

What's up at the winery?: There's a bountiful season of events at Nashoba Valley

By E.T. Robbins / News Correspondent

Wednesday, May 19, 2004

Delicate blossoms dot endless rows of apple trees. A Baltimore oriole makes its distinctive call above the new wedding pavilion. Mustard plants surround eight beehives, the honeybees oblivious to human presence.

When you think of Nashoba Valley Winery in Bolton, it's easy to dream of cabernets and chardonnays. But just as a fine wine has so many complexities, this winery has so much more to offer. From artist exhibitions to Sunday brunch at J's, the on-site restaurant, Nashoba Valley Winery has something for everyone in the family.

Of course, winemaking is still one of the biggest crowd pleasers. The winery conducts tours Saturdays and Sundays year-round. The cost is \$3 per person, and tours run every 30 minutes starting at 11 a.m.

Rich Pelletier, owner of the 50-acre winery and orchard since 1995, chuckles when asked if the ubiquitous black-and-yellow "Wine for Dummies" book is a useful read.

"That works. I've read that," Pelletier said before launching into a comprehensive snapshot of winemaking that would put the book's authors to shame.

While winemaking is an art, its basic formula is easy to follow. Pelletier said grapes (other fruits, like apples, go through a different process) are deposited in "lugs," which are stackable containers that won't crush the fruit. Pelletier grows a variety of produce on site, but grapes are not one of them. He gets his grapes from Apponagansett Vineyard in Dartmouth.

From the lugs, the grapes go into a machine that cracks the skin and pulls out the stems. Then it's time for the press, a large cylindrical machine that extracts the juice from the pulp. The machine is computerized, and "once you fill it, you basically walk away," Pelletier said.

The juice is chilled to about 30 degrees, causing any remaining solids to settle to the bottom so they can be removed. The juice is warmed back up, and it's time for fermentation, which is the process of converting sugar into ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide. This process is done by adding yeast, a catalyst for fermentation.

This "controlled" fermentation is done in 1,000 gallon tanks. The juice "has to be between 60 to 70 degrees. And the timing of the fermentation is probably going to be somewhere around three weeks to four weeks," Pelletier said.

After fermentation, the wine is stored in stainless steel tanks or oak barrels, standard materials in the aging process. There a wine develops its distinctive aromas and flavors.

Pelletier noted the process is more scientific using stainless steel and more creative with oak because there are many different types of oak.

"This is where it gets fun...Oak is kind of the spice rack of a winemaker," said Pelletier.

Pelletier's wines are aged from five months to 2 1/2 years. Dry red wines typically age longer, while a raspberry wine may be bottled sooner since the goal is to capture the flavor of the fruit.

The bottling process is an important one since the main thing that destroys wine is air. The bottling room consists of a conveyor belt system where machines fill, cork, foil and label bottles. Pelletier said the machine also uses screw caps, which are making a comeback as better closures for bottles, despite their unfair association with "cheap wines."

According to Pelletier, roughly 5 percent of all wine is destroyed by TCA (trichloroanisole). Cork is the main culprit in TCA transmission. A November 2003 fact sheet from the Wine Institute in California states that TCA is a natural compound that won't hurt consumers, but the problem is the impact it has on the wine's flavor, which Pelletier described as a "musty, barnyard character."

Pelletier said screw caps appear to eliminate the problem. He concedes, though, that they're a hard sell in a world that adores the glamour associated with corkscrews and sommeliers.

A couple of windows look into the bottling room, so people on tours may be lucky enough to see the process. While the actual "action" of winemaking doesn't happen every day, Pelletier said, "We're making wines all the time, but primarily...when we're harvesting, which is in the fall, is the busiest time."

The rest of spring and summer look busy, too, with a variety of activities planned:

- On May 22 and 23, Framingham artist Lynette Haggard will be on hand, from 1 to 5 p.m., to answer questions about her paintings, which will be on display at the winery until mid-June. Haggard is an award-winning painter whose work has appeared in 40 different exhibitions throughout the Northeast. Reservations are not required and admission is free.
- On May 30, you can learn the basics of herb cultivation for \$5 during workshops (includes an herb to take home) led by Orchard Manager Glen M. Lord at 11:30 a.m. or 2:30 p.m. (reservations required).
- Nashoba Valley Winery also has its own beer brewery. On June 5 and 6, you can enjoy microbrewery tours conducted from 1 to 3 p.m. Admission is free and you don't need reservations.
- What winery would be complete without a wine and cheese tour? Learn the art of pairing wine and cheese on June 13. Tours will run at 1 and 3 p.m. Cost is \$20 per person, which includes a tour, cheese and wine pairing, and lecture. Reservations are required.
- Enjoy more artwork on Father's Day weekend, from 1 to 5 p.m., with Judy Royster, owner of "Art on the Walls Gallery" in Southborough. Royster will display the works of an international artist who also happens to be her brother, Steven Royster. Admission is free.
- If you need some music to go with your wine, check out "Taste With Us," the winery's premier event of the season, from noon to 5 p.m., on August 14. Enjoy the sounds of "The Squirrel Hill Jazz Band," cooking demonstrations and fresh produce from the orchard.

Then there's always J's, the winery's award-winning restaurant, and the kids will enjoy picking everything from raspberries to apples (when in season).

Nashoba Valley Winery is located at 100 Wattaquadoc Hill Road, Bolton. For more information, call 978-779-5521 or visit www.nashobawinery.com.