

## Winnett Vineyards: A Winning Combination



*A winning combination: grapes, sunshine, smiles and wine at the Winnett Vineyards on Sunday afternoon.*

Some folks celebrated the transition to the new millennium like they would the coming of any old new year. Others loaded up on canned beans and rice, and sleeked off to hide in the desert, in preparation for a worldwide ‘Y2K’ meltdown. Sharon and David Winnett, former Illinois teachers, “wanted to plant grapes in the new millennium.” So they did, marking their entrance into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by buying enough land to start an organic vineyard on the outskirts of Willow Creek. Last Sunday, over ten years later, the fruits of their vision and labor were all too evident to any of the sixty people attending their second annual wine tasting event.

The concept behind the event was simple and elegant. Six aperitifs were served by different chefs at different tables, each accompanied by one or two select Winnett wines. Babe’s Pizza & Pasta, a Eureka family business with Italian and Portuguese roots, decided to offer a 2006 Merlot to accompany their excellent mushroom and bacon pizza. “We wanted to try a wine that isn’t on our normal menu”, explained chef Gina Costa. Eureka resident Anthony Carnemolla, who dismantles nuclear power plants for a living and is getting into wine-tasting on the side, thought her choice constituted “an excellent representative of a Merlot.” Jay Smith and Lynn Martinez of Willow Creek held a similar opinion, voting it their favorite wine of the whole event.

Brett Shuler, who owns an organic catering business, chose the Willow Creek Red to go along with his exquisite polenta. “I thought others would choose the fancier stuff,” he joked. This table wine was certainly popular: “I drank a lot of it the other night, and it’s still good now!”, exclaimed one tipsy Willow Creek member. “It’s consistently good,” added Karen Armor from San Jose, who was staying in town specially for the Winnett event. New Mexico resident Chuck Jones held a more explicit opinion. “This wine has a beautiful finish. But most of all, it’s got balls. I hate wimpy f\$#@ing red wine. This is a real nice ballsy red.”



*Chuck Jones from New Mexico enjoying “a ballsy red”.*

People sometimes give unexpected reasons for preferring some wines over others. To accompany a traditional Lebanese salad called a fattoush, Bob and Amy Doran wanted a wine that “tasted like summer.” They settled on a cool 2009 Sauvignon Blanc. “Our favorite,” opined Willow Creek residents Joe and Tyla. Molly O’Gorman, serving bruschetta adorned with vegetables from her family’s Trinity River Farm, served Chardonnay alongside because it matures in steel barrels and she “doesn’t like the taste of oak barrels”. Davin Peterson and Tracy Brand of Eureka, on the other hand, expressed a strong preference for oak barrels..

Perhaps the afternoons most interesting wine was a 2008 rosé served up by family friends Colin and Michael. If one were pressed to look for a silver lining to the devastating fires which blackened the northern Californian skies two years ago, it would be in this wine’s unmistakable smoky taste.

Taking a minute from selling bottles to talk to the *TRT*, winemaker and owner Sharon Winnett was right to feel “very satisfied with the turn-out.” Looking back over the last ten years, her husband David admits that he sometimes misses teaching, but enjoys being kept occupied by grapes. But will the wines from our northern Californian valleys ever be good enough to compete with the big labels from Napa Valley? “I’ll tell you in about twenty years”, responded David with a humble yet confident smile.

After packing away my camera and reporters notebook, I zigzag my way through the rows of healthy grapes, the laughter, the tinkling of glasses and the smells of food towards the parking lot. “Next year, I better ride my bicycle instead,” I mumble to no-one in particular whilst fumbling for my keys.