views from the property encompass lower-lying vineyards planted to mainly chardonnay and pinot noir. On the hill's plateau where the couple built their home stands a lone chimney — a testament to the property's rich history.

Originally, the land belonged to General Mariano Vallejo, who was the last Mexican governor of California before the state's independence. In the early 1840s, Vallejo granted a portion of his vast holdings to his son-in-law, Captain Cooper. Cooper sold 120 acres, which included the portion now dubbed Sapphire Hill, to Lucy Sullivan and her husband Levi Grove in 1869. The Grove's original home burned down in 1916 but the chimney, crafted out of rocks from the nearby Russian River, remains.

Though the property is steeped in history, Giere and Meinken are firmly ensconced in the Internet age. The majority of their 1,350

case production of chardonnay is sold through the online wine commerce site, [Virtual Vineyards](#). “We’re big Internet fans,” said Giere. “It’s really great for consumers because they have access to limited-production wines that they’d never be able to get otherwise.”

Peter Granoff, owner and self-proclaimed “cork dork” of Virtual Vineyards, offers wineries the chance for distribution in more than 40 states. “Small producers have a painless decision to make with us. They get access to states without having to have a distributor,” Granoff said. “It’s really a win/win for everybody.” Meinken concurred: “We’ve taken non-traditional routes to distribution because with our limited-production, it’s tough to get out there. We think the electronic age is amazing.”

Currently, the winery makes only chardonnay, but the 1998 vintage will include small lots of pinot noir and syrah. Meinken and Giere have planted three rare Dijon clones of pinot noir, and in preparation for the impending blow of phylloxera, are inter-planting syrah vines when they replant chardonnay vines. Production should hit 3,000 cases in 1998 and the couple hopes to be making 10,000-15,000 cases within five years. “It’s exciting and being small we do everything, but we love it...what a life,” Meinken said.



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