

San Francisco Chronicle

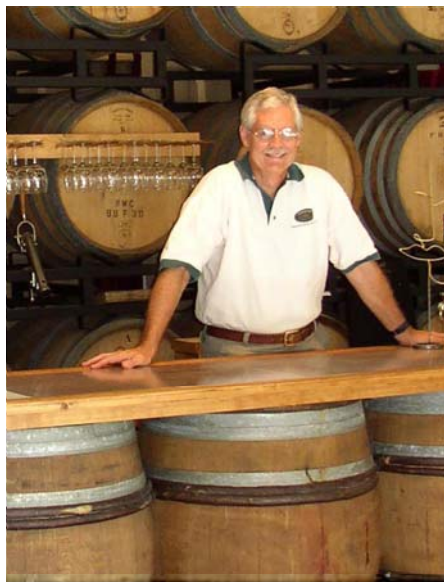
TRAVEL

May 17, 2009

By Matt Villano

Special to the Chronicle

People with a sweet tooth are happy when they step into a winery and spot one or maybe two dessert wines on the tasting list. But imagine a winery where the only options are sweet wines; a place where every tasting enables you to drink your dessert.



Sonoma Valley Portworks

Owner Bill Reading stands in the tasting room at Sonoma Valley Portworks in Petaluma

This is what Sonoma Valley Portworks is all about. The small but intimate winery in Petaluma's quirky Foundry Wharf building cranks out roughly 4,000 cases each year of nothing but Port, sweet wine and after-dinner spirits.

Founder and owner Bill Reading runs the show, administering free tastings in the facility's tasting room. All tastings include samples of four Port wines, two dessert wines and a vinegar from Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. Starting this week, the Portworks also plans to serve dessert pairings on Saturdays, offering cheeses and pound cake, among other foods.

I visited the winery on a recent weekday and was impressed by how modest the operation is. Reading, a native of Ohio, greeted me behind a makeshift bar in the tasting room and immediately explained what it is about Port that inspired him to start making it in Sonoma County in 1994.

"When I got into this, I figured the world didn't need another Chardonnay or Merlot," he says. "What I like about Port is that you can be more creative with it since you can stop fermentation at a specific time and add a fortified spirit to create something entirely new."

After overwhelming me with details about the process of making Port, Reading invited me and some other guests behind a wall of wine casks to tour his production facility.

As we wound through rows of casks, Reading offered a history lesson. Though Port dates back thousands of years, it became popular in the late 1600s, when political problems between France and England made it difficult for the British to obtain wine from Bordeaux.

English merchants living in Portugal seized the opportunity and began selling wines from vineyards along the Douro River as a substitute. This wine was known locally as Porto, the

Portuguese word for port of call and the name of Portugal's second largest city, at the mouth of the Douro. Standard practice at the time was to add brandy to preserve the wine for shipment overseas. The strategy has stuck.

Reading's Port is a variation on this recipe. While most Ports have 18 to 21 percent alcohol, his have no more than about 18.5 percent, making them more fruit-driven and light.

With the Ports he makes from scratch (one of his products, the Maduro, is made with wines imported from Australia), Reading also differs from other Port-makers in the way he treats his grapes.

Most big-time wineries crush and press Port grapes mechanically. Reading gives his fruit a cold soak, de-stems and crushes his fruit with a small machine, then presses it by hand - or rather, foot - with a contraption he has fashioned to save energy and make the experience more fun.

These autumn wine-stomping sessions usually involve members of the winery's wine club.

Unfortunately, because we're still months from harvest, the crush pad was quiet during our tour.

Back in the tasting room, I sampled the fruits of this labor firsthand. The tasting started with the Deco, a Port with bittersweet chocolate essence, and moved on to the Maduro, which won gold medals at the 2005 San Francisco International Wine Competition and the 2008 Los Angeles Wines of the World Wine Competition.

Next, Reading poured two variations of his Aris Port - one made from Petite Sirah grapes and the other made from Petite Verdot. The former revealed wonderful dark fruit characteristics that hinted of blackberries, plums and cherries. The latter is the only 100 percent Petite Verdot Port made in California.

Our tasting wound down with samples of a Sherry-like after-dinner wine called Duet, the fortified muscat A3 and Sonomic, a sweet vinegar made from cabernet sauvignon grapes.

As a lifelong sweet tooth, I enjoyed every drop. Who says you can't have dessert before dinner anyway?

Sonoma Valley Portworks: Open noon-5 p.m. Mon.-Sat. 613 Second St., Petaluma. (707) 769-5203, www.portworks.com.

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This article appeared on page **R - 48** of the San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Datebook