

New winery will sparkle

There is a stereotype about "the new kid on the block," that he or she will for a while be pushed around a bit by the established residents.

It will not be that way in the wine world of Sonoma, however, where a new "kid" was introduced to the world recently at a gala weekend bash at the Gloria Ferrer winery. The event signaled the arrival of a muscular, fully developed winery operation that will play no subsidiary role in the rapidly expanding world of California sparkling wine producers affiliated with European parentage.

In this case, the parentage is Freixinet, Spanish wine producer who today is the largest producer of sparkling wine in the world. The story is the 1986 production in total will be some 66,000,000 bottles!

Freixinet is known nationally for its black-bottled Cordon Negro and frosted-bottle Carta Nevada (both selling locally for about \$6 most of the time). The producer's United States efforts with the new winery began back in 1982. By 1984 it had released its first effort, a brut, called Emerald Cuvee and did so under its present American name of Gloria Ferrer (named for the wife of the founder of the multinational complex, Jose Ferrer).

THE EARLY release was made in rented facilities at Graton. But from now on Gloria Ferrer sparkling wines will all be made in the new facility in Sonoma Valley. Its second release, unveiled during the eventful weekend, is primarily a pinot-noir-based wine. Early 1987 will see yet a third, a blend of pinot noir and chardonnay.

The winery, known officially as Gloria Ferrer Champagne Caves, is south of the city of Sonoma on Highway 121. It is the first major winery tourists can visit readily as they drive from San Francisco into wine country. It is an \$11-million effort, most attractive, whose heart is in its

two enormous caves used for storing wines.

President is 28-year-old Pedro Ferrer (there's nepotism in the wine industry, too) who oversees the whole operation for the Barcelona-based parent company. Eileen Crane, well trained at UC Davis and Domaine Chandon, is the winemaker.

Two hundred and fifty acres of chardonnay and pinot noir will eventually surround the winery, whose projected production is to be in the 80,000-100,000-case range. Only a quarter of that is currently planted. Only estate-grown grapes will be used to produce brut and blanc de noir.

PRICED AT about \$11 a bottle, the wines are targeted into a great void in the California sparkling wine market. There is today little or no competition at that level, no coincidence for master marketer Jose Ferrer. He not only knows how to make wine, he also knows how to sell it.

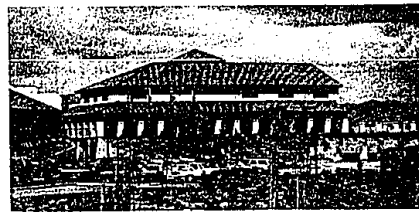
Enough numbers and pedigrees, Watson. What about the wine?

Delightful! This was the near-universal consensus of some 20 wine writers gathered, by invitation, from across the country (e.g. Atlanta, New York, New Orleans, Denver). A few reported hints of citrus, others said the fruit predominated. Whichever, this is not a yeasty, austere wine. Winemaker Crane wants fruit, strong hints of it, and has gotten it in this cuvee.

The wine should be available locally now, at better wine outlets. It also will be sold in some of our finer restaurants at an affordable price. I suspect it will go well with the public. It is fairly priced, it is most attractively packaged and, most important, it tastes good.

On the same day, only a couple of hours earlier, another imposing winery officially opened, over in Napa,

wine
**Richard
Watson**



Gloria Ferrer winery, whose parent company is Freixinet, is a strong new arrival on the California wine scene.

to the press and a host of visitors from the area. It is called Chimney Rock, brainchild of "Huck" Wilson, former hotel and restaurant owner and beverage producer.

To secure a winery in the Stags Leap area, he bought Chimney Rock Golf Course on the Silverado Trail and the mountain behind it, moving nine holes of the course to plant his vineyards with 75 acres of sauvignon blanc, cabernet and chardonnay. When the winery is complete, Wilson plans to confine production to 20,000 cases. This seems to be, as its promotional literature suggests, "the

newest jewel in the Stags Leap crown."

INITIAL RELEASES, a chardonnay and a funne blanc, from the 1985 vintage, are both superb, elegant and beautifully varietal. A 1984 cabernet will be released in a year. Phillip Togni is the winemaker, and the entire operation seems to be loaded with thought and good taste. This winery will also be a winner.

If I read the machinations correctly, look for this wine soon at any of the Merchant of Vines stores — which I suspect will have near-exclusive rights for a while. Worth finding.

**Cathie
Breidenbach**

'A Touch of Spring' Where's the sizzle?

Performances of "A Touch of Spring" by Samuel Taylor continue at 8:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays through Oct. 23 at Will-O-Way Repertory Theatre in Birmingham. For ticket information call the box office at 644-4418.

Despite a distinctly pretty leading lady (Sally Dubats) and a set with some panache, the Will-O-Way production of "A Touch of Spring," directed by Celia Merrill Turner, lacks sizzle in the romance department.

A romance without sexual sizzle is like flat champagne, no matter where it's served.

The play by Samuel Taylor is a frivolous little love story made palatable by the decadent charm of an Italian P.T. Barnum named Baldassare Pantalone (et, that name roll off your tongue with all eight syllables to get the flavor of the man's Italian brand of chutzpah).

This story takes place in romantic Rome in the springtime when a supposedly dynamic American businessman (Robert Dunn) comes to find the body of his father who died in a car accident.

He finds instead a lovely English girl whose mother died in the same accident. What looks like a coincidence turns out to have been a hot "same time next year" kind of af-

fair between her mother and his father. Under the influence of the outrageous Italian huckster named above played with sleazy charm by C.J. Nodus, the American businessman and the English girl fall in love.

ROBERT DUNN lacks the impetuous mastery his character demands both in love and in business and he's no match for his wife (Francine Hachem) who's capable, pushy and not particularly likeable. Why he opts to get away from her is obvious. Why he stays with her at all is not.

With great good humor, the play plays the American way of getting things done against the relaxed Italian lifestyle where lunch takes three hours and love is a time — honored excuse for nearly anything. The Italians may have something there, even if argue with implications in the play.

"A Touch of Spring" seems designed to showcase heartrob leads who radiate romantic energy. As diligently as the leads try in the Will-O-Way production, the chemistry between them just doesn't work.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield has always loved theater. A former high-school English teacher, she works in public relations, advertising and as a freelance writer.

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