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Area residents become winemakers for a day

By TERRI GORDON / H-P Correspondent

"It's amazing," said Greg Weiser of St. Joseph, "when you go out and buy a bottle of wine, how much work actually went into making it."

Weiser knows firsthand how much work it takes because he, along with his wife Susan, has made his own wine.

Last year, the Weisers, already wine enthusiasts, signed up for a red winemaking class at Heart of the Vineyard in Baroda. They joined 24 other couples and spent the day picking, crushing and preparing the grapes for the fermentation process.

"My wife and I enjoy the wines in the area, so we thought that would be a fun thing to do," said Greg, "just to spend a weekend day out learning how to make the wine -- and drinking a little bit of it too!"

The Weisers were not disappointed.

"It's a party atmosphere," said Rick Moersch, owner of Heart of the Vineyard, and teacher of the class. "We serve wine and hors d'oeuvres."

When people arrive for the class, they are given containers and released into the vineyard to hand-pick the 100 pounds of grapes needed to make five gallons of wine -- or 24 bottles.

The grapes are then taken into the winery where they are de-stemmed by machine and split open.

For white wines, the grapes also are pressed to separate the fruit from the skins. Leaving the skins on the fruit creates bitterness -- desirable for red wines, not for white.

The juice is then put into five-gallon jugs, called carboys, and yeast is added. They are then capped with "bubblers," and left to begin the fermentation process.

During the fermentation process, the sugar in the fruit is converted to alcohol, but during the conversion process, three products are made: alcohol, carbon dioxide and heat.

"The bubbler releases carbon dioxide," explained Moersch, "because if you closed it off, there's

so much energy in that conversion that it would just blow that [carboy] apart. I mean, it'll blow stainless steel tanks apart!"

After the sugars have converted to alcohol, the bubblers are replaced by stoppers, and the carboys are left to let the sediments settle to the bottom.

The wine is then "removed off the sediment" and left to age over the winter.

Class participants then return in the spring to adjust the taste and sweetness of the wine with grape juice reserved from the fall's pressing. This is done to each person's own taste, thus personalizing the final product.

The new winemakers now put their wine in bottles and cork it.

The Weisers made their own labels and gave bottles as Christmas presents.

"I think it meant a little more," said Greg, "especially because people knew we had made it ourselves."

The Weisers took the red winemaking class last year, and followed it up with the white winemaking class this year. They also are considering taking the brandy class Moersch offers, where fruit wines are distilled into what the Dutch call "burnt wine."

"The whole thing is pretty fun," said Greg. "It gives you a greater appreciation for what (winemakers) do. We'll probably take one or the other (classes) every year. A lot of people come back every year, so they're meeting old friends and carrying on."

According to Moersch, people can and do make wines at home following the same steps outlined in his classes. They can use new, clean garbage cans as fermentation vats.

The Weisers are considering trying the process at home but say the Moersch family takes a lot of the work out of it by monitoring it and keeping it in cold storage over the winter.

"They have all the equipment," Greg said, "and the grapes are right there. If you do it at home, you have to either buy and crush your own grapes or go somewhere and buy grape juice that's already been crushed."

And then there are those hors d'oeuvres.

Moersch got the idea for his winemaking classes when teaching science classes at the local high school. He included a lesson in winemaking to demonstrate how yeast converts sugars into alcohol.

He was surprised by how many of his students came from local fruit farms and were acquainted with winemaking through parents, grandparents or aunts and uncles.

"It's a tradition in this area, with the fruit farms and immigrant backgrounds," he said.

"What typically happens to traditions," he said, "is people lose them because times and places change, so I have a lot of people who enroll in the class who are really kind of rediscovering their roots."

Resurrecting traditions or just plain having fun, home winemaking is a popular activity. Moersch has to limit his classes to 25 couples, and they are full every year.

For people who want to make their own wine at home, the classes are a good place to learn what's involved, though Greg Weiser warns that folks should wear old clothes, especially if taking the red wine class.

"When I got done, I was purple," he said. "We had to go to a party afterward, and people were eying me kind of funny because I was stained. I thought it would wash off, but it didn't come off quite so easily."

White winemaking classes are held every year on the third Saturday in September and the first or second Saturday in March for bottling.

Red winemaking classes are held the first Saturday in October, and bottling is the second or third Saturday in April.

Heart of the Vineyard will do the bottling for a small fee for people unable to return on designated days in the spring.

For more information about the winemaking classes, or about making wine at home, contact Heart of the Vineyard at (800) 716-WINE (9463), or visit the Web site at www.heartofthevineyard.com.