

California's Pepi Winery leads revolution

California winemakers have what it takes to make great wine. They are the best educated winemakers in the world. They have the best technology, and they have the money to purchase the high-tech equipment required.

At present, increased quality of California wine is a result of improved vineyard techniques (viticulture) rather than winemaking skills (viniculture). As many California producers contend, "Wine is made in the vineyard."

One of the leaders in this viticultural revolution is Robert Pepi Winery in Napa Valley. Pepi is a specialist in sauvignon blanc production. He attributes the success of his wine to what he has learned in the vineyard.

"Herbaceous, grassy sauvignon blanc is a result of uncontrolled vegetative vigor," Pepi explains. "Excessive vine growth prevents direct sun exposure on the fruit and reduces the flow through the vine that helps balance the fruit."

SAUVIGNON BLANC grapes that are shaded from the sun do not ripen completely, giving a vegetable rather than fruit character to the wine.

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To improve sun exposure and air flow, Pepi has developed a new vine-trellising system that he calls the "Two-Heart Canopy." The canopy is a term for the upper vine and leaves that shade the fruit from the sun.

Pepi has divided the canopy by separating the trunk of the vine into two major branches that are trained upward in a wishbone design, as if each vine is split in two. This method opens the canopy and exposes the fruit to direct sunlight.

"The wide trellis is the single most important factor to us viticulturally," Pepi says. "It's not only giving us better quality fruit, but it is enabling us to directly style the wine in the vineyard."

"Allowing more filtered sunlight



focus on wine
Eleanor and Ray Heald

to have direct contact with the fruit affects the development of the floral, perfumed, citrusy aroma and flavor elements of sauvignon blanc with the elimination of one-dimensional herbaceousness so common in the variety."

THE WIDE TRELLIS system can be described as a stake with a four-foot cross arm at the top. Consider the head of the vine as a "Y" that is split in two, then every vine has two heads and four canes.

"We're trying to achieve as much complexity in aroma and flavor as possible without any markedly assertive character dominating," Pepi explains. "Essentially, we're striving for a style that showcases the best qualities of a white Bordeaux and, therefore, blend with just under 20 percent semillon, an amount that

adds complexity, viscosity and body without being obvious or dominating. "We don't want a lot of oak in our sauvignon blanc. In addition to flavors developed through our training and trellising system, we age sauvignon blanc in large, five-year-old oak casks. This helps us achieve oak subtlety as well as providing a place for the flavors to marry."

Although Pepi considers optimum consumption time three to five years after harvest, he qualifies this by saying, "A lot depends on personal preferences for the way sauvignon blanc changes in the bottle."

Pepi recommends grilled swordfish, sole, and white meat fish to accompany the Pepi style of sauvignon blanc. He also likes it with spicy Cajun dishes because of the wine's clean, refreshing acidity.

WINE SELECTIONS OF THE WEEK

1989 Robert Pepi "Two-Heart Canopy" Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$13) features aromas and flavors of fresh pineapple and honeydew melon with just a touch of varietal grassiness to let you know it's sauvignon blanc. The wine's crisp, clean lines make it a perfect accompaniment for grilled tuna or swordfish garnished with a fresh pepper and tomato salsa.

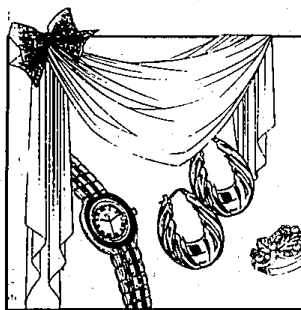
1986 Robert Pepi "Vine Hill Ranch" Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$25) Cassis and blackberry aromas are accompanied by a note of cedar and eucalyptus. It boasts good fruit flavors, medium-full body, excellent structure and a touch of mint. Vine Hill Ranch is adjacent to the famous Martha's Vineyard on the Rutherford Bench in Napa Valley.

WINE BULLETIN BOARD

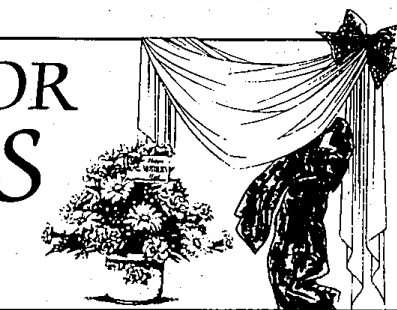
• Cloverleaf Market hosts another of its popular Burgundy dinners Monday, May 13, at the Golden Mushroom restaurant in Southfield. Cost of \$95 includes a reception with hors d'oeuvres, beginning at 5 p.m. A six-course dinner showcasing the classic Burgundy wines of Domaine Moillat begins at 6 p.m. For reservations phone Jim Luty, 357-0400.

• Sample the wines of Franciscan Vineyards and dine with the winemaker at the Ritz-Carlton, Dearborn, on Thursday, May 16. A wine and hors d'oeuvres reception begins at 6:30 p.m. and is followed by a gourmet dinner prepared by Executive Chef Maxwell Weeks. Cost is \$60. Reservations, 441-2000.

• Wines of the Loire Valley may be sampled 7-9 p.m. Wednesday, May 22, at Royal Oak's Les Autiers restaurant. Cost of \$25, or \$30 at the door, covers the tasting and a buffet of foods complementing the wines. Reservations, 544-2887.



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